

*Research Article*

# Women's Rights in Post-U.S. Afghanistan: Assessing the Impact of the Taliban's Return on Gender Equality

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**Abstract:** This research explores the regression of women's rights and gender equality in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. Grounded in feminist and postcolonial theory, this research examines Taliban-imposed restrictions on education, employment, healthcare access, and women's socio-political participation. Drawing from qualitative interviews with Afghan women in diaspora and analysis of international and local reports, the study highlights the ideological underpinnings of Taliban policies, the psychological and economic toll on women, and the emergence of resistance through grassroots and digital activism. It also compares the current Taliban regime with its earlier rule (1996–2001) to assess continuity and transformation in gender policies. The paper argues for localized, culturally grounded advocacy strategies and stronger international support to counter gender apartheid in Afghanistan.

**Key Words:** Women Rights, Afghanistan, Taliban Regime, Patriarchy

## ABD Sonrası Afganistan'da Kadın Hakları: Taliban'ın Cinsiyet Eşitliğine Geri Dönüşünün Etkisinin Değerlendirilmesi

**Öz:** Bu araştırma, ABD'nin Afganistan'dan çekilmesinin ve Taliban'ın Ağustos 2021'de yeniden iktidara gelmesinin ardından kadın hakları ve toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğinde yaşanan gerilemeyi incelemektedir. Feminist ve postkolonyal kuram temelinde yürütülen bu çalışma, Taliban tarafından

dayatılan eğitim, istihdam, sağlık hizmetlerine erişim ve kadınların sosyo-politik katılımına yönelik kısıtlamaları ele almaktadır. Afgan diasporasındaki kadınlarla yapılan nitel görüşmelerin yanı sıra ulusal ve uluslararası raporların analizine dayanan araştırma; Taliban politikalarının ideolojik temellerini, kadınlar üzerindeki psikolojik ve ekonomik etkileri ve tabandan gelen direniş ile dijital aktivizmin yükselişini ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, mevcut Taliban rejimi ile önceki (1996–2001) dönemi karşılaştırarak toplumsal cinsiyet politikalarında süreklilik ve dönüşüm boyutlarını değerlendirmektedir. Makale, Afganistan'daki toplumsal cinsiyet apartheid'ine karşı kültürel bağlamlara duyarlı yerel savunuculuk stratejilerinin geliştirilmesi ve uluslararası desteğin güçlendirilmesi gerektiğini savunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kadın Hakları, Afganistan, Taliban Rejimi, Ataerkillik

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## Introduction

Afghanistan, a landlocked country in South-Central Asia, is home to a deeply rooted Islamic identity, with 99% of its population identifying as Muslim. The Islamic faith has historically shaped the country's political, legal, and cultural institutions. However, gender interpretations of Islamic law vary widely across different regimes. The return of the Taliban in August 2021 after the U.S. military withdrawal marks a dramatic turning point for women's rights, reversing much of the progress made over the previous two decades. While Islam, in principle, emphasizes justice and equality (Badran, 1995), the Taliban's governance interprets Islamic Sharia through a highly restrictive, patriarchal lens.

This research is anchored in the lived experiences of Afghan women and aims to answer the following research question:

How have the Taliban's post-2021 policies impacted gender equality in Afghanistan, particularly in the realms of education, employment, health, and economic independence, and how have Afghan women responded to these changes?

To address this, the study engages feminist theory—particularly liberal, radical, and postcolonial strands—and draws on qualitative data from interviews, reports, and field narratives.

The argument is threefold:

1. The Taliban's policies represent a systemized rollback of women's rights, not grounded in core Islamic values but rather in patriarchal traditions.
2. The regression encompasses more than education and employment also affects women's access to healthcare, property, and economic independence.
3. Despite these setbacks, Afghan women both inside and outside the country continue to resist through various strategies including digital activism, localized organizing, and diasporic advocacy.

By weaving together theoretical insights with empirical observations, this paper contributes to a more nuanced, locally informed understanding of women's rights in post-U.S. Afghanistan.

The literature on gender equality and women's rights in Afghanistan spans decades of political transformation, ideological contestation, and international intervention. This review categorizes existing scholarship into four analytical strands: pre-2021 liberal feminist gains, post-2021 gender regressions, Islamic feminist responses, and critiques from postcolonial perspectives.

