

## **Women's Rights in Afghanistan; Apartheid against Women**

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The issue of women's rights has been at the core of Afghanistan's domestic problems since before its inception. Women have been treated as secondary human beings with the sole purpose of gratifying men and strictly adhering to the religious laws imposed on them. The country witnessed a glimmer of hope when it was ruled by monarchs. Abdur Rehman Khan, the Emir of Afghanistan (1880-1901) was in the vanguard of reforming laws concerning women's rights. Emir Abdur Rehman reformed numerous laws regarding women's rights and his wife was the first Afghan queen to interact with the Afghan populace in the absence of a veil. Habibullah Khan succeeded his father in 1901. He furthered his father's progressive policies and went on to establish Afghanistan's first college. Women flourished under the reign of King Habibullah. His reign, however, was short-lived. He was assassinated in 1919. His son Amanullah Khan succeeded him. It was during Amanullah's reign that Afghanistan gained complete independence from the British. Enticed by his grand tour of Europe, Amanullah wanted to modernise Afghanistan and recognised that women's rights were to play a pivotal role in the country's path towards modernisation. During his reign, Amanullah became a strong advocate for women's rights. Women could now be seen working in disparate sectors, making their contribution to their country's economy. This blatant advocacy of women's rights by King

Amanullah did not sit well with the country's clergy. Violence soared, and in an effort to avert a civil war, King Amanullah abdicated the throne in 1929 and went into exile. This marked the launching of religious groups onto the Afghan political scene.<sup>1</sup>

After the Soviet troops marched on to Kabul, significant reforms were introduced by the newly-installed communist government during the 1970s. Laws that enabled women the right to education and set a legal age before which they could not be married off were enacted. The government pushed for literacy programs for both the genders and legislation was passed to safeguard the interests of women in the Afghan society. Although the reforms received a warm welcome in Afghanistan's urban centers, in rural settings, they were seen as an attempt to undermine the Afghan culture and Islam.<sup>2</sup> It was during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan that millions of Afghans had to leave their homeland and several thousands were displaced internally. From the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan to the US war on terror, the Afghan women have fallen victim to the atrocities of war. Even though women do not actively engage in active warfare, the war still finds its way to them.

During the US intervention in Afghanistan, an effort was made to help secure the future of Afghan women and help protect their rudimentary rights. Schools were opened again and females were encouraged to gain

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education, predominantly in urban areas. Hospitals and clinics were set up to ensure that women in Afghanistan were not left medically neglected. Since hasty US withdrawal from Afghanistan, numerous NGOs and humanitarian aid organisations have ceased to function in Afghanistan. The Afghan populace relied significantly on foreign aid for its survival, now that these organisations have pulled the plug, the fragility of the country's economy has become evident. Women have been disproportionately affected by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Under the Taliban regime, women face unprecedented levels of discrimination. They are not allowed outside of their homes without a chaperone, seeking education after adolescence is tantamount to a heinous crime, and speaking publicly and involvement of women in politics is loathed under the new Taliban rule. Within months of coming into power, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was disbanded and was replaced with Ministry for Preaching and Guidance and the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.<sup>3</sup> In 2020, 27 per cent of the parliamentarians were women which gave women some representation in the country's legislature.<sup>4</sup> Under the Taliban rule, however, women representation in the legislature has become non-existent and the role of women in governmental managerial positions has vanished. This will only contribute to the marginalisation of women in Afghanistan. The Taliban government is able to get away with such hard-line policies due to reasons that are entrenched in Afghanistan's social structure. Afghanistan, being a patriarchal society, most men remain in favour of subjugating women and not giving them any

hope of liberation in the foreseeable future. Such decrees suppress women and legitimise the control of Taliban over Afghan women. The Taliban thrive on the suppression of women.

