

The Historical Evolution and Contemporary Challenges of Women's Struggle for Equality in Afghanistan

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Abstract. The recent enactment of restrictive laws by the Taliban in Afghanistan, reversing critical advancements in women's rights across education, employment, and social participation, has generated global concern, highlighting the urgent need for sustained advocacy toward gender equality. This paper examines the historical evolution and contemporary challenges of women's struggle for equality in Afghanistan. It begins by highlighting the recent regression of women's rights under the Taliban government, which has sparked international concern. Historically, Afghan women had limited roles in a traditional patriarchal structure. However, from 2003 to 2021, there were advancements in rights, such as in the constitution and education. Since 2021, there has been a regression with restrictions on education, employment freedom of expression of social media. Factors contributing to gender weakness include educational inequality, social and cultural barriers, and political instability. The paper also discusses the impact of international intervention. It suggests solutions like education improvement, social and cultural improvement, and political improvement. The research is significant as it shows historical progress and setbacks, helps understand inequality factors, but has limitations regarding intersectional factors and men's role, indicating areas for future study.

Keywords: Afghanistan, women's rights, historical evolution, contemporary challenges, social and cultural barriers.

1. Introduction

Recently, a series of laws introduced by the Taliban government in Afghanistan have sparked widespread international concern. These 114 pages of legislation completely strip women of their basic rights in areas such as education, employment, and social activities. The move marks a significant rollback of women's rights in Afghanistan and deals a severe blow to the progress made towards gender equality. This is a regressive step that the world cannot condone. Women's rights must be respected, and the journey toward equality for Afghan women has been hard-fought and should not be undone. Prior research largely lacked a focused examination of the specific impact of recent Taliban legislation on Afghan women's rights in education, employment, and social life, leaving gaps in understanding the full extent of these restrictions. Additionally, few studies explored the immediate and long-term implications of these legislative changes on the broader struggle for gender equality in Afghanistan, highlighting the need for an updated and thorough analysis. Therefore, this paper will analyze the historical evolution and Contemporary Challenges of Women's Struggle for Equality in Afghanistan, which emphasizes the importance of gender equality for Afghan women and what Taliban's new legislation means to them. Besides, specific suggestions on how to improve the current poor situation of women are also provided at the end of this paper.

2. Gender Roles and Rights in the Historical Context

2.1. Women's Status in Traditional Family Values

In Afghanistan, the traditional social structure has significantly influenced women's status and their role in society. Historically, living in a semi-tribal patriarchal country, women are often viewed as secondary and inferior to men, with their primary role being in the home, weaving, doing

housework and caring for children [1]. However, the recent struggles and advancements in the news in Afghan women's rights further highlight a shift in this traditional hierarchy.

The traditional structure of Afghanistan is deeply rooted in family values where the family is considered the foundation of society. The family plays a vital role in determining social status and functions, and women remain primarily responsible for domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and raising children. This hierarchical system is reflected in the fact that many Afghan women face discrimination and violence because of their gender, despite efforts by various organizations to support them. According to the 2015 Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey, 52 percent of married women reported experiencing have experienced different forms of intimate partner violence in their lifetime [2]. These abuse of violence against women was mainly derived from the risk factors that are prevailing in Afghanistan's society, including early marriage, gender inequality, women's poverty and low education level [3].

2.2. Changes in Laws and Policies

In Afghanistan, most people follow customary laws, which are informal, unwritten rules distinct from state laws. These laws govern people's daily life and are crucial for maintaining community harmony. Many of them are rooted in restorative justice principles. Community disputes are resolved through a traditional council called a Jirga, whose decisions are regarded as binding laws by the community. Although the council meetings are public, they are typically male dominated, with limited participation from women as they are often excluded due to concerns about their presence being disruptive. However, in rare instances, women have been known to sit on the council [4].

