



Women in Afghanistan: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

Afghanistan has been the toughest and (it would not be incorrect to say) the worst place for women. The journey of an Afghan woman has been extremely challenging where she struggles for basic rights from the 'cradle to grave'. Although Afghanistan has not seen peace and stability for more than four decades now, the Afghan women have managed to earn freedom and equal rights in the society under the civilian rule in the last 18 years. Indeed, one of the most critical achievements of the Afghan state has been *women empowerment*. One of the major concerns within Afghanistan and especially, Afghan women is that what will be the future of women in the country given the fact that the Taliban are likely to hold a political position in the new establishment? The paper explores the answers to this basic question.

Key Words: Women, Maternity, Opportunities, Challenges, Mainstream.

Introduction

Terror attack on the maternity hospital in Kabul on May 12, 2020, in which more than 16 women and newborn children were massacred by the militant group was probably the worst attack in terms of brutality that the Afghan state has witnessed in the past four decades. Marwa Amini, the Afghan interior spokesperson commented, "Attacks on pregnant mothers, on sick people and on new-borns that have new eyes to the world are not in any dictionary. New-borns breathe the first moments of life with the most horrific scenes. Shame on the terrorists."¹

Afghanistan has been the toughest and (it would not be incorrect to say) the worst place for women. The journey of an Afghan woman has been extremely challenging where she struggles for basic rights from the 'cradle to grave'. Decades of civil wars in Afghanistan have provided the militant groups- both the mainstream militant groups, like the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network and relatively new militant outfits, like the Islamic State Khorasan, a conducive and fertile ground to operate, expand and conduct deadly attacks. Although Afghanistan has not seen peace and stability for more than four decades now, the Afghan women have managed to earn freedom and equal rights in the society under the civilian rule in the last 18 years. Indeed, one of the most critical achievements of the Afghan state has been *women empowerment*.

The United States (US) and the Taliban signed a peace agreement on February 29, 2020, paving the way for the withdrawal of the US and foreign forces. The agreement moderated by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad went through various ups and downs, but certainly gave a ray of hope to the Afghans. The agreement charts the exit of the US and foreign forces from

¹'Unforgivable': Attack on Afghan Hospital Kills At Least 16, Including New-borns", *npr*, Mar 12, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/12/854387970/maternity-hospital-in-kabul-attacked-heart-wrenching-reactions-follow>. Accessed on June 1, 2020.

Afghanistan and talks about a political settlement with the intra-Afghan dialogue. The deal was meant to bring in peace and all-inclusive governance in Afghanistan (with the Taliban), but it faces multiple challenges and Kabul is yet to witness respite from constant Taliban attacks.

While there are a number of questions that are unanswered in Afghanistan, one of the major concerns within Afghanistan and especially, Afghan women is that what will be the future of women in the country given the fact that the Taliban are likely to hold a political position in the new establishment? Will the Afghan women continue to cherish the hard-earned freedom (post-2001) or the Taliban will go back to their pre-2001 policies regarding women? Will the new political infrastructure involving the Taliban ensure women's rights? Taliban have been known for their strong position against women's freedom and basic rights. The paper aims to explore answers to these critical questions in Afghanistan.

The Taliban Gender Policies

Traditionally the Afghan women occupied positions of respect in the society and they actively participated in all spheres of society. The transformation for the lives of Afghan women under the oppressive and brutal Taliban rule (1996-2001) was drastic and painful. The Taliban implemented an extreme interpretation of Sharia which was colored by the austere Wahhabi doctrines of the madrassas' Saudi supported and encouraged. The Taliban closed all schools for girls and women were not allowed to step out. Going out for women carried strict conditionalities and non-adherence to the Taliban verdict resulted in a death penalty. Without dwelling into the historical details, it would be useful to have an understanding of the *Taliban decrees relating to women and other cultural issues, after the capture of Kabul, 1996*:²

“Decree announced by General Presidency of Amr Bil Maruf and Nai Az Munkar (Religious Police.)Kabul, November 1996. Women, you should not step outside your residence. If you go outside the house, you should not be like women who used to go with fashionable clothes wearing much cosmetics and appearing in front of every men before the coming of Islam.

