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Being a Woman under Taliban's Theocratic Regime¹

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Abstract

In the light of the recent events that have taken place in Afghanistan, the purpose of this policy brief is to turn back to the time when the Taliban were in power (1996-2001) and to explore the brutality of their theocratic regime against women. In particular, this policy brief examines the restrictions imposed by the Taliban on Afghan women, by depriving them of essential rights, as well as the changes that are claimed to have taken place in the post-Taliban era. It is concluded that the international community and NGOs should play a significant role in upgrading the position of women in Afghan society.

Keywords: Taliban's regime; women's rights; extremism; international community; civil society

Introduction

There is no doubt that the darkest times Afghanistan have ever experienced were under the Taliban regime. When they ascended to power, they attempted to establish a theocratic regime, through which they would apply their own interpretation of Qur'an (Farhoumand-Sims, 2007). More specifically, they repeatedly violated the human rights of Afghan people and in particular those of women, who were the main target of Taliban's political action (Farhoumand-Sims, 2007). As Goodson (2001) notes, directly after the occupation of Kabul, they seek to underrate the place of women in society, based on a modified version of Pashtunwali traditional beliefs. Historically, in Pashtun culture, women's public life was restricted, as they constituted the personification of family and clan honor, which had to be protected (Goodson, 2001).

It has to be noted that the way the Taliban interpret Islam does not represent the Islamic community as a whole, neither is supported by it (US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2001). Even though in their political discourse they argued that their actions were aimed at protecting the role and the position of women in society, in reality they deprived them of their rights to health, education, work, religion etc. (US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2001). Among other things, girls were not allowed to attend school, women were required to follow a strict dress code when they were away from home (Goodson, 2001), it was not easy for them to have access to medical health, and the majority of them were forced to quit their job (US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2001). In fact, as reported by the US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights

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and Labor (2001), there are many cases of women who have been raped, abducted or forced into marriage. These incidents demonstrate the Taliban regime's violent treatment of women and how that had an impact on their position in Afghan society.

In the first section, the living conditions of Afghan women under the previous Taliban regime are examined. In the second section, the changes that took place in the post-Taliban era are analyzed. Finally, some recommendations are presented on how women can claim a better future with the help of the international environment and the NGOs.

Living in fear under the Taliban Regime

Much is known about the brutality of Taliban regime, but the policy of racial segregation towards women, has governed the most negative attention. As Goodson (2001) observes, the role of women and girls was the only central purpose of Taliban's Islamization program. Their backward policy was justified in Sharia religious law but also in allegedly traditional perceptions of Afghan society (Goodson, 2001). As it will be analyzed below, their prohibitions covered both the private and public sphere of women's lives.

The first thing Taliban did right after the occupation of Kabul was to ban girls from attending school and even deprived the right from women to study at universities (Cole, 2003). According to Taliban's ideals, schools were the way to hell, as through them girls would turn into prostitution (Cole, 2003). In fact, they argued that a girl's education was not supported by either the Qur'an or the Islamic law of Sharia. Girls were only allowed to be educated with the teaching of Qur'an, starting from the age of 8 (Goodson, 2001). Furthermore, under the Taliban regime, women had the right to be seen outside under two conditions: first, it was obligatory by the law to make public appearances under the escort of a relative male such as father, brother (mahram) or husband. Secondly, having secured the appropriate escort, women in order to be able to appear in public places had to wear the suitable attire which was the head to toe burqa. In other words, to be full veiled (Goodson, 2001). The logic behind the head to toe veil was that the body of women was a private matter and had to be protected. More specifically, Taliban presented themselves as Islamic modernizers and protectors of the privatization of female body, but in reality this policy intensified the discrimination of women (Cole, 2003). Moreover, Taliban ideology did not allow women to work, forcing them to quit their jobs and leading many of them to begging in the streets or even to prostitution (Skaine, 2003; De Leede, 2014).

In addition, according to Goodson (2001), taxi drivers were prohibited from taking unaccompanied women or letting them sit in the front seat. Also, they were not allowed to attend social events in hotels. At times, many cases of women being beaten for violating the above prohibitions have been

