

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Afghan Women: Surviving in the Land of Blue Burqas and Spilled Blood

Sanchita Bhattacharya
(Institute for Conflict Management, India)

Introduction

Since 9/11 and the US-NATO's War on Terror in Afghanistan, the Taliban were officially deposed. But, more pertinently it can be said that the Taliban took a back seat, until they could regroup and gather their lost strength to capture Kabul, as they did on August 15, 2021. It took the Taliban 10 days to capture major cities in Afghanistan (with little resistance), a 'success' that was never anticipated even by the US intelligence. Unfortunately, however, the two decades of the War on Terror in Afghanistan gave enough time and space for the Taliban to display its strength over a substantial period of time. This 'come back' of Taliban as the governing force of Afghanistan has proved fatal for the marginalized sections of the country: women, children, religious minorities, ethnic minorities, journalists, artists, etc.

As the focus of this discussion is on the women of Afghanistan, the Blue Burqas, rarely visible in open spaces and often associated with fear, segregation, silence, and even death, must not be ignored nor forgotten.

There has been a rise in the fatality count of women this year. Alarming, women comprised 14 percent of all civilian casualties during the first six months of 2021, with a total of 727 women casualties recorded (219 killed and 508 injured), an increase of 82 percent, compared to the first six months of 2020. Between January 1 and June 30, 2020, UNAMA documented 400 women casualties (139 killed and 261 injured) (UNAMA, 2021). Out of desperation and fear, the women anxiously have started burning and destroying their certificates, professional degrees and diplomas, and other official documents, so their faces and names remain hidden from Taliban scrutiny.

Though the Taliban was officially overthrown from Afghanistan, their ideals remained at the core of the country's society and culture. Most Afghan men in the traditionally conservative society still hold the view that women are inferior and have no right to freedom. Some of the women have been killed in so-called "honor" killings carried out by their own families; others have been killed by the Taliban insurgents and their affiliates. They oppose women participating in public roles and those who speak for Women's rights. Therefore, the deep-rooted social condition has caused a large proportion of women to stay away from the political, social, and economic discourse of the country

considerable period of time (Bhattacharya, 2019).

Why Afghan Women Suffer Violence?

The reasons why women suffer violence are extremely complicated and most of the time they result in rampant violence against women. Afghanistan is a country with a lethal concoction of tribal norms, Sunni Islamic practices, and patriarchy. These combined three factors are the major force behind atrocities meted out on the female population of the country. Resultantly, violence is manifested in various ways.

Factors contributing to this violence include the failure to deal decisively with perpetrators; a culture of impunity; perceptions that violence against women is ‘normal’; illiteracy and low levels of public awareness; traditional patterns of marriage; corruption and abuse of state positions; women’s limited access to justice; the lack of security; and weakness of state authority in the districts and provinces. According to UNAMA’s 2021 Mid Year Report, “women appeared to be targeted for the following reasons: (1) professional affiliation (ANP officers, penitentiary staff, judges, media professionals); (2) accused of supporting the Government or ANSF, spying for ANSF; (3) accused by the Taliban of “immoral conduct”, adultery” (UNAMA, 2021).

Women’s Place under the Pashtunwali

Pashtunwali, or, “the way of life of the Pashtuns,” is said to be the unique and shared way of the people. The code of Pashtunwali is based on honor (*izzat*), chivalry (*ghayrat* or *nang*), hospitality (*melmastia*), gender boundaries (*purdah* or *namus*), and council (*jirga*), the legislative authority in the public domain. With respect to women’s position in the tribal society, *Purdah* and *Namus* are compulsory components of Pashtunwali that are related to the honor of the family, especially, of women. The veil or a curtain is often used as a boundary and segregates men and women’s space (Naz and Rehman, 2011).

According to the code, the sexual honor and general conduct of females are crucial elements for male honor. The girls and women for whom a Pashtun man is responsible for, must always act in a manner in keeping with Pashtun social traditions (Margolis, 2021). Under the pretext of preserving and honoring these norms and customary laws, the Taliban have once again started on a rampage to assert their power and presence over the female population of Afghanistan. Like the 1990s the faces of Afghan women are gradually vanishing both literally and metaphorically from the public domain once again. The Taliban decides whether or not women and girls should receive education, income, employment etc. The degree of intolerance is increasing with each passing day and the women are sacrificed at the altar of the Pashtun Code by Taliban militia.

Justifying Violence in the Name of Islam

Violence against women is deep-rooted in human civilization. Every society and state in this world

has experienced such brutality in some way or other. What makes the Taliban's rigid and horrid treatment of women different is their justification in the name of Islam. In medieval Europe and parts of the U.S. women were branded and killed in the name of witch-hunting. The Indian sub-continent also experienced the gory custom of burning widows along with their dead husbands. But these practices are the reality of the past and contemporary societies do not justify such crimes in the name of religion.