Women should not create such an opportunity to attract the attention of useless people who will not look at them with a good eye. In case women are required to go outside the residence for the purposes of education, social needs or social services they should cover themselves in accordance with Islamic sharia regulations. If the women are going outside with fashionable, ornamental, tight, and charming clothes to show themselves they will be cursed by the Islamic sharia and should not expect to go to heaven. Female patients should go to female physicians. In case a male physician is needed, the female patient should be accompanied by her close relative.”

In 1997, new regulations were issued under a new edict. Some of the excerpts given by Ahmed Rashid define the extent of women suppression during the Taliban regime. “The new regulation banned women from wearing high heels, making a noise with their shoes while they are walked and wearing make-up.”³The edict issued in 1997 specified: "Stylish dress and decoration of women in hospitals are forbidden. Women are duty-bound to behave with dignity, to walk calmly and refrain from hitting their shoes on the ground, to walk calmly and refrain from hitting their shoes on the ground, which makes noises. Women are not allowed to work

²Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2010), Appendix I, pp 247-249.

³Rashid, *Ibid*, p. 105

in any field except the medical sector. Women working in the medical sector should not sit in the seat next to the driver. No Afghan women has the right to be transported in the same car as foreigners”⁴

The situation deteriorated significantly for women during the Taliban rule, as even before the Taliban came into power in 1996 the state of women had taken a blow due to continued civil war which destroyed the family and community structures in Afghanistan. Ahmed Rashid in his outstanding book, *Taliban*, shared his personal experience and conversation with the Afghan Taliban and their rationale for women oppression: “Taliban leaders repeatedly told me that if they gave women greater freedom or a chance to go to school, they would lose the support of their rank and file, who would be disillusioned by a leadership that has compromised principles under pressure. They also claimed their recruits would be weakened and subverted by the possibility of sexual opportunities and thus not fight with the same zeal. So, the oppression of women became a benchmark for the Taliban’s Islamic radicalism.”⁵

The US-Taliban Agreement (2020) and Women Rights

The negotiations of the US-Taliban agreement (2020) did not include the Afghan government as the Taliban were against the inclusion of President Ashraf Ghani and his aides whom they term as the *puppets of the west*.

The agreement mainly talks about four points:⁶

“1. Guarantees and enforcement mechanisms that will prevent the use of the soil of Afghanistan by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies.

2. Guarantees, enforcement mechanisms, and the announcement of a timeline for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan.

3. After the announcement of guarantees for a complete withdrawal of foreign forces and timeline in the presence of international witnesses, and guarantees and the announcement in the presence of international witnesses that Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies.

4. A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations. The participants of intra-Afghan negotiations will discuss the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, including joint implementation mechanisms, which will be announced along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan.”

The deal focuses on the withdrawal of the foreign troops and assurance for the US that the Afghan soil will not be used/allowed to be used to target the US and its allies. The agreement

⁴Ibid, pp 105-106

⁵Ibid, p. 111

⁶ “The U.S.- Taliban peace deal” *The Washington Post*, February 29, 2020, Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America February 29, 2020, which corresponds to Rajab 5, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 10, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar, https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/u-s-taliban-peace-deal/7aab0f58-dd5c-430d-9557-1b6672d889c3/?itid=lk_inline_manual_3. Accessed on May 1, 2020.

does not ensure the protection of women rights or for that matter human rights in Afghanistan under the future regime.

