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## Gendered Governance in Afghanistan: Examining the Taliban's Impact on Women's Rights Since 2021

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| ARTICLE INFO                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | ABSTRACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
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| <p><b>Received:</b><br/>July 31, 2026</p> <p><b>Revised:</b><br/>August 15, 2026</p> <p><b>Accepted:</b><br/>August 26, 2026</p> <p><b>Available Online:</b><br/>September 07, 2026</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b><br/><i>Afghanistan, women's rights, Taliban, gender apartheid, education ban, human rights, socio-economic exclusion, gender discrimination</i></p> <p><b>Corresponding Author:</b><br/><b>Aneeza Fatima</b><br/>Email: <a href="mailto:faneeza421@gmail.com">faneeza421@gmail.com</a></p> | <p>Afghanistan has seen an unprecedented setback for the rights and freedoms of women and girls with the Taliban taking over the country in August 2021. In just a few months, the de facto government systematically removed all of the legal, educational, political, economic and social opportunities that women had gained in the past 20 years. A ban on secondary and higher education was observed for girls, women were denied access to many formal and informal jobs, and there were strict restrictions placed on movement and public participation. It has profoundly affected the lives of women and girls nationwide psychologically, economically and socially. As per the Taliban's harsh interpretation of Islamic Sharia, women must cover all parts of their body which is actually known as hijab. The Taliban haven't enacted any formal law other than that it would be in line with Islamic "principles." These ambiguous pronouncements have created a general misunderstanding of what Islamic "principles" are as people of different Islamic faiths have various understanding of Islamic teachings.</p> |

## Introduction

Women's rights in Afghanistan have undergone dramatic and troubling changes since the Taliban took over in August 2021. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghan women have made unprecedented advances in the areas of education, employment, political participation and social freedoms in almost two decades. The number of girls attending school and university continued to grow and women were entering the paid workforce in a variety of roles, while legal measures were established to protect women from violence and discrimination. Gains in women's status were evident with women getting support and advocacy from various institutions, including the Ministry of Women's Affairs, gender desks in courts, and independent nongovernment organizations. In this world today, most women are given the chance to be good at their jobs, to hold any political office they may be interested in, to own businesses, to have many other positions of power, thanks to the women movement. To top it all off, in this same world women in Afghanistan are now powerless. Afghan women have been trapped in a world that is ruled by the Taliban' regime. Over the years, Afghanistan has been a country where women have been living under the rule of patriarchy and conflicts and political instability. Withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces brought swift Taliban takeover of Kabul, offering a

“reformed” form of government from their earlier rule (1996-2001). The pledges of equality and tolerance soon fell apart, however, when the new government implemented harsh restrictions on women's mobility, education, employment and involvement in public affairs (Schulz, 1999).

After more than seventy-five years of political turmoil in Afghanistan, the Taliban, an Islamic movement, seized control of some eighty-five percent of the country in 1996. Women have turned into an invisible entity under the Taliban Regime. Afghan women cannot get the most basic necessities under the strict government of Taliban. Women, for example, are not allowed to get formal education, leave their homes unless accompanied by a male family member to protect them, or receive medical care except in full burqa, nor can they appear in public except in full burqa. Prior to Taliban rule, many Afghan women were employed outside the home, and many had access to formal education facilities, and lived more liberally in Afghanistan's urban areas. Prior to the Taliban's rule over Afghanistan, according to the statistics of the Feminist Majority Foundation, 75% of teachers were women, 40% of doctors were women, over one-half of the students of Afghanistan's universities were women, schools were co-educational at all levels, women served as judges, engineers, nurses, and lawyers, and women were not required to wear burqas (Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002).

When discussing the situation of women's rights in Afghanistan, Heather Barr draws attention to the fact that the situation has become the “most serious women's rights crisis in the world” since the Taliban returned to power. The Taliban have been persistently and all-roundly attacking women and girls' human rights over the last two and a half years, infringing on every right and dimension of women's lives, whether in education, paid work, or freedom of movement, political participation, and women lives have been pushed into ever deeper misery (Heather Barr, 2024).

