

BRIEF BACKGROUND ON AFGHANISTAN AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, propping up a communist leaning government. As a result, the U.S. supported multiple groups of Afghan leaders and fighters to oust the Soviet Union from their country. In 1989, The Soviet troops were defeated and were forced to leave Afghanistan. The lack of leadership among Afghan leaders, known as mujahidin, combined with an immediate vacuum of support from the U.S. led to a civil war between the several mujahidin armies. This resulted to more killings, destruction, and chaos in Afghanistan. The Taliban, which was once supported by the U.S., emerged as victors and seized control of the capital, Kabul, in 1996. The Taliban almost immediately issued edicts, taking away the rights and freedom from Afghans, especially women. During this period, a total of 13 million Afghans fled the country.

AFGHAN WOMEN UNDER THE TALIBAN

Under the Taliban, no girls and women were allowed to go to school at any age. The Taliban destroyed and closed girls' schools and even killed teachers who persisted in educating girls and women. Women were not allowed to work outside their homes. Hospitals that did not have female staff were not allowed to treat women and girls. Infant mortality and maternal mortality soared and was the second highest in the world. Women were forced to wear burkas in public, they could not speak or laugh in public, and could not wear white socks and shoes that made noise; those who violated these rules were flogged. Women accused of adultery were forced to kneel in the center of the soccer arena and were stoned to death or shot in the head. This was a brutal regime.

FMF TAKES ACTION

The Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) led a Stop Gender Apartheid campaign demanding that the United States and the United Nations not recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government because of its inhumane treatment of women. We delivered hundreds of thousands of letters to then President Clinton and UN Secretary General Kofi Anan. On March 11, 1998, in recognition of International Women's Day, President Clinton and Secretary General Kofi Anan announced that neither the U.S. nor the UN would recognize the Taliban due to its denial of all women's rights. FMF continued its campaign and sought humanitarian help for Afghan women and girls during the Taliban regime, and continues this work today.

AFGHAN WOMEN WIN THEIR RIGHTS

Following the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban government was defeated by the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. The internationally-recognized Afghan government created upon the collapse of the Taliban regime has made

remarkable achievements in many areas negatively impacted by the years of war and Taliban rule.

Prior to the devastating years of wars as well as the Taliban rule, Afghan women in the urban areas were a large portion of the medical personnel and education. Women and girls also made up a considerable portion of students in all levels of education. Equal rights for women were provided under the Constitution of 1964 and women had the right to be active in the political arena of the country.

Afghan women have equal rights under the new Constitution of Afghanistan of 2004. Human rights and women's rights are protected under all the major international treaties and conventions signed by the Afghanistan government, including the CEDAW. The elected leaders, especially women leaders, have vowed to protect women's rights, continue to support the elimination of violence against women, and support women's economic and political participation and advancement.

“WE WILL NOT GO BACK”

The latest so-called peace talks between the Taliban and the U.S. have been of grave concern to Afghan women and the Afghan government. The U.S. Special Envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, has been meeting with Taliban representatives in various locations, especially Qatar. The Taliban has insisted on the exclusion of Afghan government officials and Afghan women in their talks. This exclusion of women is a violation of the U.S. Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 that requires the participation of women in all peace negotiations of the U.S., and was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Trump. It is also a violation of UN Security Council resolution 1325. The talks between the U.S. and the Taliban have made Afghan women fearful that they will lose their hard-won human rights. The Taliban have already made it clear that they would bring changes in certain areas related to women's professions and public lives, endangering the gains made by Afghan women since 2001.

In order to preserve the gains Afghan women have made in the last 18 years, any peace treaty with the Taliban must preserve women's rights and the Afghan Constitution. Afghan women expect and hope that their allies will stand by them to ensure their human rights and bring peace and security to their country. Afghan women leaders and activists have been clear that they want peace but not at the cost of their rights and freedom. Time and again, Afghan women have demanded equal participation in the negotiations. This must not be limited to only their inclusion; the rights of Afghan women must be addressed and protected, and democracy established in the constitution must be upheld.