reported, as well as taxi drivers who have agreed to transport unaccompanied women. It is worth noting that married women were more limited and had the least social life, as demanded by the divine will (Cole, 2003). The extremist views of Taliban's regime went one step further, when they required that houses must be painted black so no one could see the women inside their home (Farhoumand-Sims, 2007). In order to ensure compliance with the above measures the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice established a "religious police", responsible for maintaining order. In particular, the religious police raided the streets and publicly punished (via flagellation, beating or stoning to death) those women who did not respect the rules of the regime, such as going out in public unescorted, going to work or revealing parts of their body (Farhoumand-Sims, 2007). However, the prohibitions of the theocratic regime did not end up here. As Cole (2003) points out, women were not permitted to express feelings of joy publically or wear high heels, because they could become provocative to the opposite gender. Also, specific clothes and jewelry were forbidden for them (Goodson, 2001), as well as all beauty products (Cole, 2003). Amnesty International documented an incident in which a young girl's finger was amputated by the "religious police" because her nails were manicured (Mukherjea, 2021). According to a Presidential Decree in November 1996, women that were sprucing themselves up and were wearing elegant and fashionable clothes "would be cursed by the Islamic Sharia and should never expect to go to heaven. The Religious Police have the responsibility and duty to struggle against these social problems and will continue their efforts until evil is finished" (Tanner, 1996: 140). The right to medical care was another area where the Taliban sought to exclude women socially (Skaine, 2003). It is a fact that many sick women have suffered under the Taliban regime, as it was morally acceptable to be examined only by female physicians or nurses. However, the government did not provide the required facilities, as few hospitals were accessible for women and the female employees were inadequate (Goodson, 2001). Among other extreme measures, doctors were not able to examine women who did not wear burqa nor perform a physical examination on them (Goodson, 2001). According to the Taliban's belief system, "if a woman was sick, it was better for her to die than to be treated by a man. If she refuses male doctor to touch her, she would be certain of going to Heaven. If she let herself be treated by him, she would be condemned to Hell" (Zoya et al., 2002: 102).

It must be highlighted that women did not have the chance to address their problems to a judicial body capable of protecting and defending them. The segregation and devaluation of female gender was expanded also in the political sphere of women's life (Goodson, 2001). There was no law able to protect their political and social rights, as the Taliban's government did not treat or consider them as equals. Goodson (2001) cites some examples, through which the political discrimination of women

is understood; It was not easily accessible for women to get in touch with men who held high positions, they were not allowed to take part to political initiatives and they did not have the right to work in governmental positions or as lawyers, judges and journalists. The social degradation of women was apparent even before courts, where their confession did not have the same validity in comparison to men and in family law matters men prevailed against them (Goodson, 2001).

It is clear that the Taliban despite their claims in their formal discourse about protecting the integrity of the female gender, sought to marginalize women by depriving them of any right to public and social life (Skaine, 2003; Bonh, 2018). According to RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan), many women ended their lives because they were not given the necessary medical care (Cole, 2003). For instance, a young girl set herself on fire with gasoline as she felt helpless, because there was no available female physician to treat her in the city of Herat. RAWA has also recorded a great number of women diagnosed with depression due to their confinement at home and the humiliating treatment they received daily from the Taliban. Radio Sharia had brought into light about 225 cases of women being beaten because they had violated the dress code (Cole, 2003). It is a paradox that through their violence Taliban believed that they were protecting and improving the lives of women, as their actions constituted the personification of Sharia Muslim law (Cole, 2003; Mukherjea, 2021). In fact, the ideology of Taliban's theocratic regime represents, in a great degree, the way in which Muslim fundamentalism receives public and private life (Cole, 2003).

By examining Taliban's violent and inhuman policy towards women, the following question arises; why were they so absorbed in regulating women's lives and did not focus on other areas of social policy? Goodson's (2001) paper gives some interesting explanations. Some scholars believe that by focusing their political action on women, they could ensure the coherence of their supporters, even those with the most extreme perceptions. Others argue that the Taliban leadership feared the "corrupting" influence women could exercise upon their young followers, so they sought to marginalize them. However, the prevailing view is that the Taliban regime was not in reality capable of engaging in other areas of politics, as it did not possess the necessary funds, sufficient administrators and there was no industry to invest. In the absence of a solid political orientation, Taliban had to introduce a reason for the existence of their regime and thus promoted the Islamic ideology. An important part of this ideology considers women as the weakest and inferior gender, to whom they have to protect their moral integrity at all costs (a "politics of fear").

Can we talk about real liberation since the collapse of the Taliban regime?

The fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 was accompanied by feelings of relief and optimism, because it was expected that women's living conditions would change for the better and that no one would be able to impose restrictions on them anymore. Women began to walk carefree in the streets with or without the imposed by the Taliban burqa, laugh freely, go to beauty salons, and attend social events (Riphenburg, 2004; De Leede, 2014). Furthermore, education for both women and girls became accessible again, women were allowed to take part in political events, sports, entertainment and to start working again (Kabir, 2012; BBC, 2014). More specifically, they were now able to hold political positions such as governors, ministers, join the police or enlist in the armed forces (Kabir, 2012; Reynolds, 2021). In 2003 the newly formed government of Hamid Karzai validated the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, under which states commit to treat both genders equally under the domestic law (Reynolds, 2021). Additionally, in 2009 the Constitution introduced a law that provided protection to women from forced and underage marriages, as well as from acts of violence. As a result, many incidents came to light and began to be investigated by the police, although fewer reached the courts (Reynolds, 2021).

