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Women's position in Afghanistan: Recent challenges

Abstract: The recent declaration by the Taliban Ministry of Morality, prohibiting women from speaking or showing their faces in public, marks yet another troubling step in the ongoing erosion of women's rights in Afghanistan. Framed as part of the regime's effort to promote virtue and eliminate vice, this move highlights the Taliban's unwavering commitment to enforcing a strict and oppressive interpretation of Islamic law that systematically marginalizes women. Measures such as the bans on music, the prohibition of mixed-gender interactions, and restrictions on women traveling alone contribute to a stifling environment of control and repression. These actions are not only aimed at enforcing a specific moral code but also serve to consolidate the Taliban's power by keeping the population, particularly women, in a constant state of fear and subjugation. This article will examine the current conditions of women under the Taliban regime, comparing them to the earlier Taliban era. Additionally, we will address the limitations of initiatives by Western-dominated powers aimed at improving the status of women.

Keywords: Afghanistan, women, Taliban I, Western Allies, Taliban 2.0

Introduction: Afghanistan is a deeply traditional, religiously-driven society, where women's rights have

always been at risk. Afghan women have endured suffering for decades, regardless of who has been in power—whether it be monarchs, Soviet invaders, the Mujahedeen, the Taliban, the US-backed government of Hamid Karzai, or the current Taliban 2.0 regime. Each ruling authority has impacted women's rights in different ways. While some regimes saw limited improvements, women's rights have largely been violated throughout most periods of governance. This paper seeks to highlight the severe challenges women endure by providing a concise overview of both the historical and current Taliban rule.

Objective of the Study

- To analyse the conditions of women in Afghan society
- To examine the erosion of rights of women during Taliban regime (1996- 2001)
- To analyse the failure of US allied powers to empower women in Afghanistan
- To analyse recent challenges of women in Taliban regime phase ii (2020 onwards)

Methodology:

The aim of this study is to examine the status of women in Afghanistan, focusing on the challenges they face under the current Taliban regime. The research utilizes primary sources, including reports from the United Nations, government publications, and data compiled by major international organizations. In addition, secondary sources such as books, reports, journal articles, academic papers, newspaper articles, and online resources are also used to support the analysis.

Historical Status of women in Afghanistan

In ancient times, women held a high social status and were treated as equals to men. However, the situation began to deteriorate when the Taliban took over Afghanistan. The process of modernization started during the rule of Abdur Rahaman Khan. He gave some rights to women regarding marriage and divorce. Even women were granted property rights of their father and husband¹. After the death of Abdur Rahman, his son Amir Habibullah Khan also follow the same way to uplift the conditions of women. He mainly emphasized to reduce marriage expenses to upgrade the economic condition of women². After sudden death of Habibullah led to his son Amanullah ascending to the throne, initiating a period of full-scale modernization in Afghanistan. He introduced modern culture and norms and gave freedom to women³ Amanullah started women education all over Afghanistan. According to him girls should not be confined home. During the 1940s and 1950s, women began working as nurses, doctors, and teachers. In 1964, the third

Constitution granted women the right to vote and to participate in elected politics. The late 1970s marked a second wave of significant reforms for women, with an increase in female education, more women faculty members at universities, and more women in Parliament. In 1978, a nationwide literacy campaign was launched, benefiting both women and men of all ages⁴ But the situation was changing rapidly when soviet power retreat from Afghanistan. Very soon the Mujahedeen took control and women were vanished from public life.

Condition of Women during Taliban regime phase I

Afghanistan a small nation of South Asia bordered by Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China. After the withdrawal of Soviet forces Taliban, a fundamentalist Islamic group, took control of the country in 1996⁵ Under Taliban rule, women were restricted to move freely in society. They are prohibited from speaking to men who are not close relatives and are not allowed to travel on buses with men. Additionally, their freedom is further constrained by the enforced burqa, a full-body covering resembling a tent, with a mesh screen for the eyes⁶ Under Taliban rule, women have become almost entirely invisible. The Taliban's strict regulations prevent Afghan women from accessing even the most basic necessities of life⁷. Under Taliban rule, women's roles were limited to domestic chores, with doors shut and windows covered. In the Taliban-controlled state, women were treated as objects, possessions, rather than as living beings⁸. The international community strongly opposed such repression against humanity. When the US-led forces took control of Afghanistan, it brought a little hope for the advancement of women's rights and status.

