AjSO

Shattered Dreams

The Erosion of Women's Rights in Afghanistan

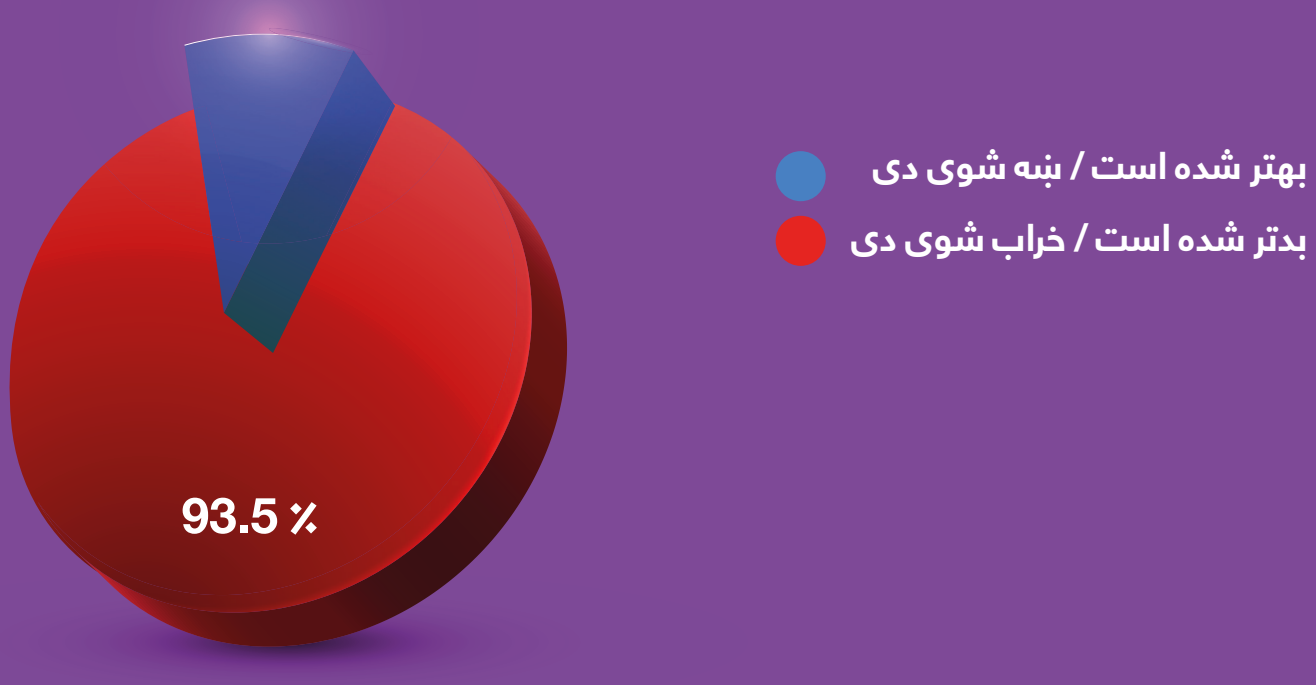
Introduction

Afghanistan has a rich history and a complex cultural heritage (Dupree, 1980). The country has also experienced significant turmoil, particularly over the last few decades, due to ongoing conflict, political instability, and power shifts (Ewans, 2002). Among the various challenges Afghanistan faces, the issue of women's rights remains a pressing one. The status of women in Afghanistan has been a focal point of international concern for many years, and it has fluctuated dramatically depending on the governing authorities. In recent years, the situation has deteriorated following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, leading to severe restrictions on women's rights, particularly in education, employment, and public life.

