



## **Afghan Women: A Political Battleground and a Bargaining Chip**

Dr Abida Bano  
Pakistan

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The fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan at the hands of the Afghan Taliban and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in August 2021 has ushered in unprecedented misery for women in Afghanistan. Hailing from a conservative culture and beset by ongoing conflict and economic deprivation, the women of Afghanistan were already facing significant challenges to their empowerment. However, during the democratic system, albeit weak and flawed, they had the opportunities to pursue education, follow careers, and improve their circumstances, thereby transforming the war-torn Afghan society. Therefore, the IEA and its regressive policies regarding women's human rights represent a severe setback to all the progress achieved over the past decade. Some of the drastic steps the IEA has taken so far include systematically excluding women from public life by banning girls and women from higher education, restricting their employability opportunities, discouraging the social sector that employs women, imposing a strict dress code, and preventing them from travelling alone. This essay makes a point that the Taliban's prohibition of women from education and employment threatens to push Afghan society to the point of no return, potentially causing irreparable damage to its social fabric. I argue that upholding women's human right to education is essential for a strong and stable Afghanistan.

We must note the milestones achieved during the democratic era (2001–2021) to know what is at stake here. According to estimates, women constitute half of Afghanistan's population. Since 2001, there has been a considerable increase in girls' enrolment in educational institutions, reaching approximately more than 3 million compared to 1 million in the early 2000s, as per the World Bank's report. Similarly, there was a visible rise in women attending higher education institutions. Women also showed considerable progress in the economic and political arenas. A separate women's ministry, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, was formed under Ashraf Ghani's government to advocate for women's rights in education, health and employment. Some legal reforms, including the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law, were passed to criminalize domestic violence against women. In the economic sector, initiatives like the Afghan Women's Business Federation and creating jobs in the formal and private sectors paved the way for women's economic empowerment. In the security sector, women also participated in the Afghan National Army and police.

Furthermore, with a growing awareness of their socio-economic realities and political conditions, more women joined the social sector and raised their voices for women's rights. Consequently, a vibrant women's movement with transnational reach emerged.

Although these campaigns and movements remained confined to urban centres and did not extend to the peripheries, the consistent collective action of civil society could slowly and gradually change societal attitudes towards women and nurture democratic norms within a prevailing conservative social system. According to scholars, from Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) to Nancy Fraser (2007), vibrant civil society is a critical arena of contestation and plays a crucial role in democratization. However, these movements and struggles were curtailed after August 2021. Women in the social sector were primarily targeted and forced back into either their traditional roles or to flee the country. Some of these examples mentioned above show that Afghan women would have been on their way to participating in the development of their country equally if the system had not derailed and fallen into the hands of repressive powers.

What are the logical consequences of this rollback of women's rights, and what does it signify for a potentially stable and prosperous Afghan society? Firstly, women's participation across all sectors is crucial for Afghanistan's economic development. Having been war-torn for decades, Afghanistan faces severe economic and political challenges that can only be alleviated when all its educated and able-bodied workforce contributes their efforts and energy. Excluding women (half of the population) from the workforce and failing to harness their potential is counterproductive to building a prosperous nation.

Secondly, in the global community, a government's legitimacy is significant for establishing diplomatic and cooperative relationships internationally. Strong and stable international partnerships are key to a country's economic development. Any government that lacks legitimacy in the eyes of the global community is at risk of economic isolation and deprivation. Afghanistan, being in perpetual conflict, requires international partners more than ever for its economic recovery and institutional building. Yet, it is not attempting to gain international legitimacy, severely affecting its ability to smoothly manage the country's affairs. Furthermore, banning girls and women from education and their workplaces has compounded the injury and further deteriorated the chances of the IEA working with the global community. Lastly, women's lack of education and political engagement has historically impeded the possibilities of political reforms and establishing a stable government in Afghanistan.

The question now is why this list of women's rights in Afghanistan is shrinking day by day. In my view, there are specific reasons for the rollback of women's human rights in Afghanistan. Firstly, there was insufficient emphasis on granting women's rights during the Doha Talks, which allowed the Afghan Taliban to establish the political system according to their vision. Given the history of the Taliban's former rule, women's rights should have been a crucial topic of discussion with the Taliban administration during the talks. However, the lack of political will among global powers left women's rights at the mercy of the forthcoming government in Afghanistan.

Secondly, the absence of support and insistence on safeguarding women's rights from transnational civil society, including the United Nations, exacerbated the plight of Afghan women. While some voices from various parts of the world have highlighted discrimination against women, a consolidated and meaningful effort remains elusive.

Finally, what can be done to address this dire situation? First, a strong and unified effort is required by the global community to put pressure on the IEA to reinstate women's education and employment while granting them their rightful rights. Second, human rights organizations (especially Afghans at home and abroad), alongside advocacy for women's rights, could form a consortium to develop mechanisms encouraging girls to continue their education online until the situation changes. Those with specific skills could be employed to ensure their journey progresses. Lastly, the IEA must reassess its actions and evaluate its policy towards women, considering international commitments and the expectations of the global community; otherwise, it may face extinction through international isolation.