In 2001, after the collapse of the Taliban, the new Afghan government, supported by the international community, launched a comprehensive process of transforming Afghanistan in favor of women. After the collapse of the Taliban in 2001, the new Afghan government which was supported by the international community, initiated a broad process of change in the country's favor of women. The 2004 Constitution guarantees equality under the law, and reserves 27% of parliamentary seats for women. Afghan women enrolled to police, military, media and academia. Between 2001 and 2020, the number of girls enrolled in schools rose from less than 1 million to more than 9 million, with almost one-third being girls (Shahir, Ren, & Noor, 2025). . Women served as judges, doctors, businesswomen, journalists and even ministers. These gains however were lost, almost overnight, with the withdrawal of the U.S. and the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021. The Taliban leadership restores policies that were similar to the ones they had imposed in 1996-2001.

Female participation in education is low in certain areas, mainly health. UN Women (2023) reported that over 80% of women have lost their jobs since August 2021, leading to the impoverishment of thousands of female-headed households. Taliban practices are in violation of International Convention that Afghanistan had signed prior to 2021 such ICCPR (1966) and ICESCR (1966), which all promote gender equality and protection from discrimination.

Women have been altogether excluded from the political processes. Lacks does not have a female Governor, Judges or Ministers. In addition to legal and economic constraints, women are suffering from psychological trauma, social isolation and depression from the lack of identity, social participation and purpose. Numerous female journalist and activists have been tortured or forced to flee for various policies put forward by the Taliban. But, a number of Muslim scholars worldwide have criticized such interpretations, emphasizing that Islam gives women rights to education, to work and to own property (Goodson, 2001). The Taliban use this way of approach as an indicative selection of religion to uphold the patriarchy.

## **Literature Review**

The former Afghanistan's diplomat Haron Amin, once said that women in the Taliban rule ‘have become selfless physical non-beings that must live. They exist. The paper ends with recommendations for the practical steps the international community, regional actors and local Afghan actors could take to help alleviate the plight of women and girls under the Taliban (Zada & Zada, 2024).

The argument of the article “Women, extremism and repression under Taliban 2.0 in Afghanistan: beyond the good” is that the anti-modern and anti-western ideology of the regime has played a great role in the current form of women systematically repressed not only by few restrictions but also by governance, law, culture and social order. The author proves that the regime of the Taliban 2.0 is not the same as that of the first Taliban because the new forces, the ideology of the Taliban and the relationship with the local powers in other countries need to be investigated afresh . (Wani, 2024). The Doha Agreement (2020) does not mention anything about human rights, particularly women rights, which could have made the Taliban more legitimate in the political aspect as this article is primarily political and ideological and lacked in-depth empirical field data regarding the women lives under the Taliban 2.0.

During 2001-2021, the Afghan women were making great strides in their rights, especially in politics, employment and education, says Roqia Samim in the article titled "The State of Women's Rights and Freedoms after the Taliban Take-Over". There was an improvement in the legal security of women with the adoption of a new Constitution in 2004 and by the EVAW Law in 2009. However, these gains were reversed since the Taliban's takeover on August 15, 2021. The Taliban prescribed rigorous limits on the movement of the women, education, employment and political participation (Samim, 2022). These policies, the article argues infringe international human rights laws that include UDHR, ICCPR, ICESCR, and CEDAW, especially the concepts of equality and non-discrimination. However, much of the article focuses on legal and policy analysis, and contains few empirical bits from the field.

Afghan women have not only been victims but agents of resistance and identity making in the face of several pressures rule of the Taliban and foreign invasion. She believes that material realities (wars, displacement, and economy) and ethnic/gender identity are additional factors that influence the struggles of women in Afghanistan (Rostami-Povey, 2007).

In Kabul the thumb of a women was cut of just because she was wearing nail polish and the women were lashed on their back and legs for the violation of Taliban policies on dressing. Author shows that many women were banned from working outside the home, Women's movements, dress, employment, education and public roles were drastically extensively limited e.g., what shoes they could wear, how they walked, the coverings they wore. Those limitations put significant constraints on women's rights (she talks about "shadows" and "behind the veil" to denote women's invisibility and silencing) (Telesetsky, 1988).