Studies such as Kabeer (2009) and Kandiyoti (2000) document the substantial progress made by Afghan women during the U.S.-backed republic (2001–2021), particularly in education, healthcare, and political representation. This progress was often guided by liberal feminist ideals advocating legal equality, access to public institutions, and formal political inclusion. Kabeer (2009) emphasizes how international donors and NGOs created pathways for women's empowerment through quotas, media visibility, and employment.

However, Firestone (1970) and other radical feminists have critiqued the limitations of this framework, noting that legislative gains often failed to dismantle deeply rooted patriarchal structures. This is evident in how fragile these reforms proved to be following the Taliban's return.

Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, a rapid reversal of women's rights has been widely documented. Ahmadi (2022), Human Rights Watch (2023), and UN Women (2023) provide detailed accounts of the systematic rollback of women's freedoms in education, employment, and mobility. Akbar (2022) and Shahrani (2022) use the term "gender apartheid" to frame Taliban policies, highlighting the legal and structural segregation of women from public life.

Local Afghan scholars such as Salehi (2024) and Kakar (2021) contribute important context by situating the Taliban's ideology within the Deobandi school of Islam and Pashtunwali cultural norms. These perspectives suggest that the

Taliban's gender policies are less about Islam and more about conservative ethno-religious power structures.

A growing body of Islamic feminist scholarship contests the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia. Badran (1995) and recent statements by regional religious leaders (Sub, 2022) argue that the Taliban's policies lack theological justification and are instead rooted in pre-Islamic tribal customs. Afghan women's rights organizations such as RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) and independent voices like Homa Ahmedzai and Mahbouba Seraj have also spoken out against these distortions of Islam, calling for faith-based gender justice grounded in the Qur'an's egalitarian ethics.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) critiques Western-centric feminist narratives that depict Third World women as passive victims. In the context of Afghanistan, Mohanty's framework is essential to understanding why externally imposed models of "liberation" have faced resistance and ultimately failed to secure sustainable progress. This is echoed by Vora (2022), who emphasizes that Afghan women's agency must be understood within their cultural, religious, and political contexts—not as mere recipients of Western aid but as active agents of change.

Moreover, regional think tanks such as the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) and Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) offer underutilized data on local women's coping strategies, economic resilience, and underground education networks—areas largely overlooked in Western literature.

Despite a growing body of literature on Taliban-era gender regression, most studies rely on secondary data and international reports. There is a marked absence of primary fieldwork, especially involving Afghan women in exile or in rural communities. Furthermore, few studies attempt a systematic comparison between the two Taliban regimes (1996–2001 vs. post-2021), nor do they sufficiently integrate Islamic feminist interpretations or economic and healthcare-related impacts.

This case study seeks to bridge these gaps by:

- Including qualitative interviews with Afghan women in Türkiye,
- Comparing the two Taliban regimes in terms of gender governance,
- Framing the findings through feminist and postcolonial theory,
- Incorporating local and regional knowledge to challenge Western-centric assumptions.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on feminist theory, postcolonial feminism, and human rights frameworks to critically examine the regression of women's rights in post-U.S. Afghanistan.

Liberal Feminism emphasizes legal and institutional equality, focusing on reforming laws and expanding access to education, employment, and political participation (Tong, 2009). This framework explains the progress achieved between 2001 and 2021 under the U.S.-backed government, which facilitated international aid, gender quotas, and women's inclusion in public life.

However, Radical Feminism offers a more critical lens, arguing that legal reforms are insufficient without dismantling patriarchal structures embedded in culture, religion, and political institutions (Firestone, 1970). In the case of Afghanistan, the imposition of male guardianship (Mahram) and public segregation (Purdah) reflect deep-seated patriarchal norms that persist despite previous legislative reforms.

Postcolonial Feminism, as articulated by Mohanty (1988), critiques the imposition of Western models of liberation and universalist discourses of human rights that often ignore local histories and cultural complexity. This perspective is critical in Afghanistan, where externally driven feminist initiatives have struggled to gain legitimacy among conservative factions. Postcolonial feminism calls for community-based, culturally grounded strategies that center Afghan women's voices.