This quarterly report evaluates women's rights in Afghanistan using data gathered from an online questionnaire. The survey was designed to capture the perspectives of Afghan women regarding their rights and social conditions, both within Afghanistan and abroad. A total of 107 Afghan women participated in the study, 91 of whom reside in 19 different provinces of Afghanistan, while 17 live in foreign countries. The distribution of respondents living abroad is as follows: eight in Pakistan, two in Germany, Iran, and India each, and one in France. To ensure diverse age representation, the questionnaire recorded the age of provinces respondents, categorized into four groups. Of the total sample, 38.3% were aged between 20 and 25 years, 36.4% between 26 and 30 years, 15% between 31 and 35 years, and 7.5% between 36 and 40 years. The questionnaire employed a structured format with quantitative and qualitative questions to assess respondents' perspectives on women's rights. The online format was chosen to ensure accessibility for participants regardless of their physical location, offering a practical and efficient method for collecting data in a challenging context like Afghanistan.

The findings reveal that 62.6% of respondents have witnessed or experienced violence or the erosion of their fundamental rights. In contrast, 37% indicated that their rights had not been violated. Among those who reported rights violations, a significant portion (70%) expressed fear and an inability to share evidence of their experiences, underscoring the pervasive sense of insecurity and repression. Furthermore, 93.5% of participants observed a deterioration in the overall human rights situation over the past six months. This decline is widely perceived as ongoing, with 92.5% of respondents predicting that the human rights situation will worsen in six months. These results reflect deep concerns about the trajectory of women's rights and human rights in Afghanistan, with a prevailing sentiment of fear and pessimism among the respondents.

Badakhshan, Badghis, Baghlan, Balkh, Bamyan, Daikundi, Faryab, Ghazni, Herat Jowzjan, Kabul, Kapisa, Kandahar, Kunduz, Nangarhar Parwan, Saripul, Wardag, Takhar



Caption: 93.5% of the respondents believe that the human rights situation has been worsening.

Context of Women's Rights in Afghanistan

Women's rights in Afghanistan have historically been influenced by cultural, religious, and political factors (Dupree, 1980). However, there were multiple efforts from the government, firstly immediately after its independence in 1919, secondly during the monarchy (1973-1930), and thirdly in the Soviet-backed governments (1992-1974). Women's access to education was expanded, and female participation in the workforce and government increased (Misdaq, 2006). Nevertheless, the situation worsened drastically during the Taliban's first regime (2001-1996), when women were banned from public life, denied education, and forced to adhere to strict dress codes (Rashid, 2010). After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan saw significant progress in women's rights, particularly in urban centers. Women were again allowed to work, attend school, and participate in public life. However, this progress was short-lived. The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 marked a significant setback for women's rights in Afghanistan. Within weeks of their takeover, the Taliban began implementing policies that severely restricted the rights of women and girls. Despite initial promises of respecting women's rights, the Taliban quickly reimposed many of the draconian measures that characterized their previous rule. Below are the restrictions the responders shared.

Restriction on Education

One of the first restrictions reported by the participants is a ban on education. The Taliban initially closed schools for girls beyond the sixth grade and have since implemented a nationwide ban on girls' education. This policy has had a profound effect on millions of girls who are now denied the fundamental right to education, effectively erasing two decades of progress in this area. Girls and young women who once dreamed of becoming doctors, teachers, and engineers are left with no viable path forward. The ban restricts their academic growth and impacts their social and economic futures, as education is a critical factor in tackling the cycle of poverty and promoting gender equality.

Restrictions on Employment

In addition to education, the second restriction report was employment. The Taliban have imposed severe restrictions on women's participation in the workforce including media (RSF, 2021). Women are now barred mainly from most employment outside the home, with a few exceptions in the health and education sectors where women's services are deemed necessary. These restrictions have had a devastating impact on Afghan women, many of whom are the sole or primary breadwinners for their families. The loss of employment opportunities has plunged countless women and their families into poverty, exacerbating the already dire economic situation in the country.

Women who previously held positions in government, media, and civil society organizations have been forced out of their jobs. "I am a journalist, and my husband, who worked as a national security officer during the Republic, are both currently unemployed. With our four children, we are sitting at home, and there is nothing we can do. The situation for women and girls in Afghanistan is worsening with each passing day. Economic poverty, forced marriages, and social restrictions are taking the lives of young girls." The exclusion of women from the workforce not only violates their fundamental human rights but also deprives Afghanistan of a critical segment of its labor force, hindering the country's overall development and recovery.

