

The Status and Position of Women in Afghanistan: A Case Study of the Taliban's Policies in Respect to Women

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Abstract

This study aims and objective of this paper is to explore the status and position of women in Afghanistan during the Taliban government. Further, this paper will analyze and explore the Taliban policies in respect of women in Afghanistan. The methodology adopted for this study is purely descriptive and analytical in nature. The key findings of the study are that women's of Afghanistan has enormous capacity and potentials. But unfortunately they were never gave any chance to utilize their capacity and potential because of their customs and traditions. The study aims to explore and highlight to show the world the Taliban real image regarding fundamental principles by guaranteeing women a dignified place in society.

Key words: Taliban, Women, Status, Afghanistan, United State of America, and Soviet Union.

INTRODUCTION

Women in Afghanistan were faced with cruelty in different period. It was Ghazi Amanullah Khan who introduced rapid reforms toward modernization. Women's agenda was identified as a vital component of these reforms. The people witnessed visible changes in social life of the women in particular urban women. Thus the women showed an excellent achievement in the field of education, and classical literature. But the advancement of these things reversed in 1978 by Marxist coup and the invasion and occupation of Soviet Union 1979-1989, because women's education also came under suspicion during the communist period because parents feared that girls would be indoctrinated by Marxist Ideology. In 1996 the status of women was once again abruptly disrupted by the onset of the Taliban regime, due to immature Taliban's leadership and the harsh law. Taliban argued that due to war and emergency situation in the country it is not possible to allowing girls to safely go to high schools or colleges. This ban on education of girls approaching puberty remained in place even in places like Kandahar where there was peace and stability. This also negated the Taliban arguments. Because of these restrictions the women became jobless and widows were specially affected. Taliban also imposed some health care restrictions. Despite of education and health care restrictions there were social and general restrictions for women like wearing of *burqa*, avoid wearing long heal shoes etc. The Taliban government was announced a sever punishments if someone found to violate these laws, and they did in some cases. The anti Taliban cashed these things and started propaganda against Taliban regime. By the this way the human rights associations/organizations, Western countries and USA and UNO imposed sanctioned on Taliban, and at last after 9/11 the dropped scene the NATO and USA attacked on Afghanistan under the umbrella of UNO.

BRIEF BACKGROUND

Afghanistan is a multi-national Islamic State. Its population is composed of various ethnic and tribal groups estimated to be 23.8 million. Women are estimated to constitute some 48.6 percent of the total population¹. The code of Afghan behavior is permitted by the Pushtunwali or code of the Pushtuns, the major ethnic group in Afghanistan, comprising over 50 percent of the population. Purdah is a key element in protection of the family's pride and honor (Knabe 1977).² Women are regarded as men's property. As noted by Boesen, men exercise control over women in two crucial ways: their control of marriage and of property, as illustrated by the institution of bride price, the Pushtun prohibition of divorce (despite the Quranic allowances, primarily to the men) and the taboo of land ownership for women (again contrary to Islamic Law and the actual practice in many other Muslim Countries). Women normally are viewed.³

WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE COURSE OF HISTORY

Afghan's history is adorned by exploits of courageous and heroic women who fought with little resources side by side with men for dignity, freedom and peace of their citizen. Their movement and struggle for solidarity and harmony in the country remained remarkable in history. With the passage of time however their gains were clawed back by numerous factors, among which were religious fundamentalism, invasion, armed conflict and ethnic and geographical segregation.⁴

Until September 11, opposition to the Taliban outside of policymaking circles concerned with Afghanistan came not from their regional dealings, nor even with their general imposition of Islamic Law, but from an entirely different source. That source namely western advocates of women's rights grew through the efforts of RAWA, the acronym for a movement launched shortly after the fall of

¹ Moonis Ahmar, Ed., *The Challenge of Rebuilding Afghanistan*, 2nd Ed(Karachi: Bureau of Composition, Compilation & Translation Press, 2006) , 111.

² Grant M. Farr and John G. Merriam, Eds. , *Afghan Resistance The Politics of Survival* (Lahore: Vanguard Books (Pvt) Ltd, 1988) , 105.

³ Ibid., 106.

