

# **WOMEN IN CONFLICT: A CASE STUDY OF AFGHANISTAN IN US WITHDRAWAL PERIOD**

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## **Abstract**

In the wake of the post-American withdrawal (2019-2023), Afghan women develop apprehension that the regressive policies of the Taliban regime will resurface. This study, guided by the feminist conflict and peace theory, investigates the hurdles faced by Afghan women in this revived Taliban regime. By examining a range of sources, including reports, scholarly studies, and first-hand testimonies of Afghan women, this study analyzes how women have navigated through the complex political turmoil they faced as a result of power changes, foreign interventions, and the far-reaching effects of the Taliban resurgence. The study also dwells upon the impact of the policies of the Taliban regime on the political, social, and personal life of Afghan women. The study seeks to contribute to the broader discussion on the gendered nature of the conflict, shedding light on the significance of empowering women not only as victims but also as active participants in achieving lasting peace.

**Keywords: Conflict, FCPT, Regressive, Revived, Resilience.**

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## **Introduction**

Women have long been an integral part of societies affected by conflict all over the world. Afghanistan, with its tumultuous history of war, foreign interventions, and political instability, provides a compelling case to study the experiences of women in conflict. Conflict is a diverse phenomenon. Understanding the myriad impacts of conflict on women is crucial, as it helps to develop gender-responsive strategies to mitigate harm, protect rights, and promote empowerment in conflict-affected settings.

## **Gendered Nature of the Conflict**

Conflict traditionally means the involvement of a significant and often violent disagreement or struggle between two or more groups.<sup>1</sup> The traditional definition of conflict usually refers to the tangible manifestation of conflict, which primarily includes armed conflicts, power struggles, and confrontations between two groups over resources, territory, or differences in ideological preferences.<sup>2</sup> Although correct, the traditional definition misses out on a broader and more nuanced understanding of conflict through a gender lens. A more gender-specific definition and approach to studying conflict is thus required to understand women's agency and their experiences in conflict. It recognizes that conflict is not limited to overt or physical displays of violence but encompasses the cultural and everyday social practices of discrimination and injustice, which disproportionately affects the agency of women.

John Paul Lederach supports the argument, emphasizing that women are rarely directly involved in armed wars like men (as frontline soldiers). Still, it doesn't factor out the fact that women become direct targets of not only the consequences of militarized wars but also make them victims in their domestic spaces involving unbalanced gender relations.<sup>3</sup> This gender-specific approach highlights issues such as limited access to education and healthcare, exposure to various

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<sup>1</sup> Azar, Edward. 1986. *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases*. Dartmouth Publishing Company.

<sup>2</sup> Burton, John. 1990. *Conflict: Resolution and Prevention*. Macmillan.

<sup>3</sup> Lederach, John Paul. *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

forms of violence (both sexual and mental), and discrimination.<sup>4</sup> Among the many countries in the world where women struggle to recognize and establish their identity in society, Afghanistan's women's rights violations and the crisis have grabbed the most amount of attention globally. Similarly,<sup>5</sup> it was revealed that patriarchal gender norms that perpetuate the idea of women's subordination to males are among the many variables that impair women's agency in Afghanistan. These factors include poverty, limited access to healthcare and education, and patriarchal gender norms. The authors also point out that violence against women and girls fosters a culture of fear, limits their freedom of movement and expression, and poses a severe obstacle to women's agency and participation in public life.

Gender is thus seen not as an isolated but as a constructive term.<sup>6</sup> It states that conflict is shaped not only by gender but also by other dimensions ranging from ethnicity to religion to socioeconomic. It realizes that all social factors interconnect to create unique experiences for women in different contexts.<sup>7</sup> Applying an intersectional lens helps to uncover the diverse experiences and challenges faced by marginalized women, such as ethnic minority women or internally displaced women. It highlights the need for targeted interventions that address their specific needs.

The construction of gender in a place like Afghanistan calls for a thorough analysis of what gender is in Afghanistan and how it is constructed to shape the individual life experiences of women in conflict. Therefore, to dwell upon the complexities of women's experiences in the Afghan conflict, it is pertinent to have a clear understanding of what conflict entails through a gendered lens.