Finally, Islamic Feminism plays a crucial role by challenging patriarchal interpretations of Islam used by groups like the Taliban. Scholars such as Badran (1995) and recent regional religious figures (Sub, 2022) argue that the Taliban's practices are not derived from the Qur'an, but from tribal traditions masquerading as religious mandates.

This multidimensional theoretical foundation allows for a nuanced analysis of how gender inequality is produced, justified, and resisted under the Taliban regime.

## **Research Methodology**

To explore the impact of Taliban rule on women's rights after 2021, this research employs a qualitative, interpretivist approach using two main methods:

### *Thematic Analysis*

The research applies a qualitative thematic analysis of official documents, media reports, and interview transcripts to identify recurring themes in Taliban policy and women's responses. The themes are framed within the four analytical lenses:

- Taliban ideology and governance
- International reactions and diplomatic discourse
- Socio-economic structures under Taliban rule
- Grassroots resistance and women's agency

Thematic coding was informed by feminist and postcolonial theories and cross-validated using academic literature, NGO reports (UN Women, Human Rights Watch), and local Afghan commentary.

### *Primary Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews*

Given the restrictions on conducting fieldwork in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, the study utilizes semi-structured interviews with Afghan women in exile in Türkiye, gathered between 2023–2024. These participants were selected via purposive sampling based on the following criteria:

- Female individuals who left Afghanistan after August 2021
- Previously active in education, civil society, media, or public service
- Willing to share their experience and provide informed consent

A total of 20 interviews were conducted in Dari.

Interviews focused on:

- Personal experiences of life under Taliban rule
- Impact on education, employment, healthcare, and mobility
- Perceptions of resistance and international advocacy

Ethical protocols included full anonymity, voluntary participation, and no use of identifiable details. Pseudonyms and location masking were applied where needed.

### *Supplementary Sources*

To ensure triangulation and balance between global and local perspectives, the following sources were analyzed:

- Reports by Afghan NGOs (e.g., RAWA, Afghan Women's Network)
- Regional think tanks (e.g., Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit)
- Islamic scholarly critiques from Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan

- Social media activism and digital ethnography (hashtags such as #LetAfghanGirlsLearn)

### *Limitations*

This study acknowledges its reliance on diaspora voices, which may not fully represent rural or internally displaced Afghan women. Access to current, in-country data remains limited due to the Taliban's suppression of free speech and independent reporting. Nevertheless, this work offers valuable insight into the lived experiences and resilience of Afghan women as documented through first-hand testimony and multi-sourced secondary analysis.

## **Research Findings: Regression, Continuity, and Resistance**

### *Education and Public Participation*

Across both Taliban regimes, a consistent pattern of restricting girls' education and women's public participation is evident. From 1996 to 2001, girls were outright banned from schools and women from workplaces. Similarly, since August 2021, the Taliban have closed secondary schools and universities to women (Popalzai & Stambaugh) and reinstated restrictions on employment, particularly in government, media, and NGOs. While the 1996 Taliban regime enforced these bans through religious police and public executions, the current regime uses bureaucratic decrees (e.g., through the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice), signaling a shift from brute enforcement to institutionalized legal repression.

### *Economic and Property Rights (Newly Expanded)*

In both regimes, women's economic independence has been undermined. However, post-2021, new dynamics have worsened women's financial vulnerability:

- Women barred from most paid work sectors (Women, 2023)
- Closure of businesses led by women entrepreneurs
- Discriminatory inheritance practices returned in areas under Taliban control
- Reports on forced marriages and bride-price inflation due to women's diminished agencies

Unlike the 1996 period, where the economy was largely informal, today's restrictions come in the context of an internationally sanctioned and aid-

dependent economy, exacerbating poverty. With no control over assets or income, many Afghan women now rely on male relatives or face marital coercion as survival.

