

The Dilemma and Causes of Modern Afghanistan Women's Social Development

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Abstract. The development of Afghan women is one of the key research topics today. Researcher has found that people's awareness of women's rights is gradually increasing. However, there is still a certain research gap in focusing on the uniqueness of Afghan women. Therefore, this study focuses on Afghanistan, discovers the real situation and challenges faced by Afghan women's lives, and reflects on the reasons that lead to these problems. It is hoped that the situation of Afghan women can be used as an example to stimulate people's thinking about women's basic rights. This researcher focuses on and analyzes different types of information to find the correlation between phenomena. The research results of this article indicate that Afghan women face significant difficulties in education and social integration, and the causes of these hardships are comprehensive, including social structure, religious factors, geopolitics, dominant economic structure, and other factors. However, the researcher is pleasantly surprised to find that despite facing many challenges, Afghan women have not given up their struggle and are constantly fighting for their own rights directly or indirectly. Their vitality and female power have moved and inspired researchers.

Keywords: Afghanistan, women, social development, religion.

1. Introduction

With the Taliban government coming to power for the second time, the situation in Afghanistan has undergone significant changes. The Taliban government has implemented various policies that have greatly restricted women's right to education and ability to integrate into society. In such a historical context, the challenges faced by Afghan women's development have significant research value. In previous studies, researchers have provided explanations for women's basic rights. Scholar Fraser Arvonne expressed the view that restricting education is a heavy burden that persecutes women's basic human rights by studying women's right to education [1]. Scholar Jafri S. A. Minan provides a comprehensive description of the living conditions of Muslim women [2]. In summary, scholars have attached great importance to human rights issues in the Muslim world. However, there is a gap in research on the uniqueness of the situation of Afghan women and the analysis of women's rights from a public policy perspective. Therefore, this paper takes the development dilemma of contemporary Afghan women as the topic, and through literature research and policy analysis methods, describes the real situation of contemporary Afghan women from two aspects: education dilemma and social integration dilemma. At the same time, it attempts to further explore the reasons for the emergence of this situation.

2. The Education Dilemma of Afghan Women

2.1. The Regulations and Changes in Educational Policies

From 2021 until now, women in Afghanistan have been shrouded in the shadow of dropping out of school. With the continuous introduction of education bans, their situation has become increasingly difficult, and the presence of Afghan women is rare at all stages of education.

In September 2021, the Taliban reinstated their policy from 1996 to 2001 to prohibit teenage girls from attending secondary school. Then, In December 2022, the Taliban extended their ban on women, preventing them from pursuing higher education at the university level [2].

According to the report released by UNESCO in July 2024, at least 1.4 million girls have been deliberately deprived of the opportunity to receive secondary education since 2021[3]. Including girls who dropped out of school before the ban was implemented, approximately 2.5 million girls in Afghanistan are currently deprived of their right to education, accounting for 80% of school-age girls in Afghanistan [4].

Besides, although girls under the age of 12 can still receive education, the number of primary school enrollments has significantly decreased since 2021. The latest data from UNESCO shows that in 2022, the total number of primary school students in Afghanistan was only 5.7 million, compared to 6.8 million in 2019 [4]. This is closely related to the Taliban government's order to expel female teachers and their rewritten school curriculum.

2.2. Family Attitude towards Female Children's Education and Afghan Women's Feelings towards Education Restrictions

In Afghanistan, different families exhibit varying attitudes toward girls' education due to their different economic conditions, educational levels, and other factors. Some families support girls' education, partly due to their daughters' strong desire to go to school, and partly because parents recognize the importance of education. These parents see education as a means for girls to achieve self-improvement and economic independence. In addition, many people believe that good education can help girls clarify their rights, thereby reducing the possibility of domestic violence and unfair treatment [5]. Besides, some devout Muslims do not agree with the Taliban's Islamic doctrine. They believe that, as written in the Quran, seeking knowledge is the duty of every Muslim, and they believe that education can help girls better understand the real teachings of Islam [5].