According to a UN Women gender alert document, Afghanistan ranked 166 out of 167 countries on the Gender Development Index. Furthermore, Afghanistan ranked 170 out of 170 on the Global Women, Peace and Security Index 2021.<sup>5</sup> This exhibits the level of gender inequality that exists in Afghanistan. The Taliban have restricted women from working outside of their homes. Afghanistan already is among one of the poorest countries in the world, with a per capita income of only \$516.7 (2020).<sup>6</sup> Women have been completely omitted from the country's workforce. This omission of women from the country's economy is estimated to cost around \$ 1 billion or 5 per cent of its total GDP.<sup>7</sup> In Afghanistan, an estimated 3.7 million children remain out-of-school, 60 per cent of which are girls.<sup>8</sup> The causes of the alarmingly low enrolment rate of girls in schools are predominantly cultural and religious. According to the World Bank, 22 per cent of the total Afghan population inhabit urban areas, the remaining 78 per cent live in rural areas. Afghanistan, being a predominantly rural country poses as an impediment in women's right to education. In rural areas, access to basic facilities such as education and healthcare has become almost impossible for women. Women in Afghanistan have been victims to unprecedented levels of domestic violence. According to the UNFPA, 87 per cent of Afghan women have experienced at least some sort of domestic violence during their lifetime.<sup>9</sup>



It is an indisputable fact that the Taliban presently ruling over Afghanistan have evolved in virtually every single facet. The Afghan Taliban now employ the use of modern technological tools, they squander millions of dollars to equip their fighters with the latest weaponry, and have a significant presence on social networking platforms which is subsequently used for recruitment and propaganda purposes. The Taliban have adapted well to the technological advancements but their oppressive policies regarding women herald a bleak ensuing for the women of Afghanistan. In a latest turn of events, the Taliban issued an edict which states that women must be covered from head to toe in order for them to appear in public.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhonzada affirmed that women should not leave their homes unless 'necessary'.<sup>11</sup> Any woman found in violation of the decree will be penalised in accordance with the Sharia law. Given Afghanistan's social, cultural and religious make-up, it is clear that not a significant chunk of the country's conservative population will protest against the religiously propelled government's latest decree. Historically, the burqa was worn in Afghanistan as a divine instruction from God. However, under the new Taliban regime, the rationale behind the *burqa* has pivoted from religious to strategic and political motives. At the outset of the Taliban regime, high ranking Taliban officials, in conversation with western journalists and diplomats would often reassure that the rights of women would be protected under Islamic jurisprudence. That, however, does not seem to be the case.

The decades of war in Afghanistan have disproportionately affected the women of Afghanistan. Although the state of women prior to the fall of Kabul was not ideal, there still was hope. Now, Afghan women have lost all hope. Their fate lies in the hands of the Taliban regime. Rather than re-evaluating and revising their hard-line policies regarding women, the new Taliban regime has proven that it is no different than the Taliban of 1990s. The government in Afghanistan should take lessons from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran where the implementation of Sharia law is prioritised, but not at the cost of women's rights. The issuing of the latest decree speaks to the government's narrow understanding of Islam. It speaks to the ulterior motive of the Taliban regime. It has little to do with religion, and aims to achieve political and strategic goals for the incumbent government. The prerequisite for a prosperous Afghanistan is inclusivity and integration of women in the country's social, political and economic circles. The international community has a grave responsibility towards the Afghan women. Human rights violations in Afghanistan need to be closely monitored to ensure further escalation of the already existing humanitarian crisis in the country. Women need to be assisted in every possible manner to ensure the protection of their rights. In order for the Taliban government to roll back the harsh policies that they have introduced regarding women's rights, the Taliban must be incentivised in the form of financial assistance and relief.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, focusing on trivial issues such as whether women should observe veil or not should be the least of the Taliban's concern right now. The government should

turn its attention to crucial problems such as the country's fragile economy, the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, protection of rights of women and minorities and overcoming the various governance impediments that the Taliban regime currently faces. The Taliban seem to have learned nothing from their past experience of governance.

### Notes and References

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