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<sup>4</sup> Grewal, K. K. (2021, March 11). *Feminist Responses to Conflict: Within, Against, and Beyond the Law*. In T. Väyrynen, S. Parashar, É. Féron, & C. C. Confortini (Eds.), Retrieved January 29, 2024, from research.gold.ac.uk website: <https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/30296/>

<sup>5</sup> Omidian, P. A., and S. J. Tabibi. "Women's Agency and Empowerment in Afghanistan." *Gender & Development* 24, no. 2 (2016): 219-233.

<sup>6</sup> Haq, Rukhsana. 2013. "Intersectionality of Gender and Other Forms of Identity: Dilemmas and Challenges Facing Women in India." *Gender in Management* 28 (3): 171–184. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-01-2013-0010>.

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, Zakiya F. 2018. "Intersectionality and Gender Theory." In *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*, 69–80. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76333-0\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76333-0_5).

Conflict through a feminist lens not only includes the traditional aspects of violence but also focuses on the intersectionality of gender-based injustices, such as patriarchal gender inequalities, with social, political, and economic dynamics.

Feminist peace conflict theory (FCPT) explains the definition of peace, which, in turn, gives us what conflict means through a feminist lens.<sup>8</sup> It describes peace in three ways: firstly, it is the absence of structural violence, which Johan Galtung characterizes as the form of violence propagated by social structures and institutions, harming and preventing people from meeting their basic needs.<sup>9</sup> In this study, we are building up on how FCPT defines peace and refers to conflicts as "the overt and covert struggles marked by a complex interplay of power imbalances between gender and societal structures, historical grievances among different groups, and external interventions contributing to the instability in the country, prompting a call of action to more equitable society."

### **Women Navigating through Afghanistan's Social-Cultural Context**

Tribal ties, ethnic diversity, and outside influences mark Afghanistan's complicated past. The cultural landscape is marked by a strict interpretation of gender roles, rigidly defined along patriarchal lines. Men were typically responsible for protecting and providing, and women were confined to the boundaries of their homes and hearth. These gender roles hindered the visibility and mobility of women in the public sphere. Women's agency is constrained in Afghanistan due to different cultural, social, economic, and political circumstances. These factors include gender discrimination, violence and instability, patriarchal norms and values, limited access to education and career opportunities, movement restrictions, and limited engagement in public life.<sup>10</sup> Male-dominated gender norms that perpetuate the idea of women's subordination to males are among the many variables that impair women's independent agency in Afghanistan. Violence against

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<sup>8</sup> Bond, J. (2021). *Foundations of Intersectionality Theory*. In *Global Intersectionality and Contemporary Human Rights* (pp. 6–26). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198868835.003.0002>

<sup>9</sup> Galtung, Johan. *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*. Sage Publications, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Omidian, Parveen A., and S. Jalal Tabibi. 2016. "Women's Agency and Empowerment in Afghanistan." *Gender & Development* 24, no. 2: 219-233.

women and girls fosters a culture of fear, limits their freedom of movement and expression, and poses a severe obstacle to women's autonomy and participation in public life.

With the advent of Islam in Afghanistan, gender roles were reshaped according to the teachings of Islam. While there exists spiritual equality between men and women in Islam, the gender roles were subjected to local interpretations, which led to a complex interplay between religious teachings and cultural and societal norms.<sup>11</sup>

Though Islam emphasizes spiritual equality between men and women, the gender roles in Afghanistan are subjected to local interpretations shaped by social mores and traditions, which led to a complex interplay between religious teachings, cultural constructs, and a stringent interpretation of the Islamic law concerning women. While explaining the relationship of Islamic teachings passing through a local lens, states that Islam at its core upholds the fundamentals of modesty and privacy for women.<sup>12</sup> However, misogynist cultural views restrict the visibility of women in public. It not only hinders women from participating in the social fabric of the country but also limits their access to education, healthcare, politics, and employment opportunities.

Applying the gender lens, our study exposes the increased women's vulnerabilities after the recent return of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the implications of the Taliban's devised policies on the lives of Afghan women.