However, despite this, there are still many families who voluntarily or involuntarily give up letting their daughters go to school. This paper will analyze the reasons for their actions from three perspectives. Firstly, economic factors make it difficult for many families to afford the cost of girls' education. Although secondary and lower education in Afghanistan is generally free, families still need to pay for various miscellaneous expenses such as clothing, stationery, books, commuting, etc. for girls [6]. At the same time, keeping girls at home for farming (especially in agricultural areas) and other labor can help families earn more income. Therefore, some families gladly accepted the policy of girls not going to school.

In addition, some families are concerned about the safety of girls going to school. Apart from the government's own aversion and regulation towards girls' education, going to school itself carries risks for girls. On girls' way to school (usually a long journey), they may be harassed by strangers or attacked by robbers but the whole society seems to have become accustomed to this, and there are no police to protect their safety [5].

Apart from economic and security factors, this paper believes that the most influential factor is still the extremely strong traditional social values. When the whole society tends to believe that girls going to school is shameful and insulting to family reputation, then those families who originally wanted girls to go to school will also face great social pressure. In many interviews, many parents mentioned their neighbors, relatives, and local mullahs who advised them not to let their daughters go to school. In addition, the entire marriage market favors girls who have not attended school, which may result in girls who have attended school not being able to marry at all, which is unacceptable for some parents [5]. From another perspective, girls who are already engaged will be forced to interrupt their studies and devote themselves to their families to 'repay' the groom's family for their marriage.

Girls who cannot go to school, according to USIP's survey, exhibit signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, saying they feel they are living a life with no purpose and an uncertain future [7]. Some are even isolating themselves from family, while others have turned to narcotics, further fueling Afghanistan's drug crisis.

2.3. The Problem of Child Marriage Caused by Educational Restrictions

As is shown in previous studies, child marriage is closely related to girls' lack of education [8]. Keeping girls in school is one of the best ways of delaying marriage. On average, the likelihood of a girl marrying as a child is six percentage points less for every additional year she stays in secondary education [6].

According to UN Women, the phenomenon of child marriage has increased by about 25% since the rise of orchid students [9]. The child bride incident is directly related to the school emergency and the Taliban's decision to prohibit girls over 12 years old from attending school after coming to power. There is no doubt that child marriage increases a girl's chances of experiencing violence, puts her at greater risk of pregnancy-related complications, and contributes to continued cycles of poor health and poverty, which is both a big threat to girls physically and psychologically.

3. The Dilemma of Afghan Women's Social Integration

3.1. The Dilemma of Restriction in Public Places in Afghan Women

However, in contemporary Afghanistan, women are not only unable to receive secondary and higher education, but their living space is also strictly restricted. As early as August 25, 2021, the Taliban issued an order requiring women to stay at home because soldiers were not trained to respect women [10]. Subsequently, restrictions became clearer and stricter, and the prerequisite for women to appear in public places was that they were accompanied by men, including buying coffee, taking public transportation, taking a taxi, going to restaurants, and other daily small things [11]. To ensure the effective implementation of the decree, they punished women and operators who disobeyed orders and continuously strengthened the power of the police. At the same time, women's bathhouses were closed and women were deprived of the qualification to take driver's license exams. Just take a close look at it, for widows, single mothers, and other women without husbands around them, this will be a huge disaster, and they may be unable to live because of it. After 2024, there has been a new upgrade to the policy that women are not allowed to enter public parks or travel to a foreign country alone and women's voices are also being controlled [12]. The Taliban does not allow women to make audible sounds in public, including singing and reciting books, and it is also not allowed to be friends with non-Muslims. In addition, the clothing that women wear in public places is also strictly restricted. Women must completely veil their bodies, including their faces, in thick clothing always in public to avoid leading men into temptation and vice [13].

