
Assessing the Taliban's 'Doublespeak' and Women's Rights in Afghanistan

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More than one year after the Taliban's nearly unimpeded takeover of Afghanistan, religious freedom and associated rights in the country are spiraling towards an all-time low. The modest gains in these freedoms made over the past two decades risk complete erasure. The withdrawal of NATO forces and subsequent rapid fall of the previous government in 2021 sparked an emergency evacuation of the international community and of Afghans who supported their work. With energies focused on the closure of diplomatic offices and the withdrawal, there has been limited contact with actors remaining in Afghanistan.

This series invites scholars, diplomats, and regional and policy experts to share their insights into the country and provide recommendations to ensure protections for religious and ethnic minorities and other vulnerable communities, including women and children, across the country.

This contribution was adapted from Palwasha Kakar's remarks at the "[Afghanistan: the Next Chapter](#)" discussion hosted by the Keston Center for Religion, Politics, and Society at Baylor University and the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at Notre Dame

I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight issues of Afghanistan and women's rights, which I've worked on for a long time. I come to this at the intersection of women, religion, and peace as Director of the Religion and Inclusive Societies Program at the United States Institute of Peace.

I will give an overview of the Taliban decrees issued to date related to women's rights and consider their differences and positive and negative impact. I will also highlight the 'doublespeak' we have seen from the Taliban and the distrust experienced within communities. I will also identify the community-level progress we have seen and how we support these local efforts.

Regarding legal rights and protections, the Constitution is no longer functioning. Family law, as it was under the Republic, is no longer being applied. The Elimination of Violence Against Women Act is no longer being applied, and the National Action Plan for the Implementation of U.N. Resolution 1325 is no longer being applied. In terms of education, more than three million girls are out of school, 68,000 women teachers and university lecturers are out of jobs, and tens of thousands of students who were studying science, law, arts, engineering, technology, and other subjects are no longer able to.

In terms of employment, 6,000 women served as judges, prosecutors, and defense lawyers who are out of jobs. Over a thousand female journalists and businesswomen—running small and medium businesses that created more than 77,000 jobs and invested 70 million U.S. dollars into the economy—can no longer work. High-level women—like the 18 women who served as Ministers, Deputy Ministers, Ambassadors, legislators, and those that were in Parliament—have been removed from power.

Regarding the media, there is no longer freedom of expression. Before Taliban rule, we had a very vibrant and relatively independent media with over 250 radio stations, for example. Women led many, and all employed women in one form or another.

We saw a series of decrees, edicts, and orders implemented by the Taliban as soon as they declared themselves the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. They conducted house-to-house searches in August 2021, looking for journalists and individuals with ties to the Republic and Western forces. They implemented a ban on music in public. They ordered Imams to provide lists of unmarried women and girls between the ages of 12 and 45 for their fighters to marry. Some of these turned into abductions and forced marriages.

In September 2021, after a caretaker government was announced, the Taliban replaced the Ministry of Women's Affairs with the Ministry of Vice and Virtue. Shopkeepers were ordered to deface the mannequins in their stores. The Taliban told women working professional jobs to stay home until further notice. Women were also banned from attending and teaching at Kabul University.

On December 3rd, 2021, Amir Haibatullah Akhuzada issued a special decree about women's rights. While the decree described women as noble and free, the following lines spelled out the rights of women in terms of marriage, in a way that treated them as property, ignoring women's mobility, employment, and education rights and only discussing marriage rights. The Amir's declaration was followed later that month by an order from the Ministry of Vice and Virtue declaring that women should not be offered rides to travel beyond 72 kilometers if not accompanied by a mahram—which has increasingly limited women.

Here's an example: women traveling to work in a company car were stopped multiple times at checkpoints and asked where they were going. They were allowed to travel in the early days of the Taliban regime. Now, they are told they cannot travel without a mahram.

Taliban foot soldiers beat taxi drivers transporting women unaccompanied by a mahram, so taxi companies no longer allow women into their vehicles. Although the order declared restrictions only on long road trips, it increasingly became more restrictive in its actual implementation.

In December 2021, the Election Commission, Ministry of Peace, and Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs were also dissolved.

In January 2022, women were no longer allowed into shops without accompaniment by a mahram. The Taliban targeted shop owners if they served women not accompanied by a male relative.

