



# The situation of Afghan women before and after the Taliban government takeover in 2021

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**ABSTRACT:** This article describes how different types of Afghan governments affected the role and impact of women. It follows the political pathway of the country and its impact on women's education between the time of the Constitutional Monarchy, through the Russian occupation, the first Taliban government, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the present Taliban Dictatorship. Women's education and achievements in entrepreneurship as well as their withdrawal from public and working life altogether under the Taliban rule are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Afghanistan, women, education, entrepreneurship, Taliban

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

When Afghanistan was a constitutional monarchy, before 1979, its society was liberal and women living in urban areas played significant roles in education, health care, economy, politics and in social life. Also during the Soviet occupation, 1979-1989, which is widely praised for establishing gender equality in education, women continued to play a significant role in the development of the country. After the first Taliban government<sup>8</sup>, 1996-2001, women were banned from all areas of public life and working life. They lost most of their human rights (violence against women reached its picks) and had to submit to the policies, rules and regulations of the Taliban. In 2001, the Taliban regime was overthrown and replaced by the newly established Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. This lasted until 2021. With the support of the international community, women recovered their previous roles and their status in Afghan society and assumed important roles in the reconstruction of their country and beyond. The recapture of the government by the Taliban on August the 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021 set an abrupt end to these new

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<sup>8</sup> The Taliban (religious 'students' or 'seekers') government, which refers to itself by, 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' is a *Deobandi* Islamic fundamentalist, militant and jihadist political movement in Afghanistan (Ayoob 2019).



developments. “Sometimes the strongest women are the ones who love beyond all faults, cry behind closed doors, and fight battles that nobody knows about” (K. Bromberg, 2021).

Concerning Afghan women, this quotation has a deep meaning as it describes one of their most prominent characteristics: their resilience in the face of excruciating suffering. It applies to women who were forced to stay indoors instead of participating in social life, to women who renounced their human rights and to those who have been killed by the Taliban, because of insisting on their most basic rights, such as health care, education and jobs. During the first Taliban government, they established rigorous rules for women and banned them from all public and working life. After 2001, the Taliban government collapsed and the new Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was established with the help of the international community. Government and non-government institutions have supported women in their efforts to recover their rights, roles and positions in the country. As a result, a large number of Afghan girls accessed basic and higher education and subsequently were included in all areas of working life, including politics. After the recent takeover of the Afghan government by the Taliban, the previous dark days returned for Afghan women. For this reason, the authors of this article fled the country, even though this meant leaving everybody and everything behind and trying to resettle in Italy which welcomed us with generosity for which we are deeply grateful.

It is noteworthy to mention that the contents of the article have been gathered from different sources such as books, reports, websites and personal witnesses of people involved. These last has been observed by the local people and narrated through phone calls, texts and voice messages. Their names and address are kept confidential for their choice.

## **2. GIRLS’ EDUCATION AND WOMEN’S SITUATION UNDER TALIBAN RULE**

The first Taliban regime follows an extreme version of the Islamic Code, enforcing rigorous rules including prohibiting women to leave their homes without a male relative and wearing a whole-body veil (Burqa). Besides, using make-up and listening to music were also forbidden. If women broke the rules, they were punished very harshly, including public humiliation and beating. Altogether, women were extremely vulnerable during this period of hopelessness.

After five years, the United States and its international allies overthrew the Taliban government and assisted in the establishment of a more liberal Islamic government. Subsequently, the situation improved for women. Enrolment in educational institutions at all levels rose rapidly, with more than 3.6 million girls enrolled by 2018, more than 2.5 million in primary schools, and over one million in secondary schools. The increase in girls’ secondary education was particularly marked, with nearly 40% enrolled in 2018 compared with 6% in 2003, according to the U.N. children's agency (Batha 2022).



Women could resume working in all areas and even assume positions as members of parliament.

