

## A New Feministic Wave in Afghanistan under Taliban Regime: Building Postmodern Narrative

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### **Abstract**

On August 15, 2021, when Kabul Officially fallen on the hands of Gruella Fighters, Taliban (Amarat-e-Islami) which astonished the world. After taking over and establishing New-Government, international community started worrying about 'Human Rights, especially, Women's Rights' in Afghanistan. They raised the issue that ratio in violence against women will rampant in Afghanistan. But in their first press conference, Taliban implicitly stated that, "Women will have rights as per Sharia". About women's rights, many countries and media showed their concern, but Taliban's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Abdul Qahar Balkhi countered the narrative by saying in of hiss interviews, "The state policy is that we will give every right to the female members of our society that comprises half of the population, the right to work, the right to education and every single other right, that has been afforded to them in Islam". However, besides these implicit statements, some females protesting for demanding their rights, which is supported by international community and media. The purpose of this research paper would be to analyze Taliban's narrative and their efforts for women empowerment, women's rights, participation of women in newly established government and the causes of female's protest for their rights, international media trial and challenges faced by Afghani women under Taliban's regime. Furthermore, for the purpose of balanced approach, in this paper, the Analytical, critical and comparative research methodology will be adopted with qualitative research paradigm.

**Keywords:** Women's Rights in Afghanistan, Taliban's government, women empowerment.

## **Introduction: A Historical Background**

Many Afghan women recall a time when they could freely traverse the streets of cities and pursue their education and careers. Queen Souriya began working to change Afghan traditions by founding schools for girls as early as 1928<sup>1</sup>. Her husband, King Amanullah, prohibited child marriages, pushed universal education for girls and boys, and even imposed Western European clothing norms on the Kabul people<sup>2</sup>. Due to vehement opposition from conservative *Mullahs*, these drastic reforms were later repealed, and when King Zahir Shah came to power, most Afghan women remained veiled. In 1959, the burqa was made optional, and Afghan women were allowed to attend schools and universities<sup>3</sup>. Afghan women were granted equal rights and obligations, as well as the right to vote, in 1965. By the 1970s, women held fifteen percent of all legislative positions. The Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan made significant changes to marriage regulations and women's education in 1978. Many traditionalist Afghans, on the other hand, were opposed to these far-reaching reforms<sup>4</sup>.

With the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the Mujahadeen expanded their dominance over Afghanistan, finally toppling the Soviet-backed puppet state of Mohammed Najibullah. "The *Mujahadeen* then enacted rules prohibiting the consumption of alcohol and required women to wear veils. Floggings, amputations, and public executions were all possible punishments for both of these new offences<sup>5</sup>. *Mujahadeen* factions attacked Kabul on April 28, 1992, and declared themselves rulers of Afghanistan.

When news reports about the ruling Taliban's treatment of women reached the attention of the international press in the mid-1990s, the women of Afghanistan earned international notice. "Western feminists were quick to raise awareness about the "victims of brutal gender apartheid"<sup>6</sup>. For years, Afghan women were oppressed by the Taliban, who barred them from working and confined them to their houses or the traditional Afghan burqa while outside. They were denied access to health care, education, and the basic right to work.

After 9/11, when America declared "War on Terror", a new era started in Afghanistan as a result of US invasion. US claimed that they are re-organizing the infrastructe of the country, human rights and especially women's rights. As President Bush addressed the nation, he also claimed that "today women are free, and are part of Afghanistan's new government"<sup>7</sup>. True, a few women have recently been appointed to important government positions, particularly those involving women's rights. After interacting with women's groups in Afghanistan, Medea Benjamin of the human rights organisation Global Exchange said:

"While it is a positive development that several women were asked to participate in the Bonn talks on the transition government, the women were selected by the male delegates in a completely undemocratic fashion. We met many women who felt that several of the women delegates were selected

primarily due to family connections. Women's groups that have been on the forefront of defending women's rights under the reign of the Taliban were not invited"<sup>8</sup>.

Such groups include the women of *Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan* (RAWA) formed in 1977, who have had over two decades of experience in community building, educating, healing, and organizing. There are experienced, able women who could have been selected to help run the country. As part of a call by the United National Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to improve women's leadership in Afghanistan, one recommendation of high priority was that "an independent judiciary based on the rule of law must protect women's rights"<sup>9</sup>.