The Taliban version of Islam and Sharia law are completely anti-women. This vicious version was formed to demonstrate power of Talib who has once again marked out his territory in each province, district, city, and village in Afghanistan. Sharia laws are based on permutation and a combination of various sources- Quran, Sunnah, and Hadith (sayings and deeds of Prophet Mohammad) and other scriptures. There is no standardized Sharia Law, and it varies according to different sectarian interpretations within Islam. Therefore, Taliban's extreme and conservative version of Sharia Law does not essentially match with Sharia Law of Saudi Arabia or Iran, even though these two countries are also known for their anti-women policies.

A Peep into the 1990s

In order to explicate the current situation, it is crucial to look back at the notoriety of Taliban rule during the 1990s and their treatment of Afghan women. During the 1990s, the Taliban not only brutally imposed social restrictions on women such as mandatory head-to-toe Burqa coverings, but, more primarily and deleteriously, controlled their access to health care, education, and jobs. It barred women from appearing in public spaces without a *Mehram* (male chaperon), indirectly, sentencing widows and their children to starvation (Allen and Felbab-Brown, 2020).

Women and girls could not pursue education, work, or be treated by a male doctor. To enforce the strictest form of restrictions on women, the Taliban established the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in the year 1996. It was Afghanistan's most feared and hated Ministry. Its vigilantes would stone women publicly for adultery, flog women for not wearing Burqa, or for applying make-up, chop off their fingers for painting their nails. Its forces would patrol the streets and beat up women for showing their hands or wrists. Afghan girls would be stopped from attending schools, women's access to health care would be limited, among many other vicious measures. The sight of public execution of women in open fields was well documented.

Afghan Women during the 20 year-long War on Terror

The post-Taliban Constitution in 2004 gave Afghan women all kinds of rights, and the post-Taliban political dispensation brought social and economic growth that significantly improved their socio-economic condition. In comparison to 2003, with fewer than 10 percent of girls enrolled in primary schools; in 2017, that number had grown to 33 percent. Additionally, female enrollment in secondary education grew from six percent in 2003 to 39 percent in 2017. Thus, Afghanistan had 3.5 million female students with 100,000 studying in universities. Women's life expectancy grew from 56 years in 2001 to 66 in 2017, and their mortality during childbirth declined from 1,100 per

100,000 live births in 2000 to 396 per 100,000 in 2015 (Allen and Felbab-Brown, 2020). By 2020, 21 percent of Afghan civil servants were women (compared with almost none during the Taliban years), 16 percent of them in senior management levels; and 27 percent of Afghan members of parliament were women (World Bank, 2020). During this period, a section of Afghan women joined various services like the Police force, held government offices, performed on stage, took part in the Olympics, pursued careers in science and technology. Also, girls who were forbidden under the Taliban regime from attending school flooded into classrooms.

Interestingly, four years after the disappearance of the Vice and Virtue Ministry, the Ulema Council of Afghanistan suggested the then-President Hamid Karzai, to bring back the ministry. The Karzai Cabinet also advised the same, but this suggestion did not see the light of the day.

As encouraging the above mentioned statistics might be, still many women experienced trauma, torture, and brutality in Afghanistan during those years. In 2011 and 2018, Afghanistan ranked at the top of the list of most dangerous countries. The women especially in rural parts of Afghanistan suffered beating, rape, murder, and other forms of physical violence even during these 20 years. Many still lived in fear of persecution. Even though the Taliban was absent, these women suffered at the hands of their father, brother, husband or other male members of their family and tribe.

Taliban 2.0 and their new Modus Operandi

Unlike the 1990s, the Taliban is somewhat playing a double game. It wouldn't be incorrect to state that in its first 'term' the fanatics were open and straightforward about their anti-women approach. However, this time around, they are trying to maintain a 'moderate' image, but their trademark brutal practices of public flogging, lashing, beating, killing, etc are in continuation. Since the signing of the Doha Agreement on February 29, 2020, the Taliban attained international political legitimacy. This shameful and unfortunate event increased Taliban atrocities on women and other minorities.

Although the Taliban continue to insist that women are 'safe' under their rule, they are in reality, causing violence against Afghan women in two ways: first by public lashing, whipping, beating of Blue Burqa clad women in the rural areas of Afghanistan and second by target killing working women who have a voice and opinion in the urban center.