Since the Taliban retook control of the country on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021, they re-introduced some rules and regulations for men and very rigorous restrictions regarding personal freedoms for women. This means that after 20 years of hard work and struggles towards emancipation, women lost their achievements again, most tragically, they lost hope and their dreams turned into nightmares. As a consequence, an enormous number of Afghan women are suffering from depression, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorders and anxiety, and many are tempted to commit or have committed suicide. The majority of Afghan women demonstrated against the Taliban in public. They demanded them to re-open schools and universities for girls and women. During those demonstrations, many women were badly abused, but this did not stop them from continuing to demonstrate. So, the Taliban were forced to re-open primary schools for girls too and also universities to some extent. Secondary and High Schools are not yet open to them. In an internal national Taliban assembly, they have promised to re-establish women's rights in all areas of life, within the framework of their fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law. After this news was proclaimed in the media, women started having some hope again, but this also got suffocated almost immediately, as nothing changed for the better. According to Taliban policy, girls and boys have to study in separate classes and at separate times, and only female teachers are allowed to teach girls. However, there are not enough female teachers for gender-segregated schooling. Hence, presently, only 70% of Afghan girls are attending primary school in urban areas, and 40% do so in rural areas, according to the Center for Global Development<sup>9</sup>. Only 16% of the pupils in primary schools are girls (Batha, 2021; 2022). Moreover, in the context of the Taliban takeover thousands of educated Afghans, including teachers, fled the country. Therefore, only about 10-15% of female teachers are properly qualified (Batha, 2021). Many families keep their daughters at home, because of safety concerns and transport difficulties. Similarly, those parents who have experienced the first Taliban government, remember the horrific crimes, including the abuse of girls and young women, they had committed. Therefore, they are afraid to send their daughters to school. For example, a 10 years old girl who was studying in grade four has been punished by the Taliban in Bamiyan. The reason for this was that on her way to school, her hair was visible and the Taliban punished her so badly in front of her companions, equally small girls, which made some of them faint. Also, one teacher was beaten badly while she was going home from school (An Afghan girl named Suria Danish). Such incidents frighten parents and tempt them, not to send their daughters to school.

In contrast, in most provinces of Afghanistan, the Taliban restriction could not stop females to continue their studies. They go to universities and go to work with a strict

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/girls-education-casualty-disastrous-withdrawal-afghanistan>



Islamic dress code and wear Niqab (face cover that only leaves space for the eyes). They tolerated any restriction the Taliban made from the day they took over control of the country, but unfortunately, on 25/12/2022 the education minister of the Taliban proclaimed that girls are not allowed to go to universities and are not allowed to go to work. This decision of the rulers caused once again university students and women demonstrated on the streets. In response to this action of women, the Taliban behaved harshly and arrested some of the girls, and took them to an unknown place. This decision of the Taliban caused thousands of women who were working in governmental and non-governmental organizations to lose their jobs, thousands of students to leave their universities, and some foreign organizations who were working, to stop their activities in Afghanistan. The NGO order came in a letter on Saturday 24 December 2022 from Taliban Economy Minister Qari Din Mohammed Hanif. It said any organization found not complying with the order will have its license revoked in Afghanistan. It means those who do not accept their decision have to stop their activities in Afghanistan (Euronews 2022).

On the other hand, in Kandahar city, which is located in the southern part of Afghanistan, and in some other cities, hundreds of male students boycotted their final semester exams. They left the exam hall. They did this in support of female students and told to their professors that they will not give their exams without their female classmates. Besides, hundreds of university professors resigned and left their jobs because of supporting their female colleagues and students.

Afghanistan is the only country that does not have female teachers, doctors, and any other female employees in its offices.

Meanwhile, its unstable political situation pushed the fragile healthcare system to become worsen and on the verge of collapse. After the power-taking of the Taliban regime in the capital, Kabul, the director-general of the WHO said, *“Unless urgent actions are taken, the country faces an imminent humanitarian catastrophe”*. Afghan Scientific studies (Their name is withheld to protect their life, family, and colleagues in Afghanistan), *have shown that lack of clean water, lack of food, shortage of healthcare professionals, poverty, and education limit women’s access to maternal care*. The Taliban rule directly and indirectly negatively affects Afghan citizens and especially women’s health. As Afghans resist the Taliban, war has continued since 15 August 2021 in Punisher province and northern regions of Afghanistan. Every day hundreds of people have been killed in explosions in mosques, and education centers. The risk of dying is three times higher among women of childbearing age living near intense fighting than among women in a peacetime setting. Infants are also more than 25% more likely to die young. Thousands of Afghans have also been internally displaced, and the majority of them are women and children. Also, Fear, trauma, and oppressions increase mental health risks. Afghan Scientifics (*\*the author, now affiliated with UCSF, is among a handful of Afghan scholars, physicians and refugees*



*the university helped to find a safe haven in the Bay Area. Their name is withheld to protect their family and colleagues in Afghanistan).*

In consideration of the current political and social context in Afghanistan, especially the gender apartheid imposed by the Taliban, we can predict the highest rate of illiteracy, mortality, and morbidity among women in Afghanistan within the next couple of years.