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan's laws and policies on gender inequality have changed significantly, which was apparently on the down grade. Therefore, the analysis of policy and legal changes in this paper will take August 2021 as the time segment point to analyze the policy changes and prove the regressive changes on women's rights before and after August 2021.

Before August 2021, several important policy changes made by the former government gradually led women's empowerment activities back to the right track. For example, in December 2003, a Constitutional Loya Jirga approved a new constitution, guided by the liberal 1964 Constitution, which women helped to draft, gave women the right to vote and guaranteed them "dignity, compulsory education and freedom to work". It had helped to create an environment in which women occupied prominent political and professional roles. Bonn set out basic rules for the development of women's roles and pledged "to include them in political life, particularly by participation in the Loya Jirga and the interim administration" [5].

Besides, after the adoption of the Constitution in 2004, Afghanistan began to try to integrate women's rights into the country's legal framework. The constitution was drafted after strong international demands to protect women from traditional customs and tribal laws. The constitution was seen as an important milestone in the struggle for women's rights, as it provided basic guarantees for women in terms of political participation, prevention of violence and traditional legal challenges. The new Constitution includes the following improvements in women's rights [6].

The new Constitution explicitly forbids discrimination and acknowledges equal rights for both men and women, stating that "all forms of discrimination and privilege among Afghan citizens are prohibited" and that "Afghan citizens, whether male or female, have equal rights and responsibilities under the law. [6]"

The Constitution guarantees a minimum number of seats for women in Afghanistan's bicameral National Assembly. Women are required to hold at least two seats from each province, with a total of 68 out of 249 seats in the Wolesi Jirga (House of the People). Additionally, 50 percent of the President's appointees to the Meshrano Jirga (House of Elders), which accounts for about 16 percent of the total seats, must be women [6].

The new Constitution also protects women's political participation rights by stating that "the state shall abide by the U.N. Charter, international treaties, international conventions that Afghanistan has

signed, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” This requires the government to comply with the many treaties to which Afghanistan is a party, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which requires state parties to take all necessary steps to eliminate discrimination against women in the country's political and public life of the country [6].

Before August 2021, changes in women’s education level in Afghanistan have also achieved great results. Before 2001, with the domination of the Taliban, they had been forbidden from all levels of education and thus it was not just a matter of reopening the doors of the universities to women, but the issues related to women from all regions, either rural or urban, and those girls who had returned from exile in Pakistan, Iran and other places where women were allowed to attend secondary schools [7]. With the defeat of the Taliban, the Afghan government has implemented several policies to improve women's education. For example, the Afghan Ministry of Education provides school grants, teacher training, and institutional capacity building through the Quality Improvement in Education (EQUIP) program to increase girls' equitable access to quality basic education. Higher education has moved from a situation of virtually no women students, faculty, or staff in 2001 to 28% women students and 14% women faculty members in 2017 [8]. Figure 1 also virtually and clearly shows the increasing trend of number of women enrolled in primary school from 2001 to 2018, which proves the effectiveness of measures taken by the government after beating the Taliban.