### *Healthcare and Psychological Impact*

Under the 1996 regime, healthcare services for women were decimated, with female doctors banned and women prohibited from accessing male physicians. In the current regime:

- Women's mobility constraints (Mahram enforcement) have reduced access to clinics
- Employment bans have driven female healthcare professionals out of the system
- Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and trauma have spiked (UN Women, 2021)

One interviewee shared:

*"Before the Taliban, I was a midwife. Now, I cannot leave home alone, and my patients call me in secret. I feel erased."*

While both eras restrict access, the psychosocial collapse is far more visible today due to increased awareness, social media exposure, and the sheer scale of regression after 20 years of progress.

### *Digital Resistance and Diaspora Advocacy*

New to the post-2021 era is the emergence of digital activism and diasporic networks. Afghan women inside and outside the country are organizing protests, sharing stories, and raising awareness through hashtags like:

- #LetAfghanGirlsLearn
- #StandWithAfghanWomen
- #AfghanWomenExist

One interviewer in Türkiye stated:

*"I lost my career, my classroom, and my freedom—but I haven't lost my voice."*

These efforts have drawn attention from international organizations, resulting in UN condemnations and European Parliament resolutions (though enforcement remains weak).

Resistance in the 1990s was largely underground. Today, it is digital, transnational, and highly visible—although this also places activists at heightened risk of Taliban surveillance and retaliation.



*Legal Structures and Ideological Justifications*

The Taliban’s legal system—based on a selective interpretation of Deobandi jurisprudence—continues to be patriarchal and exclusionary. However, Islamic feminist scholars argue that:

- Mahram and Purdah are not Qur’anic mandates
- The Taliban’s rulings distort Islam to justify authoritarian control

Both Taliban eras share ideological foundations, but today’s Taliban are more rhetorically strategic, often claiming alignment with “Islamic values” to deflect international criticism—even while violating core Islamic teachings on justice, dignity, and education.

Summary Table: Comparative Analysis

Aspect	Taliban 1996-2001	Taliban 2021-2025
Employment	Women banned from most Work	Women banned from Govt, NGOs, Media; informal work policed
Mobility (Mahram)	Strictly enforced	Re-imposed and digitally monitored
Healthcare	Women lacked access; Staff banned	Limited access due to Mahram rule, economic collapse
Resistance lobbying;	Underground schools (E.g. RAWA)	Digital activism; diaspora viral hashtags
Legal Framework ministries	Religious police (Amr bil Maruf)	Bureaucratized system via and decrees
Ideological Justification	Deobandism + tribal codes	same framework, but more strategic

Use of public rhetoric

Property / Economic Rights	Minimal rights; limited Enforcement	Denied access to property, banking, income; marital coercion rising
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Discussion and Theoretical Reflections

The findings of this research confirm that the trajectory of women's rights in Afghanistan is deeply intertwined with political shifts in power. The post-2021 Taliban regime has not merely reversed previous gains but institutionalized a gender apartheid system that systematically removes women from public life. The discussion below draws on feminist and postcolonial theory to interpret these developments and evaluate the Afghan women's responses.

*Feminist Theory: Legal Gains vs. Structural Patriarchy*

While liberal feminism helps explain the achievements made between 2001 and 2021—such as constitutional protections, education expansion, and female employment—it also reveals its limits. These gains were primarily legalistic and top-down, dependent on international funding and vulnerable to political collapse. The return of the Taliban shows how formal equality can be swiftly dismantled in the absence of structural change.

Radical feminism offers a deeper critique: gender oppression in Afghanistan is not merely legal but embedded in patriarchal customs, economic structures, and religious institutions. Practices like Mahram and Purdah are upheld not just through policy but through cultural internalization, making women's exclusion seem "normal" or "moral." This view aligns with the testimonies of interviewees who described feeling "invisible" or "erased" under Taliban rule—an embodiment of structural, not just symbolic, violence.

*Postcolonial Feminism: Beyond Western-Centric Advocacy*

Postcolonial feminist theory, especially Mohanty's (1988) critique of "universalist feminism," illuminates a core tension: international campaigns to "save" Afghan women have often ignored local voices, Islamic interpretations, and culturally grounded strategies. These external frameworks, though well-meaning, failed to build sustainable, community-anchored change and instead

fueled backlash from conservative factions who perceived women's rights as foreign impositions.

This study supports Mohanty's argument by emphasizing Afghan women's self-generated strategies—from underground education to digital activism—rather than positioning them as passive victims. As several interviewees noted, even in exile they continue to advocate, teach, and organize, framing their struggle within both religious and cultural legitimacy.