Women in Kabul suffered severe psychological and physical impacts due to war trauma (conflict, killing, displacement) experienced as a result of Taliban takeover. The study reveals that of the 160 women surveyed: 71% indicated a decrease in their physical health and 81% indicated a decrease in their mental health in the last two years in Kabul under the Taliban rule (Rasekh, Bauer, Manos, & Iacopino, 1998).

### **Research Gap**

While most studies mentioned above have addressed the limitations imposed on Afghan women after the Taliban's return to power, they offer little analysis of the social, psychological and economic impacts of these limitations on women and families in the long term. While the existing literature primarily concentrates on the experience of the international community and the policies of the Taliban, studies on the experiences of Afghan women at the grassroots level, their coping strategies and resistance mechanisms during Taliban rule are lacking. While previous studies have noted a worsening of women's rights since the US's departure from Afghanistan in August 2021, they were not conducted with a view to making a comprehensive comparison between the status of women before and after the withdrawal. Although legal and political exclusion of women has been discussed, little consideration has been given to how these policies affect women's involvement in nation-building and governance and in Afghanistan's future development. The majority of the research focuses on urban settings and national-level policies, and there is a lack of information on the situation of women in rural and remote areas of Afghanistan.

### **Research Questions**

1. How has the Taliban been strategically used ideologically to institute gender based control in the interpretation of Islamic law?
2. Under international law can there be a valid legal characterization of the systematic exclusion of women from the public life as gender apartheid?
3. What was it about the inner struggle and resilience of the Afghan women that enabled them to adapt to the highly conservative policies of the Taliban without outside help?

### **Hypothesis**

**H1:** The Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law and tribal customs have a direct impact on policies that impose a system of gender-based oppression and severely limit women's access to education, employment, and public life and contribute to worsened social and psychological health of Afghan women.

### **Research Methodology**

This paper will adopt a qualitative approach and in-depth look at the case of women rights abuse in post-Taliban Afghanistan. It is mostly secondary data which is gathered from the reliable sources such as UN Reports, Human rights watch, Amnesty international. Findings of the study are based on the theories from the feminist perspective and the human rights perspective which indicate that the gender inequality is created through ideology, culture and politics. Secondary data was also utilized due to ethical and security constraints and therefore, valid and reliable case studies and reports were analysed through a method

called triangulation. Overall, the methodology will yield an evidence-based and detailed picture of the situation of the women in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule.

### **Research Objectives**

- To critically examine the manner in which the ideology of the Taliban is able to reinterpret women rights through its synthesis of Islamic jurisprudence and the tribal traditions.
- To know the social economic, psychological and generational impacts of women's unaffordability of education and employment.
- To gain insight into the new role of digital spaces, transnational activism and Afghan diaspora in protecting the rights of women under the Taliban government.
- To identify the current gaps in the research, and propose the next line of research in the conflict-laden Islamic societies on the tri-dimensional problem of gender, human rights and governance.

### **Historical Context of Women's Rights in Afghanistan (Pre-2021)**

Since 2001, when the republic came into existence, Afghan women have been seeing significant progress in education, employment, legal protection, and representation. With the girls' enrollment in schools having increased significantly and women entering into a variety of professions, such as medicine, law, education, and government work, that had been previously denied to them during the first Taliban regime (1996-2001), they are reclaiming their place. Over the past two decades, Afghanistan made important strides, but uneven progress, in advancing women's rights before the Taliban's victory in 2021. Following the collapse of the first Taliban government in 2001, various governments with international backing began to make strides on the legal and institutional fronts to promote women's empowerment and ensure their rights are respected. The Constitution of Afghanistan 2004, includes a provision of equal rights to all citizens, including women, to vote, engage in political life, and maintain employment and other rights, and a mechanism for the promotion of gender equality which is responsible for protecting and promoting human rights, including gender equality. A major success has been the passage of the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) Law in 2009 which outlawed harmful practices such as forced marriage and domestic violence and thus brought the national law in line with the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) ratified by Afghanistan at the international level (Yasa, 2022).