⁴Ahmar, 112.

the communist regime, Revolutionary Afghan Women's Association. Opposition by educated urban Afghan women to how Afghan were being marginalized in Pakistan by the largely rural and religiously trained Mujahidin leadership in Peshawar had led to attempts to form Afghan women's organizations. Schools and clinics were some of the ways in which these women, with NGO help tried to maintain the gain of women in Afghanistan that had begun during 1920. Throughout the period of opposition to communist rule and Soviet occupation the single relatively successful appeal that the Afghan communists could make came in the ways they created legal equity for women on paper.⁵ At the time of Afghanistan's independent in 1919, the political organization Afghan Youth was a constitutional reform movement which developed within the royal court itself. King Amanullah's daughter became a member of this group. This organization was very proactive in creating an environment for women to participate in political and social affairs.⁶

When the Najibullah regime ended in 1992 the Mujahidin in much disarray adopted those practice with regard to the social order that had prevailed in Peshawar when they entered Kabul. Thus between 1992 and 1996 women came under many restrictions.⁷

WOMEN BEFORE THE TALIBAN

After the independence from the British rule, Ghazi Amanullah Khan (1919-1929), introduced rapid reforms toward modernization. Women's agenda was indentified as a vital component of these reforms. The people witnessed visible changes in social life of the women in particular urban women. However, toward the end, the efforts to reform, including the women's agenda ended in vain, as they were met by religious and cultural opposition and widespread rebellion that ended the era.⁸In the field of modern story writing, Donya Gobar and Malalai Mosa started writing stories in the 1950.⁹ In

⁵ A member of the Perseus Books Groups, *Afghanistan Mullah, Marx and Mujahid* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2002) , 206.

⁶ArleyLoewen and Josette McMichael, Eds. , *Images of Afghanistan* (new York: Oxford University Press, 2010) , 291.

⁷A member of the Perseus Books Groups, 206.

⁸Ahmar, 112.

⁹Loewen, 291.

other areas of literature, women have also made considerable contribution to Afghan culture. For the small minority of women who were privileged to receive any type of formal education, training in religious education and classical literature had been customary for centuries.¹⁰ Western Afghanistan was renowned as a highly cultured place where women would dance at weddings and many girls had been in school until the Taliban closed them all down.¹¹ Afghanistan which was much rural and pastoralist and less urban than most of the Muslim world, had a far more limited and sectoral experience of modernity, mainly among the small urban upper middle and upper classes. Early reformist measures taken by Amir Amanullah in the 1920s, such as improving the position of women, contributed to a popular backlash against that monarch. The country was thrown into long term upheaval by the 1978 Marxist coup and the Soviet invasion and occupation from 1979 to 1989, during which again, the question of women's position in the public sphere was broached in a major way,¹² and women's education also came under suspicion during the communist period because parents feared that girls would be indoctrinated by Marxist Ideology.¹³ A Conservative approach to women was taken by the Islamic guerrilla movement and implemented during the period of warlord infighting between 1992 and 1996,¹⁴ It may be mentioned here that it was during the reign of King Zahir Shah in 1964 that women got into the constitution LoyaJirga process for the first time. Women friendly provisions were therefore entrenched in the country's first constitution. They were allowed to participate in nearly all spheres of life. The lifestyle of women in urban cities was comparatively progressive. The female members of Royal family were the pioneers for establishment of girls' schools, teachers training centers and women associations. A significant number of women were working in government offices.¹⁵ In 1976 women constituted 12.5 percent of participant in

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Christina Lamb, *The Sewing Circles of Heart* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002) , 18.

¹² Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi, Eds., *The Taliban and the Crises of Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) , 122.

¹³ A members of the Pereus Books Group, 208.

¹⁴ Robbert D. Crews, 122.

¹⁵ Ahmar, 112.

Loya Jirga. The elite Afghan women struggled for better positioning of women in the country. Women associations and interest groups were established and made known through especial programs such as “women and the society”. The first organization of women was the Afghan Women’s Association, a semi government organization that was formed by the royal elites. However it was difficult to expand their spheres of activity and influence because of limited resources.¹⁶