Not allowing girls to appear in public life can cause significant psychological harm to them. In a BBC interview, a girl told reporters "When we got out, we're scared. When we're on the bus, we're scared. We don't dare to take down our masks. We even avoid speaking among ourselves, thinking that if someone from the Taliban hears us, they could stop and question us" [14]. It's hard for us to imagine how they could live without speaking freely to their friends and how they could survive without contacting with the whole outside world.

3.2. The Dilemma of Occupational Restrictions in Afghan Women

The Taliban's employment restrictions on women have penetrated various fields of society. On September 20, 2021, the Taliban first ordered professional and working women to stay home until further notice [10]. Their restrictions then took place in the governmental professions, which includes removing professional women from their jobs and prohibiting the hiring of any female members into the government. Apart from domestic professions, international jobs also get involved. For example, On December 24, 2022, they banned female staff from international NGOs [15]. Faced with these restrictions, women in Afghanistan are no longer able to make principal decisions and pursue political achievements. In the economic field, the condition is also worrying. For instance, women are not allowed to run any small businesses like bakeries, medical centers or beauty salons. These sidelining implementations erode women's path to economic independence. As reported by UNDP, the

proportion of women working in Afghanistan has dropped from 11% in 2022 to 6% in 2024 and this number is still decreasing [16]. It's hard to believe that the sports field could not tolerate women's participation. Female athletes are not recognized by the Taliban, and even in large-scale events like the Olympics, Afghan women are unable to participate in the name of their own country [17].

3.3. The Personal Safety Risks Faced by Afghan Women

The lives and health of Afghan women have not been effectively protected, and they are facing various threats. Firstly, domestic violence is prevalent in Afghanistan. Since 2021, the Taliban has closed all women's aid centers, and victims of domestic violence have lost their only refuge. At the same time, the government has imprisoned women who accuse themselves of domestic violence under the pretext of protection, but this not only fails to acknowledge the irrationality of domestic violence but also exacerbates women's lack of freedom. There are other risks for women like rape and harassment. According to the AIHRC, 85% of women and children have been harassed in some way [18]. Women who stepped outdoors alone or worked outside the home were frequently harassed, with groping, catcalling, and being followed. Threats were occasionally aimed towards women in public positions or their families [18]. What's worse, Sexual violence continues to be underreported due to the fear of reprisals, stigma, the absence of services and ongoing security concerns. In many cases, husbands, family members, police, lawyers, and judges discourage women from taking legal action [18]. Besides the threat to their lives, Afghan women also lack basic health protection, which is closely related to public restrictions like removing women from healthcare centers and banning women from going out alone. This means if a woman has something wrong with her health, she can't get immediate access to proper health care, leading to worse health conditions.

4. The Causes of the Worsening Dilemma and Resistance of Contemporary Afghan Women

4.1. The Social Structure of Patriarchy

It is difficult to say that the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan emerged suddenly, as it has existed in their culture for a long time, and the emergence of the Taliban regime is like a magnifying glass that exposes it unreservedly to our vision. If observing the terrain of Afghanistan, people will find that it is filled with rugged mountains, steaming deserts, and endless grasslands. Under the dominance of such a natural environment, the people living on this land make a living by nomadic means. They have developed a fierce and unruly personality, are good at riding and shooting, and form small tribes for occasional migration needs. In the order of nomads, women and children need protection, while men play the role of protectors [19]. This kind of one-way relationship is different from the setting of the male protagonist outside and the female protagonist inside an agricultural society. The deep-rooted nomadic culture in Afghan culture has not only shaped this resilient and lovely nation but also made male rule reasonable and unshakable. Nowadays, the traditional structure turns into strict family rules, including seeing husbands are those expected to provide economically for their wives and children throughout their lives.