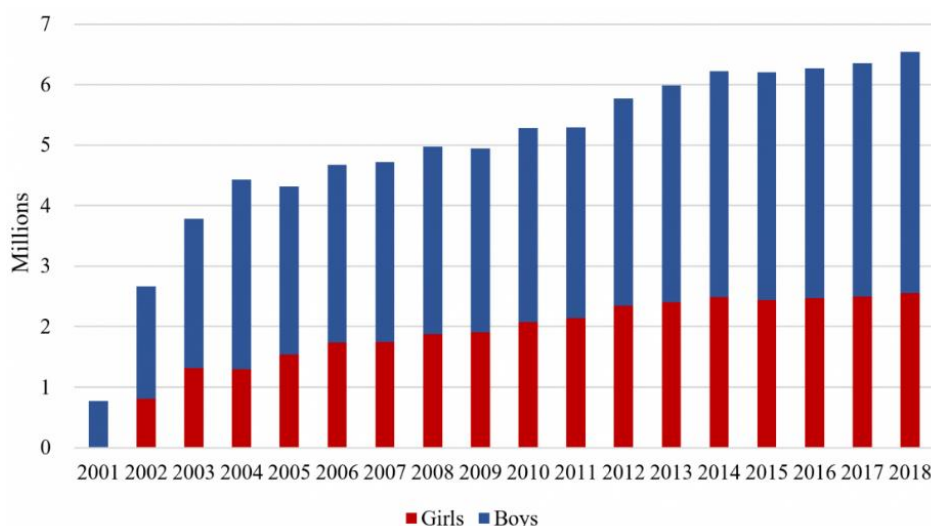


Figure 1. Number of primary school enrolment in Afghanistan by sex, 2001-2018 [9]

However, since the Taliban regained power in August 2021, there have been significant negative changes to laws and policies regarding gender inequality in Afghanistan. The following key points summarize the situation:

The first remarkable change was restrictions on Education. The Taliban government has imposed strict limits on women's education. For instance, studies indicate that the Taliban has severely curtailed women's right to education, resulting in limited opportunities for female students, which in turn negatively affects their mental health and social development. These policies have significantly reduced women's participation in both social and economic sectors [10].

Secondly, there were also serious Reduced Employment and Economic Participation: Taliban policies have also led to a sharp decline in women's involvement in the workforce. Reports suggest that after the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan's economy shrank by 20.7%, with a notable drop in women's participation in both employment and education. This not only undermines women's economic independence but also poses challenges to the country’s economic recovery [11].

Besides, freedom of expression on social media was also further limited. The Taliban government has restricted women's activities in the media as well. For example, rights previously granted to female journalists have been revoked, and women are now banned from freely reporting and

disseminating information. These policies not only limit women's right to express themselves but also hinder the flow of information and transparency in society [12].

Overall, the return of the Taliban has led to a severe regression in Afghanistan's laws and policies on gender equality. These changes not only infringe on women's basic rights and freedoms but also have a negative impact on the country's social and economic development. The international community has expressed deep concern and has called on the Taliban government to respect and protect women's rights.

2.3. Impact of International Intervention

International and non-governmental organizations have played an active role in improving the status of women in Afghanistan.

International interventions, such as development programs and gender quotas, have indeed increased women's participation in economic, political, and social activities to some extent. For example, a randomized field experiment in 500 villages in Afghanistan found that even in highly conservative social backgrounds, such initiatives and activities effectively enhanced the enthusiasm of women's participation in certain economic, social, and political activities, including increased mobility and income, although this single experiment and appeal was difficult to completely change the more entrenched female roles linked to family decision-making or in attitudes toward the general role of women in society [13]. In addition, the micro-grants program aims to empower rural women and agricultural entrepreneurs, and these women who received grants are empowered to increase family income by working, send their children to school to improve the overall education level, and support community development projects [14].

International organizations such as the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) have played an important role in improving gender equality in Afghanistan particularly on health, social, education, politics, and even the economy. Through various projects and efforts, UN Women has successfully raised public awareness of women's rights, helped governments enact laws, and strengthened the capacity of local NGOs to reduce the occurrence of violence against women [14].

Actions of UN Women include but not limit to the promotion of Afghanistan's sustainable development goal (A-SDGs). UN Women tries to enhance gender equality by implementing the Afghanistan's sustainable development goal (A-SDGs), which are intended to serve as a framework for the country's development over the next 30 years, including the advancement of women's status and rights in society [15].

Secondly, UN Women also tried to preventing violence against Women. It has worked with the Afghan government and civil society organizations to develop and implement several projects aimed at preventing violence against women. Projects such as the EVAW SF Fund, the HeForShe Campaign and the UNiTE campaign all have raised public awareness of women's rights and strengthened the capacity of civil society organizations [16].