In February 2022, more restrictions were placed on universities to enforce gender segregation in classrooms—even in private universities. NGOs had to replace women living outside of Afghanistan

while holding leadership positions. Organizations were asked to replace female board members, or else they would face a shutdown.

In March 2022, girls' schools from grade seven up were closed. We saw many girls in the streets wanting to go to school and being turned away. We also saw their fathers standing up for them. This is interesting and unique. In many cases, fathers in Afghanistan have stood up for their daughters publicly in protest and in the media for the rights of their daughters to go to school. Recently in Paktia, some men and fathers protested the girls' schools being closed.

During this same month, the Amir issued an order stating that women employees in offices must not leave home, and restrictions on women continued to increase.

Media and broadcasting were also restricted. Foreign T.V. series, especially those depicting women in different roles in society, were limited.

In April 2022, there was an announcement allowing men and women in universities for three days per week, but the Taliban imposed several restrictions.

In May 2022, female T.V. presenters on the air were ordered to cover their faces. Women could no longer obtain driver's licenses and were no longer allowed to use public transportation alone. The Ministry of Vice and Virtue ordered public transportation drivers to install curtains in the front and middle of their buses to separate women from the driver, with women in the front and men in the back of the bus.

The Taliban has issued several orders concerning the hijab and how to wear it, ultimately trying to enforce what they deem the 'proper hijab.'

Locally, in Ghazni, female students from grades four to six were ordered to cover their faces when commuting to school or face expulsion. There is a degree of variation of this policy on the local level as some places are more extreme than others.

The Taliban then held an all-male Gathering of 4,500 clerics and leaders in Kabul. They claimed that men could sufficiently represent the views of women.

In July 2022, the Taliban banned women from going to parks. They then told women employees of the Ministry of Finance that each woman should send a male relative to replace them in their positions, disregarding their expertise.

The Ministry of Vice and Virtue also began implementing mandatory religious reviews of government offices.

In August 2022, they dismissed women flight attendants from Ariana Airline. They said women are not allowed to travel without a mahram. They then removed the Muharram's public holiday status, which has religious significance to the Shi'a Muslims. They then declared August 15th, the day they took control of the country, a public holiday.

The Ministry of Foreign affairs then required female employees to sign their timesheets at the gate rather than enter the building and ordered them not to speak to male employees of the Ministry.

In an interesting move, the Taliban announced a “women’s department” in the Ministry of Vice and Virtue, led by a woman, to guide women in their religious duties and, in many cases, control their religious expression.

On a day-to-day basis, young women between the ages of 7 and 12 cannot attend school. The Taliban has created various excuses to turn them away. Some have given up altogether.

There are manifold issues women are facing. It is difficult for many women and girls to go anywhere outside the home, even to the bazaar, due to public transportation restrictions. Shopping for anything is difficult because of the threats shopkeepers face if they interact with women.

In the same vein, decrees are being implemented in a range of ways. There is a stricter implementation in some areas than in other areas. We have seen less strict implementation in places where the Afghan public has pushed back against the orders. In some cases, after demonstrations, community elders have spoken with local Taliban authorities to change things. Because of these negotiation efforts, some girls' schools have opened in several provinces.

But once these efforts become too public, the Taliban fear they look bad for not enforcing their decrees. In Paktia, girls' schools were re-closed a week and a half after opening. There is a give and take in the negotiation of various boundaries and in places where the Kandahar leadership wants to enforce certain views and decrees.

This is different from the past when the Taliban issued blanket decrees across the nation. There is more responsiveness to local communities.

In Kunar, the Taliban attacked a wedding as they were playing music. The groom was killed, and many wedding party members were killed. Elders of the community went to the Taliban and said, “You will not do this anymore. You will not attack wedding parties. Otherwise, we will rebel against you and not allow you to stay in power.” The Taliban coalesced around this and have not yet attacked wedding parties.

There have been negotiations with local businesses to allow women to work — very quietly — with the condition that these businesses must not tell the media.

This local-level negotiation is effective.

We are working with Afghan religious scholars and leaders on women's rights issues and helping them come together with civil society and international scholars to support these local-level negotiations. We recognize there is no "one size fits all" solution, and sometimes local efforts will fail. Nevertheless, this is where we see traction and movement as communities advocate for their rights.

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