Afghan Women Today: Achievements and Challenges

Ambassador Amar Sinha, former ambassador to Afghanistan, in a webinar hosted by *Indian Council of World Affairs* (ICWA) on June 4, 2020, talked about the women empowerment in Afghanistan: "This war while of course had serious cost for Afghan women has also empowered them in a way, one of the most amazing stories of success in the last twenty years is the status of women and their achievements...what they have achieved till now...Afghanistan has a significant representation of women in the Afghan parliament which is nearly two and half times more than India...this far exceeds the reservation they have got. The reservation is 25 percent.... since 2010 they have actively elected more women in the parliament."⁷ Women empowerment has been one of the major achievements of Afghanistan in the last 18 years. There has been significant improvement in girl's education. Although Afghanistan lags much behind in numbers and quality of education when compared to other developing nations, the girl's enrollment in schools did increase over the last 15 years. According to *Education Cannot Wait*, a global fund dedicated to education in emergencies and protracted crisis- In 1999, in Afghanistan, not even a single girl was enrolled at the secondary level education and at the primary level the number of enrolled girls stood at 9,000. In 2003, 2.4 million girls were enrolled in school and by 2013, the number went up by about 35 percent.⁸ According to an *Afghanistan government* report, in 2015, more than 8 million children were in school, 39 percent of whom were girls. *Human Rights Watch* reported that according to a Ministry of Education official, in 2017 Rights there were 9.3 million children in school, 39 percent of whom are girls.⁹ The Afghan government has been accused of misrepresenting the data, but the fact is that the numbers came up from 'zero' (when the Taliban completely banned the girl education) and this can be viewed as an achievement for the Afghan women.

The status of women has changed significantly in terms of their basic rights. According to Mary Akrami Sahak, *Director of Afghan women's Network*:

"It's incomparable...Before, women were hardly allowed to leave their houses. Today, we can walk freely, without a burqa and a male escort, throughout the country. Before, there was not a single school for girls. Today more than 250,000 girls go to private schools and universities and millions of girls go to public schools."¹⁰

⁷Ambassador Amar Sinha at the Webinar on 'What (Afghan) Women Want: What do Peace Talks with the Taliban mean for Afghan Women?' ICWA, New Delhi, June 4, 2020.

⁸"Women and girls take the lead in Afghanistan", *Education Cannot Wait*, <https://www.educationcannotwait.org/girls-day-afghanistan/>. Accessed on June 17, 2020.

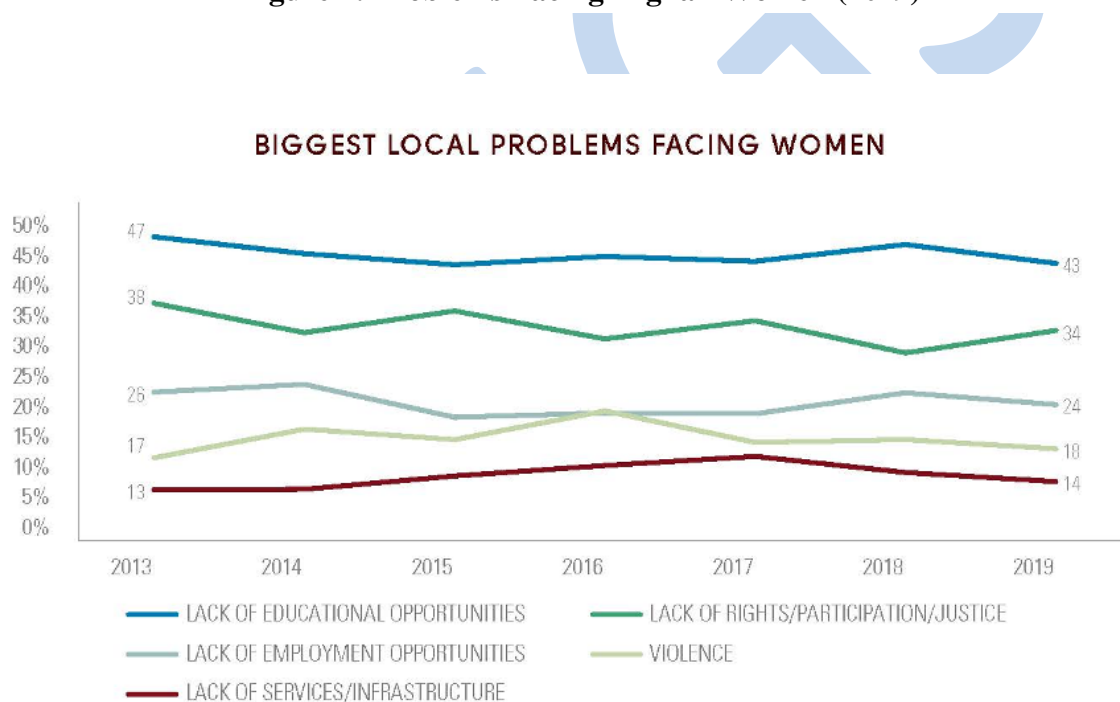
⁹"I Won't Be a Doctor and One Day You'll be Sick" Girls Access to Education in Afghanistan, *Human Rights Watch*, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/afghanistan1017_web.pdf. Accessed on June 10, 2020.

