

Interview Questions for Mary Ann Callahan

These are the questions we will ask you during the recorded conference. Please remember the audience will be our fellow classmates in graduate school even though the lesson is written for 9th graders.

1. Describe the current living conditions, education and the overall treatment of women.

Current living conditions for most Afghans are still very difficult. Most people work for around \$50-\$60 per month and living costs are very expensive. A two room apartment with limited running water and electricity is \$200 per month. There is widespread corruption and there are some Afghans who live very luxuriously at the expense of their countrymen. There is great frustration among most people at the slow progress in the areas of job creation, salary scale improvements, electrical and water provision at reasonable rates as well as other “quality of life issues”.

Education is free and most people do send their children both girls and boys to school, but the government does not have adequate money to provide the tools we take for granted for schools in the US. There are often no chairs, desks, books, pencils, or paper for students and some “schools” are really outdoor theatres where students sit under trees and repeat the lessons being given much the same as students in US one room schools did two centuries ago.

Women have been officially welcomed back into society and are given the same basic rights as men, at least in theory. Really great strides have been made in the years since the deposition of the Taliban.

2. What efforts are being made to increase women’s rights today?

Afghans , for the most part , do not traditionally have a demeaning attitude toward women, so that as society becomes more healthy the position of women will also become healthy. I truly believe that women’s rights are inextricably woven into the fabric of society. So, as Afghanistan becomes a strong nation, governed by the rule of law, all her people will enjoy their inalienable rights.

3. Who is responsible for making the decisions to help the women’s movement in Afghanistan? This is hard to really answer, as there is a Ministry of Women’s Affairs, but they are not equipped to handle the large number of problems that face them. They have very little resources and staff skills are relatively low. The Cabinet and the President’s Office are burdened with so many issues, from education to infrastructure as the country rebuilds that quite honestly, there is not enough money or time to adequately deal effectively with everything. There are, of course, International NGOs who are trying to help, and those that take into consideration the whole family, not just the women’s aspect are providing the best kind of help. If programs are created that stress the kind of “women’s rights” we are familiar with, they often create severe problems in such a traditional culture as

Afghanistan. A more holistic approach is to talk about balanced families where women's rights are protected as part of both traditional culture and Islamic laws.

4. What is school like for a 14 and 15-year-old girl?

School is segregated after about the third grade, and girls are encouraged as much as boys, however, the lack of real resources, i.e., books, supplies, even schools, as many schools meet under the shade of trees, as well as the lack of qualified teachers does impede progress for both sexes. There are also a large numbers of female students at the universities, but resources are a huge problem there as well.

5. Since the Taliban is no longer in control can women go out in public?

Again, as I have said the determination about what women do is now up to each individual family. The current laws are very democratic in their nature and legally women are to have the same rights as men....how this really plays out is up to the people involved.

6. Are there any restrictions on women? If so can you elaborate.

Legally women are free to pursue educations, run for public office, have jobs.....again based on their individual family structures.

7. How are women punished if they break a rule?

The new legal system does not differentiate between the sexes, and at least in theory women have the full protection of the law and are entitled to due process. I remember a case where a women and her lover were accused of having murdered several men and burying them in Kabul (sounds a lot like a story our tabloids would report, doesn't it?) She is now awaiting trial. But then I have alluded to the case of the young girl who was killed by her father because she refused to enter into a forced marriage with an older man who already had two wives....so you can see it is a system still in transition

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS FROM EMAIL CORRESPONDANCE

Patsy, if I could I'd like to suggest that we consider a different approach with the questions. As you can imagine the whole question of gender here is very complex.

As you know, now that the Taliban is gone, women are far freer to go out, to hold jobs, to wear a burka or not...most of the choice is a family matter...so a young woman with conservative parents and grandparents may have to wear a burka and may not be allowed to work, in fact, may be compelled to marry early, while a young woman with a more liberal family can wear just a head scarf and may attend university or have a job prior to marriage. There are huge contrasts here...and we must be careful not to over simplify or create stereotypes unwittingly...

For example, when I worked on a library project funded by the America's Fund for Afghan Children (which was the money collected when Pres Bush asked kids to bring a dollar or school after we our forces landed here) there were twice as many girls as boys in most of the places we visited, including remote villages in the Northern Provinces...conversely, in the Southern areas, especially near the Pakistani border, there were virtually no girls allowed to go to school. Unmarried girls with skills are being allowed more and more to have jobs, yet there are still reports of girls either committing suicide or being killed by male relatives because of forced marriages...it is a series of contrasts that is hard to define, just like it would be if we tried to describe life in the US... so much depends on the specific region, the culture and traditions there, and the influences from outside....

Another important point here is that the whole society is in a state of transition...Afghanistan is struggling to find its place in the modern world. Every aspect of life is being examined and change is coming whether people are ready or not.

The whole women's issue that is talked about so much in the West is only one aspect of the changes here.... we are experiencing a new form of government...for the first time on literally 5,000 years, Afghans, both men and women last year voted for a President, and they will again go to the polls to vote for a Parliament...with 6,000 candidates to choose from...in both those elections, women were also candidates...

So I am concerned that we put this into perspective...we must also talk about the new lives that Afghan men are facing as well, and how we help both genders adjust to the new reality is important...too much emphasis on either group creates an imbalance...

Hope this makes sense, we can talk more about this and perhaps if we wait to do the interview we can present a more balanced picture that will more accurately reflect Afghanistan.

Mary Ann