According to De Leede (2014), following the dissolution of the Taliban regime, more organizations became active in defending women's rights. In particular, these organizations seek to protect them from becoming victims of domestic violence and to give them voice in the political arena. Similarly, individuals with political power and influence are fighting for the protection of women's rights and for the condemnation of those who violate them. For example, Malalai Joya, the youngest Member of Parliament, constantly highlights the difficulties faced by women and publicly exposes the representatives of the local warlords in the Lower House (De Leede, 2014).

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that living conditions have improved only for women living in the capital of Kabul. Women in rural areas do not have as much freedom and fear still dominates their lives (Riphenburg, 2004). Despite what they have achieved, Afghan women are way far from gaining the full independence that women in the rest of the world enjoy. According to a testimony of a woman in Herat "Only the doors to the schools are open. Everything else is restricted" (Riphenburg, 2004: 403). The hope and optimism for a better future that prevailed after the overthrow of the Taliban regime began to disappear. Although provisions for the protection of women's right have been incorporated into the Constitution, the fact remains that "In Afghanistan, no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam" (Riphenburg, 2004:405). In other words, women must continue their struggle in order to gain access to basic human rights (Riphenburg, 2004).

At the same time, De Leede (2014) points out that even though the participation of women in the Lower House has increased significantly, in reality they do not play a significant role in the decision-making process. Unfortunately, the changes that have taken place under the Karzai government are yet very fragile, and despite the promises of gender equality and protection of human's rights, women are still at a disadvantage (Kabir, 2012).

As De Leede (2014) confirms, the truth is that since 2005, the Taliban have begun to regain power and exert influence in many parts of the country, mainly in the South. This in return has a serious impact on women's lives and on the changes they seek to establish in the public and political domain. For example, women who strongly oppose the predominant perceptions of female role in society are constantly threatened by the Taliban and the country's conservatives (De Leede, 2014). Moreover, in the southern part of the country, teachers are daily threatened by the Taliban to stop teaching young girls and to quit their jobs. If they do not obey they will endanger the lives of their children. In other areas, girl's schools have been set on fire and many cases of students being attacked with acid have been reported (Kabir, 2012). Taliban terrorism has resurfaced, with numerous bombings, arsons and suicide attacks being carried out, in order to undermine the effectiveness of the new government (Skaine, 2003). In 2010, in northern Afghanistan, the committee of Herat decreed that women could not make appearances in public without being escorted by a male relative (Kabir, 2012). Women may have been able to include the matter of their rights in the political agenda, but there are still many incidents of violence against them, mainly of domestic violence (Kabir, 2012; BBC 2013). In 2014, the Afghan government reported that 80% of suicides were committed by women because of the daily violence they endured in their lives (Bohn, 2018). In addition, although the majority of girls can now attend school and study at universities, there is still much room for improvement. According to UNICEF, 3.7 million children do not have access to basic education, with 60% being girls (Reynolds, 2021). Overall, for some, life after the fall of the Taliban and the support received by the international community, has improved significantly, while for others things have remained the same (Snow, n.d).

Recommendations - Conclusion

Although the role of women is considered necessary for the transition of Afghan society from a culture of violence to a culture of peace (Farhoumand-Sims, 2007), Afghan women need the help of the international community to achieve even more change. For instance, RAWA, a political/ social organization and one of the most active in Afghanistan, aims to promote both women's rights and social justice. If the great political actors of the international system, such as the US, UN and EU, helped its action, the organization would become more visible and would be able to press for more

drastic changes within the afghan socio-political system. Meanwhile, local organizations operating in educating girls and women, should seek ways to attract external financial assistance, so that they can provide them the necessary education and give them access to the workplace. Only then women will be able to obtain bargaining power and political legitimacy, in order to claim their socio-cultural rights (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006). Finally, it is imperative to awaken the international public opinion through the constant disclosure by the media, private initiatives and NGOs, about incidents and testimonies of women who endure difficulties on a daily basis. By extension, the pressure that the civil society will exert through demonstrations and mobilizations will force governments to turn their attention to Afghan women.

To conclude with, Afghan women have not stopped fighting for the rights they deserve, and no one can overlook what they have achieved. However, Afghanistan remains the worst country to be raised as a woman. “Women’s rights were supposed to be the success story of the 2001 invasion, but the legacy of war is still killing them” (Bohn, 2018: par. 20). The Taliban’s return to power in 2021 has raised many concerns about the impact it will have on women’s lives from now on. Although they claim that they will respect them and will not deprive them of their participation in the public sector (Pikulicka-Wilczewska, 2021) it makes us wonder; Will history repeat itself or will there be real progress? The interest of the international community is once again focused on the future of Afghanistan.

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