## **Literature Review**

The effects of conflicts and wars cannot be fully understood without applying the gender lens. Whenever a conflict is talked about, only armed conflict is taken into consideration, which pivots around males and negates the presence of women. It is further corroborated by a report titled *Gender and Inclusive Mediation Strategies: Practical Guidance for Gender-Sensitive Conflict Analysis*, published by the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA)<sup>13</sup> It emphasizes that women and men cannot be considered a homogenous group in times of conflict

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<sup>11</sup> Abū-Rummān, Muḥammad, and Hassan Abu Hanieh. "The 'Islamic Solution' in Jordan." *British Journal of Sociology*. 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Afsaruddin, Asma, and Anan Ameri. *Hermeneutics and Honor: Negotiating Female "Public" Space in Islamic/ate Societies*. Cambridge, Mass.: Distributed for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University by Harvard University Press, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA).

as both are impacted differently. Women are disproportionately affected by war in comparison to men. The experiences and struggles of women in war are not only different but relatively undervalued, understudied, and underutilized both during and after the conflict. It has led to the severe underrepresentation and deprivation of the inclusion of women on negotiation tables. While exploring the role of women as architects of peace, it propounds that historically, people in power have deliberately left women out of the negotiation process, directly affecting their agency and social presence in times of conflict.<sup>14</sup>

Conflict or situations of instability have proved to enhance the discriminatory practices against women and other marginalized groups. Lack of delivery of essential services and resources during the conflict situation disproportionately affects women, often building on pre-existing unjust and gender-biased cultural practices. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 clearly<sup>15</sup> "reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security."

### **Challenges faced by Afghan women in conflict**

Afghanistan's women's rights violations and the crisis have captured overwhelming attention globally. Since the beginning of the process of state building in Afghanistan, women's rights have been a contested issue, swinging as a pendulum between the liberal policies introduced by foreign actors and the regressive policies of Islamic fundamentalist groups such as the Taliban. Women's rights, thus, have always been entwined with the struggle for power between the central governing authorities and the struggling groups at the peripheries.

The power dynamics within the household hold that men are supposed to be the leaders of the family. The substantial prevalence of patriarchal norms and gender inequality perpetuates the cycle of domestic violence, emphasizing the need for supportive services and interventions to break the

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<sup>14</sup> McGuinness, Margaret E. "Women as Architects of Peace: Gender and the Resolution of Armed Conflict." In *Michigan State Journal of International Law*, 15:63, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Security Council. Resolution 1325 (2000). S/RES/1325, 2000.

cycle of violence. Restricted mobility, ban on education, under-representation in the political and economic sphere, and absence in public spaces pose extreme challenges to women in Afghanistan.

Restricted mobility and presence in public spaces are other challenges that women are still facing in the wake of conflict. While studying the direct implications of this restriction, highlighting that the limitation on social mobility has resulted in the absence of women from the decision-making processes, compromising their agency.<sup>16</sup>

Gender-based violence is another prevalent abuse of Afghan women as a result of strict patriarchal norms and financial dependency on men. While writing about the severe consequences of GBV,<sup>17</sup> he explains that the survivors experience stigmatization, social isolation, and reduced access to essential services. Furthermore, they state physical and mental abuse, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections as the long-term and immediate effects of Gender-based violence. GBV in Afghanistan has broader societal repercussions in addition to affecting individual survivors.

Gender-based violence is any act of violent activity that is targeted towards any individual based on their gender, resulting in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering. This section explores critical literature on the prevalence, causes, and consequences of GBV in conflict-affected areas, with a focus on Afghanistan.

Multiple factors contribute to the occurrence of GBV in conflict-related areas. Patriarchal rural norms, gender inequalities, and the erosion of social and legal norms are some factors highlighted in the literature contributing to GBV.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, it highlights the gendered implications of violence, displacement, and social transformations in the context of conflict in

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<sup>16</sup> Khan, J., and S. K. Mohanty. 2018. "Spatial Heterogeneity and Correlates of Child Malnutrition in Districts of India." *BMC Public Health* 18: 1–13.

<sup>17</sup> Wirtz, Andrea L., Kaveh Pham, Nancy Glass, Sarina Loochkartt, Tigist Kidane, Daniela Cuspoca, ..., and John W. Pape. 2018. "Gender-based Violence in Conflict and Displacement: Qualitative Findings from Displaced Women in Colombia." *Global Public Health* 13 (12): 1763–1778.

<sup>18</sup> Bastick, M., K. Grimm, and R. Kunz. *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector*. Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2007.

Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Women in Afghanistan have faced various forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, forced marriages, and sexual assault.

Despite the challenges, a few Afghan women actively participated in peacebuilding efforts and showed resilience as negotiators, local civil society workers, and women rights activists, raising voices for women-inclusive policies in post-conflict situations both at home and abroad.

## **Historical Evolution of the Women's Movement in Afghanistan**

The status of women in Afghan society is deeply influenced by the cultural and religious practices shaping gender roles. While talking about the Saur Revolution of 1978, the author talks about the active involvement of women during this time. Her work explains how women's active participation has led to the country's social and political transformations. The Saur Revolution marked the beginning of the communist setup in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Women vehemently participated in the revolution by protesting and rallying against the government. This revolution increased women's access to educational and professional spheres. Women also got legal rights in the areas of divorce and inheritance. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the highest level of women's activism was seen in the country. Women not only came out to advocate for educational and political rights but were also seen taking part in the country's economic sphere. Several women opened salons in their areas and ran independent businesses. Lemmon, in her book "The Dressmaker of Khair Khana," narrates the story of a woman who was able to run her clothing shop successfully even in the presence of the Taliban. The woman named Kamila Siddique proved to be an unusual breadwinner of her family, who, despite the strict laws inflicted by the Taliban, was resilient enough to not only provide for her family but also help other women in need. While narrating the story, Lemmon says that these stories help us see beyond the grave image of women's

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<sup>19</sup> Amowitz, L. L., C. Reis, and V. Iacopino. "Maternal Mortality in Herat Province, Afghanistan." *Reproductive Health Matters* 10, no. 20 (2002): 91-102.

<sup>20</sup> Hilali, A. Z. 2003. "The Soviet Decision-Making for Intervention in Afghanistan and Its Motives." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 16 (2): 113–144.

rights presented by the media and respect Afghan women's resilience, strength, and determination.<sup>21</sup>

While supporting local women's voices and facilitating advocacy for women's rights by Afghan women, NGOs and women-led entities have played a crucial role in helping to propagate the agenda of women's rights in Afghanistan. One such organization is the Afghan Women Network(AWP)<sup>22</sup>, formed in 1996; this works as a platform for promoting the collective voices of Afghan women. Afghan Women's Educational Center is another organization in Afghanistan that works primarily to promote Afghan women's educational rights. The program equips women with knowledge and skills to enhance their socioeconomic status.

AWEC's legal aid wing provides legal support to women against mental, physical, and sexual abuse inflicted upon them. AWEC is also associated with running campaigns to raise awareness on the issue of women's reproductive healthcare. In the face of the immense struggles that women have faced in Afghanistan, mainly at the hands of conservative religious groups, Afghan women have emerged as active agents of change through their unwavering commitment to local activism.

## **Gaps in literature**

While ample literature is available on women in conflict, especially targeting Afghan women since the Taliban came back, however scant attention is accorded to focus on the struggles of women in the new Taliban set up post-US withdrawal. The current literature on the ground realities of women in Afghanistan and the impact of the recent Taliban takeover and their policies on their daily lives is insufficient. Therefore, the article aims to address this gap and provide a comprehensive analysis of the situation faced by Afghan women under the Taliban regime.

Our study attempts to find answers to questions such as: how have Afghan women navigated through the complex landscape of political turmoil and external interventions in Afghanistan

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<sup>21</sup> Lemmon, Gayle Tzemach. "The Dressmaker of Khair Khana: Five Sisters, One Remark...." Accessed January 30, 2024. Goodreads. <https://www.goodreads.com/>.

<sup>22</sup> Ruttig, Thomas. 2019. "Women and Afghan Peace Talks: 'Peace Consensus' Gathering Left Afghan Women without Reassurance." Afghanistan Analysts Network - English. April 15, 2019. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/women-and-afghan-peace-talks-peace-consensus-gathering-left-afghan-women-unassured/>.

during the past four decades? And what is the impact of the Taliban's Government policies on Afghan women, both in the public and private sphere, after the USA's withdrawal?

## **Research Methodology**

The primary research conducted for this article employed a qualitative methodology, encompassing both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was acquired through structured interviews conducted with Afghan refugees and women activists, offering valuable firsthand insights and perspectives on the subject matter. Fifteen individuals were approached for interviews. The first group, Afghan refugees, comprises individuals who have been displaced from Afghanistan due to the ongoing conflict. This group includes a total of 10 Afghan women students, 5 of whom are present in Pakistan, continuing their studies, and 5 of them are outside of Pakistan. The second group interviewed was women activists who are actively involved in advocating for women's rights and gender equality in Afghanistan. The third group of interview participants consists of experts, political scientists, and researchers specializing in the intersection of women's experiences in conflict in Afghanistan. Thematic analysis was used to extract themes such as heightened security concerns, limited access to education, healthcare, and controlled mobility. Secondary methods involve the use and analysis of the existing literature, including newspaper articles, journals, and books on the contemporary status of women in Afghanistan.

