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Afghanistan: Women's Economic, Political, Social Status Driven by Cultural Norms

Afghanistan's progress since the end of Taliban rule toward meeting broadly accepted international standards for the conditions of women has been uneven, reflecting cultural norms and conflict. The Taliban regime barred girls from attending school and prohibited women from working outside the home or being in public without a male relative. Although the Taliban's fall officially ended some policies, many continue in practice even in government-controlled areas, and years of war have left millions of women maimed, widowed, impoverished, and displaced.

- Roughly 3.5 million of the 9 million Afghans enrolled in school are female. However, only 17 percent of rural girls attend secondary school, compared to 45 percent of their urban peers, and more than 80 percent of Afghan women over age 15 are illiterate. The number of schools rose more than tenfold after 2001, but many have been shuttered in recent years by rising insecurity.
- Afghan women have less access than men to capital, struggle to own property, and face obstacles to operating in mixed-gender workplaces. As of 2017, approximately 16 percent of working-age women were employed—compared to 41 percent of men—and just 5 percent of business owners and mid- and upper-level managers were women.
- Progress is concentrated in cities and ethnic minority enclaves, where violence is lower and women had more freedom before Taliban rule. Gains are less pronounced in rural areas, where roughly 70 percent of Afghans live.

Progress probably owes more to external pressure than domestic support, suggesting it would be at risk after coalition withdrawal, even without Taliban efforts to reverse it. After decades of intensive international focus and funding, Afghanistan still ranks at or near the bottom of multiple UN and other global indices of conditions for women.

- In some rural Pashtun areas, tribal codes that predate the Taliban require women's full-body covering or seclusion in their homes as a means of protecting their perceived virtue and their families' honor. Nationwide, child marriage and stoning for adultery persist, and rape victims are killed by relatives for shaming their families.
- A UN study in 2019 found that only 15 percent of Afghan men think women should work outside the home after marriage, and two-thirds complained that women have too many rights.

Taliban Maintains Rigid Views

The Taliban remains broadly consistent in its restrictive approach to women's rights and would roll back much of the past two decades' progress if the group regained national power. The Taliban has seen minimal leadership turnover, maintains inflexible negotiating positions, and enforces strict social constraints in areas that it already controls.

- Some Taliban officials publicly say that the group will respect women's rights, but they caveat that these protections must align with Taliban interpretations of *sharia*. The group also claimed

during its previous regime that it afforded women all of the rights that Islam guaranteed them.

- Since the current peace process started in 2019, Taliban officials have issued statements opposing “alien-culture clothes worn by women” and have accused women’s rights advocates of promoting immorality, indecency, and non-Islamic culture.

If the Taliban were again Afghanistan’s dominant power, we assess that any prospect for moderating the group’s policies toward women would lie with ethnic minorities’ ability to maintain local variation and technological development since the Taliban’s previous rule. International pressure could play a reinforcing role.

- Successive Kabul governments’ struggles to extend their writ countrywide and previous resistance to Taliban rule in ethnic minority areas could lead to inconsistent implementation of Taliban edicts, whether by lack of capacity or local accommodation. Thus far, the Taliban’s effect on girls’ education in areas under its control has ranged from total shutdown to negotiated agreements on which subjects are taught.
- The proliferation of Afghan cell phone accounts—about 27 million in 2020—would offer Afghans greater access to the broader world and could make extreme Taliban behavior more visible than it was in the 1990s. International attention to Afghanistan probably would also be greater, at least for a few years after coalition withdrawal.
- The Taliban’s desires for foreign aid and legitimacy might marginally moderate its conduct over time. However, in the early days of reestablishing its Emirate, the Taliban probably would focus on extending control on its own terms.

Previous Reforms Faced Pushback

Efforts to raise Afghan women’s status began long before the Taliban’s fall but have met strong rural and religious resistance.

- King Amanullah Shah (1919-29) advocated for girls education, abolished forced marriage, and restricted polygamy. His wife famously removed her veil in public and was regularly photographed wearing European fashion. However, backlash to his reforms’ pace and scope contributed to him being forced into exile amid violent demonstrations.
- King Zahir Shah (1933-73) took a more cautious approach to change, including abolishing gender segregation and enacting women’s suffrage. His wife and daughter also appeared unveiled, igniting condemnation from clerics, but many urban women followed suit.
- The Communist era brought compulsory co-ed schooling and expanded female employment, but after rural protests, the government focused reform efforts on cities. The anti-Soviet *mujahidin* period that followed saw the return of mandatory veiling and the closure of most girls’ schools.