### **From Promises to Prohibitions: The Taliban's Post-2021 Governance Framework**

These changes allowed Afghan women to attend school, become teachers, doctors, lawyers and civil servants and to participate in public life. For example, in 2021, women were a large share of university students and held seats in parliament and in government offices, having made much more ground in gender equality and public participation over the past 20 years.

In August 2021, when the Taliban retook power, their main message was that they would provide a 'moderate' form of government and that women's rights would be respected 'in the framework of Islam'. The assurances seemed to be an effort to secure international validation and to avoid diplomatic isolation. But in weeks these promises were followed by controlling laws that gradually changed the fabric of Afghan society and systematically excluded women from public life. The Taliban governance system has these unique features: centralization, no constitution and a system of governance based on the decrees of religious leadership. Women were not at all included in political decision making, cabinet and consultative processes. Absence of institutional accountability allowed the regime to carry out the gender policies without legal challenges or public debate. This system of governance was the precursor of the present-day institutionalized gender discrimination, as it is now understood by scholars and human rights groups. (Shuja, 2025). The comprehensive exclusion of women reflects a broader effort to rebuild Afghan society according to rigid gendered roles, eroding gains made over the past two decades and accelerating psychological, economic, and social marginalization.

### **Education as a Battleground: Systematic Denial of Knowledge to Women and Girls**

Taliban rule has been the most focused on sector, and it is the education sector. In September 2021, girls were barred from secondary schools, leaving millions of girls with no formal education. The ban was expanded to universities in December 2022, taking away women's right to higher education altogether. These decisions were quite different from what had been decided in the post-2001 period when there had been a high rate of girls' enrolment in schools and universities. Denial of education has many strategic functions in the Taliban's governance system. Education gives women the knowledge, critical thinking skills and economic independence attributes that challenge authoritarian and patriarchal systems. The Taliban's exclusion of women from education places limits on their future in professional, political and intellectual pursuits, perpetuating their reliance and subordination. Among the areas targeted most under the Taliban's is education.

In September 2021, it was announced that girls would not be allowed to attend secondary school, which effectively put an end to formal education for millions. In December 2022, the prohibition was extended to universities, thus stripping women of higher education altogether. The choices came as a contrast to the post-2001 period, when there had been a significant rise in the number of women in schools and in universities. Denial of education does a number of strategic jobs to the Taliban's governance system. Women's empowerment through education means that women are equipped with knowledge and critical thinking skills as well as economic independence, which challenge authoritarianism and patriarchy (Ike, et al., 2025). The Taliban exclude women from schools, so there is no possibility for them to engage in professional, political and intellectual fields in the future, thereby ensuring their long-term subordination and dependence.

### **Economic Marginalization: Removing Women from Afghanistan's Workforce**

Another key aspect of the Taliban's limitations on women's employment is the prohibition on women from jobs in the private sector. Shortly after taking office, the regime blocked women from various government positions and later it rolled the ban out to nongovernmental organisations and international organisations too. The traditional bastion of women, including education, healthcare and humanitarian services, was stifled. The devastating impact of this economic exclusion on households and communities. For many Afghan families, women's income was the primary source; especially when women were widowed or the main breadwinners. Many families were plunged into poverty, food insecurity and humanitarian dependency as a result of sudden joblessness.

In *The Women of Afghanistan Under the Taliban* (2002) Rosemarie Skaine is an author who speaks about the harsh limitations placed on women's jobs and how this results in significant loss of employment. In Afghanistan, Hafizullah Emadi says, men are given priority on their birth; and women suffer discrimination throughout their lives. Women have little value except in terms of virginity and obedience and when they fall short of such a standard as breaking their virginity before marriage, they face punishment or death. These customs limit their social activities and public appearance (Skaine, 2002)

### **Justice Without Representation: The Collapse of Legal Protection for Women**

One of the most disturbing consequences of the Taliban takeover has been the destruction of the legal and institutional systems that were put in place to safeguard the rights of women. Some institutions, including the Ministry of Women's Affairs were eliminated, women's shelters were shut down or limited, and women's judges, prosecutors, and lawyers were let go. These activities wrought a kind of gender erasure from the justice system. Legal problems are typically settled under the Taliban under informal religious or tribal system, which is dominated by males. These systems seldom focus on the rights of women and instead further entrenched patriarchy. Some widowed women, who didn't have a man, fed their young daughters boy's clothes so that they could go outside to do their chores. This emphasises the Taliban's notion of targeting women as vulnerable as well as symbols of male Honor (Nahani Pour, Zare, & Haghighat, 2024).

