



Declining Women's Rights and Freedom: Afghan Women at Two Years of Taliban Rule

By: Vinuri Perera | Dec 10th, 2023



Figure 1: Figure 1: Women's struggle for rights and freedom in Afghanistan, Picture Courtesy: UN.org

Abstract

Since the Taliban's ascension to power in 2021, the group has enforced harsh restrictions on Afghan women, which has resulted in women losing access to education, employment, and even public spaces. In addition to seriously impacting women's rights and freedoms, these misogynistic policies also impede the delivery of humanitarian aid and assistance. In this article, the author addresses the present situation of women's rights in Afghanistan amidst Taliban rule as well as the effects they have on the nation as a whole.

Introduction

Two years have passed since US troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan in accordance with the *Doha Agreement* signed between the US Trump Administration and the Taliban in 2020. Following the chaotic withdrawal of the US military, the Taliban has rapidly regained power over the country in the form of countless terrorist attacks and resulting casualties and has

transitioned from an insurgent group to a government. Nonetheless, despite having made promises to preserve the rights of women and minority communities during the signing of the aforementioned *Doha Agreement*,¹ the group has since enforced strict policies and restrictions upon the Afghan population. In the past two years, these policies have severely impacted the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Afghan populace, particularly those of women and girls.

Taliban Rule: Oppression of Women from Past to Present

The Taliban first assumed power in Afghanistan in 1996 and remained in power until US intervention in 2001. During this period, the group enforced and enacted a strict interpretation of Sharia law and imposed numerous restrictions on Afghan women that undermined their freedom and independence, thus effectively jeopardizing Afghan Civil and Political rights. The imposed restrictions include a ban on female education and employment, restrictions on movement, public appearances and even speaking out in public among many other limitations of personal freedoms.² Despite the change in times and leadership, current gender policies enforced by the Taliban are irrefutably a continuation of the policies first enacted in 1996 if not more severe.³

Even in the face of pressure from the international community as well as promises made during the *Doha Agreement*, starting from a ban on education masked as a temporary suspension,⁴ Afghan women and girls have been denied even the most basic freedoms over the years since the takeover and are left in dire situations. Women have been denied the right to education and employment as well as personal freedoms and are barred from public life with women being unable to even travel or appear in public without the presence of a male guardian. As of 2022, girls above 6th grade have been excluded from both public and private education, making Afghanistan the only country to ban girls from attaining secondary school education or higher.⁵ Furthermore, all women, including those of foreign nationality, have been banned from employment in both domestic and international organizations acting within the country.⁴ Thus, Afghan women have been rendered powerless and have lost access to the few places that they may seek support and assistance.

Regardless of this reality, Taliban leaders continue to state that all is well and that women are being “saved from oppression”⁶ and are being guaranteed their rights. Yet, Taliban Spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, indicated in an interview commemorating the anniversary of the takeover that a ban on female education

will remain in place⁷ despite constant assurance that the ban is temporary. Furthermore, in a 2023 address to the public on Eid al-Adha, Taliban Leader, Haibatulla Akhunzada stated the following:

“The status of women as a free and dignified human being has been restored and all institutions have been obliged to help women in securing marriage, inheritance and other rights,”
– Haibatullah Akhunzada, 2023⁶

Thus, while the Taliban Government maintains an outward facade that all is well, and shows no sign of improvement, the reality of the restriction of women’s rights and the Taliban’s totalitarian principles have set the nation on a path of destruction and turmoil.

Consequences of the Taliban’s Gender Policies and its Toll on Afghan Society

The implications of the harsh restrictions imposed by the Taliban have transcended the personal level and have had an impact at the national level. The ban on employment has caused approximately 60,000 working women to lose their jobs.⁸ As a result, households supported by female breadwinners have been thrown into precarious situations in which they are unable to have their basic needs such as food and medical services met.⁹ Furthermore, these restrictions on employment have severely affected the nation’s economy by pushing many such households beyond the poverty line with estimates indicating that two-thirds of Afghan households were in poverty in 2022.¹⁰

Furthermore, the Taliban restrictions have left young women with few alternatives for survival aside from marriage, which they are on most occasions coerced into, now that education and employment are no longer an option. This situation in which the aspirations and livelihoods of women have been snatched away from them, many women are choosing to end their lives over facing the bleak options that they have left. Hence, while precise figures have been withheld by the Taliban regime, reports from the ground indicate that women’s suicide rates have soared above past numbers as well surpassed that of men which is a rare occurrence in most nations.¹¹

In addition, another detrimental consequence arises from the employment ban which was extended to include female staff members of United Nations subsidiaries and other international NGOs in December 2022. While sparking widespread criticism and outrage, this has been described as a "clear breach of humanitarian principles".¹² UN agencies have had a substantial presence in

the country's relief and development activities. However, with the significant reduction in staff there are concerns as to whether adequate and timely relief can be provided to Afghan citizens¹². Furthermore, due to the current restrictions, NGOs being unable to hire female employees would severely impact the rate at which Afghan women would be able to receive help as well as impact the timely identification of women's issues and needs in the country as Taliban regulations as well as cultural restrictions prohibit men from working with women.¹²¹³ Hence, The Taliban's misogynistic policies have not only crippled the the country's economy but have also propelled a majority of Afghan households into poverty as well as impeded the actions of NGOs that supply aid and welfare within the country.

“Deeply concerned that the Taliban’s ban on women delivering humanitarian aid in Afghanistan will disrupt vital and life-saving assistance to millions...This decision could be devastating for the Afghan people.”

-Antony Blinken, 2022¹⁴

From the Sidelines: Inaction from World Actors

The policies initiated by the Taliban has sparked outrage amongst the world community and has been criticized by many states including those that are of a Muslim-majority. Following the announcement of the ban on female education, states that provide the majority of Afghanistan's Humanitarian aid such as the G7 further threatened consequences should the ban continue. Yet, despite these *threats* and the imposition of some reductions in aid flow, not many have taken any form of direct action.¹⁵

This behavior may be attributed to certain constraints such as a reluctance to grant recognition for the Taliban regime³ as well as a poor track record of persuading the Taliban to rescind change their policies as following the many years of US operations that had restricted the activities of the organization, the Taliban has been quite reluctant to consider the opinions of foreign actors.¹⁵ In addition, the United Nations and other foreign NGOs have had their activity restricted and left in a barely operational state due to the ban on the employment of females thus effectively making them unable to take any sufficient action to prevent the humanitarian situation from deteriorating. Thus, while the Taliban itself has taken action to prevent international interference in its extremist actions, the international community itself has largely taken a stance of watch and wait with regards to this issue.¹⁵

Conclusion

The results of the 2020 *Doha Agreement* have led to a disastrous violation of women's rights and has set Afghanistan back by decades of social reformations. Since Taliban's resurgence two years ago, the group has been determined in implementing its restrictive policies and 'militant misogyny.'³ In the name of cultural revision, the group has implemented political and social structures designed to regulate, obstruct, and repress the rights and freedoms of Afghan women. At present, women are left in dire situations with their futures snatched away from them, yet they continue to persist despite the dangers. Yet, the international community remains largely silent. International actors, especially those of Muslim-majority countries must speak out against and severely condemn the Taliban's actions and impose harsh sanctions on Taliban leadership in order to actively promote human rights within the country. Should the Taliban leadership continue this oppression, the future of Afghanistan as a nation appears to be bleak.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Dr. Hayat Alvi for her invaluable perspectives and input during the podcast as well as during the formulation of this article.

Author Biography

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