



STATUS OF WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN AFTER TALIBAN CONTROL

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ABSTRACT:

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban entered Afghanistan's capital city of Kabul and took control of the country.

Over the past 36 months, human rights violations against women and girls have mounted steadily. Despite initial promises that women would be allowed to exercise their rights within Sharia law—including the right to work and to study—the Taliban has systematically excluded women and girls from public life.

Taliban rule has had a devastating impact on Afghan women and girls, new research shows, Human Rights Watch and the Human Rights Institute at San Jose State University (SJSU) said today. The organizations looked at the conditions for women. The Taliban have imposed rights-violating policies that have created huge barriers to women's and girls' health and education, curtailed freedom of movement, expression, and association, and deprived many of earned income. Afghanistan's rapidly escalating humanitarian crisis exacerbates these abuses,

Richard Bennett, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, said his new report found that the Taliban's institutionalised system of gender oppression, established and enforced through its violations of women's and girls' fundamental rights, was widespread and systematic, and appeared to constitute an attack on the entire civilian population, amounting to crimes against humanity

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THE FRAGILITY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN AFGHANISTAN

In 1920, the first school for girls opened in Afghanistan. In 1991, 7,000 women enrolled in higher education, 230,000 girls were in schools, 190 women were professors, and 22,000 women taught in schools across the country (Kaplan, 1992)

By the end of the Taliban's first rule in 2001, less than one million Afghan children were in school, and none of them were girls

In 2004, a new constitution enshrined gender equality and reserved 27 per cent of seats in parliament for women. By 2021, Afghan women had secured 69 out of 249 seats in parliament, women were negotiating peace across the country, and laws were in place allowing women to include their names on their children's birth certificates and identification cards. There was a Ministry of Women's Affairs, an independent human rights commission, and a law-making violence against women a crime. But more than this, women were visible—from law, politics, and journalism, to sidewalks, parks, and schools.

Over the last three years, the Taliban have issued 80 edicts,

54 of these directly target women and girls . The roll backs started as soon as they took power in August 2021, when they ordered women to stay at home because their foot soldiers were "not familiar with seeing women outside the house and were not trained to respect women. One year into their rule, and it was clear gender segregation and restricting women's movement remained the cornerstone of their vision for society. The so-called "Taliban 2.0" never eventuated. On women's rights, Afghanistan went back to the future.

The Taliban have imposed and enforced rules and policies that comprehensively bar women and girls from exercising their fundamental rights, including freedom of assembly, movement, work, and education. These rules also undermine other rights, such as the rights to life, livelihood, and access to health care, food, and water. In addition to the ban on women working in most jobs for the UN and international NGOs, Taliban authorities previously prohibited women from working in the public sector or holding senior positions within their central or provincial

institutions. Most women who worked for the former government have been unable to resume their jobs.

Now since three years into their rule. Women have been banned from going to parks, gyms, and public bathing houses. They have been stopped from pursuing education beyond the sixth grade. Their ability to work outside of health and education is all but prohibited. There are no women in cabinet and there is no Ministry of Women's Affairs, effectively removing women's right to political participation. Women are required to have a male chaperone when they are travelling more than 78 kilometres. They're also required to cover their faces in public. The cumulative effect of the Taliban's edicts and behaviours has largely resulted in the imprisonment of women within the walls of their homes.

Actions by Taliban authorities through 2023 suggest the crackdown is deepening, including their refusal to allow 63 women to travel to the United Arab Emirates to accept scholarships, their closer of all beauty salons, which cost women 60,000 jobs, and their ban on women visiting the Band- E- Amir national park

Taliban security forces have used excessive force to disperse women protesting against Taliban policies and have arbitrarily detained some female protesters, holding them for hours or days. In some cases, their family members have also been detained. Detained women protesters and their family members have sometimes been tortured. Among the women's rights protesters detained in 2023 were Neda Parwani and Zholia Parsi, both taken by the Taliban in September.

The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls visited Afghanistan in April and May. They presented a report to the UN Human Rights Council in June describing the widespread and systematic discrimination to which women and girls in Afghanistan are subjected, concluding it "constitutes gender persecution and an institutionalized framework of gender apartheid."