WOMEN UNDER THE TALIBAN

After so many years on the periphery, Afghan women stand centre stage in the full glare of world opinion. Since the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban Islamic Movement, the women’s issue has been raised to a pinnacle with equal fervor by both the Taliban and the international community. Each stands steadfast on foundations of fundamental principles guaranteeing women a dignified place in society. Yet they stand poles apart.¹⁷In 1996 the status of women was abruptly disrupted by the onset of the Taliban regime.¹⁸

a. TALIBAN’S IMMATURE LEADERSHIP AND THE HARSH LAWS

The Taliban had no leadership with political acumen and administrative experience. The top leadership like Mullah Omar had only spiritual foundation. They therefore imposed harsh laws on the Afghans. The Women were completely relegated into the background. The men were compelled to follow medieval laws.¹⁹

b. EDUCATION RESTRICTIONS

Radically changed come in Afghanistan in 1996 when the Taliban took control of Kabul and declared Islamic Law. A radio broadcast in the capital city announced that girls could no longer to go school.²⁰ Two thers developments were arguably much graver in their impact.

¹⁶ Ibid. 113.

¹⁷ William Maley, Ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn?* (Lahore: Vanguard Books (Pvt) Ltd, 2002) , 145.

¹⁸ Ahmar, 113.

¹⁹ Major General Samay Ram, *The New Afghanistan Pawn of America?* (New Delhi: Manas Publication, 2004) , 117.

²⁰ Ursula Meissner, *Afghanistan* (New York: B, Bucher publishers, 2008) , 12.

One was the immediate exclusion of women from most paid employment. During Rabbani's government women lectured at the University of Kabul provided 70 percent of school teachers and played an important role in the health sector. Some of these women were widows, of whom there were 50,000 in Kabul in January 1997 and did not have male breadwinners to whom they could look for support. The consequences for these women and their children of loss paid employment were therefore catastrophic.²¹Urbanite Afghans chafed at the Taliban edicts that rendered working women jobless and denied opportunities of education to the female population. Though the Taliban made certain exception and allowed widows to work and limited number of females to receive medical and nursing education it did not win them any praise due to the harshness of their edicts and their effect on the majority of the population. Hardliners among the Taliban saw to it that the ban on education of girls approaching puberty remained in place even in places like Kandahar where there was peace and stability. This also negated the Taliban argument that war and emergency situation in the country were obstacles in allowing girls to safely go to high schools or colleges. Lack of resources for establishing girl's schools and colleges was another Taliban excuse that did not hold ground.²²

c. MAULAVI SAID SHAHID KHAYL THE TALIBAN UNDER SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

In 1998 the under secretary of education explained the regime's policy toward women to Huwaydi.²³ The Egyptian journalist²⁴ "The education of girls requires a jurisprudential ruling (fatwa) that would fix its path and its limits. As for women working outside the house, the text concerning that is clear and the matter is incontrovertible. For when the Koran says 'stay in your houses' {33:33; the feminine imperative is used}, the issue requires no further discussion and we have nothing to do but obey". The undersecretary insisted that the formal ban on girl's education was not a fixed policy, but rather a temporary

²¹ William Melay, *The Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2002) , 238.

²²Dr Rifaat Hussain, et al eds., *Afghanistan and 9/11* (New Delhi: Lotus Collection Roli Books Pvt Limited, 2002) , 113.

²³Robbert D. Crews, 141.

²⁴ *Ibid.* , 134.

measure.²⁵ Despite Mawlawi Shahid khayl's equivocations, the first step the Taliban took once they captured Kabul was to close the girl's school. Within three months the Taliban had closed sixty three schools, affecting 103,000 girls and somewhat more boys, ²⁶ though the Taliban promised to re-open girls' school when they had rid the country of impure elements.²⁷

d. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SOME SECRET GIRLS SCHOOLS

Though the Taliban's regime had closed all the doors of female education but in this situation some bold women had established some secret schools which were only for the teaching of girls.²⁸ They operated their home schools despite the unpredictable action of the Taliban. Although the Taliban knew the schools were open, the teachers never knew when the police from the Department for the Propagation of Virtue and Suppression of Vice would pounce. And when they did, the teacher was jailed and the student's families were punished, usually with beatings.²⁹

e. HEALTH CARE RESTRICTIONS

Rules and Regulations of work for the State Hospitals and Private clinics based on Islamic Sharia principles. Ministry of Health on behalf of Amir ULMomineen Mullah Mohammad Omar. Kabul, November 1996.

1. Female patients should go to female physicians. In case a male physician is needed the female patient should be accompanied by her close relative.
2. During examination the female patients and male physicians both should be dressed with Islamic *Hijab* (veil).
3. Male physicians should not touch or see the other parts of female patients except for the affected part.
4. Waiting room for female patients should be safely covered.