4.2. Factors of Religious Culture

In addition, in this land of Afghanistan, two key factors cannot be ignored: religion and multiethnicity, which influence each other, are full of tension, and form a subtle balanced relationship. As mentioned earlier, Afghanistan has a strong nomadic migration culture, and at the same time, many outsiders' iron cavalry has stepped on this land, which makes the ethnic composition of this land very complex. According to United Nations statistics, there are at least 20 ethnic groups in Afghanistan, with Pashtuns being the majority, followed by Tajik, as well as Hazara, Uzbek, Turkmen, and other ethnic groups [20]. The complexity of its ethnicity provided the soil for the birth of Islam and solidified its importance in this land. Specifically, Islam, as a universal faith, is devoutly adhered

to by people of all backgrounds, regions, ethnicities, and wealth. This provides a cultural connection and cohesion for the multi-ethnic Afghanistan, and its binding role unleashes tremendous vitality and survival within the religion itself. However, religion and multiethnicity interact with each other, and when the interests of different ethnic groups clash, this initial bond may also turn into a whip, serving as an important weapon in ethnic wars and mutual killings. In short, the people's devout faith in religion precisely gives rise to the possibility of religious extremism. And the Taliban regime is one of the outcomes brought about by ethnic strife.

According to the Taliban's interpretation of Islam, women do not have the right to education and work, but the primary task of Prophet Muhammad was to liberate women. Historian Braudel's words can serve as evidence, as he once said: There is no doubt that the primary task of Islam is to liberate women. This goal has been clearly stated from the beginning and is currently being achieved. And if deeping into Quran, in the divorce chapter, there was a passage that read: "O believers! You cannot seize women as inheritance, nor can you oppress them so that you can take back a portion of the dowry you gave them unless they have committed obvious wrongdoing". And when it comes to breastfeeding, there is a paragraph that says if the woman is willing to breastfeed the child, then the man should be paid. These issues should be decided through mutual consultation and should not harm the interests of either party, which clearly shows its respect and care for women.

However, there is still a question of why the Taliban is willing to distort Islamic doctrine to restrict women? this paper is going to analyze the reason by delving into the composition of Taliban members. Due to limited information, this paper uses the first Taliban rule period as an example. During the Taliban's first rule, most of their leaders came from the southern part of Afghanistan, and their hometowns were mostly concentrated in the three provinces with the poorest, most conservative, and highest illiteracy rates in the country [21]. In the small village where its leader Omar was born, women were required to wear burqas, and girls hardly attended school. They have almost no contact with women. This experience has been generalized into Taliban policies and applied to every corner of Afghanistan. And to explain its legitimacy, the Quran has been distorted into a weapon. Besides the influence of personal experiences of leaders, perhaps people should also realize that Taliban members are a new generation of Muslim men who grew up in a culture of war. There is a huge disconnect between their past living environment and the actual Afghan society. Women often play a role in correcting social behavior in society, as an unstable symbol that may overturn power, and therefore suffer persecution. In addition to cultural factors, perhaps the shortage of positions in the real economy forces women to give up their career opportunities, which may also play a certain role. However, the researcher tends to believe that culture and history are still at the center of the problem.

4.3. Geographical Location and Nationalism Factors

Besides, the reasons analyzed above, the persistence of colonial ideas has also exacerbated the crisis for Afghan women. Afghanistan is a country with a unique location. Afghanistan, located between Europe (former Soviet Union), China, Iran, and Pakistan, is undoubtedly the crossroads of Asia. Coincidentally, whether it is joy or sorrow, this land is rich in resources, including lapis lazuli, mineral deposits, oil, and natural gas, all of which are nurtured under this magical land. Therefore, the history of Afghanistan is not only about itself but also extremely important for the entire world. The British, Soviet, and American cavalries set foot on this land one after another, but they were lost and left because they could not completely control it. This national situation seems to have set a sad tone for the survival of Afghan women.

From a domestic perspective, the long-term wars of foreign governments and their establishment of puppet regimes continue to intensify the nationalist sentiment of the Afghan people [22]. Undoubtedly, the Western world has brought a blueprint for democracy and construction to Afghanistan, and in the short term, it has indeed improved Afghanistan's economic strength and the average living standards of its people. But the problem is that not all groups on this land benefit from democratic policies. In other words, have people overlooked the fact that there are significant regional differences within Afghanistan, with vastly different lifestyles between urban and rural areas [23].