Thirdly, supporting the Government in Law and Policy Development was also part of UN Women's duty. It collaborates with the Afghan government to assist in the formulation and monitoring of policies and laws that protect women's rights. This includes implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and enhancing the ability of local NGOs to reduce violence against women [17].

Besides, UN Women also emphasized the importance of Women's Political Participation. It promotes the involvement of Afghan women in political and social activities. This includes developing aid projects, such as gender quota systems, to improve women's status in economic, political, and social areas [18].

Education and advocacy were another important issue promoted by UN Women. Through education and advocacy activities, UN Women strives to change societal perceptions towards women, empowering them to enjoy equal rights with men in politics, education, and healthcare areas [19].

In areas affected by conflicts, UN Women supports female community health workers (CHWs), who play a critical role in providing essential healthcare services. These workers not only increase access to healthcare for women and children but also build trust within communities regarding health services [20].

UN Women also supports rural female farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs through micro-grant programs, helping them increase household income, supporting their children's education, and contributing to community development projects. These grant programs serve as positive indicators of social change [21].

Finally, UN Women fosters global cooperation to support the rights and status of Afghan women. This involves working with international organizations, NGOs, and other stakeholders to address gender inequality [22].

Overall, UN Women works to solve gender inequality problems in Afghanistan through a set of actions including policy advocacy, legal support, education, community engagement and support.

3. Analysis of the Causes of Contemporary Gender Weakness and Its Reflection.

3.1. Inequality of Educational Opportunities

The inequality of educational opportunities in Afghanistan can be reflected in various parts.

First, since the Taliban regained control in 2021, educational opportunities for Afghan women and girls have been seriously limited. Afghanistan was now the only country in the world that prohibits girls over the age of 12 from pursuing secondary and higher education [23]. This restriction directly impacts the future development of Afghan women and girls, limiting their access to knowledge and skills and deepening gender inequality.

Besides, with Taliban's policies banning female teachers from instructing boys, the teacher shortage has worsened. This shortage has led to a significant drop in enrollment rates even at the primary level, from 6.8 million in 2019 to 5.7 million in 2022 [23]. The scarcity of teachers affects both girls' and boys' education, exacerbating gender disparities.

Lastly, Afghanistan's educational system sometimes inadvertently reinforces gender stereotypes through its curriculum, teachers' attitudes, and school culture. These stereotypes may shape perceptions of educational and career options, limiting the potential of both boys and girls [24].

3.2. Social and Cultural Barriers

Other than patriarchal structures and gender norms and traditions mentioned above, there are still several factors seriously affect gender inequality conditions in Afghanistan.

The first factor is Child marriage, a very common and serious problem in Afghanistan. According to research conducted in 2022 which focused on Afghan women aged 20-24 years old, and estimated of 52% of women got married before 18 years old. The gender inequality caused by child marriage manifests itself in several ways. First, child marriage limits women's educational opportunities and career advancement, putting them at an inferior position in the family and society. Second, child marriage increases women's risk of domestic violence, especially in Afghanistan, where there is a link between child marriage and domestic violence. In addition, child marriage affects women's mental health and social status, making them more vulnerable to psychological trauma and social isolation [25-27].

Religious misinterpretation is another important factor. Uneducated Afghan women often rely on uneducated mullahs (religious leaders) to learn about Islamic teachings. These mullahs interpret Islamic teachings according to their own convictions, often ignoring women's contributions to society and trying to limit their roles, encouraging them to only play a role in domestic work [28]. Besides, Some Afghan men use religion to justify the segregation of women, a practice that has more to do

with social norms than religious texts. This results in women being restricted and unable to move freely in the public sphere, increasing their risk of violence and discrimination.

3.3. Political Instability and Conflict

The Disruption of education usually happened in instable environment like Afghanistan. Lives of people under political instability such as wars will inevitably be affected. Their schools will be at vulnerable situation and women will be restricted at home to cook, do housework for the families to maintain the basic normal life instead of going out for school [29].