### 3. DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

Throughout history, it has been observed that women in Afghanistan are the most marginalized group of the population. Even though they can assume important roles in the development of Afghan society, they are not granted their rights. They receive less formal education than men and they are not given space to prove their knowledge and abilities. Every single woman and girl in Afghanistan has faced discrimination, no matter which social class, ethnicity and religious affiliation she has. The reason behind this discrimination is the ideology of people. Afghanistan is a traditional patriarchal country, where men look at women and girls as tools of entertainment, as humans with less ability to gain knowledge and skills. Discrimination is not a new phenomenon. It is deeply rooted in the history of Afghanistan. Afghan women always had less important and less prestigious roles than men (Bachelet, 2022). The ongoing conflicts did not allow the people to think openly and to understand that women and girls' participation in their community can influence nation-building.

Girls face discrimination first in their families. The parents and other family members respect and value males higher and ignore the needs and ideas of females. Families give freedom to their sons but not to their daughters. They appreciate the boys for what they do and put barriers in the way of the girls. They imprison them inside the walls of their homes to learn household chores. At the same time, families provide the best facilities for their sons to have a wonderful childhood. This is how discrimination against women starts (Allen and Felbab-Brown 2020).

In 2021, millions of Afghan women have again lost their right to education beyond grade four. Most parents believe that the priority of a girl's life has to be dealing with household chores in order to find a suitable husband. Many families arrange their girls' marriage before they are eighteen. Also for financial reasons, they force them to marry a person, whom they have never met and/or are much older than them (Fore, 2021).

On the other hand, those girls who have access to education face great obstacles. Even if they successfully complete basic schooling, many of them face difficulties to continue in higher education. Many of them cannot continue higher studies because of the traditional, cultural and religious ideas of their family. In addition, women are being discriminated against in getting jobs and a workplace. While men can easily get a job for which their gender is suited, women are thought to be less good at work. A lower



percentage of women take part in different areas such as education for women and girls, health and participation of women in civil and political activities (Yixin Wang 2021).

After the takeover of the country by the Taliban, these discriminations became even more severe. *“Afghan women and girls are facing both the collapse of their rights and dreams and the 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”* (Human rights watch 2022).

Taliban’s ideology is very different and religious.

They believe that women should not study or work outside the home, and as a result, they deny women and girls their basic rights. They are attempting to create a society in which men are the dominant force and have complete control. The Taliban believes in a strict interpretation of religious laws, which can limit citizens' human rights, particularly those of women. They do not consider men and women to be equal and believe that there is no need for women or girls to attend school or work. Women in Afghanistan have faced discrimination based on their gender for many decades, but now that the Taliban is in power, life has become more difficult for them.

Women and girls, on the other hand, feel insecure in Afghanistan; they live in fear and have a deep sense of loss and helplessness.

*“The crisis for women and girls in Afghanistan is escalating, with no end in sight,”* said Heather Barr, Human Rights Watch's associate women's rights director. *“Taliban policies have quickly turned many women and girls into virtual prisoners in their own homes, robbing the country of one of its most valuable resources, the skills and talents of the female half of the population”* (Human rights watch 2022). The Taliban want small girls to focus more on religious studies, similar to how girls were only allowed to go to Masjids (Mosques) to learn religious lessons decades ago.

Furthermore, gender inequality existed in Afghanistan due to cultural beliefs, but it has now been exacerbated by the Taliban regime. Afghan women have long been oppressed, discriminated against, and marginalized, and their rights have been violated. Gender inequality is a two-sided issue in which men believe that the oppression of women is justified.

Women are unable to speak up for themselves and challenge these inequalities because those who do so risk being imprisoned by the Taliban or facing difficult challenges such as physical violence. The Taliban is imposing strict rules on women, which is causing a lot of problems in society. Millions of women face difficulties; they are unable to maintain good mental health because they are victims of violence, helplessness, and hopelessness (CBS news 2021).

The Taliban are uninterested in girls' and women's education and refuse to include women in their government. According to Taliban beliefs, men have complete control over everything and women should stay at home so that other men do not spy on them. Women lack basic rights and live in the dark.