¹⁰Women of Afghanistan: "We came out of the Dark. We will never go back", *Cordaid*, March 4, 2019, <https://www.cordaid.org/en/news/women-of-afghanistan-we-will-never-go->

According to the *United States Institute of Peace*, as of 2019:¹¹

- Millions of women actively participated in the Afghan elections. More than 25 percent of the parliament seats are occupied by women. In 2019, at least 18 seats were occupied by women as ministers or deputy ministers and four served as ambassadors.
- More than 68,000 women instructors are employed in schools and universities (including 800 university professors)
- More than 6,000 women proudly serve as judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, army personnel, and police.
- Approximately 10,000 women are serving as doctors, nurses, and health professionals.
- Around 1,070, Female journalists are actively working throughout Afghanistan.
- Around 1,150 women entrepreneurs have invested \$77 million in different businesses all across the country which has provided job opportunities for 77,000 Afghan women and men.

Figure 1: Problems Facing Afghan Women (2019)



[back/?gclid=EAJaIQobChMIp8fWgv-B6gIVCyQrCh30LwqFEAAYAiAAEgLjCPD_BwE](https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/03/afghanistan-talks-no-women-no-peace). Accessed on June 18, 2020.

¹¹Belquis Ahmadi, “Afghan Talks: No Women, No Peace”, United States Institute of Peace, March 1, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/03/afghanistan-talks-no-women-no-peace>. Accessed on June 19, 2020.

Source: A Survey of the Afghan People, Afghanistan in 2019, *The Asia Foundation*, 2019, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019_Afghan_Survey_Full-Report.pdf. Accessed on June 10, 2020.

There has been progress in terms of uplifting of women's status in Afghan society, but they continue to face a number of challenges (as seen in Figure 1) owing to poverty, lack of infrastructure and continued instability and violence in the country etc. Lack of educational opportunities remains the biggest challenge, followed by lack of employment opportunities, violence, lack of infrastructure, etc. (Figure 1)

Ms. Fawzia Koofi, Afghan Politician and Woman's Rights Activist Leader of a newly established political party in Afghanistan, *Movement for Change*, expressed serious concerns regarding women rights in Afghanistan in the coming time:

"As we move towards a peace settlement in Afghanistan the concern of the Afghan women remains a concern and what will happen in a political settlement....more than four decades of war women have been the first victim of war.... War has been very ugly and the latest attacks in Afghanistan has been the most brutal targeting the most vulnerable group of the society. Pregnant women. The good thing is there is political consensus over peace settlement with the Taliban...we have overcome the political disputes between President Ghani and Abdullah...the women of Afghanistan have been pushing for the past three years ..pushing for inclusion in negotiation and their voices to be heard."¹²

The US negotiations with the Taliban lacked representation from the Afghan government and Afghan women. Mary Akrami talked about concerns regarding lack of representation, "It's the absence of the Afghan civil society and women, in particular, that really undermine the outcome of the talks."¹³

Afghan women are apprehensive and unsure if their rights will be taken care in the emerging political/power-sharing scenario in Afghanistan mainly owing to three factors:

1. The Taliban have been known for their radical ideology and harsh gender policies which banned freedom for women in the past. Although the Taliban at this point in time are saying the right things and holding a position that they support equal treatment for women. At a webinar hosted by the *Global Counter Terrorism Council, GCTC Manthan*, "The Afghan Peace Process: The Way Ahead", on 23 April, 2020, Muhammad Suhail Shaheen, Member of the Negotiation Team and Official spokesperson Afghan Taliban was asked a direct question regarding Taliban's policy towards women and he said:

"We are committed to the women rights...education.. there is no issue with this...but according to the Islamic rule they should wear a hijab....if they want to for education...go to the university....work in offices with hijab...we have no problem with that.."But if the Taliban are serious about changing their gender policies or the current position is to appease the international community? This question remains unanswered.