²⁵ Ibid. , 141.

²⁶ Ibid. , 145.

²⁷ Nick B. Mills, *Karzai* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, Inc, 2007) , 100.

²⁸ Yvonne Ridley, *Taliban Ki Qaid Mai*, tran. Muhammad Yahya (Lahore: Nigarshat Publishers, 2008) , 120.

²⁹ Sally, Armstrong, *Veiled Threat* (New York: Four walls Eight windows, 2002) , 112.

5. The person who regulates turn for female patients should be female.
6. During the night duty in what rooms which female patients are hospitalized the male doctor without the call of the patient is not allowed to enter the room.
7. Sitting and speaking between male and female doctors are not allowed, if there be needed for discussion, it should be done with *hijab*.
8. Female doctors should wear simple clothes; they are not allowed to wear stylish clothes or use cosmetics or make-up.
9. Female doctors and nurses are not allowed to enter the rooms where male patients are hospitalized.³⁰

f. SOCIAL/GENERAL RESTRICTIONS

Of the general regulations only three pertained to women. Number 1 stated that in order to prevent 'sedition and uncovered females', no drivers were allowed to pick up female wearing the Iranian *burqa* which did not cover the face, or seductive clothing, or those unaccompanied by a *mahram*. In case of violation the driver would be imprisoned and the husbands would be punished. Number 12 required that it should be announced in all mosques that women found washing clothes in the river would be picked up in a 'respectful Islamic Manner' and taken to their homes where their husbands would be severely punished. Number 15 announced that tailors found taking female body measurements and displaying fashion magazines would be imprisoned.³¹ Women not allowed buying things from male shopkeepers,³² No women allowed playing sports or entering a sports club, any women showing her ankles must be whipped; Women not allowed appearing on the balconies of their houses. All windows were supposed to be painted so women could not be seen from outside their homes.³³

³⁰ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban Islam Oil and the New Great Game In Central Asia* (London: I.B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2000) ,

³¹ Maley,

³² Yahha, 120.

³³ Lamb, 17.

g. ARGUMENTS OF TALIBAN'S REGARDING THESE RESTRICTIONS

The Taliban insisted that the assessment of their rule must be based on their entire record and not on the record of the activities where they were weakest. They pointed to the security enjoyed by all Afghans, especially women, in areas administered by the Taliban. In a country racked by war for twenty years, security and stability rank high among the population. Taliban representatives explain that the isolation of women from the work-place and all public venues is intended to serve two main purposes: to prevent the molestation of women and girls by remaining unlawful and unruly elements, and to allow the stabilization of the workplace and other institutions for men whose education of the shari'a in an equitable manner to women and girls would follow as the country gained the ability to re-build infrastructure and administrative and legal structures.³⁴

h. PUNISHMENTS/TREATMENT WITH WOMEN BY TALIBAN

Maulvi Raffi ullah Muazin, general president of the *Amr Bil Mar of Wa Nahi An Ul Munkar* and his Deputy Maulvi Inayat Ullah Baligh commanded a team of 100 religious inspectors to enforce this flood *fatwa*.³⁵ He had a tendency to exceed his instructions, once telling one journalist: whenever we catch them doing immoral things, we can do anything we want. We can execute them, we can kill them. When Radio Shaia announced In December 1996 that 225 Kabul women had been beaten in a single day for violating the department's dress codes,³⁶ A young girls was beaten because she had left the house without wearing socks.

One woman with painted nails had her thumbs cut off.³⁷ On the basis of interviews in Kabul after the Taliban left, Matthew Campbell concluded that 'hundreds of women were abducted, forcibly, married, rape, such behavior violated the very principles which the Taliban leaders purported to be defending. It was also deeply

³⁴A Member of the Pereus Books Group, 208.

³⁵ Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind*(Rawalpindi: Army Education Publishing House, 2002,2003) , 66.

³⁶ Ibid. , 66, 67.