#### **4. ACHIEVEMENTS OF FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS IN AFGHANISTAN BEFORE THE PRESENT OF TALIBAN TAKE OVER**

Entrepreneurship is generally regarded as a force of change, development and innovation in the modern economy. More specifically, it is about business enterprises, initiatives, organizing production, handling operative aspects and taking risks involved in running the enterprises for women in the traditional Afghan society being an entrepreneur can be challenging, because this role is new. For decades, Afghan women were excluded from the world of business. But they have dealt with all these problems and eventually could overcome the difficulties. Since the collapse of the Taliban government in 2001, the new government of Afghanistan and international organizations have helped women to enter this sector and play their own roles. Afghan women have actively used these new opportunities as best as they could, and many have been successful. During the past 20 years, many female entrepreneurs have opened micro-businesses all around the country, and in this way, they have improved their personal economy besides assisting many other women to find jobs and work for themselves. Female entrepreneurs are women who organize and manage an enterprise, especially a business. The number of female entrepreneurs has steadily increased in Afghanistan during those 20 years. During the Taliban regime in 1996-2001 and before, most women were busy with farming, agriculture, and livestock. This way, they had an income, but it was not serving their needs, because their products were seasonal. After the Republic Government of Afghanistan was established, gradually, many women were exporting different commodities even outside the country. Women artisans in rural areas have sold their products in cities, and they have presented themselves as business owners and economic actors on regional and international platforms (Wafeq 2022).

Afghan women entrepreneurs started their businesses in packaging dried fruits, cultivation of Safran, handicrafts, carpet weaving, jewelry production, farming, hair salon, beauty salon, bakeries, Afghani clothes shops, and others. Through these types of businesses, they have improved their own economy, facilitated the economy of the country, and created many job opportunities for 130000 of Afghan women too. Before the fall of the country to the Taliban on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2021, the female entrepreneurs invested around 90 million USD. Despite the challenging cultural and security problems, they played a great role in the economy of Afghanistan (Manizha Wafeq, 2022)

Some of the successful entrepreneur's women in Afghanistan are Nahid Hamidi who had a jewelry stone shop, Benazir Yakta who had a business in packaging and exporting dried fruits to other countries, Nazia Haidary had a handicraft business and was producing clothes and hats. Zahra Jafari had the idea to open an advertising company to give public notice of the products of other entrepreneurs through producing short films



and shows. Sona Mahmoudi had a business exporting dried fruits to south and central Asian countries. She had one Safran farm in Herat and one almond farm in Mazari Sharif where hundreds of women were working (Sediqi 2022).

Roya Mahboob, an Afghan female entrepreneur who was selected by Time Magazine as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2013, is the founder and chief executive officer of the Afghan computer company Citadel, and the CEO of Digital Citizen Fund. She chose the path of assisting Afghan girls and women in education and employment in the field of computer and technology. In the last 20 years after the first Taliban regime, a large number of Afghan women have gained access to education and employment with the support of Ms. Mahboob. She is also the founder of the robotics team in Herat. After six months, Afghanistan was able to win the first position among the strongest teams in different countries in the European robotics competition in Estonia and the second place in the international robotics compilation in Forest Global in the United States (Global Female Leaders 2022).

Afghan women made significant progress during these years under the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. They have proved their abilities by establishing businesses and creating investments that added to the economy of the country. But tragically after 20 years, again Afghanistan had gone under the control of the cruelest regime “The Taliban”, and Afghan women are experiencing the same history as they did in the past. And they experience again the horrific events they experienced 20 years ago. With the rise of the Taliban, women in many areas have quit their jobs or outsourced their work to a man. Women entrepreneurs said that they invested hundreds of thousands of Afghans in the previous government. Those investors were forced to shut down their businesses due to the lack of Taliban Government support. And now they have lost everything they had and they are not allowed to continue their businesses anymore in Afghanistan (Tanno 2022).

Taliban do not allow women to be present in the community or to be active outside the home, and they believe that women are only meant to stay at home, do housework, and listen to what their men tell them. The Taliban claim that it is stated in the Islamic religion and by Allah that women are not capable of performing the same tasks as men. In reality, such things do not exist in Islam or its holy book, the Quran. The issue of women in Islam is exacerbated in part by the misbehavior of some Muslims, which has been misinterpreted as representing Islamic teachings. However, in Islam and the Holy Quran, this is not the case, and the position of women from spiritual, economic, social and political standpoints has been discussed (Quran 4:1, 7:189, 42:11).

According to the Quran, men and women have the same spirit and there is no spiritual superiority between men and women. Furthermore, the Quran makes it clear that all human beings have what you might call humanity (Quran 4:1, 7:189, 42:11). Furthermore, no restriction or law exist in Islam states that women cannot work or have the same profession as men and that their place is in the home. Women nurses, teachers, and physicians are required in an Islamic society (Islam’s women 2023).





However, gender inequality is genetically attributed to religion, even though the causes are entirely non-religious. It stems from political, economic, social, and cultural factors, as gender equality is part of Islam's religious jurisprudence and fundamental teachings. There are numerous Quranic verses and Prophetic traditions (al-Qur'an, 4:1), that advocate for gender equality, demonstrating unequivocally that gender inequality is not based on faith (Tahir-ul-Qadri M. 2011).