### **Doha Peace Talk: An initiative for Transition**

When Afghan Taliban started peace Talk at *Doha* for peaceful transition of the government, feminists started raising their voices that they have ignored women from this peace talk, which is not good gesture for Afghan women in future, whether she would be the part of newly established government or not. An Afghani feminist activist, *Mary Akrami* show her concern as, "These institutions have provided employment to women, educated them, given them skills, lowered their mortality rates and have provided them with relative security", further, network of feminist activists say, "No peace deal should come with restrictions on women's employment, freedom of movement and autonomy. If it did, this would not only curtail women, it would be disastrous to the country as a whole. No peace deal should suspend Afghanistan's commitments to the international and regional legal instruments and laws that safeguard women's rights. Any peace deal has to prevent the infliction of physical punishment such as public stoning, flogging, and executions". Actually they are of opinion that Taliban must not ignore women in peace talk and ultimately in their newly established government. But the question is, does these feminists supported long term struggle of Taliban after 9/11 against US and NATO for establishment of their government? Does these feminist raise their voices for the abduction of Afghan women and especially Taliban's women on the hands of NATO? If they claim their very existence in Afghanistan, then question of their existences can be raise with counter question that what are their contributions to establishment of Afghan Taliban's government?

### **Women's Status in Afghanistan: An International perspective**

International organizations conducting various surveys in Afghanistan about status of women. According to UNDP report about gender equality in 2019, Afghanistan was ranked 166 out of 167 countries regarding Gender Development Index<sup>10</sup>. This statistical data shows that gender equality is at crisis in Afghanistan. Similarly, data shows that violence against women is also at peak. According to studies, 87 percent of Afghan women and girls have suffered intimate partner abuse at some point in their lives<sup>11</sup>.

International organizations for human rights are of the opinion that the peace and security for women in Afghanistan are not conducive. Afghanistan was placed worst (170 out of 170 countries) on the Global Women, Peace and Security Index in 2021, according to a survey<sup>12</sup>. This statistics shows that the lives of Afghan's women are in danger which may lead to a historical catastrophe, but still the data collection method, the tools they used, the target population of this survey is dubious. There is no direct statement or reference towards their methodology that how they collect data, how from whom they collect data and how they analyzed their collected data which ranked Afghanistan at such dangerous position for women. It is general perception about *Pashtun* society that they knot their female child in very early age, which is a kind of violence on girls. Keeping in view this norm, as Afghanistan is inhibited by *Pashtuns*, UNICEF in 2021 conducted a survey in which they claimed that 28% of 15-49 years age of Afghan's women married before the age of 18<sup>13</sup>.

According to international organizations, the education system is almost crippled for girls specifically. According to UNICEF, 60% of overall Afghan's children which is out of schools are girls<sup>14</sup>. Now the question can be raised on this data that Afghanistan is suffering from wars for almost 60 years, does their all boys are in-schools and getting proper education? UNESCO, conducted another survey regarding women education that, 4.9 per cent of women are accessing tertiary education, compared to 14.2 per cent of men<sup>15</sup>. According to available data, the school population grew eightfold from less than one million students in the early 2000s to 9.2 million students (38%) in 2018<sup>16</sup>. Before August 2021, there were no rules prohibiting girls from entering secondary school; girls could attend all levels of education in all 34 provinces. Girls' access to education has altered dramatically since the Taliban took power; as of November 14, 2021, girls only have access to secondary schools in seven of the 34 provinces. In other words, from grades 7 through 12, girls are routinely forbidden in 27 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Young women face similar challenges in acquiring a university education<sup>17</sup>.

It is also a debatable issue that Afghan's GDP may fall due to excluding women from Government machinery or any other economical set up. A survey of UNDP shows that Afghanistan's GDP is expected to fall by 20% in a year. Furthermore, it is predicted that prohibiting women from working might result in an instant economic loss of up to \$1 billion, or 5% of GDP<sup>18</sup>.

