

The Taliban Remain the Same, But Society Has Changed

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Articles & Testimony

Years of U.S. involvement visibly advanced the dignity and prospects of Afghan women, but wholly abandoning them now would risk undoing much of this progress.

Earlier this month, the Taliban announced new rules that further restrict women's rights in Afghanistan. Women can no longer appear in TV dramas (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59368488>), among other television restrictions (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/23/afghan-journalists-taliban-rules-restricting-role-women-on-tv>). Girls and women also cannot attend (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2021/nov/22/dreams-on-hold-afghan-girls-and-women-are-desperate-to-get-back-to-class>) secondary school based on new rules. "Life now is not living. It is surviving and breathing without any purpose," one woman, a former medical student, told BBC (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59029517>).

From the moment the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August, it was clear this group remained every bit as cruel and brutal towards women as in the 1990s, when women disproportionately bore the bulk of their **assault on Afghanistan** (<https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/drl/rls/6185.htm>). Indeed, this time around, one of the Taliban's first official acts was to replace the Ministry of Women's Affairs with the notoriously vicious **Ministry for Vice and Virtue** (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/29/afghan-women-frightening-return-vice-and-virtue>).

But while the Taliban remain the same, something else has changed—Afghan society. Over the past two decades of US presence in Afghanistan, a genuine internal shift towards greater recognition of women's rights had taken place. What does this mean for Afghan women now, and Afghan society more broadly, as the country struggles with Taliban

control? And what does it entail for the future?

To answer these questions, first it is necessary to understand what change took place in the last twenty years, both its advances and the shortcomings. An oft-cited statistic about Afghanistan is that prior to the Taliban taking control this August, the country's parliament had a higher **percentage of women** (<https://www.brookings.edu/essay/the-fate-of-womens-rights-in-afghanistan/>) than the U.S. Congress. There are of course numerous other data points. Afghanistan's **2004 Constitution** (https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Afghanistan_2004.pdf?lang=en) enshrined equal rights for men and women, while in December 2009, Afghan law **criminalized** (<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5486d1a34.pdf>) violence against women for the first time in the country's history. Over the last two decades, millions of Afghan women have taken jobs in the security, justice, and other sectors of Afghan society, while girls went to school, began to participate in sports, and gained greater access to vital healthcare. The infant mortality rate has fallen **dramatically** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/24/afghan-babies-have-been-dying-in-huge-numbers-for-decades-now-something-is-changing/>). Consider that at the time of the Taliban's ouster in 2001 no girls were in school, and two decades later, **over 3.5 million** (<https://www.etilaatroz.com/73948/how-womens-participation-government-sectors/>) were enrolled. A recent **UNESCO report** (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378911>) finds that despite clear shortcomings in the trajectory of education, "relatively speaking, [Afghanistan's] pace of progress has been faster than that of most other countries in the South Asia subregion."

But as crucial as numbers are, they do not tell the full story—indeed they can even obfuscate it. And laws might sound good on paper but turn out to be difficult if not impossible to implement. When it comes to genuine societal change, it is not always solely about numbers. Writing about the struggle of Soviet dissidents, Andrei Sakharov once **noted** (http://www.sakharov-archive.ru/Raboty/Rabot_38.html), "it is not a question of arithmetic but of an intangible factor: breaching the psychological barrier of silence." His broader point is relevant to a conversation about women's rights in Afghanistan as it applies to cultural change.

Unquantifiable factors, together with the numbers, demonstrate that the change in Afghanistan was real. After the Taliban overthrow, women took full part in rebuilding the country, they were not mere placeholders for engineering positive statistics. For example, **Dr. Sima Samar**, (<https://www.jfklibrary.org/events-and-awards/profile-in-courage-award/award-recipients/sima-samar-2004>) a renowned human rights activist, became Deputy Chair of the Interim Administration and Minister of Women's Affairs. Bahar Jalali, a historian who founded the first gender studies program at the American University in Afghanistan, **told the Washington Post** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/24/afghanistan-ministry-women-affairs-rights-taliban/>) that despite many difficulties in advancing women's rights, in the first decade after ousting the Taliban "you really did see competent women emerge. A class of women who...knew how to speak to the international community and who knew the needs of Afghanistan."