Living and being a woman under the Taliban's Theocratic Regime, on the other hand, is extremely difficult. Many negative comments have been made about the racial policy of segregation toward women. The Taliban's Islamization program was centered on the role of women and girls. Their policy is justified by religious law, as well as an allegedly traditional perception of Afghan society. When they first arrived in Kabul, they prohibited girls from attending school and denied them the right to study and attend university. According to Taliban ideals, a school is a place that will turn girls into prostitutes. They, too, have argued that girls' education is not permitted or supported by Islam or the Quran which in reality such a thing does not exist. Women are permitted to be present outside under some conditions: they can make a public appearance while escorted by a male relative (brother, father, husband) and they must wear a suitable attire known as a burqa. The logic behind wearing this burqa is that women's bodies are private and must be protected, and they present themselves as Islamic modernizers and protectors of the privatization of the female body in the country. Their ideology forbade women from working, forcing them to leave or quit their jobs.

Right now, women's living conditions have deteriorated significantly, and the Taliban has imposed numerous restrictions on them, including the prohibition on women from walking freely in the streets without a burqa, laughing freely, going to beauty salons, working, attending social events, and many others (Kallini 2021)

## **5. THE ESCAPE OF THE EDUCATED GENERATION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE FUTURE OF AFGHANISTAN**

After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, despite all the challenges and uncertainties in the country, there were many good educational opportunities for youth and children, including girls. They took advantage of every little opportunity for their studies and achieved good results. Many of them got scholarships and studied at the best universities around the world. These people were more familiar with the world of technology. They worked in high positions in Afghanistan and created a better system in the country. Unfortunately, most of them fled after the fall of the country under the rule of the Taliban, which led to the collapse of the system. It is not just technology that is affected, but the whole system, which means education, economy, industry, business ... etc. In general, the escape of Afghanistan's educated generation has an immediate and delayed impact on the future of the country. The immediate impact was the closure of



many organizations, businesses, institutes, and government offices, resulting in unemployment and poverty. The later impact will be even more dangerous. As the majority of educated people who held key positions in government offices, universities, institutes and companies have left the country their positions are now empty or have been replaced by uneducated Taliban.

This has a direct impact on the quality of public administration. Many well-educated professors have left the country and there are no people at their level to replace them. This automatically affects the quality of education, and students may also not be interested in continuing their studies. This will lead to a further increase in the number of illiterates, which has been decreasing over the last 21 years to some 50%. Recently there has been an impressive upsurge in the establishment of various businesses operating at national and international levels, and now the owners of these businesses have fled and the properties have either been stolen or taken by the Taliban. There were many vulnerable people, both men and women, who made their living through these companies and now are struggling with hunger.

Western governments emphasize that humanitarian aid does not go to the Taliban government, which is not recognized by the international community, but rather to aid organizations on the ground.

With the UN warning that 97 per cent of Afghanistan's population is at risk of falling below the poverty line, the Taliban appears to be attempting to shift economic responsibility to the international community. Because of the brain drain, Afghanistan's new administrators have very little human potential to drive economic growth.

Overall, marginalized groups will remain on the margins and their voice will not be heard anywhere because the youth who had the enthusiasm of helping them are not with them anymore. The sources and relationships to facilities such as NGOs are no longer available for the communities in need. Women and children lost their voices due to the flight of the activists. They lost the opportunity of getting an education and freedom. Families lost their sources of income and are losing their lives because of hunger. The education system, infrastructure system, business system, and even lifestyle go toward the worst situation.

## **6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

As a matter of fact, after the re-take of the Afghan government by the Taliban in August 2021, women are back at the square once again as far as their basic rights and particularly their right to education and work are concerned. The Taliban have not changed either their fundamentalist ideology or the governing rules and regulations derived from this, perhaps with the exception of executions of women in public. They have betrayed women and girls by largely banning them from public and working life again. The Taliban regime follows an extremely fundamentalist interpretation of Islam,



which even many Muslim scholars have difficulty associating with true Islam. Women have worked hard to catch up with the educational level of men and achieved a lot in terms of entrepreneurship during the last 20 years. They have played a significant role in the country, socially, politically and economically. But with the arrival of the Taliban for the second time, Afghan society has lost its achievements altogether, allowing their government to restrain women in their households which has resulted in the increase of gender-based issues. As Afghan women have shown during the past 20 years, they are able to contribute to the reconstruction and development of their war-torn country. However, the utilization of this immense resource lies in the hands of men, Taliban and other.

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