### **Women's Rights under Taliban's Regime: A Feministic Perspective:**

After fall of *Kabul*, Taliban in the first news conference, Taliban's Spokesperson, *Zabiullah Mujahid* said, "Our sisters, our men have the same rights". But however, we can hear some voices which claims that Taliban violated basic human rights and women's rights. A well-known feminist and South Asian Campaigner of Amnesty International, *Samira Hamdi* opined

that, "It's astonishing that, at a time the country is facing an economic and humanitarian crisis, these women and thousands more like them are being barred from public life. We urge the Taliban to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of women and girls. We call on the international community to engage directly with Afghan women to understand their reality, listen to their pragmatic recommendations, and work with them to support women's rights." Her this statement referring towards the Taliban's guidelines for female subjects of the country.

Last week, the Taliban issued new guidance prohibiting Afghan women from travelling more than 45 miles from home without the company of a close male relative (Mahram) This instruction comes after a November 2021 guidance that instructed television stations to stop showing programs featuring female actresses. In Kabul, about thirty women marched to the streets to protest the limitations and demand that the Taliban respect women's rights. The women also expressed their displeasure at the Taliban's purported assassination of soldiers serving under the former Afghan government. The following day, some fifty women took part in a demonstration in Kabul demanding that the US unfreeze the Taliban government's assets. Since September 20, girls aged 12 and above (grades six and up) have been barred from attending school, and strict gender segregation at universities has severely limited women's access to higher education. As a condition of accepting help, foreign governments have stated that the Taliban must protect the rights of women and girls. Despite the threat of severe famine this winter, the Taliban has instead tightened restrictions on women's rights. Last month, the Biden administration announced additional measures exempting humanitarian relief organizations operating in Afghanistan from Taliban penalties.

According to national and international media, the ratio of joblessness in the new government is at highest peak, especially female suffered more. As Taliban ignored women in government similarly they compelled them to be confined to the walls of their homes. Women in some professions, such as the media and civic society, are reporting additional challenges as a result of the de facto authorities' position on women's freedom to work. Some of the hurdles to women's employment participation are created by a lack of clarity and self-censorship by families and women in the absence of any official order from the Taliban allowing full participation in the workforce. In nutshell, analyzing the reports and analysis of Media, it can be said that there has been a visible reversal in a woman's right to work as a result of the Taliban's ascension to power, with no clear strategy or mechanism in place for women to fully return to their jobs.

Moreover, it has been also reported that Taliban restricted female journalist from work. According to a report by Reporters without Borders

(RSF), after August 15, 2021, only about 100 of Kabul's 700 female journalists will be technically working at privately owned radio and television stations<sup>19</sup>. This falling ratio of journalists may be due to the newly imposed restrictions of Taliban on Media industry, this opinion can be confirmed from CNN report which states that, "According to new Taliban media restrictions enacted on November 22, 2021, women actresses are prohibited from acting in television programs"<sup>20</sup>. The dearth of female representation in the media can have a chilling effect, obliterating women from public view and encouraging male dominance in specialized industries.

The restriction imposed on women by Taliban, as reported by international media and community seems failure of Taliban Government. If the repeated the mistakes they made during their first takeover, may lead to their isolation in international community. Women humanitarian workers confront significant barriers to meaningful participation in response planning and execution. The majority of female humanitarian workers are required or prefer to work from home due to a combination of constraints—right women's to work, workplace sexism, wardrobe limitations, *Mahram* rules, and safety and security difficulties when travelling to and from work. In humanitarian situations, a lack of complete representation of women risks erasing and/or marginalizing their contributions, as well as limiting women's access to services. Women must be at the center of humanitarian activities in a country where gender segregation affects many facets of life. This will ensure that communities are contacted and fully accessed.

### **Taliban's Government Narrative on Women's Narrative: Countering New Feministic Wave in Afghanistan:**

The Taliban's government has declared that it is developing a national policy to ensure that girls have equal access to education at all levels across the country. They've admitted that developing and implementing such a strategy will take longer. In September 2021<sup>21</sup>, the Taliban, for example, proclaimed that women would be allowed to study, but not alongside men; that gender segregation and a new dress code would be introduced; and that the topics would be reviewed<sup>21</sup>. This has yet to happen, underscoring the need of assessing the Taliban's stated commitments in light of their actions on the ground.

Taliban are shown to the world as staunch enemy of women and strong violators of Women's Rights. They are portrayed as brutal, barbarous, savage, and truculent to the world. They are shown that after their take over, they will start violence against women, but the reality is not the same. Prior to August 15, 2021, rates of violence against women and girls were already extremely high, with studies suggesting that 87 percent of Afghan girls and women abused at some time in their life<sup>22</sup>. It shows that violence against women in Pre-Taliban Afghanistan was at its peak. But after takeover, Taliban

took initiatives to counter violence against women. The Taliban issued a "Special Decree on women's rights" on December 3rd, which lays down the regulations for women's marriage and property, as well as implementation instructions.

