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# Improving Women's Rights under the Taliban Regime

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Since their takeover in August 2021, the Taliban have re-enacted their discriminatory and harsh policies towards women from the 1990s, including depriving women of education and social, economic, and political opportunities. While the international community has prioritized women's rights in its ongoing engagement of the Taliban regime, there are no guarantees that the Taliban will change their behavior and policies towards women. Therefore, the international community needs to devise a long-term strategy to ensure and protect women's rights under the current Taliban regime, in exchange for improved international relations, and possible eventual recognition. This report will discuss challenges women face along socio-political and economic lines in Afghanistan, especially under Taliban rule, and how to strengthen women's presence and participation.

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## About the Authors



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Zainab Hakimi is a university lecturer in Kabul, Afghanistan. She has a master's degree in "theology and philosophy" from International Islamic University, Islamabad. She specializes in contemporary philosophical schools of thought in the Islamic world. She has lived most of her life in Pakistan as a refugee, where she graduated from high school and then completed her BA in Education. She then completed her BS and MS in Islamic Studies, theology and philosophy from Islamic University Islamabad. She has been Assistant Director in the Department of Social Studies at CSRS (Center for Strategic and Regional Studies, Kabul). She has also worked as a visiting lecturer in International Islamic University-Islamabad. Currently, she lectures at Qalam University in Kabul and volunteers as a Researcher in IWA (Integrity Watch Afghanistan). She speaks Dari natively and has well command on four other languages (Arabic, English, Urdu and Pashtu).

## **Essential Background**

Afghanistan has a traditional, tribal, and male-dominant society. Men are the decision makers in all social ranks, including in matters related to women's rights. Women have a symbolic presence in the political and social arena, have almost no presence in commerce and economy, and an intangible presence in the service sector. Gender-based discrimination and violence, lack of education, lack of healthcare, forced marriages, forced and unwanted pregnancies, and prohibitions on social, economic, and political participation are pressing issues for Afghan women, especially in rural areas that constitute more than 70% of Afghanistan's population.<sup>1</sup>

Despite much talk about Afghan women's rights, there has never been a programmatic approach by any Afghan government to solve the problems faced by Afghan women in fundamental ways. Rather, this topic has time and again been hijacked for political gain and exploitation by previous Afghan governments. In fact, widespread corruption in the previous US-backed Afghan government – and lack of monitoring by the international donors – resulted in the loss of important opportunities that could have elevated the condition of Afghan women, especially in terms of improving their literacy, increasing their social and political presence, and reducing violence against women. Nonetheless, there were some signs of improvements in the past two decades as exposure to the rest of the world led to positive changes in Afghanistan in social, economic, and cultural terms. For instance, the share of women as civil service workers rose to 24% under the US-backed government,<sup>2</sup> maternal mortality rates reduced, girls attended schools and universities both at home and abroad, and women-owned businesses were starting to thrive. Of course, women in the urban areas were living in relatively better conditions than women in rural areas.

However, Afghan women arguably still live in the worst condition in the world. More than four decades of war has hindered the growth of women's human capital by limiting their access to justice, education, employment, and other social and economic opportunities. Traditional attitudes rooted in society have added to their deprivation. The fact that more than 80% of Afghan women still lack basic literacy is alarming.<sup>3</sup>

The environment for women has worsened under the Taliban rule since August 2021. The Taliban abolished the Ministry of Women Affairs – the only institution dedicated to look after the welfare of women – and fired most female civilian and military personnel. They suspended education for girls between grades 6-12, limited women's ability to travel, and instituted a strict dress code. The outlook for Afghan women seems dire without timely and concerted interventions to help mitigate the difficulties that Afghan women face.

## **Strategies and Solutions**

Solving the problems of Afghan women requires purposeful cultural and social planning

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1 National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA), Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2021, Section two, population, p. 7, accessed 9 May 2022, [nsia.gov.af](https://nsia.gov.af)

2 National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA), Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2021, Section three, Government Employees, p. 21, accessed 9 May 2022, [nsia.gov.af](https://nsia.gov.af)

3 BBC, 2018, BBC News Persian, accessed May 8, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-43563365>; Ariana News, 2016, Afghan women have highest illiteracy rate in country, accessed May 8, 2022 . <https://bit.ly/3SuB0zF>

and efforts to change public opinion, rationality, and the dominant views in Afghan society. The international community needs to mobilize efforts towards fostering a culture of tolerance, positivity, and openness. Only then will women have a strong presence and equal role in Afghan society, and this is imperative because women constitute about half of Afghanistan's population<sup>4</sup>, thus, a significant portion of the workforce.

Taliban must reconsider their policies towards women and establish an independent institution to oversee affairs related to the welfare and growth of Afghan women. This institution should be tasked with facilitating women's access to opportunities, services to improve their welfare, and chances for upward mobility. Moreover, this institution should serve as a bridge between women and the government supporting and defending the interests of women, as well as empowering and mobilizing women's human capital and resources for social participation. The international community, especially Canada, should use all available leverages to push for such an agenda as it engages the Taliban regime.

Some other strategies and recommendations are as follows:

- Launching special programs to improve the level of women's literacy and professional skills development
- Formulating policies to eliminate violence against women
- Paving the way for increasing the participation of women in public services
- Providing facilities for women to access work, education, justice, information and media
- Supporting the cultural, literary, and artistic development of women
- Reducing poverty, unemployment, and female mortality

### **Recommendations to international community and the government of Canada**

The Government of Canada has the opportunity to use its leverage to influence the Taliban regime to make positive improvements in women's rights. A long-term strategy to engage the Taliban on women's issues should focus on the following targeted goals:

- Compelling the Taliban to establish an independent institution dedicated to women's affairs in its government structure
- Using political pressure to push the Taliban to provide women with socio-economic and political participation opportunities
- Using political pressure to push the Taliban to provide women with intrinsic rights to work, education and, justice
- Supporting and launching programs to enhance the scientific capacity and skills of Afghan women
- Supporting Afghan women entrepreneurs and fostering new opportunities for women's entrepreneurship and business growth

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<sup>4</sup> National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA), Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2021, Section two, population, p. 7, accessed May 8, 2022.