I worked in Afghanistan as an analyst with a US military contractor in 2010-2011, and talked to Afghans in subsequent years. During my time in Afghanistan one of **my most memorable experiences** (<https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/afghanistans-women-face-a-dangerous-and-uncertain-future>) was a visit to a girl's school in Kabul completely rebuilt by ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) after the Taliban had razed it to the ground. The school's principal, also a woman, told me back then that the girls were excited about learning and enjoyed coming to school. Though cramped in small trailers, Afghan girls smiled, eager to learn, despite the scorching heat, overcrowding, and swarm of flies around the public bathroom. Statistics cannot communicate how bright the faces of the girls I saw were.

While in Afghanistan, I also met a number of young women who had entered the work force and went to school. At

the time, not only education enrollment, but demand for education, was growing. I also met Afghan men who wanted to see women's rights ensured and were proud of the success of their wives and sisters. As I look at reports of the Taliban restricting women's rights now, I think back to those experiences, to meeting a new generation that worked for a better future, and this makes current reports about Afghanistan all the more painful.

It would be an understatement to say Afghanistan had a long way to go when it came to women's rights. Despite improvements, women continued to face harassment and abuse, including violence with impunity. Reforms were especially slow in rural parts of the country; indeed, the gap between urban and rural settings was vast. In addition, overall corruption in the country compounded the problem.

Much can be said about the reasons why these problems continued to plague Afghanistan, but during my time in the country, the women I met were most concerned about then-ongoing discussion about a peace deal with the Taliban, which they were afraid at the time could jeopardize women's rights. And herein lay perhaps the key issue. After approximately the first decade of fast-paced improvements for women, the Taliban re-emerged as a violent insurgent force. The resultant insecurity and attempts at peace efforts complicated progress. As Mariam Safi, executive director of the [Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies \(DROPS](https://dropsafghanistan.org/?page_id=5) (https://dropsafghanistan.org/?page_id=5), explained it, "[T]he democratization and reconstruction process—within which women's empowerment was a cross-cutting theme—has consistently been undermined by two fundamental factors: the Taliban insurgency, and the approaches taken to fight it." Exclusion of women from participating in the peace process in a meaningful way is one key problem that Safi identifies.

Yet despite these setbacks, looking at the grand scope of the past two decades, Afghanistan is a better place than under Taliban control, and nowhere are the gains more visible than in women's rights. Afghans themselves point this out routinely. A recent case study that explored economic activities of female Afghan entrepreneurs found that certain segments of Afghan society are more open to female entrepreneurs. "Families are gradually becoming more supportive; they create opportunities for the female members of the family, and people have been beginning to trust women's effective participation in economic activities compared to 2010-2015," [concluded the author](https://dropsafghanistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Final-Journal-Ready-for-Publication.pdf) (<https://dropsafghanistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Final-Journal-Ready-for-Publication.pdf>), Batol Hashimi, founder and CEO of the Organization for Rehabilitation and Optimal Development.

The changes in Afghan society are perhaps especially reflected in the fact that many Afghans are not willing to accept the Taliban's restrictions. Since the Taliban took over, women's protests against the Taliban erupted throughout Afghanistan. "[Why is the world watching us die in silence](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211026-women-protest-the-world-s-silence-over-crisis-in-afghanistan) (<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211026-women-protest-the-world-s-silence-over-crisis-in-afghanistan>)?" read one sign of female activists during one of these protests. At another protest, one woman fearlessly stood right in front of an armed Taliban man as he pointed a gun to her chest. In a separate video that went viral, an Afghan girl asked the Taliban who they are to take away women's rights. "I am from a new generation," she continued, "I want to go to school."

What is more, local pressure appeared to have some impact. In the city of Herat, schools from grades 7-12 have reopened after the Taliban banned girls that age from school. A local resident said not only were his two daughters overjoyed to return to school, but so was he. "I suffered ten times more than my daughters when they couldn't go to school," [he said](https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-1646c35931083c3d25edfae3d2628dbd) (<https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-1646c35931083c3d25edfae3d2628dbd>). "I wish all girls can study and be educated to serve this nation alongside the men," [said](https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-1646c35931083c3d25edfae3d2628dbd) (<https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-1646c35931083c3d25edfae3d2628dbd>) another resident. Demand for education remains in an upward trajectory, while many women now see themselves as part of a "new" generation that has the right to shape its own destiny.