There is no legal protection and it has fostered a culture of impunity. Violent men and women are held accountable at minimal level, and women are kept silent by fear, stigma, and lack of recourse. Women who do try to seek justice face consequences that may include further punishment or retaliation for their efforts and this deters them from reporting and may reinforce cycles of abuse. The attack on legal protection undermines fundamental principles of international human rights law (e.g. equality before the law, freedom from violence). It also perpetuates discrimination through women's legal inequality and lack of access to justice.

### **Policing Femininity: Control Over Mobility, Dress, and Public Space**

In addition to bans on education and employment, the Taliban have strict regulations on women's presence and activity in public venues. Women must wear strict dress codes, including full-body covering (burka), and are discouraged and/or prohibited from traveling without a male guardian. Women's access and participation in public spaces like parks, gymnasiums and recreational areas has been limited. An article written by Anastasia Telesetsky in 1998 titled *In the Shadows and Behind the Veil: Women in Afghanistan under the Taliban Rule* is an account of how women in Afghanistan have been pushed to a very hidden and restricted life under the rule of Taliban. In Kabul the thumb of a women was cut off just because she was wearing nail polish and the women were lashed on their back and legs for the violation of Taliban policies on dressing.

She demonstrates that far too many women were excluded from working outside of the home, Women's movements, dress, work, education and public life were not only drastically limited but also widely extended e.g. what shoes women wore, how women walked, the coverings on women's heads. Due to those limitations, women's rights were heavily limited (her words are "shadows" and "behind the veil" meaning invisibility and silencing).

### **Islam as Ideology: Faith, Power, and the Politics of Interpretation**

The Taliban always make their policies based on the Islamic principle and make their governance religiously legitimate. But this is very unpopular in the Muslim world. Islamic history and jurisprudence depicts multiple interpretations that champion women's rights to education, employment, inheritance and legal engagement. The Taliban' vision is a very limited and politicised version of Islam which is focused on control over consideration, authority over justice. The regime dominates religious discourse, and this stifles the free flow of alternative interpretations and challenges. Such a religious instrumentalization of religion turns religion into a tool for governance and not a source of moral guidance.

In the article Women's Rights in the Taliban Regime by Homayoun Mallyar in 2023, author main focus is on how the Taliban regime constructs its gender-order and how that impacts women in Afghanistan. He reports about the state of affairs from a rights-based and structural perspective, and analyses 'why?'. Religious ideology, power relations and institutional dynamics. Islam and custom were used by Taliban to impose ideologies in the society such as prohibition of women from getting involved in the workforce, limiting their education and closing social activities (Mallyar, 2023). The author points out the disconnect perceived by international human rights and treaties on women's rights and the reality of the Taliban regime.

### **Gender Apartheid in Action: Institutionalized Segregation and Exclusion**

On the whole, the Taliban' policies indicate a consistent system of gender-based segregation. Formal laws and institutional procedures, as well as social norms, prohibit women from accessing education, employment, politics and other public areas.

A significant focus in the article, Silenced voices, enduring struggles: An Islamic feminist analysis of Afghan female academics under Taliban rule, is on the role of female academics in Afghanistan, a community particularly on the frontlines of being silenced and enduring struggles when under Taliban rule. They see women's rights not as a western liberal agenda but from an Islamic feminist standpoint; and put up resistance within an Islamic paradigm that challenges the construction of gender and authority in Afghan society (Shahir, Ren, & Noor, 2025).