As the previous parts mentioned, after the political instability happened and when the Taliban government has gained the control over Afghanistan's citizens, women have been restricted to work in many areas which negatively affected their economic situation.

According to many research and real facts, gender-based violence was always more frequent at conflict zones. Women and girls face heightened risks of domestic violence, forced marriages, and sexual violence during periods of conflict and instability. The breakdown of law and order during political turmoil means that women have limited access to justice and protection, which made males be less afraid of being accuse of domestic violence. Besides, Afghan women are more likely to fall victim to political conflict, and many have experienced war-related trauma such as repeated rape, forced prostitution, slavery, and other forms of gender-related violence [30].

When there's conflicts and political instability happened, international organizations that used to help improve gender equality in Afghanistan are difficult to get access to the domestic women and continuedly to help them, which makes women's situation even worse during that hard time [29].

4. Possible Solutions to Improve Afghanistan's Gender Equality Situation.

4.1. Education Improvement

The Afghan government should lift its current restrictions that prevent girls from attending secondary schools and universities. Additionally, it should allow girls to pursue a wide range of subjects, rather than limiting their choices to a few basic career paths, such as nursing, teaching, or homemaking. Creating a safe and stable learning environment is also crucial for women's education. The government must ensure that conflicts and violence outside schools are controlled, and within schools, where mixed-gender education is prohibited due to religious concerns, there should be female-only facilities. International organizations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank, along with global donors, can collaborate with the local government to play a key role in building schools, training teachers, and providing educational resources. Their support can also help make education more affordable for families with daughters.

4.2. Social and Cultural Improvement

Improving social and cultural barriers against gender equality in Afghanistan requires a multifaceted approach beyond education and political reforms.

The first recommendation is leveraging community-based interventions that involve local religious and cultural leaders. These leaders usually hold significant influence in Afghan society and can play a transformative role by advocating for women's rights within an Islamic framework, correcting the misconception that gender equality opposes religious beliefs, which can foster community acceptance and enhance women's overall awareness of the importance of gender equality.

Another approach is increasing the visibility and participation of women in media, arts, and local storytelling. Media campaigns that portray positive role models for women, both as active participants in society and as contributors to family and community well-being, can help shift cultural narratives around gender roles.

Finally, promoting economic empowerment through local entrepreneurship and cooperative models can break gender barriers by providing women with financial independence. This can gradually challenge the gender norms that restrict women's roles to the domestic environment.

Community-based women's cooperatives, micro-finance initiatives, and vocational training programs can give women the tools to contribute economically, altering both their social status and cultural perceptions of their capabilities.

4.3. Political Improvement

Despite legal frameworks supporting women's involvement, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and security risks have limited their role in politics. To enhance participation, it's crucial to reform the political system to ensure women's representation is meaningful, not just symbolic. Quotas can ensure a baseline of female participation in government institutions, but they must be accompanied by efforts to empower women to participate actively, including through leadership training and mentorship programs. Additionally, women's political movements need to be strengthened and supported to advocate for gender-sensitive reforms and policies.

5. Conclusion

The key findings show that in Afghanistan's traditional social structure, women had limited roles. From 2003 - 2021, there were advancements in women's rights, such as in the constitution and education. However, since 2021, there has been a regression with restrictions on education, employment, and more. Factors like educational inequality, social and cultural barriers, and political instability contribute to gender weakness. The research is significant as it highlights historical progress and setbacks, emphasizing the importance of gender equality and the impact of new legislation. It also helps understand factors influencing inequality for policymaking. Although discussions in this paper have already been thorough and comprehensive, it still has limitations such as insufficient consideration of intersectional factors like ethnicity, class, and regional differences, and ignoring men's role in gender equality movements. Therefore, future studies could focus more on these missing parts as well as the effectiveness of proposed solutions like education improvement and community-based interventions.

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