It is not possible to go through the actual count of such horrid incidents (as most are unreported due to fear of retribution from the Taliban), but it is possible to look into couple of incidents to understand how, independent and assertive women are systematically targeted. Moreover, due to the Taliban's new policy of deceit, these violent incidences are unclaimed, and fall under the category of death caused due to personal enmity. A few such unfortunate instances of women killed are:

- A pregnant Policewoman, Banu Negar, was mutilated and killed in front of her husband and children in Firozkoh, capital of Ghor Province in September 2021 (Doucet, 2021).
- 24 years old Fatima 'Natasha' Khalil, an employee of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) was killed in June 2020. Afghan security sources before the

August 15 episode, believed the Taliban or groups aligned with it are conducting a covert strategy to send chills through civil society (Shalizi and Sediqi, 2020).

- Malala Maiwand, an Afghan TV anchor working with Enekaas TV, a privately-owned TV channel of Afghanistan was killed in December, 2020 in Jalalabad. She was also the Jalalabad representative of the Centre for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

Moreover, the Taliban replaced the Ministry of Women's Affairs with the Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which was disbanded in 2001, on September 17, acting contrary to the promise of safeguarding women's rights. 20 years later the Taliban have reinstated this ministry to remind the world that Afghanistan has re-entered the dark days of horror and torture, all in the name of the Taliban's version of Islam. Most importantly, this Ministry is a reminder to the world that the Taliban have not changed.

Conclusion

The Taliban are composed of and legitimized by Sunni Muslim conservative clerics and their followers, from the Pashtun tribes of southern Afghanistan. These men cause havoc under the justification of preserving the religion and their way of life. After 20 years of basic exposure of the outside world, the women of Afghanistan are in a worse situation than in the 90s.

Moreover, the Taliban's way of governance or justice, in a way amplifies the intrinsic 'trigger happy' culture within the tribal set-up of Afghanistan. The decades of war have completely ruined the social fabric of the country which is very well manifested towards the heinous treatment of women. The violence against women has been completely legalized by the Taliban and their re-entrance to the political center of Afghanistan displays the massive support of people, who have complete faith and adherence for the militia.

The official presence of the Taliban will normalize violence against women. It's hard to measure the degree of exploitation and harassment, particularly of women, across this country. Dreadful incidents may be isolated but now there's an everyday tension pervasive in the lives of many Afghan women. ■

Reference

- Allen, John R. and Vanda Felbab-Brown (2020), “The fate of women’s rights in Afghanistan”, *The Brookings Gender Equality Series*, <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/the-fate-of-womens-rights-in-afghanistan/>
- Bhattacharya, Sanchita (2019), “Afghan Men in This Conservative Society Still Hold the View That Women Are Inferior and Have No Right to Freedom”, *New Age Islam*, <https://www.newageislam.com/islam-women-feminism/sanchita-bhattacharya/afghan-men-this-conservative-society-still-hold-view-that-women-inferior-no-right-freedom/d/118909>
- Doucet, Lyse (2021), “Afghanistan: Taliban accused of killing pregnant police officer”, *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58455826>
- Margolis, Maxine L. (2021), “It is not just Sharia law: The Taliban, Pastunwali and Afghan Women”, *Newswise*, <https://www.newswise.com/articles/it-is-not-just-sharia-law-the-taliban-pastunwali-and-afghan-women>
- Naz, Arab and Hafeez-ur-Rehman (2011), “Pakhtunwali and Islam: A comparative analysis of women’s rights in Islam and their violation under Pakhtunwali”, *International Journal of Humanity and Social Sciences*, Volume 1, Issue 2, pp. 22-32.
- Reporters Without Borders (2020), “Afghan women journalists rep shot dead in Jalalabad”, <https://rsf.org/en/news/afghan-women-journalists-rep-shot-dead-jalalabad>
- Shalizi, Hamid and Abdul Qadir Sediqi (2020), “Gifted young Afghan returnee is victim of campaign attacking civil society”, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-attacks-rights-idUSKBN2412Y8>
- UNAMA (2021), “Afghanistan 2021 Midyear Update on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict”, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2021_26_july.pdf
- The World Bank (2020), “Afghanistan’s Developmental Gains: Progress and Challenges”, <https://doi-org.brookings.idm.oclc.org/10.1596/33209>

- **Sanchita Bhattacharya** is a Research Fellow in New Delhi based Institute for Conflict Management, India. Her core area of research is Madrasa Education in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. She focuses on terrorism and socio-political issues of Pakistan. She also has an avid interest in the Af-Pak region. Her articles and commentaries have been published in the East Asia Forum, The Kabul Times, The Outlook, The Pioneer, South Asia Monitor etc. She has written research papers in national and international journals and also contributed chapters in various edited volumes. She can be reached at sanchita.bhat83@gmail.com.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

“Afghan Women: Surviving in the Land of Blue Burqas and Spilled Blood”

979-11-6617-254-0 95340 Date of Issue: 28 October 2021

Typeset by Jinkyung Baek

For inquiries:
Jinkyung Baek, Director of the Research Department

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 209) j.baek@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr