



# Occasional Paper

## Women in Afghanistan: The Fight Back

Hemantika Kar

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# Contents

• Women under Taliban 1.0	1
• Changes since 2001	2
• Women under Taliban 2.0	4
• Attempts to Reclaim their Space	5
• What Lies Ahead	7
• Notes	10
• References	12



# Women in Afghanistan

## The Fight Back

**Hemantika Kar**

Women and men undergo varied experiences in the event of an absolute collapse of the socio-political order. When combined with a catastrophic political transformation, their exposure to systemic abuse and violence dramatically increases. The vulnerability of women and their exposure to such violence is much more pronounced compared to what men face. This paper attempts to map the violence and abuse of rights women in Afghanistan are facing under the new Taliban rule after the American withdrawal. It also focuses on their response to the same.

### **Women under Taliban 1.0**

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country with a diverse population. Women's issues have always had a central role in the governance system. From the beginning of the birth of modern-day Afghanistan, different monarchs have played a key role in determining the status of women in society, in line with their Islamic worldview. However, though women were considered inferior to men, they had their share of rights that were in no way meant to keep them confined to their houses. Instead, their free movement was hardly restricted. Covering their heads or wearing a *burqa* was not mandatory. There were organisations like the *Anjuman-I-Himayat-I-Niswan*<sup>1</sup> (Organization for Women Protection), which worked to encourage women to report any kind of injustice meted out to them.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, women's rights were further amplified, with universities in most cities, especially Kabul, admitting them. After the departure of the Soviets in May 1988, the Mujahedeen overturned all that the Soviet Union had stood for, which included women's rights regarding employment and education. Women were pushed away from public life and forced to wear a *burqa*. Fewer women were visible on television.

Under the Taliban regime (1996-2001), rules targeting women became more stringent. Women not wearing a *burqa* were flogged, and girls were asked to stay at home, education being barred for them. Women were to travel or venture out with only a male member (*mahram*) of the family. Their access to health care was cut as they were not allowed to visit male doctors. Nancy Dupree, an Afghan scholar, opines<sup>2</sup> that the Taliban's imposition of these rules has much to do with their rural, particularly Pashtun culture, which places women's sanctity as central to the family; by extension, society's honour is therefore central to their superior Islamic virtue; thus, male superiority is given utmost importance.

The Bush administration used the oppression faced by women in the country by the Taliban to legitimise the "The War on Terror" campaign they launched.<sup>3</sup> In a radio interview with regards to the war on terror, Laura Bush linked the War against Terrorism with the need to "free women of Afghanistan from the oppression and give them back their dignity." Post the interview; the State Department made a point of emphasising the heinous treatment of women and children under the Taliban administration. The regime's treatment of women, including denial of access to education, jobs, healthcare, and freedom of movement, became interwoven with the war on terror in general and the war in Afghanistan in particular.

### **Changes since 2001**

After the Taliban regime was dismantled in 2001, the plight of women underwent significant improvement. Women, especially in urban centres like Kabul, joined the workforce and went back to educational



institutions. With the Constitution of 2004 guaranteeing women two seats for each province in the Lower House of Afghanistan's National Assembly, women held 69 of the 249 seats in the Lower House, a 27.7 per cent share.<sup>4</sup> Of the 102 seats in the Senate, 34 were appointed by the country's president and 50 percent of those were reserved for women, strengthening women's rights and political participation.<sup>5</sup>

Afghanistan adopted its first Women, Peace and Security Agenda under which the National Action Plan was adopted a decade later in July 2015 to address the challenges women faced in Afghanistan. The plan aimed to increase women's participation in peace processes and the security sector as well as address issues around protection and relief and recovery services for women. The plan emphasised the need for men and women to have equal access to opportunities. This plan therefore focused on encouraging participation of women in the decision making and executive levels of the Civil Service, Security and Peace and Reintegration; making women active participants in national and provincial elections; making sure that women have access to an effective, active, and accountable justice system. Women were to be given absolute protection from all forms of violence and discrimination. Under this, men and boys were to be engaged in preventing violence against women. The plan aimed at providing support to building civil society with a special emphasis towards women's organisation.

The Afghanistan government's 21-member team for the 2020 intra-Afghan peace talks included four women.<sup>6</sup> During this period, around 5,000 women were recruited under three security agencies: the Ministry of Defence and the army, the Ministry of Interior and the police, and the National Directory of Security, Afghanistan's secret police. According to figures from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), millions of Afghan women and girls were enrolled in school, and approximately 80,000 female teachers worked in schools and institutions. More than 100,000 of the almost 400,000 Afghan civil officials were women.

