

Women in Afghanistan: Past, Present and Future



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A country can never be fully democratic unless women don't enjoy the same rights and privileges as men (John Stuart Mill: 1806-1873). Mill claims that without reforming the patriarchal system, even men wouldn't know how to be fully democratic. Democracy starts with family, society, state and then nation (Jha, 2009). Mill spent most of his years in explaining that society would benefit in several ways if women were granted equal social, political and economic rights and status as men. In today's world context, in the fight for democracy, the role and rights of women are highly undermined and questioned, especially in the Central and West Asia.

In the last decades, Afghanistan has undergone many political changes under Soviet Union, Mujahedeen, Taliban and then the so called democratically elected government with support of US-led international forces. The issue of women's rights in Afghanistan has been historically constrained by the patriarchal nature of gender and social relations deeply embedded in traditional communities and the existence of a weak central state that has been unable to implement modernizing programs (Moghadam, 1997). Now to understand the role and struggle for women rights in Afghanistan, one just not look at 'the condition of women under soviet or US or Taliban or Karzai or Ghani' but within the larger historical context of Afghanistan. Only such a perspective can ensure that women will be seen as integral to the rebuilding of the Afghan nation. This paper highlights how the role of women has changed over past five to six decades with the political unrest in Afghanistan. The paper argues that the true sense of nationhood would be created only if strong efforts made to empower women.

Under Monarchs

The women in Afghanistan were not always oppressed and discriminated. With the birth of modern Afghanistan under Abdur Rahman Khan, also known as 'Iron Amir', ruled from 1880 to 1901, women were given high status and many privileges. During his time the tradition to force a woman to marry her deceased husband's next of kin was abolished. He also allowed women to divorce their husband under special circumstances and granting them their husband's and father's property rights. Even though Abdur Rahman considered women subservient to men, he still felt that they were "due just treatment." After his death, his son, Amir Habibullah Khan took over and reigned for 10 years. Habibullah continued his father's progressive ideology for next 19 years. His wife was seen in western clothes in public spaces. He put a ceiling on an extravagant marriage expenses that often-caused poverty in many families. He claimed that educated women were an asset for the society and future generations and that Islam religion also gives equal rights to the women. Mahmud Beg Tarzi, foreign minister to the Habibullah, had liberal views and influenced Habibullah to open a school for girls with english curriculum which tribal leaders and mullahs saw as going against the grain of tradition.

Under Modern Monarchs

After assassination of Habibullah, Amanullah was passed the throne in 1919. Amanullah took independence from British and drew up the first constitution. The new constitution provided the basis for the government structure and role of the monarch. His views about women were influenced by Tarzi. Amanullah believed that 'Islam did not require women to cover their bodies or wear any special kind of veil.' In a public gathering, Queen Soraya, wife of Amanullah (and daughter of Tarzi) tore off her veil and the wives of other officials present at the meeting followed this example. Though Amanullah tried to consolidate Islam and state policies, he faltered while trying to impose rapid changes pertaining to women's status. The rapid changes were challenged by many mullahs and countryside tribal leaders who saw this act as a violation of Islam and too western (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

In the following two decades the political scene in Afghanistan witnessed many changes in the leadership but none of them pushed social reforms for women as Amanullah did.

The next wave of change for women came with the entry of Zahir Shah in 1933 and Mohd. Daoud Khan in 1953. By the late 1950s, the economic and political rights of women were again given some consideration in order to achieve the targeted economic goals. By now women were expected once again to abandon the veil and women were encouraged to contribute to the economy. The 1940s and 1950s saw women becoming nurses, doctors and teachers. In 1964, the third Constitution allowed women to enter in politics and gave them the right to vote. The first woman minister was in the health department, elected to the Parliament along with three other women.

Under People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and Soviet Union

During the late 1970s, the PDPA started rapid social and economic restructuring programmes, echoing some of the 1920s themes (Amanullah's reforms), like mass literacy for women and men of all ages, were introduced, massive land reform programs, the abolition of bride price and raising of marriage age. (Moghadam, 1997). Again, this pace of revolutionary reforms was challenged by Mullahs and Tribal leaders. They viewed compulsory education for women as going against Islam. Several clashes between rural tribal groups and government were reported.

By that time, Afghanistan became the Cold War battleground with the entry of Soviet Union. Ironically, in Soviet-backed Afghan, women's issues moved to the centre stage and implementation of women reforms were enforced. In 1984, equal job opportunities to that of men were offered to women. Women were seen working in a variety of fields. Women were employed in significant numbers in universities, private corporations, the airlines and as doctors and nurses. But for the nation, it was a period of anarchy and destruction.