### *Islamic Feminism: Contesting the Taliban's Claims*

The Taliban's justification of their gender policies through Islam is vigorously contested by Islamic feminist scholars, who argue for gender equality grounded in Qur'anic values. Badran (1995) and (Sub, 2022) assert that the Taliban's interpretation is culturally patriarchal, not theologically sound.

Afghan religious figures—both male and female—are increasingly using Islamic texts to challenge Taliban edicts, especially around education. This growing faith-based resistance is a crucial development, providing an alternative moral and religious framework for advancing women's rights.

### *Women's Agency and Innovative Resistance*

A central contribution of this study is highlighting the resilience and adaptability of Afghan women:

- They form secret learning networks
- Mobilize digital campaigns
- Engage in cross-border solidarity
- Use Islamic arguments to counter Taliban decrees

These actions show that Afghan women are not merely reacting to oppression but actively constructing alternative futures, often at great personal risk.

As one interviewee said:

"We don't need saving—we need space, safety, and solidarity."

### *Original Contribution*

This research makes a unique contribution by:

- Combining theoretical depth with empirical voices through interviews
- Centering Afghan women's own frameworks of resistance, not externally imposed agendas

- Offering a comparative analysis of Taliban regimes, often missing from mainstream literature
- Highlighting the intersection of gender, economy, religion, and displacement

## Conclusion

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 marked a catastrophic turning point for women's rights in Afghanistan. The dismantling of educational access, economic participation, healthcare access, and public visibility for Afghan women has transformed the country into what many scholars now describe as a gender apartheid state. This study has shown that these repressive structures are not rooted in core Islamic teachings, but rather in cultural patriarchy masked as theology.

Drawing on feminist, postcolonial, and Islamic feminist theory, this study reveals that the progress made from 2001 to 2021—although meaningful—was structurally fragile. It relied heavily on liberal feminist reforms and Western aid without sufficiently challenging the underlying patriarchal systems. The collapse of these reforms after the U.S. withdrawal underscores that without deep structural transformation, legal equality alone cannot ensure durable gender justice.

Yet, within this regression lies a powerful counterforce: Afghan women's agency and resistance. Whether protesting in the streets of Kabul, teaching in underground schools, or amplifying their voices through digital activism in exile, Afghan women continue to fight for their rights. Their resistance is not only political—it is cultural, spiritual, and intellectual.

In light of the findings, this study offers the following recommendations for international organizations, policymakers, regional actors, and civil society:

### *Center Afghan Women in Advocacy and Aid Delivery*

Donors and INGOs should support women-led local NGOs and networks—especially those rooted in Islamic or community frameworks. Empower Afghan women as agents, not just recipients, of support.

### *Recognize and Act on Gender Apartheid*

The UN and international community should classify Taliban practices as a form of gender apartheid, triggering stronger legal and political accountability.

Investigate and document violations through the International Criminal Court (ICC).

*Appoint a UN Special Envoy on Afghan Women*

A dedicated envoy should be tasked with monitoring, reporting, and advocating on the specific conditions of women in Afghanistan.

*Promote Faith-Based Advocacy Against Misuse of Sharia*

Collaborate with Islamic scholars across the Muslim world to counter the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia and amplify religious arguments for women's rights.

*Strengthen Economic Alternatives for Women*

Develop aid strategies that bypass Taliban structures and allow women to safely earn income, especially in education, healthcare, and cottage industries.

*Protect Afghan Women in Exile*

Ensure Afghan refugee women in neighboring countries and Europe receive legal protections, trauma-informed services, and opportunities to continue their advocacy.

*Stop Deportations of Afghan Women*

No country should forcibly return Afghan women to Taliban-controlled territories where their lives and rights are at extreme risk. The story of Afghan women is not one of victimhood—it is one of courage, innovation, and relentless resistance. This study aims not only to document oppression but also to amplify that resistance. The global community must act—not just in words, but through sustained policy, protection, and partnership.

As one interviewee powerfully stated:

"We do not need sympathy. We need the world to stand with us—not as saviors, but as allies."

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