## Women under Taliban 2.0

The return of the Taliban to the seat of power in August 2021 saw the return of the “Old Taliban” rules regarding the forceful withdrawal of women from public spaces. Women in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan were asked to cover themselves up from head to toe, along with the return of other orthodox dictums reminiscent of the previous Taliban rule. Though elementary schools have opened, girl children have been forced to stay behind the walls of their homes and sacrifice their right to education. Though the current Taliban regime has repeatedly made statements of their intention to grant women their rights within the “*boundaries of Islam*”<sup>7</sup>, their words do not match their actions.

According to Forbes, these sweeping restrictions on women have severely impacted the country’s economic condition and may have resulted in an economic loss of up to \$1 billion, or 5 percent of Afghanistan’s gross domestic product. A quarter of the 352 Parliamentarians, 4,000 female police officers, 800 attorneys, 300 judges, 242 prosecutors, 13 female ministers, and eight deputy governors are no longer in office. The Ministry of Women’s Affairs was abolished in August 2021, and the National Human Rights Institute was dissolved, leaving no legal institutional or judicial systems for women for recourse. The media also suffered disproportionately, with 40 percent of Afghan media closing and 80 percent of female journalists losing their jobs.<sup>8</sup> According to an Afghan media report, removal of women from their work sphere has led to a rise in domestic violence, taking a toll on their mental health.<sup>9</sup> With schools shut and girls being barred from education, in the Badghis province, girls have been forced to take up other skills such as carpet making and tailoring.<sup>10</sup> In different cities, the Taliban have come up with segregation diktats for restaurants. Men and women, even from the same family, cannot dine together.

In addition to the *burqa* becoming an important criterion with regards to women’s mobility, women reportedly are not being allowed to access public transportation or drive themselves. This has had a grave impact on their financial independence as well as their means

of livelihood. In Panjshir valley especially, in view of the anti-Taliban resistance movement, many women have lost male members of the household and are facing abject poverty and food insecurity.<sup>11</sup>

### **Attempts to Reclaim their Space**

Reactions of women to the loss of their rights mostly correspond to the privileges and opportunities that they had access to in the last two decades. As a result, urban centres in Afghanistan, which had provided opportunities for women, have witnessed a series of protests demanding the restoration of their lost rights, whereas, in the rural areas, which remained mostly untouched by the gains made during the last two decades, the expression of dissent has either been subtle or non-existent.

In Kabul, women have continued to put up a fight against the regressive measures imposed by the Taliban through demonstrations on the streets of Kabul, demanding their rights be restored. There has been consistent opposition to the all-male-dominated interim government as well. Many girls in Ghazni have formed study circles in their homes to keep their education going in whatever limited form they can. Women are constantly trying to push against the Taliban regime and reclaim their space in whatever way possible, like Afghan activist Pashtana Dorani who through her NGO *LEARN* is dedicated to providing online education to children from class 1-12 so that their education is not hampered.<sup>12</sup> Women who were previously working in the government and non-government sector have come on camera to protest against the Taliban regime for pushing working women behind the walls of their home. They have been urging the government to give back their jobs and their rightfully earned money.<sup>13</sup>

On June 9, 2022, Female Civil Service Employment of Afghanistan Association in Kabul publicly protested the removal of women in government institutions and violation of their rights.<sup>14</sup> Women groups, on May 29, 2022, took to the streets in Kabul to pressurise the Islamic Emirate to lift restrictions on girls studying in classes above class six and demanded that they should be allowed to return to their

schools and resume their education. A similar demand was made by the Noor Capacities Development and Training Institute, founded in 2001 and presently working in 22 provinces of the country on human rights and capacity building.<sup>15</sup> The women protestors have coined slogans such as “food, labour, and freedom”<sup>16</sup> and have said that they are determined to protest until their rights that have been taken away from them unjustly are restored. Artists in Kabul have used their art to portray the atrocities against Afghan women by the Taliban. Female authors and poets in Kabul arranged a poetry performance programme and urged the Islamic Emirate to reopen girls’ schools for sixth grade and above.

On the other hand, women in rural regions remain isolated to the greater cause at hand as they remain divided concerning the rules imposed and the effect it has on their lives; to them, saving the lives of their male members and having food on the table take priority over having their independence and dignity. This divide is a result of the constant fluctuation between the governing systems of the country. However, these changes were again centred to the urban spaces. Traditional social practices, along with economic underdevelopment, drove tribal resistance to Kabul’s altering political scene. As a result, tribal traditions frequently took precedence over Islamic and constitutional regulations in determining gender roles in rural areas. In addition to normative impediments, structural constraints have prohibited rural women in Afghanistan from participating in public life. These hurdles have included high rates of poverty, security risks, the lack of education and career prospects, and restricted access to legal protection. Given their dramatically different lifestyles, some rural women did not necessarily feel connected to the more affluent, metropolitan women, nor did they adhere to Kabul’s “Westernized” image of citizenship. Therefore, this divide is reflected even now with the return of the Taliban regime in 2021. Women in urban areas have been the only ones to take up the baton to protest the Taliban regime and fight for the restoration of their rights by the interim Islamic Emirate government. Thus, it is imperative to understand that the

reactions to the violations of human rights of women may not be the same.

However, it is of utmost importance that we observe the coming days to see the turn the women's lives take; to see if the only option available to them is to accept defeat and move on or to resist till those in power will relent and accept their demands.

Despite the protests there has not been any favourable response from the Taliban.<sup>17</sup> The interim Islamic Emirate government, despite pressure from the international community, is yet to take any positive steps in favour of bringing women back to public life. The Islamic Emirate has denied claims made on social media that girls' schools would reopen in the next two weeks.

On many instances, women activists in Kabul have been flogged for protesting for the rights of women.<sup>18, 19</sup> The head of religious scholars of the Islamic Emirate in a statement on 8 July 2022 said that "the heads of the states aren't opposed to opening educational institutions for women but are waiting for the segregation of places needed for male and female students to join school".

There has been a lot of international reaction to this ongoing process of removal of women from public spaces and revocation of their rights from prominent figures such as<sup>20</sup> Former US Secretary for State, Hillary Clinton in her speech on 10 March 2022. The US Afghan Peace Treaty Negotiations emphasised the need for Afghan women to be a part of the peace process and that the rights that they enjoyed before the Taliban take over should be left untouched.<sup>21</sup> G7 countries such as Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States and representatives of the European Union have issued joint statements urging the Islamic Emirate to lift restrictions on women's rights.

### **What Lies Ahead**

Afghan women, since the re-establishment of Taliban rule in the country, have been resilient in their efforts to reclaim their rights. Women, mostly in Kabul, have taken to streets to urge the interim

Islamic Emirate government to allow women back to their workplaces. They have been fighting for the rights for female education where girls beyond Class six have been barred from entering any educational institutions.

As observed in the previous sections, the lives of Afghan women have never just been about their rights and place in society. It has intrinsically been connected to the political and social conditions of the country; therefore, women's place went through a series of changes throughout the years. Until the 1970s when Afghanistan was ruled by its traditional King, and later under the short communist regimes, women enjoyed a considerable amount of independence with rights and institutions in place to ensure their security and protection. This was further enhanced with the first set of international actors in the form of the Soviet Union entering the country from 1979 onwards. This helped boost female education in the country. The descent of Afghan women's condition and position started with the rise of the Mujahideen factions from various Afghan tribes to fight the Soviets and the use of Islam and Jihad to unite these factions in this war. As the Soviets withdrew, a civil war ensued leading to the chaotic and violent rule of the Mujahideens (1978–92). The fundamentalist Islamic clergy and its student group, the Taliban, took control to bring their draconian interpretation of the Sharia during their first phase of rule (1996-2001). The second international intervention from the United States brought women back into public life, their freedom of mobility and education was restored along with being granted representation in the political sphere as well.

These changes had a polarising effect on Afghan society as urban centres in the country grew more liberal while the Taliban reestablished their stronghold in rural areas. Therefore, this created a divide between the expectations of women with regards to their rights as well their position in society. This was reflected mostly with the return of the Taliban to power in August 2021. While Women in the urban spaces have been fighting pro-actively for their rights the rural women remain behind in this effort to reclaim their space.

The coming days are crucial for both the Afghan women and the country. Despite pressure from the international community, from the United Nations to the G-7 countries, the Interim Islamic Emirate is yet to take a favourable decision for the women in the country.

In a meeting held in July 2022 in Kabul,<sup>22</sup> the clerics vowed their support and acceptance of the Taliban regime as the official state authority. The 11-point statement affirmed that the country would strictly be governed on the basis of Sharia law.<sup>23</sup> Following this order, the supreme leader of the Islamic Emirate, Mawlawi Hebatullah Akhundzada, made a public announcement reaffirming the same. The country, in the span of a few months, has engaged in positive dialogue with the international actors such as China and Pakistan, which were amongst the first few countries to show their support for the country's interim government. Joining this pattern, countries like India also have engaged in dialogue with the country's authorities. Russia has also expressed its interest in building relations with the country. While the Islamic Emirate has shown keen interest in building relations with the international community, the country's heads remain firm in their belief of non-interference from the international community with regards to their internal matters and their way of governance. This does not bode well for Afghan women in the country.