Under Mujahideen and Taliban

After the Cold War, Soviets left the country in disarray. In 1992, Mujahideen took over Kabul and declared Afghanistan an Islamic State. Soon, women were increasingly precluded from public service. In conservative areas in 1994, many women appear in public only if dressed in a complete head-to-toe garment with a mesh covered opening for their eyes. Universities, libraries and schools were burnt. Women were forced to wear the 'burqa' and fewer women were visible on television and in professional jobs. The period from 1992-1996 saw unprecedented barbarism by the Mujahideen where stories of killings, rapes, amputations and other forms of violence against women were reported daily. To avoid rape and forced marriages, young women were resorted to suicide. *"Far from rejoicing that the Russians had been defeated, Grandmother told me that a new worse Devil had come to my country"* (Zoya, 2002).

Later in 1996, the situation for women became worse with the entry of Taliban. The Taliban set up Amar Bil Maroof Wa Nahi An al-Munkar (Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) to monitor and control women's behaviour. Soon the Taliban enforced their version of Islamic Sharia law. Women and girls were: Banned from going to school or studying, working, leaving the house without a male chaperone, showing their skin in public, accessing healthcare delivered by men and from being involved in politics or speaking publicly. The most visible symbol of the Taliban's oppressive regime was the order that placed all women under the burka. Its long-standing place in Afghan culture is complicated. Dr. Rahima Zafar Staniczai, head of the Rabia Balkhi hospital for women, remembers how Taliban religious police used to beat her in the street every time they caught her rushing to work uncovered: *"They would hit us and spit on us, and then we would have to come in to the hospital to do our work."*¹

After United States of America and United Nations intervention, 2001

¹ <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,185651,00.html>

The so called “Peace” restored with the overthrow of the Taliban from Kabul and democratic government set up. But the war continued between government and Taliban region. With the fall of the Taliban, women regained many of the basic rights that had been denied them. After September 2001, the special adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women continued to address the situation of women's rights in Afghanistan in meetings with the Special representative of the Secretary-General and other senior officials within the United Nations system, in inter-agency consultations and in meetings with representatives of non-governmental organizations. On January 30, 2002, the 26th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women issued a statement of solidarity and support for Afghan women, which stated, among other things, that "the participation of Afghan women as full and equal partners with men is essential for the reconstruction and development of their country."² For the first time in many years, new opportunities had been opened for women to reclaim their rights as active participants in the governance, as well as in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Schools for girls are being reopened, and young women are enrolling in universities. Women are seeking to return to their former jobs as teachers, doctors and civil servants. Radio and television broadcasts in Kabul once again feature woman commentators.

Afghanistan today

The position of women in Afghanistan has begun to improve. There have been significant improvements over the past decade, including a quota for women in the Afghan parliament that has reserved a quarter of its 249 seats for them. According to World Bank report, in 2001 no girls attended formal schools and there were only one million boys enrolled. By 2014, there were 7.8 million pupils attending school - including about 2.9 million girls. Women are now also employed in the police and army. British officers have helped to establish a military training academy that aims to train 100 female army officers per year. One thing Afghanistan should be proud of that there are more women in Afghan parliament (15%) than US and UK parliament.

Despite these advances, there's still discrimination and violence against women in Afghanistan, especially rural areas.³ A numerous social factor continues to prevent women from fully engaging in society, and ongoing international support for Afghan women is still needed (more than ever).

Conclusion

Given this historical background, one must look at the future with caution. There is a strong need of reforms and policies to reconstruct the rural areas where violence and discrimination against women is practiced in the name of Islamic Fundamentalism. Women who accept fundamentalism as a way of life do not blame Islam for their impoverished and oppressed lives, but blame the corrupt government, patriarchal controls, and distorted interpretations of the

² <http://www.un.org/events/women/2002/sit.htm>

³ <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/101east/2015/06/afghanistan-country-women-150630115111987.html>

Quran. The women empowerment could translate into political power, which in turn could impact the need to change women's situation in the emerging Afghan society.

Afghan government has to take steps to empower rural Afghan women as it forms half of the Afghan women population. To restore peace and stabilize the regions, education and political participation of women should be given higher priority because the no nation could be reconstructed or sustained long enough if women status and rights were deprived, questioned or underestimated.

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