The methodology used for analysis is called gender-responsive conflict analysis/methodology (GRCA).<sup>23</sup> Gender-responsive conflict analysis is a system that thoroughly evaluates and analyzes the power dynamics, stakeholders, and institutions through a gender-based lens. GRCA recognizes the differential impact of conflict on individuals based on their gender, explaining how it intersects with gender dynamics. In Afghanistan, GRCA helped recognize and analyze deeply entrenched gender norms and roles that changed over the long course of the conflict. Thus, it specifically focuses on identifying the root triggers, factors, and causes of the conflict and the specific impact of the conflict on women.

GRCA helped us study the diversity of experiences among Afghan women and identify factors that shape gender roles in a country like Afghanistan. Gender-responsive conflict analysis (GRCA) proved to be a valuable approach for studying Afghan women in conflict. It not

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<sup>23</sup> Gender and Inclusive Mediation Strategies: Practical Guidance for Gender-Sensitive Conflict Analysis.

only recognizes the importance of recording the subjective experiences of Afghan women relating to the complexities, challenges, and brutalities they face but also advocates the importance of the inclusion of Afghan women in policy-making structures.

## **Discussion and Findings**

### **Findings**

The following findings were extracted from the interviews. The Taliban's strict interpretation of Sharia law has systematically oppressed women, limiting their autonomy and agency even under the new policies that the Taliban leadership has devised since coming into power. A considerable gap is present between the narratives of Taliban leadership promoting and advocating for women's rights in media talks and the actual policies that this regime has been devising for women. It has banned university education for girls across the country. Two high school graduates who were living in Afghanistan pointed out that the only way out for them to pursue a university education was to obtain an international scholarship program. They firmly believe that the ban on women's education under the rule of the Taliban will never be lifted. There is a strict requirement for a mahram(a male guardian) always to accompany women who attend school and access public spaces.

The respondents of the interviews also pointed out the effects of these events on the mental health of Afghan women. All the women complained that the uncertainty of the future and limited access to education, resulting in the further limitation of economic opportunities, has taken a toll on their mental health, leading to severe anxiety and depression. They furthermore explained that the mental health of women is highly stigmatized, and the presence and access to mental health services for women are nonexistent, which has further exacerbated the mental health crisis.

Women were supporting international interventions, for instance, Americans' presence in Afghanistan, in which women could gain better access to education and healthcare resources with no mobility issues in the central city of Kandahar. However, provinces, which were strictly under the control of the Taliban during the American intervention, did not allow women to move into public spaces. The respondents of the interviews pointed out the adverse effects of restricted mobility on the mental health of Afghan women. All women complained about the rising

socioeconomic uncertainty of the future, limited access to school education, and the limitation of economic opportunities. It has taken a toll on their mental health, leading to severe anxiety and depression. The mental health of women is a stigmatized and taboo subject, and psychiatric care services for women are nonexistent, which has further exacerbated the mental health crisis. The interviews also informed me about the mobility challenges faced by women in accessing welfare organizations for help. One woman respondent explained that personal connections and social networks are essential to access support services. A few respondents reported a virtual absence of support services in their area, demonstrating a gap in services and resource distribution, whatever little is available.

Afghan women are primarily excluded from holding government positions, indicating the lack of gender-inclusive priorities at the national level. Some women viewed that the Taliban government would never take positive steps to address women's needs and allow their presence in the political sphere.

The Taliban's narrative on women's rights and their presence in the public sphere has come under scrutiny in recent years, as it appears to be carefully constructed to reshape international perceptions and downplay their history of women's rights violations. Respondents also pointed out that the Taliban are creating a false narrative on the global stage regarding the provisions of women's rights. There is a deliberate attempt from the Taliban leadership to shape and change international perceptions about women's rights violations. One woman respondent said that segregated shopping malls are a superficial attempt to provide women with opportunities in public spaces. She claimed that although the Taliban are claiming to give women certain rights and opportunities, this segregation of male and female spaces poses a severe threat to the autonomy and agency of women in the country, reinforcing the traditional gender customs of disallowing women to communicate with men freely.

