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Inside Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, the most vulnerable – the elderly, women, and children – have become the principle victims. The priority of warring factions has been to win the military battle for territory and power at any cost, ensuring that local and international communities have negated these vulnerable individuals' rights.

In 1959 the Afghani government announced the voluntary end to *purdah* (the prohibition of women in public spheres); and the wearing of the veil became an individual or family choice. Further political reforms followed, but were met with opposition and suspicion by many conservatives and the clergy. Urban middle-class women adopted a more westernised style of living – wearing western dress, participating in tertiary education and seeking employment – while life for the majority of rural women changed very little. Liberal attitudes to women reached their height during the 1980s, due to the secular socialist policy introduced by the Soviet backed government.

During this period:

- i` 60% of the teaching staff at Kabul University were women
- i` 50% of the students at the university were women
- i` 50% of the civilian government workforce were women
- i` 70% of teachers were women
- i` 40% of doctors were women¹

With the rise of the *Taliban* to power in September 1996 and their introduction of a strict interpretation of *shari'a* law, the issue of women's human rights was placed in the spotlight. The majority of Afghani women had traditionally lived their lives in an impoverished, rural environment, working within the family – westernization impacted very little on their lives. Whereas many of those women who adopted the liberal reforms had since left the country, those that remained faced immense hardship due to the war, drought, and being forced to conform to the *Taliban* laws.

The aim of the pure Islamic state installed by the *Taliban* in September 1996, was to provide a secure environment where women were able to be chaste and retain their honour and dignity. Attempts to secure this policy led to the removal of women from public society. Restrictions were subsequently imposed on education, work, dress, and other aspects of daily life, such as attending public bathhouses. The war with Russia (1979-89) created a large number of widows and orphans who were forced to take sole responsibility for providing for themselves and their families. However, *Taliban* restrictions on women working outside the home meant that this task was nearly impossible.

The repressive nature of the regime meant that outwardly women became submissive and accepting of the laws. Some restrictions were:

- i` Women were required to remain within the home, and not to participate in public life;
- i` Women were forbidden to work;
- i` Women had to be accompanied by a male family member when in public;
- i` Women had to wear the *burka* when in public;
- i` Women's recreation and sporting facilities were closed;
- i` Girls' schools were closed;
- i` Family planning was outlawed.

¹ www.hrw.org/reports/2001/afghan2.



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Thus, ordinary women in Afghanistan suffered enormously under both the former *Mujahedin* government and the *Taliban*.

How could a woman provide for herself and her family when faced with these restrictions?

The number of women begging and soliciting increased enormously, despite the penalties associated with such activity. With a subsequent ban on begging in shop entrances, prostitution was often seen as a last resort despite the inherent dangers. HIV infections and other sexually-transmitted diseases, abductions and gang rape were constant dangers that women faced. Being forced to resort to traditional abortion methods put women in further danger; there was a return to augury and amulets to treat sickness; and the use of opium to ease pain. Work that was permitted was of an extremely limited nature and had to be done in the home. Women earned just a fifth of the wage that men received for performing equivalent tasks, such as shelling nuts or hand-spinning wool. Earlier initiatives between women and the World Food Programme to provide subsidised bread in Kabul were terminated, due to a *Taliban* decree prohibiting women from working for foreign organisations.

Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) reported that women constantly faced physical and verbal violence, with no recourse to justice. Public harassment, beatings, abductions and sexual crimes were regular occurrences, and domestic violence was commonplace. It was estimated that over 80% of women suffered severe depression and that 25% had contemplated suicide. Poverty was visible in many ways, such as the selling of young daughters into marriage to ease immediate hardship or to pay off family debt. Drug addictions, notably dependence on opium, increased. In rural areas women formed the main opium cultivation labour force, and were involved in planting, weeding, lancing and collecting poppies. This work poses potential threats to household health and young women involved in this work have begun to lose their traditional skills such as embroidery and tailoring. UNIFEM records the current literacy rate amongst women as 15.8%. The ban on education coupled with the large number of women responsible for providing for their families, ensured that the situation for Afghani women under the *Taliban* was bleak.

Following the overthrow of the *Taliban* in 2001 much has changed for women in Afghanistan. A Ministry of Women Affairs and an independent Human Rights Commission has been established. The regulations prohibiting women from studying, working or going outside without a burka, or unaccompanied by a close male relative, have been abolished. There has also been progress in the participation of women in politics; for example, women participated in the Loya jurga (Traditional Grand assembly). However, while schools for girls have reopened and there have been opportunities for participation in politics and employment, there are concerns that these improvements are largely cosmetic. Thus, women's participation in the Loya jurga was criticised as being of a superficial nature, with women participants often being sidelined; this casts doubt over the meaningfulness of their participation.

Reports indicate that a level of conservatism has prevented the realisation of Afghani women's rights. Many areas outside Kabul still operate under a conservative regime, oppressive to women; there have been instances where those in authority have enforced these oppressive systems. The former warlord Ismail Khan told women working in the United Nations offices that they could not shake hands with foreign men and that they must continue to wear the burka. Furthermore, the lack of security has thwarted the newfound freedoms for women in Afghanistan. There have been attempts made on the lives of women who speak out for women rights; instances of girls' schools being burnt down or attacked; and threats made against women who work, go to school, or take off their burka.

Instances of kidnapping, violence and rape have left many women too frightened to exercise their rights. Additionally, accusations have been made against soldiers and police, who were under the command of high-ranking military and political officials in Afghanistan. This atmosphere has meant that some women have been unable to enjoy the freedoms granted to them, with women indicating that they still wear the burka out of fear of reprisal. While some women choose to follow the actual custom of wearing the burka, others feel forced to do so, despite the lift on mandatory wearing. Similarly, while girls can now go to school, the danger associated with doing so, has prevented many from attending. In