2. The US-Taliban agreement does not include any form of assurance or commitment from the Taliban towards women's rights.

¹²Ms. FawziaKoofi, at theWebinar on 'What (Afghan) Women Want: What does Peace Talks with the Taliban mean for Afghan Women?' ICWA, New Delhi, June4, 2020.

¹³Women of Afghanistan, n10.

- The security situation in Afghanistan continues to remain extremely serious with unrelenting attacks by the Taliban and other non-state actors including the deadly group – Islamic State Khorasan. The Taliban has intensified attacks on the Afghan security forces killing an average of 25 to 40 Afghan security personnel every day. 189 districts in Afghanistan remain contested (See Figure 2) Continued violence is unlikely to allow a conducive environment for talks or any form of the political settlement soon. Thus, stability in Afghanistan looks like a remote possibility. This certainly is likely to further complicate the issue of equal rights for women.

Figure 2: Taliban Control in Afghanistan



Source: As cited in FrudBezhan, “The Taliban, The Government and the Islamic State: Who controls what in Afghanistan”, *RadioFreeEuropeRadioLiberty*, May 31, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-government-islamic-state-who-controls-what-in-afghanistan-/30644646.html>. Accessed on June 18, 2020.

What Lies Ahead?

Women's voices are critical in the intra-Afghan negotiations which are scheduled to discuss the political road map of Afghanistan. President Ghani has been supportive of including the Afghan women's voices and the proposed delegation from the Afghan government (for intra-Afghan negotiations) has women representation. There are logical apprehensions and fears regarding the future of women's rights in Kabul. However, some critical facts do bring in optimism:

1. Women in Afghanistan have tasted freedom and have fought a harsh battle to gain the current position with the support of the Afghan regime and financial and diplomatic assistance from the international community. A generation of women has grown up in Afghanistan since the Taliban rule ended in 2001. The Afghan women are (rightly so!) assertive and quite vocal about their rights and will continue to fight for it. Very few of them opposed the peace talks between the US and the Taliban but they certainly wanted to be a part of it. Now that the agreement has been signed, their presence in the intra-Afghan negotiations will not only help to bring in sustainable peace but will assist in safeguarding their interests.
2. Afghanistan today is not the same which the Taliban ruled in the late 1990s. The country has changed and seen an active engagement of the various international actors- governmental and non-governmental- over the last 18 years. The world is much more aware of the Afghan crisis now than it was in the 1990s.
3. The presence and extensive use of social media play a crucial role in highlighting the situation at the national and global levels.
4. The Afghan economy cannot run without the support of international economic assistance. Even after the Taliban formally come into power-sharing, they would require the international aid/assistance to run the country. The international community should be in a position to press the cause of women's rights. There is a need for an international consensus and commitment towards the cause.

India's role in Women Empowerment in Afghanistan

India has deep cultural ties and strategic interests in Afghanistan. India is one of the leading donors in Afghanistan and, by far, the largest regional donor and has invested more than \$3 billion in developmental assistance and various infrastructure projects. India's role has been constrained given the circumstances and Pakistan's continuous unhappiness over Indian presence as well as its soft power and goodwill amongst the Afghans. Post-2001, the focus of Indian activities has been on developmental projects, including industrial, hydro projects, education and health sectors as well as humanitarian assistance. India has been actively assisting the Afghan women through their capacity building programmes, promoting



entrepreneurship and professional excellence. India's developmental assistance and its educational programme have encouraged a good number of Afghan women to study in India and develop professional skills. Indian NGO- Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which is working with the women in Afghanistan and providing vocational training in areas of food processing, garment stitching, and embroidery is a distinct example of India's assistance in women empowerment in Afghanistan. India remains committed to its policy of continued developmental assistance towards Afghanistan and Afghan women. However, New Delhi's future role and ability to engage in Afghanistan would be determined by multiple factors that are likely to unfold in the coming time.

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