Inability to engage women of US-led Government in Afghanistan

After the fall of repressive Taliban regime not only the people of Afghanistan but also the world thought that the rights and liberties of Afghan women soon be restored. But the situation was totally opposite. As they experience same kind of repression as like Taliban regime⁹. In 2004, Human Rights Watch reported that same kind of deprivation was going on by the warlords.

However, a broader analysis reveals that the Karzai government failed to adequately safeguard women's rights. For instance, in 2008, President Karzai forgave two men convicted of rape, and they remain free to this day Many female members of parliament, who still encounter threats, are not provided with the same level of protection and security as their male counterparts¹⁰ What Karzai had promised to the international community for the improvement of women's rights stands in stark contrast to his actions. In June 2010, he delivered a speech in support of the Taliban, saying, "Dear Taliban," and invited them to "come to us," claiming they were "normal people" just like others. He added

that the Taliban were afraid they didn't have a place in Afghanistan and remarked, "Personally, I know these kinds of people... During the Jihad, some were my friends."¹¹ In December 2003, during the constitutional discussions at the Loya Jirga, its Chairman, Sighbatullah Mojadeddi, told a female delegate: "Do not try to place yourself on the same level as men. Even God has not given you equal rights because, under His decision, two women are counted as equal to one man"¹². However, harshness and extremity of the Taliban's repression went beyond most other dictator of the world.

Disillusionment came from Afghanistan's democratic leadership in 2009, when President Hamid Karzai approved a family law that discriminated against women and partially reinstated Sharia law in their favour¹³ Ashraf Ghani became the president of Afghanistan in 2014. He along with first lady of the country took some initiative for the protection and promotion of rights of women. These transformations between 2014 and 2019 were revolutionary. But the process was not existed for long periods. Thus, it is evident that women's subjugation persisted not only under the Taliban but also during the period of Western-influenced governance.

Recent Challenges during Taliban 2.0 phase

After twenty years of ruling, the U.S.-led armed forces finally withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021. Since then, the Taliban has regained the country, raising concerns about the rise of an autocratic regime that never respects women's right¹⁴. The Taliban assert that they have made progress and modernized, and are now ready to adopt more moderate views on Afghan society. They promise that women will be granted rights and freedoms in accordance with Sharia law¹⁵ People around the world hoped that the nearly 20 years of US-led rule in Afghanistan would have shifted the Taliban's stance on women. However, those hopes were dashed when the new Taliban regime implemented even stricter policies against women.

The Taliban has once again restricted women's movement alone. Along with this, they have issued a set of "guidelines" for public transportation of women. Hijab became compulsory and complete ban on playing music¹⁶. Gender segregation remains prevalent in higher education. Women are permitted to attend universities, but only under rigid regulations and with strict gender separation. They can only be taught by female professors, a group that is in short supply. For instance, in 2018, just one out of every ten university employees were woman¹⁷. Women are completely absent from the higher education sector, as girls are being excluded from secondary education¹⁸. Since the Taliban's return, the health sector has been in a dire condition. Many times women are not getting medical help properly¹⁹ The conditions of health care system was worse than the earlier Taliban regime²⁰. As like the first Taliban rule the present government targeted women involved in politics

due to their gender²¹. They declared that women are restricted from holding portfolios of the government, a policy evident in the entirely male makeup of the de facto government²². Islamic community different parts of the world criticise the policies of present Taliban government in the context of women educational rights. They warned them to change their views²³ But the Taliban authorities opposes them and follow the repressive policies more than earlier.

Conclusion

So the present Taliban regime is much more restrictive towards women than the earlier. It was presuming that after the fall of first Taliban western dominated government introduced some modernized policies which is helpful for the promotion and protection of rights of Afghan women. But they failed to engage women properly to public life because of fear of hardliner of patriarchal society. So the new Taliban became much more destructive towards women at the present time. Neglecting large number of people leads to instability to the nation. To protect the rights of women along with Afghan people, the international community should come forward to oppose the atrocities of Taliban. It can be said that no nation can progress without the contribution of its women. In this context, we can conclude with President Barack Obama's statement "The best measure of whether a country will develop is how it treats its women. If a country educates its girls and women, and grants them equal rights, the country will certainly move forward. However, if women are oppressed, abused, and remain illiterate, the country will fall behind."

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