Western commentators and government officials routinely point to what they describe as American failure in Afghanistan, but it is hard to deny that the US-led operation Enduring Freedom and subsequent US involvement at

least partially met its goal of advancing the [dignity of Afghan women \(https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rm/6816.htm\)](https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rm/6816.htm). What is more, this success stands against the backdrop of previous failures of top-down efforts to advance women's rights in Afghanistan, first by [King Amanullah Khan and years later by the Soviet Union \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/the-up-and-down-history-of-afghan-womens-rights/2021/08/18/73470e34-005b-11ec-87e0-7e07bd9ce270_story.html\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/the-up-and-down-history-of-afghan-womens-rights/2021/08/18/73470e34-005b-11ec-87e0-7e07bd9ce270_story.html). And while it may be easy to invoke the cliched description of Afghanistan as “the graveyard of empires” that resists all outsiders, Afghans today [decry \(https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/25/opinion/afghanistan-taliban-army.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/25/opinion/afghanistan-taliban-army.html) America's abandonment, not its presence. “I first learned about women's rights from the Koran,” [said one female protestor \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/12/afghanistan-protests-taliban/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/12/afghanistan-protests-taliban/) in Kabul, “but when the United States was here we learned more about our rights in society, about protest and the power of raising our voices.”

The fact of the matter is, the United States had come into Afghanistan with a promise of a better world, and this promise resonated on a grassroots level. After all, Afghans resisted the Taliban in the 1990s; for many it was a brutal and foreign occupying force that appeared seemingly out of nowhere (in reality it was Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) support that empowered this movement). Moreover, back then, the Taliban never succeeded at taking the [Panjshir Valley \(https://indianexpress.com/article/research/why-panjshir-valley-stood-strong-for-decades-and-how-it-has-fallen-now-7517281/\)](https://indianexpress.com/article/research/why-panjshir-valley-stood-strong-for-decades-and-how-it-has-fallen-now-7517281/), where the [Northern Alliance \(https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/23/asia/panjshir-valley-afghanistan-northern-alliance-explainer-intl/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/23/asia/panjshir-valley-afghanistan-northern-alliance-explainer-intl/index.html) held strong.

But back then Afghanistan had not been as connected to the Western world as it was in the past twenty years, and this time around advances in women's rights have come farther. And now, having opened this door, the US has shamefully absolved itself of further responsibility. Ironically, in the 1990s, Panjshir Valley held in part because of outside support, chiefly from Central Asia and India. The world may be watching Afghanistan, but it is unclear what support Afghanistan will receive today from the West despite [pleas for help \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/18/mujahideen-resistance-taliban-ahmad-massoud/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/18/mujahideen-resistance-taliban-ahmad-massoud/). Meanwhile, this time around, the Taliban went precisely [after Panjshir Valley \(https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/06/world/asia/afghanistan-panjshir-taliban-resistance.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/06/world/asia/afghanistan-panjshir-taliban-resistance.html), likely to prevent the Northern Alliance from emerging as the organized and strong opposition force that it was in the 1990s.

If there is a glimmer of hope, it is that Afghan society continues to push back against the Taliban. Having experienced a degree of freedom in the past twenty years, Afghans do not want to give it up. It is too soon to tell what will be the result, but it is possible that the Taliban's efforts to implement measures as draconian as in the past may backfire precisely because Afghan society feels empowered to push back against the Taliban's extremism. That said, Afghanistan, and especially its women, are facing at the very least a dangerous and violent future.

Afghanistan may again plunge into a civil war and turn into a haven for terrorists, which will directly affect the West and Western interests—for example, in the form of terrorist attacks, if not domestically then in the Middle East or the Horn of Africa. But how ironic that at a time when the US chose to lose, Afghans feel they owe it to themselves to try to win.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the new book [Putin's War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America's Absence \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/putins-war-syria-russian-foreign-policy-and-price-americas-absence\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/putins-war-syria-russian-foreign-policy-and-price-americas-absence). This article was originally published on The Insider website (<https://theins.ru/en/opinion/anna-borshchevskaya/246753>). ❖

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