Public Restrictions: Voice and Presence

As a part of systemic suppression, the Taliban's restrictions go beyond education and employment. Women are now required to wear the burqa or at least a hijab that covers their entire body, including their faces, when they go outside their homes. This enforced invisibility in public spaces is a stark reminder of the Taliban's intent to erase women from public life. In addition to physical restrictions, women are also barred from speaking out or having their voices heard in public forums. Women's voices are considered 'awra' (something that should be concealed - Maududi, 1939), leading to a ban on women's voices being broadcast on television or radio. This silencing of women is a profound violation of their rights. It has led to an environment where women are not only physically absent but also politically and socially segregated and sidelined.

Women's Frustrations

The findings provide a sobering glimpse into the lives of Afghan women under the Taliban's rule. The overwhelming majority of respondents expressed a deep pessimism about their future. They believe that the situation is worsening, with no hope of improvement in sight. Many of the women reported experiencing various forms of violence, but due to security concerns, they were unable to share specific details. This fear of reprisal highlights the climate of terror that women in Afghanistan are currently living under. The survey also reveals a profound sense of hopelessness among Afghan women. Many respondents stated that they no longer see a future for themselves in Afghanistan. The combination of education bans, employment restrictions, and public invisibility has left them feeling trapped in the country.



Worsening Conditions

The women surveyed also reported that their living conditions have deteriorated significantly since the Taliban's return to power. The economic situation in Afghanistan has worsened, with many women losing their jobs and being unable to find alternative means of income. The restrictions on women's movements and activities have also increased their dependence on male family members, further entrenching traditional gender roles and reducing women's autonomy. The psychological toll of these conditions is immense, with many women reporting feelings of anxiety, depression, and despair.

Although the survey respondents were reluctant to share details about the violence they have experienced, many Afghan women are living in a state of constant fear. The Taliban's enforcement of their policies is often brutal, with reports of physical punishment, imprisonment, and even execution for those who are perceived to be disobedient. The fear of such reprisals prevents many women from speaking out or seeking help, further isolating them and compounding their suffering. This climate of fear and violence has a chilling effect on the entire society, silencing not just women but also those who might advocate on their behalf.

The Role of International Community and Human Rights Organizations

The international community has condemned the Taliban's actions, but so far, these condemnations have not translated into meaningful change on the ground. Human rights organizations have called for increased pressure on the Taliban to respect women's rights, but the response from the international community has been limited. The situation in Afghanistan poses a significant challenge for the global human rights agenda, as it highlights the difficulty of protecting vulnerable populations under authoritarian regimes.

Despite the outcry, there has been a lack of effective intervention to address the plight of Afghan women. Sanctions and diplomatic pressure have had little impact on the Taliban's policies, and there is a growing concern that the international community's attention is shifting away from Afghanistan as other global crises emerge. This lack of sustained focus and action has left Afghan women feeling abandoned and betrayed by the international community.

The Need for Continued Advocacy

There is an urgent need for continued advocacy and support for Afghan women. International organizations must continue to document human rights abuses, provide support to those in need, and pressure the Taliban to reverse their policies. Additionally, there is a need for safe channels of communication and support for Afghan women, both within the country and in the diaspora. The voices of Afghan women must be amplified, and their stories must be told to ensure that the world does not forget their plight.

Conclusion

The situation for women in Afghanistan is dire and continues to deteriorate under the Taliban's regime. The restrictions on education, employment, and public presence have effectively erased women from public life, plunging them into a state of despair and hopelessness. The findings from the survey highlight the deep sense of pessimism and fear that permeates the lives of Afghan women, who see no path forward in the current environment. While the international community has expressed concern, there has been little effective action to address these issues. The future of Afghan women depends on sustained international advocacy, pressure, and support to challenge and ultimately reverse the Taliban's oppressive policies. Without such efforts, the gains made in women's rights over the past two decades will be lost, and an entire generation of Afghan women will be left without hope or opportunity.

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