As the world grapples with other global crises, it is crucial not to overlook the ongoing struggles faced by Afghan women. The economic repercussions of gender-based restrictions, the closure of educational opportunities, and the dissolution of institutions dedicated to women's rights paint a grim picture of the challenges they currently endure.

In these trying times, the resilience and determination of Afghan women shine through their protests, advocacy, and efforts to reclaim their rights. The road ahead remains uncertain, with the international community playing a critical role in influencing positive change. It is imperative for the world to remain vigilant and actively support the cause of Afghan women, ensuring that they are not forgotten in the pursuit of stability and diplomatic relations in Afghanistan. The

restoration of women's rights is not just a moral imperative but a crucial step towards building a more inclusive, equitable, and progressive society for all.

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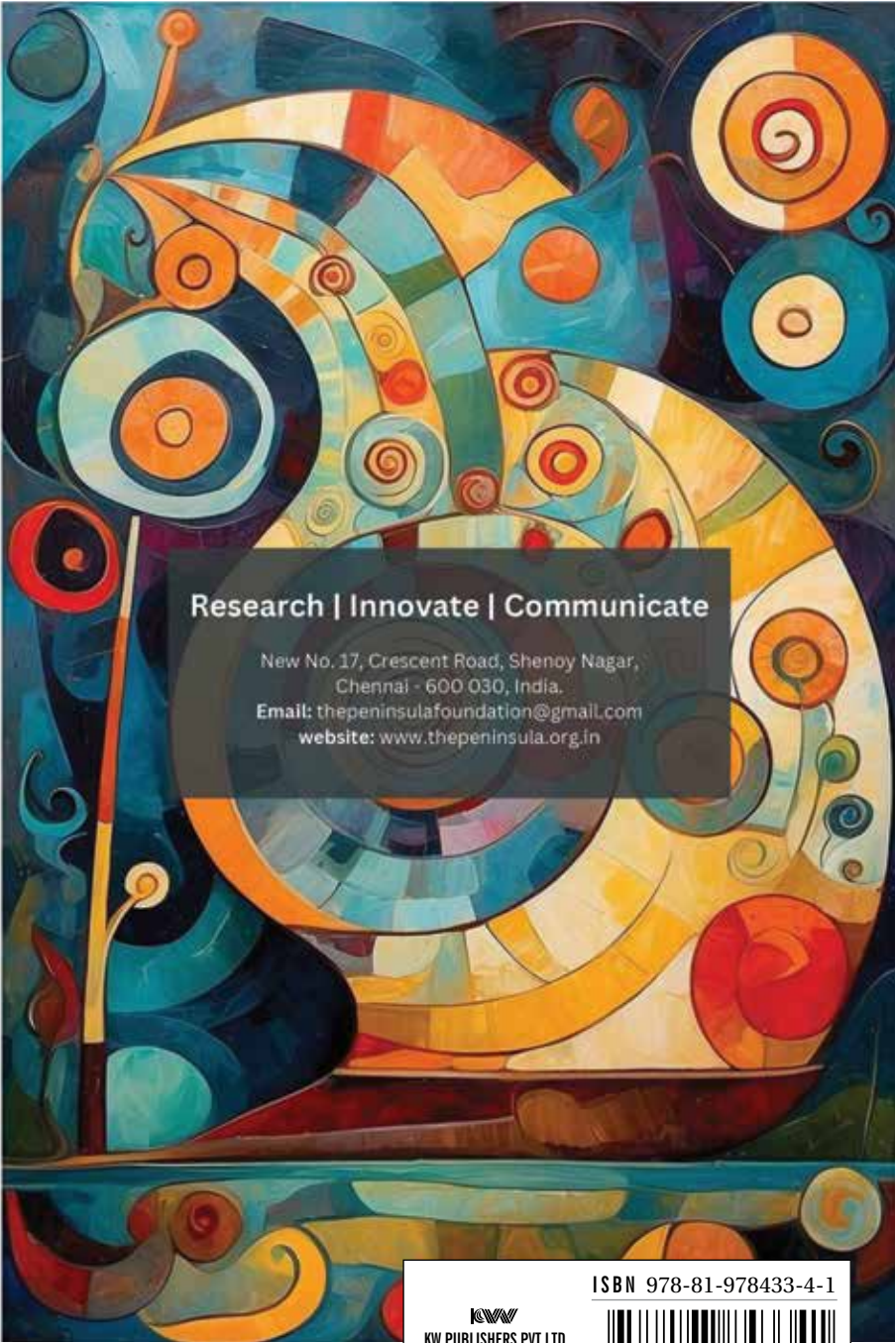
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