³⁷Meissner, 13.

hypocritical, given that the Taliban were quite willing to stone women for the 'crime' of adultery.³⁸ The women were never recognized as human beings. Every right was snatched from them.³⁹ Not so for women who are sentenced to death by stoning for alleged illicit relations. There's no numbing her pain. In fact thrown not be so big as to kill her quickly. These punishments were meted out in the infamous Hall of Honor on the main street of Kandahar. It was here on Friday, the holy day that the public were told to attend the weekly punishments.⁴⁰ As with other forms of illicit behavior, the Taliban dealt with the problem of women who contravened their laws in part by use of spectacle. Spanish journalist Ana Tortajada was shown a video by women activists of a staged punishment of a woman, this time an execution.⁴¹ In Heart a demonstration on 21 December 1996 by 50 women protesting the closing of women's bath houses turned ugly. Twenty were arrested and several others were hospitalized after being beaten.⁴²

i. RE-ACTION OF AFGHAN'S WOMEN

Not surprisingly, the rates of depression for women and teenage girls began to skyrocket under these oppressive conditions. Many women committed suicide. Others fled the country, braving the dangers and uncertainties of refugee camps in neighboring Pakistan. Some 75% of the estimated 7.5 million Afghan refugees are women and girls. The \$320 million aid package authorized by the Bush administration in early October is insufficient to provide enough food, medical supplies or shelter, especially as winter quickly approaches.⁴³

RE-ACTION OF WESTERN COUNTRIES AND USA

A Public execution of convicted murderers, amputation of the limbs of those charged with thefts and robberies, and lashing or stoning to death of adulterers may have helped check crime but it also drew worldwide criticism. Western government and organization were in

³⁸Melay, *The Afghanistan Wars*, 238.

³⁹Ram, 117.

⁴⁰Armstrong, 120.

⁴¹Robbert, 149, 150.

⁴²Melay, *Fundamentalism Reborn?*, 161.

⁴³ Cindy Hanford, "Women's Lives under the Taliban", www.now.org, June 09, 2013, <http://www.now.org/issue/global/afghanwomen1.html>

the forefront in condemning the harsh punishments as inhuman.⁴⁴United States criticized the fanatics; she overlooked the fact that it was not only Afghanistan but also its neighbors who were failing to appreciate that gender equality.⁴⁵

RE-ACTION OF UNO

On 10 November 1995 UNICEF issued an official communiqué announcing that it was suspending assistance to education programs in those parts of Afghanistan where girls were excluded from education.⁴⁶ In November 1995 the Eastern Shura in Jalalabad banned women from working. The NGOs negotiated and continued their programs the UN suspended all Afghan female employees earning a flurry of well publicized reproof from female activists in the United States.⁴⁷

ISSUE AND CHALLENGES

History proved that the women of Afghanistan have enormous capacity and potentials in rebuilding the country. At the moment, however, these are challenged by equally enormous constraints that have to be addressed as quickly as possible.⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

In the concluding remarks I would say that women of Afghanistan have enormous capacity and potentials but they never gave chances to utilize it and whenever in some cases they gave chance they proved it. The main unfortunate of the women of Afghanistan was their customs and traditions. Afghanistan is a tribal system and 60 percent of areas contains of Pushtun belt. In the pushtun culture and society there are some limitation for women which they considered Islamic laws, indeed in which some restrictions pertaining to Islamic laws and Sharia but not at all. In this term paper I tried to explain the position and status

⁴⁴Rifaat, 111.

⁴⁵Meissner, 13.

⁴⁶Melay, Fundamentalism Reborn?, 146.

⁴⁷ Ibid. , 148.

⁴⁸Ahmar, 118.

of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban government in the light of several sources. After the entire study I reached on the point that the Taliban was not on the wrong path (may be some extent), but the print and electronic media as well as anti Taliban societies displayed the dangerous and dark side of these reforms/restrictions. To analyze what is true and what is wrong we should read the book written by Yvonne Ridley, (Now Maryam) title of the book is *In the Hand of Taliban* which proved that all the stories regarding cruelties against the women by Taliban were bogus. We can see the women in Europe and all over the world where they got social freedom there social vices/sins are growing. Islam does not degrade women as shows the Western media and anti Islamic societies. The Taliban did all these which Quran and Sharia are saying, may be in some extent there were some mistaken and errors on implementation, because the Taliban were the human beings not a celestial. However as Muslims I cannot deny that the Taliban adopted the Sharia Laws and for the moderates and secular societies it was surprised. Regarding the punishment of Taliban I am not saying much more because it is clear in our religious scripture and during the life time of Muhammad (PBUH) and his companion which was implemented in practical shape and is undoubted.

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