"Afghan women and girls are facing both the collapse of their rights and dreams and risks to their basic survival," said Halima Kazem-Stojanovic, a core faculty member of SJSU's Human Rights Institute and a scholar on Afghanistan. "They are caught between Taliban abuses and actions by the international community that are pushing Afghans further into desperation every day."

The Taliban have banned women and girls from secondary and higher education and altered curricula to focus more on religious studies. They dictate what women must wear, how they should travel, workplace segregation by sex, and even what kind of cell phones women should have. They enforce these rules through intimidation and inspections.

"Taliban policies have rapidly turned many women and girls into virtual prisoners in their homes, depriving the country of one of its most precious resources, the skills and talents of the female half of the population." Said Heater Barr, associate women's rights director at Human

Rights Watch.

In recent weeks, as Taliban forces have surged triumphantly across the country, it has felt like the pretence of moderation is over, with alarming reports emerging of school closers, movement restrictions, and women forced to leave their jobs. The Taliban spokesman has continued to pledge respect for women's rights, but his claims ring hollower than ever.

LACK OF POLITICAL WILL SHOWN BY INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The countries departing Afghanistan have claimed that they will exercise influence over the Taliban based on the Taliban's need for development aid or desire for legitimacy and recognition. These may be useful levers — or they may be wishful thinking. Carefully targeted sanctions and aid conditionality, along with UN mechanisms, such as UN Security Council actions, the ongoing involvement of the International Criminal Court, treaty bodies, special rapporteur, and the role of the UN Mission Assistance to Afghanistan present some other opportunities — if the Taliban is susceptible to such influence.

Another challenge is the limits of political will, especially on women's rights. A few countries, including Sweden and Canada, both of which have played major roles in Afghanistan, have staked a claim to having a feminist foreign policy, but even these have been alarmingly silent as horrified Afghan women watched the Taliban triumph. During the decades of international presence, troop-contributing nations paid lip service and cash toward women's rights, but rarely political capital, and over time the lip service and cash dwindled too. In 2011, the Washington Post reported on how efforts to support women's rights were being stripped out of US programs, quoting an official who said, "All those pet rocks in our rucksack were taking us down." US aid funding to Afghanistan fell from \$16,748 million in FY 2010 to \$3,120 million in FY 2021

The international community's tool kit is limited, and their political will is questionable. But as shocking as Taliban abuses against women were in 2001, they are more so now. Women around the world have fought for their rights, with uneven but important successes. In the last 20 years, women and girls in Afghanistan have enjoyed a measure of freedom and are demanding more of it. Standing beside Afghan women in their struggle, and finding tools to pressure the Taliban and the political will to do so, is the least — the very least — the international community could do.

RECOMMENDATION

To support the rebuilding of the women's conditions in Afghanistan The women's movement is the key engine driving progress and accountability on women's rights and gender equality—not just in Afghanistan, but everywhere in world. Advocating for restoring, protecting, and promoting the full spectrum of women's and girls' rights and creating spaces for Afghan women themselves to

advocate for their right to live free and equal lives.

International community should Targeted, substantial, and systematic funding to programmes that address women's rights and empowerment.

Prioritize hearing from Afghan women directly on their needs and strengthening advocacy for the full spectrum of their rights, including women's right to work and engage in public and political life.

Facilitate women's meaningful participation in all stakeholder engagement on Afghanistan—this includes in any delegations meeting with Taliban officials.

Scaling up provision of services for women, by women to meet overwhelming needs. Health, education, and protection services are not only essential but, in this environment, they are lifesaving.

Supporting women-led businesses and employment opportunities for women across all sectors. The full return of women to work is key to transforming Afghanistan's economy and lifting the country out of poverty. Invest in services for women, jobs for women and women-led businesses, invest in women leaders and women's organizations.

CONCLUSION

Many Afghan women and girls feel that they are now invisible, and that the world has forgotten them—compounding their invisibility. Afghanistan is not the only country in the world where women's rights are being rolled back. But what is happening in Afghanistan is an alarm bell for all of us because it shows how decades of progress on gender equality and women's rights can be literally wiped out in months.

It is a clarion call to everyone that the fight for women's rights in Afghanistan is a global fight, and a battle for women's rights everywhere.

What we all do—or fail to do—for women and girls in Afghanistan is the ultimate test of who we are as a global community, and what we stand for.

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