### **The World Watches: International Response and Its Limitations**

The international community has expressed its dismay at the situation of women under the Taliban, but few steps have been taken to change it. The public statements, targeted sanctions, and diplomatic non-recognition have not proven to be sufficient to change restrictive policies. Humanitarian assistance is still provided, sometimes without any human rights requirements, and there is concern over the normalization of repression. International legal mechanisms such as the investigations into gender persecution show important steps to accountabilities. But complacency and fading interest in the world runs the risk of creating the status quo (Zada S. Q., 2024) . More than ever before, Afghans women are cut off from the world, and their situation is eclipsed by geopolitical and humanitarian concerns.

The author points out the disconnect perceived by international human rights and treaties on women's rights and the reality of the Taliban regime.

### **Conclusion**

With the Taliban returning to power in August 2021, Afghanistan has made a complete and systemic withdrawal of the rights of women, which had been gained in the last 20 years. Their policies show that they have a clear policy of gender exclusion, which is institutionalised in their policies of limiting education, employment, mobility and access to public participation. These measures are also blatant infringements on domestic laws and constitutional rights and freedoms, and have particularly violated international human rights standards such as equality and non-discrimination which are guaranteed in CEDAW and other international human rights agreements. Looking back at the past, it is clear that although women's rights in Afghanistan are still weak, they had seen significant improvement after the collapse of the first Taliban government with the introduction of new laws and policies, international involvement, and the work of civil society organizations. The post-2021 framework on the other hand is an intentional ideology of restructuring society, which marginalizes women and imposes a reliance on male guardians and effectively institutionalizes gender apartheid. This setback has multiple effects, not least economic, excluding women from the formal sector and professional life; social, women are deprived of a voice in public life; psychological, fear, isolation, loss of agency. The erosion of rights is exacerbated by the failure to respond effectively by the international community to the erosion of human rights and to prevent systematic oppression and rights violations in the world. Notwithstanding these difficulties, Afghan women are showing strength and resilience, calling for access to education, work and basic freedoms in the face of tremendous danger. Finally, the Taliban's administration highlights the fragility of the progress recorded in the field of human rights in conflict contexts and the need for continuous international involvement, legal responsibility and strategic assistance for Afghan women. If there is not strong international pressure and specific action, the structural marginalisation of women will continue, stymieing Afghanistan's development aspirations and the wider, international human rights agenda. The

case of Afghan women therefore serves as a compelling reminder that gender parity and equality can be lost if a guardianship system is not maintained and protected and gender equality is not advocated.

## Recommendations

A comprehensive strategy by both national and regional and international actors is desperately needed to solve the systemic violations of women's rights during the Taliban regime and to help Afghan women restore their basic freedoms:

- **International Diplomatic Pressure:** Diplomatic pressure should be applied on the Taliban consistently by the international community, the UN, the regional organizations, and influential states to respect the international norms of human rights, especially for women and girls education, working, and movement. There is an opportunity to enact conditional engagement and sanctions, and utilize these measures strategically to spur reform.
- **Enhancing Humanitarian and Educational Support:** International NGOs, donor countries and humanitarian agencies should give more priority to programs that promote education and vocational training and psychological support for women and girls. The government has imposed some mobility restrictions that can be overcome via remote learning platforms and community-based initiatives.
- **Legal Advocacy and Accountability Mechanisms:** Strategically, legal advocacy and accountability mechanisms must be implemented to document human rights violations and hold perpetrators to account at the regional and/or international level, including through the International Criminal Court. This involves representation of Afghan women's rights on the international platform to ensure that their rights are not violated without punishment.
- **Promoting Global Awareness and Advocacy:** Maintaining Global Awareness and Advocacy: Continuing to receive international media attention, campaigns and scholarly attention can help keep Afghan women's situation on the international agenda, both to keep their issues visible and to make the rights of women in Afghanistan part of a Taliban's reputation.
- **Long-Term Development and Reintegration Plans:** Plans should be drawn up to ensure women's full integration into their communities, education and the labour market in preparation for possible future authoritarian policies; to rebuild and strengthen gender equality supporting institutions and to make societies resilient to future authoritarian policies.

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