GAINS OF AFGHAN WOMEN AND GIRLS

In the past 18 years, Afghan women have served as cabinet, house, senate, and provincial council members. Afghan women today are prominent members of civil society and have been serving their nation as nurses, doctors, and teachers at all levels. They are active members, though still small in numbers, of the police and defense forces. Afghan women have also been remarkable investors in Afghanistan and have hired thousands of their fellow Afghans in their newly found businesses.

EDUCATION

As of 2019, approximately 9 million children attend 16,000 schools. During the Taliban regime, only about one million boys were in school. On average, girls make up 39% of students in Afghanistan; girls are about 40% of elementary students and 35% of middle and high school students. There are 240 higher education institutions in Afghanistan, including 36 public colleges and universities, 122 private colleges and universities, and 80 two-year teacher training institutes. Women make up approximately 25% of students in public and private colleges and universities and 49% of graduates of teacher training institutes.

HEALTHCARE

There are now 531 public and private hospitals operating across the country. Over 1,000 health centers and 1,000 health sub-centers are open to people. There are more than 12,000 pharmacies. Currently 19% of the 8,744 doctors and 40% of the 19,743 nurses are women. In the last 18 years over 4,000 midwives have been trained and are working to reduce maternal mortality and infant mortality rates, not only in cities but rural areas as well. Infant mortality rate has decreased from 95 per 1,000 live births to 53.2 per 1,000 live births. Life expectancy has increased from 56 years old to 65 for women and 62 for men.

PUBLIC SERVICE

There are 400,439 government employees, of which 27% are women. In addition, 35% of the teachers in public schools are women.

- Judges: 261 women or 12% of the 2114 judges
- Attorneys: 228 women lawyers or 10% of the 2198 attorneys
- Of the 456 provincial council members, 96 are women.
- 27% of seats in parliament are held by women.

Currently three women serve as minister, 11 serve as deputy ministers, and four serve as ambassadors. Approximately 4,800 women play an active role in the security sector (3,300 police officers and 1,500 in Defense).

BUSINESS

The Afghanistan's Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industries reports that 1,150 women entrepreneurs have invested \$77 million in different businesses in Afghanistan, creating 77,000 jobs.

ELECTIONS

Since the fall of the Taliban, three parliamentary elections and three presidential elections have been held. Afghans have risked their lives to participate in the elections, both as candidates running for office as well as citizens casting their votes. In the Provincial Councils, 20% of the seats are allocated to women. Of the 458 provincial council seats (20% of them are reserved for women), and depending on the size of the province's population, 9-33 seats are reserved for women. Although 25% of the seats are reserved for women in the parliament, women are also freely elected. Currently, women hold 27% of the seats in parliament.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Women have equal rights under the current Constitution of Afghanistan. Since 2002, the Afghan government has ratified about 20 international human rights treaties and created the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), a national human rights organization protecting and promoting human rights, further guaranteeing the rights of women and minorities. The national government also includes an Afghan Ministry for Women's Affairs. In 2009, EAW (Elimination of Violence Against Women) was enforced by presidential order.

MEDIA AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Under Taliban rule, televisions and radios were banned, music was prohibited, and phone service was not available. Existing television sets were destroyed by the Taliban. In the post-Taliban era, access to telecommunication services has flourished and grown exponentially. Over 170 radio stations and 68 TV channels operate across the country, and hundreds of newspapers and magazines are published. Television is now the main source of news and entertainment for Afghans, as more than 65% of households own a television set.

Millions of Afghans today are more connected than ever. About 90% of Afghan households own cell phones, and over 30% of people in urban areas and about 15% in rural areas have access to internet. This access has allowed Afghans to connect with others around the world and become more engaged in sociopolitical discourses in Afghanistan.

Sources: Afghan Government Statistics, UN, World Bank, AIHRC