

Taliban's Second Takeover: Impact on Women Education and Freedom of Expression

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Introduction

A nation's economic and political stability and educational facilities reflect the future of its coming generations and how a country can maximise the potential of its youth. Afghanistan experienced four decades of warfare as major powers fought each other for control of the country. The argument of victory and defeat aside, what Afghanistan experienced during these years was thousands of casualties, poverty, a large-scale exodus of people to neighbouring countries, a financial crisis, civil wars, and political instability, all of which contributed to the current state of affairs in the country. The abrupt changes in the regime led to serious implications for women education and freedom of expression.

- First, hundreds of university professors, educational expertise, and experienced lecturers left Afghanistan for their safety.
- Second, the relatively less educated people who were in favour of the Taliban took the lead in the government.

Historical data shows that from 2011 to 2021 the literacy rate in Afghanistan increased 5.82 per cent.¹ during these years the government attempted to work on improving education but it did not provide adequate funding for the purpose because Afghanistan was a warzone against the Taliban and the

Islamic state (IS) and considerable funds were diverted to the war. There was uncertainty about the future of the country immediately after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. However, after a few months, the population came to accept the administration of the Taliban and gradually formed a habit with them. Researchgate is an online platform to which scholars and experts from various universities in Afghanistan contribute. The publications focus primarily on contemporary issues such as girls' education, foreign policy, the impact of war, relationships with major powers, the financial crisis, banking methods, and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and its impact on international relations.²

It demonstrates how the Taliban's victory altered the constitution, barred girls from attending schools, affected freedom of speech and employment opportunities, caused large-scale migration, prohibited women from working, and other key issues that confront them and challenge their administration.³

Restrictions on Women Education

In the early months of their rule, the Taliban prohibited girls from attending secondary school and institutions of higher education.⁵ They do not claim that female education will never reopen; instead, they provide justifications for why these institutions of higher learning are prohibited. For instance, they maintain that they will first create the

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necessary Islamic foundation and environment for girls' education, and only then will they permit them to attend schools and universities. Education was not prohibited in one go but in phases. Initially, there were suggestions for separate class times for boys and girls, then separate classrooms. Later, universities were advised to allocate specific days for each gender. Finally, in December 2022, a decree was issued banning higher education beyond sixth grade in schools and closing female-only universities.

Of course, this decision will have an impact on the future of Afghanistan's academia. The country produced 286 scientific publications in 2020.² Research shows that the latest figure of Afghanistan's scientific and technical journals, articles, and publication is 120. These figures show that reduced numbers of academic research, a disrupted academic system, banned girls' education centres (school and university) are some of the key factors contributing to a decline in research in Afghanistan.⁴

All the Taliban members do not necessarily support this decision, though. Senior figures like Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, the current deputy foreign minister who was part of the Doha negotiation, has openly criticised it and stated repeatedly in the media that no one can deny a girl education because Islam does not mention such a thing. He has stressed the importance of reopening schools for girl students beyond grade 6, saying that the main reasons people are distanced from the interim Afghan government is the continued ban on female education.⁵ Before the advent of the Taliban, around 1,444,000 girls were enrolled in schools and approximately 112,000 female university students enrolled in universities in Afghanistan.⁶ This is a major loss

for Afghanistan's education and also the country's reputation for development.

Data indicates a considerable decline in publications at Kabul University, which is the top-ranked university in the country, from 2020 to 2023. In 2020, the university had 72 publications; in 2021, it had 150; however, in 2022, there was a considerable decrease to just 9 publications; regrettably, in 2023, there were only 4 publications overall, indicating a decline of the regular and normal progress of academia in Afghanistan.⁷

The Taliban Regime's Influence on Afghan Mass Media

In a dictatorship a small number of people control the entire system with bureaucracy that is a group of unelected government officials who set administrative policy. In an authoritarian regime, no one has the same rights and most act against democratic values. Everyone's freedom and liberty are restricted by the regime in accordance with its own rules and people have less access to the media, are unable to speak freely, and are unable to openly criticise the government and its policies. It directly affects freedom of speech and human rights, as writers are unable to reflect societal themes and discuss the subjects they are working on when under pressure.

During the five years of the Taliban from 1996 to 2001,⁸ the media was completely suppressed. Only a small number of print media outlets would disseminate the Taliban Emirate's message under Sharia law. The fall of Taliban regime led the Western-backed government to establish democratic norms in the country, which somewhat changed the direction of Afghan education towards progress. The 2004 amendment to the constitution in Article 34

permitted the operation of independent media. It stated:

Freedom of expression shall be inviolable. Every Afghan shall have the right to express thoughts through speech, writing, illustrations as well as other means in accordance with provisions of this constitution. Every Afghan shall have the right, according to provisions of law, to print and publish on subjects without prior submission to state authorities. Directives related to the press, radio and television as well as publications and other mass media shall be regulated by law.⁸

Notwithstanding the existing obstacles, media organisations and journalists have risked their lives in conflict, insurgent attacks from the Taliban and ISIS, warlords, strongmen, and corrupt officials. Media organizations and journalists have continued to do their jobs even when doing so put them and their families at risk. Journalists and analysts are still being pressured to decide on editorial choices based on fear rather than the interests of the public. It's a part of a wider trend of declining freedom of expression and access to information.

It is not easy for journalists to constantly be the targets of threats, intimidation, and assault.⁹ They implore the de facto Taliban authorities to ensure press freedom and independence as well as the security of both male and female journalists. A national Media Violations Commission has been reactivated by the de facto authorities in order to communicate with journalists, however, the legal landscape for the media is still undefined¹⁰ According to Reproters Sans Frontiers (RSF) data in 2022, women journalists have been impacted more than their male counterparts: 76.19 per cent of women journalists are no longer working in Afghanistan and women journalists are not working in 11 provinces

(Badghis, Helmand, Daikundi, Ghazni, Wardak, Nimroz, Nuristan, Paktika, Paktia, Samangan, and Zabul). Of the 656 women journalists who continue working, 84.6 per cent are based in the Kabul region,¹⁰ and reporters and writers constantly navigate vague and frequently arbitrary reporting boundaries while navigating the constant danger of closure and harassment. Afghanistan's ranking in RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index dropped from 122 in 2020 to 156 (out of 180 countries)¹¹

In the ten years after the Taliban, Afghanistan's printing and publishing sector expanded by about 500 per cent.¹² During 2010-20, the country released close to 3,500 publications. Approximately 500 new titles were being created on average during those years. Books for children as well as books in fields including science, medicine, journalism, languages, literature, and poetry were published. Textbooks were the main type of books published on academic topics like science and medicine. They provided students with a foundational understanding and pointed them towards more reputable textbooks that were imported and published elsewhere¹³

Conclusion

Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban quickly retook Kabul, wiping out two decades of slow but steady progress toward free and independent media. Thousands of journalists were compelled to hide, leave their homes, or remove their social media accounts.

The disorderly withdrawal triggered a major crisis for Afghan journalists, intensifying the existing instability for media practitioners. Efforts were quickly made to evacuate journalists and support personnel of media organizations and non-governmental bodies



through arranging private flights and navigating complex international asylum and visa processes. Since the second takeover of the Taliban, freedom of speech remains limited, half of Afghan society is kept away from study and research, the environment for education and research has changed, experts have left or are leaving the country, leadership is mostly with

the Taliban fighters that are expert in fighting but not familiar with diplomacy, education, management, and policy making. One of the consequences is that more than two years since their takeover, the Taliban have not received a *de jure* recognition for their government in Afghanistan.

Notes and References

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