*"A woman is not a property, but a noble and free human being; no one can give her to anyone in exchange for peace deal and or to end animosity" according to the decree<sup>23</sup>. It also declares that widows have a portion in their husband's property and that women, especially widows, should not be coerced into marriage."*

Many voices rose regarding Women's Health and female health workers. International community and media opined that Afghanistan facing Human and Health crisis. But Health facilities and services in Afghanistan were poor and scattered even before the Taliban assumed control, with significant gaps in rural and hard-to-reach areas in particular. The international aid freeze has seriously impacted the country's ability to provide health services, let alone specialized programs for women and girls. Health-care personnel have been working without pay for several months, and medical supplies are quickly running out as a result of the current economic situation. A huge brain drain is exacerbating the health-care sector's issues. On February 6, 2022, Afghan Health Minister, *Dr. Qalandar Ibad* expressed his views regarding health situation in Afghanistan under Taliban Regime in Salem Safi's *Jirga* Program. He said that, "we ensured the safety of female health workers and we told them if you got any trouble from anyone, please inform us, we will try to sort out your problems". He further added that since six months, female nurses who were working under *Sihmandi Project*, in previous government were not given salaries, but despite assists freeze and economic crisis, we paid their four months salaries. It is reality that Taliban government did not disturb the ranks and allocations of all employees, especially female. All of them working on the same position as they were appointed by the pre-Taliban government against posts. One of Nurses in Kabul said that, "we are happy because we feel secure under Taliban regime, because they follow *Sharia*, which is exactly same to our Afghani customs and traditions, all female doctors are allowed to practice private clinics with in prescribed rules, and government ensures their security and safety". Afghan Health Minister further said that they have hired 500-1000 freshly graduate nurses, and they have given freedom in the choice of career in all sectors especially health. In previous government, women were only allowed to opt for Gynecology, but in Taliban's regime, there is no restrictions on their choice of opting career. Similarly in examination for post-graduation program, total 5800 candidates, in which more than 2000 were female.

Taliban's Foreign Minister, *Mulla Ameer Khan Mutaqi*, in one of his interviews commented on the Rights of women in Afghanistan that, "it is

totally defamation that we have deprived women from their basic rights. All those female employees who were working in the previous government are still on their same position and receiving their salaries equal to male employees. In health sector their ratio is 100% while in the other sectors, their ratio has been raised to 75%". Another Taliban leader, *Sheikh Hammasi* on his visit to Kabul hospital addressed female nurses said,

*"I request you all to come hospitals without any fear, you are our mothers, sisters and we dearly need you in this situation. Government have spent a remarkable amount of money from national treasury, that why you are sacred trust of this nation".*

### **Conclusion**

In nutshell it can be concluded that, Taliban Regime faces many challenges, but despite other challenges like elevation of poverty, economic stability, health facilities and personal security of their subjects, the challenge of facilitation of human rights especially women's rights is on prime target. The protests which is echoing in various parts of the countries by leading activists and feminists, to whom international community highlights the most is serious issue, which must be handled with wisdom. Scholarly overview on the current Taliban Regime, one can infer that newly established government had learned from their previous "mistakes". They have empowered women, allowed their education, facilitated them in health and education sector, they have ensured security of female at their work place and treat them equal to men.

Actually international community rumored against Taliban Government for not fulfilling the basic rights of women, but Taliban categorically debunked their narrative by empowering women in their government. But still the question of political participation of women is ambiguous. Taliban not cleared their stance on women participation in their newly government machinery.

### **Recommendations**

Researcher should highlight the actual problems of Afghanistan, like human crisis, poverty and basic human needs, and should not stray away the attention of the world by engaging themselves in the debates regarding so called feministic protests,

It is high time to shed light on the progress made by the new government and highlight their strengths and weakness regarding women's rights for a powerful and peaceful country,

So called feminist grab the attention of the world by claiming that their basic rights are being violated, the researcher must investigate the narratives of these activists regarding foreign aggression and violation of women's rights since 1979.





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