Although many of the respondents were in favor of the regime set up by America in Afghanistan, expressing that they found more spaces and opportunities for freedom under the American government along with this. In response to the question on the comparison of the status of women's rights and liberties under the rule of the Taliban and the interventionist regimes, a few women believed that the interventionist regimes on global forums had used Afghan women as pawns to forward their agenda. They viewed that narratives and stories amplified by Americans are selectively framed, focusing on chunks that align and advance their own country's geopolitical

agenda rather than advocating for the actual case of women's rights and empowerment of Afghan women. They observed the exploitation of international narratives and struggles by certain global powers to advance their interventionist agenda, which further destabilized the already fragile socioeconomic position of women in the country.

Women's rights activists drew our attention to the detrimental policies adopted by the Taliban leadership to ban women's education, indicating that the Taliban still are addressing women's issues with their conservative approach as they had already applied in the past. One respondent informed that she knows that many women activists in Afghanistan were captured and killed because the Taliban's leadership views women activists and women in public spaces as a severe threat to their control and power.

Another woman activist pointed out that the families of these Afghan refugees prefer to send their boys rather than girls to schools. This choice comes from the deep-rooted cultural notion that educating boys can give higher income returns regarding future earning potential. Security for girls was another reason for keeping them inside the four walls of the home.

Women activists explained that women who seek employment in other neighboring countries are often exploited by their employers in return for necessities such as food, water, and clothing. This abuse comes in the form of physical and mental abuse, exploitation, harassment, and violence. Employers withhold their papers, such as passports or immigrant documents, and forcibly engage women in sexual activities. Women fear reporting to the police authorities as they don't want to get deported back to Afghanistan, where life is even more miserable.

Women also shared that some welfare NGOs provide women with shelters where they can live and earn their livelihood. However, male family members see the work of NGOs as a threat to their traditional family structures. Therefore, they strongly forbid women to seek such supportive services.

These findings from Afghan women, activists, and researchers gave us a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the challenges and opportunities Afghan women face.

## **Discussion**

Afghan women's struggle throughout the four decades of political turmoil and change of power structures has severely hampered their empowerment process. Agency of Afghan women, the ability to make choices or choose among alternatives is severely curtailed. It comes not only

from the institutional structures and actors in power holding positions in political institutions and the cultural, religious, and social traditions and customs but also from the family dynamics of Afghan society. Inside the institutions, influential state leaders exhibit hostile agency towards and fail to provide alternatives to women to make their own choices.

The denial of women's right to education adversely impacts other choices of women, such as employment, cultural autonomy, and financial independence, which further increases women's dependence on male members of the family. Women then find themselves incapacitated to participate in decision-making. Afghan women over the decades have lost more than what they have achieved. Under the rule of the interventionist powers, the resources and opportunities to get an education and means of employment were adequately allocated to Afghan women, which relatively increased women's economic independence, political rights, and representation.

The return of the Taliban has negatively altered the situation for women. Now, the Taliban, being one in authority, does not support women's independent place in society, which led to the severe subjugation of women's rights in the country. It reversed women's achievements by negating women's political representation and controlling their mobility, freedom of speech, education, and employment opportunities.

Afghan women, after the renewed rule of the Taliban, have felt a more significant denial of resources both at institutional and individual levels. Local women groups, who were operating before the Taliban came into power, were stopped by state policies and laws. The rigid interpretation of the Islamic sharia law has always backed up the rule of the Taliban.

The banning of university education, disallowing the social interactions of women and men in public spaces, laws compelling women to cover their whole faces, and the requirement of a male guardian for females are significant barriers impeding Afghan women's abilities and choices.

Despite international media's noise against the misogynist policies of the Taliban's rule, the Taliban are in no mood to allow women to access public or political spaces. A law passed by the Taliban has stopped women from going back to governmental institutions to work where they were previously employed. Taliban are paying salaries to women governmental officers to sit at home.

Since coming into power, the Taliban have replaced the Ministry of Women Affairs led by Debal Mazari with the Ministry of Vice and Virtue.<sup>24</sup> This symbolic move underscores the ideological outlook of the Taliban towards women. The ministry designs the rules and policies of how women should act publicly. The replacement of a whole ministry dedicated to women with a ministry that will now dictate how women will conduct themselves in public indicates a regressive shift where the affairs of the women are now framed based on morality, which is strictly defined by the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic values regarding women. Repression of fundamental rights reinforces the repressive policies the Taliban adopted in the past, hinting at another era of gender-biased policies and discrimination against women.