For rural people, the values of the West bring about loss and disaster. Faced with the thriving construction of their motherland, their primitive jobs have become cheap and less important, but modernization and economic development have forced them to bear the soaring prices brought about by economic recovery, making them a group abandoned by modernization. In this situation, when the Taliban stepped forward as protectors, they expressed their support to regain their presence and control on this land. From this, the researcher finds that behind the Taliban are huge rural forces who are conservative and loyal to traditions that benefit them, even at the cost of sacrificing women's basic rights. In the context of reality, democracy and rural areas are two difficult concepts to unify. But democracy is closely related to women's rights [24].

From a foreign perspective, although the Taliban's rule has brought great disasters to women in Afghanistan, under its threat of force and violent rule, it is difficult for huge riots to occur within the country. The stable situation in Afghanistan is a godsend opportunity for foreign energy procurement and investment companies. Therefore, it is difficult for foreign countries to be willing to assist Afghan women beyond humanitarian reasons. However, the idea behind this consideration is horrifying. Perhaps under the Cold War mentality of great power games, the people are no longer important, and human rights can be sacrificed as a sacrifice for national interests at any time, while women have become sacrifices on the "road to a strong country" in Afghanistan.

4.4. Afghan Women's Resistance and Self-realization for Education and Public Rights

Fortunately, many girls still haven't given up on pursuing their right to education. Some of them choose to learn by themselves through online courses and books, and some even set up study groups on the Internet to encourage each other; Some girls dress up as men to go to school, even though it is dangerous and inconvenient for them, they still insist on this difficult disguise to complete their studies; Some of them use their limited savings to buy books and learn as much knowledge as possible [25]. However, not all girls have the conditions to participate in online courses, nor do all girls receive support from their families to self-study with peace of mind. More girls enter marriage early and accept their own "destiny".

In public fields, although facing so many challenges, the researchers still see women trying their best to seek self-realization in many ways. They post their videos online, with their face covered, singing songs about freedom. They do secret sports at home, keeping paying attention to their fitness. They build up online groups to motivate each other and seek broader social space. Women never lose strength and hope and the day they win the "war" is sure to come.

5. Conclusion

Through this study, researchers have found that contemporary Afghan women face challenges in both education and social integration. In terms of education, the Taliban government prohibits women from receiving education beyond secondary school, restricts the teaching content of primary schools, and forcibly dismisses female teachers, resulting in a significant decline in the education rate of women of all ages. At the same time, families have different views on girls' education, but overall, due to economic pressure and societal biases, more and more families are gradually giving up on sending girls to school. The decline in female education rates has brought about the social reality of early marriage, which has caused significant psychological and physical harm to girls. From the perspective of social integration, women are prohibited from appearing in public places such as parks and are even not allowed to use public transportation alone. This undoubtedly binds women firmly within the family and limits their freedom of movement outside. At the same time, more and more positions are no longer open to women, making it almost impossible for them to achieve economic independence and break free from the constraints of their families. Moreover, women's safety is also very limited, and behaviors such as domestic violence and sexual harassment are rampant. In such a social environment, women's living space and safety are facing severe challenges. After clarifying the living conditions of contemporary Afghan women, this research further analyzed the reasons that

led to such a situation. This research believes that the nomadic nature of the Afghan ethnic group leads to deep-rooted patriarchal genes in their social structure. At the same time, the diversity of religions and the understanding of Islam by those in power have made religion a powerful weapon that restricts women's freedom. In addition, Afghanistan's unique geographical location has brought about turmoil throughout its history, intensifying people's longing for peace brought by control, while the fear of women and democracy from control itself has exacerbated women's survival difficulties. During the research process, this paper is fortunate to find that Afghan women did not succumb to their oppressed fate. They used various means to fight for their rights, and the power of women reflected in them was inspiring. In the future, the researcher hopes to further explore this issue and, if possible, conduct online or on-site interviews to more accurately grasp the real challenges faced by Afghan women in their survival and development.

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