### **Economic participation of Afghan women**

Under the new rule of the Taliban, all women working in educational, governmental, media centers (journalism), and banking sectors were forced to leave their jobs and sit back at home. The Taliban men then filled these vacant positions. Afghan women before the Taliban were involved in many professions, i.e., teaching, working as reporters(journalists),<sup>25</sup> salons, handicraft making, and trading. Women who are allowed in the media business are required to cover their head and face fully. The government's compulsion to wear specific attire limits women's freedom and raises severe concerns about women's agency to make the choices they want to make for themselves.

Salon businesses, too, which were initially closed, were open on the condition of a man being the business owner. The act of taking ownership away from women attacks not only their agency but also their autonomy over their bodies and businesses. The age-old mindset of seeing women as lower, unequal, and weak in comparison to men is reinforced by this decision of the Taliban.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Pal, Alasdair. 2021. "Taliban Replaces Women's Ministry with Ministry of Virtue and Vice." *Reuters*, September 17, 2021, sec. Asia Pacific. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-replaces-womens-ministry-with-ministry-virtue-vice-2021-09-17/>.

<sup>25</sup> Pal, Alasdair. 2021. "Taliban Replaces Women's Ministry with Ministry of Virtue and Vice." *Reuters*, September 17, 2021, sec. Asia Pacific. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-replaces-womens-ministry-with-ministry-virtue-vice-2021-09-17/>.

<sup>26</sup> Bezhan, Frud. 2021. "Taliban Imposes New Dress Code, Segregation of Women at Afghan Universities." *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*. September 6, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-dress-code-segregation-women/31446726.html>.

Women's workforce is forced to sit at home, leaving them in a vulnerable position of financial dependence on the male guardians of their families. This financial dependence, coupled with the restrictive policies of mobility, places them in the age-old loop of restrictive economic agency enforced by the Taliban.

The reinforcement of traditional gender norms has severely limited women to the sphere of domestic responsibilities only, further limiting their agency in the decision-making process.

With women now sitting at home, there has been a sharp rise in domestic abuse and violence.

### **Resilience in the face of adversities**

Afghan Women, despite facing various restrictions from the Taliban, have shown remarkable resilience by running private schools for girls. These secret school networks are sometimes run by former school teachers from their homes, either free of cost or funded by international organizations.

Afghan women have faced decades of conflicts, interventions by the Soviet Union and the USA, and now Taliban rule. The act of running secret salons by Afghan women to participate in economic activity underscores the indomitable spirit of Afghan women who refused to be silenced by an oppressive regime. Women in Afghanistan learned to adapt, survive, and rebuild their lives.

The presence of Afghan women on international platforms, despite encountering live threats and speaking to the world, is a courageous act on behalf of Afghan women.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past four decades of political and social turmoil in Afghanistan, the struggle for Afghan women's empowerment has been severely curtailed. The agency of Afghan women and the ability to make choices for themselves have been severely restricted by the institutional structures and deeply rooted cultural, religious, and social norms that permeate the Afghan society.

Despite the rhetoric adopted by the Taliban government to show moderation and commitment to the issue of women's rights in the country, regressive policies against Afghan women are continued, and women are left more vulnerable to a vicious cycle of systematic oppression, mental abuse, and domestic violence. The previous Ministry of Women Affairs was replaced by the Ministry of Vice and Virtue by the Taliban government and mandated to morally control women to exercise their independent rights under the strict interpretation of Sharia laws. It forced women

employees to retreat from public life. The unending violation of women's rights and the discrepancies between the government's promises and practices hinder the achievement of women in Afghanistan.

However, amid the pains and perils of women's suffering, we cannot take Afghan women as passive victims. Many Afghan women are showing extraordinary resilience, both at home and abroad, challenging bans imposed on women's education, political presence, and mobility. This unwavering commitment to advocating women's rights is a testament to the enduring spirit of empowerment. Our study emphasizes the inclusion of women's voices and experiences in peacebuilding negotiations and reconstruction efforts. It also argues the significance of adopting gender-sensitive and inclusive policies to ensure women's participation and representation at all levels.

The future of Afghan women, especially after the return of the Taliban, depends on the collective emphasis on gender-inclusive policies by the international community and women activists, who can keep mounting pressure on the Taliban government to change its regressive position on women's rights.