The Fate of Afghan Women’s Rights amidst US Withdrawal and Taliban Governance

What happened to the American desire to “save” Afghan Women?

By Pratha Garkoti
New Developments Team
New Delhi 4th August 2021

Young Girls Prepare for Exams in Afghanistan. Photo by The United Nations. Photo is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0
Source: Flickr
US troops are in the process of withdrawing from Afghanistan after two decades of military presence. As a result, several regions have started witnessing the resurgence of Taliban governance, and statements restricting women's movements - similar to those issued when the Taliban last governed the country, have already been released. Their renewed rise to power appears to threaten the rights of the Afghan women who are being abandoned at this crucial time. The US Administration's silence on the issue makes it imperative to understand whether the American narrative of “rescuing” and “liberating” Afghan women was even a primary goal of their agenda or just another pretext to invade Afghanistan in 2001. Either way, it is important to look at how women’s lives and existence in Afghanistan can be secured.

It is important to understand that increased militarisation can never be a solution to achieve women’s rights and protect women in war-torn countries. It is like adding fuel to the fire because wars are gendered, they disproportionately affect women vis-a-vis the incessant use of sexual violence and other crimes against humanity - considered as inevitable collateral damage of wars - as a weapon against women.

- Pratha Garkoti
WASHINGTON D.C, July 9th 2021 - The Biden Administration defends its decision to withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan by August 31st as the US War in Afghanistan, the longest ever American battle on foreign soil, finally comes to an end. According to Biden, US troops have completed their main objective of finding Osama Bin Laden - the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks – and have neutralised any possible terrorist threats to the US Mainland from Afghanistan. There is, he declared, no point in "sending another generation of Americans to war in Afghanistan".

As much as it is a cause for celebration for the American soldiers and their families, it is a rather uncertain time for the Afghan population. Indeed, the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group which is globally known for its anti-rights rhetoric, sexual and gender-based violence and human rights abuses, as well as providing Al-Qaeda with a sanctuary for its terror operations, is exponentially gaining ground. As per the recent NATO estimates, the Taliban are also believed to be stronger in number than at any time since 2001 with up to 85,000 full-time fighters. US General Austin S. Miller, who served as the final commander of NATO's Resolute Support Mission and United States Forces in Afghanistan, has warned that the country could eventually descend into a civil war. However, Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen recently mentioned that they do not want a civil war in Afghanistan nor to monopolise power.

It is very likely that the Taliban will become a significant actor in the future Afghan government. This also means that they will shape the lives, rights, and existence of Afghan men, women, and children. Taliban envoys and interlocutors have highlighted that their movement has changed from the 1990s and they have even gone further to state that they will allow girls to attend school and women to work in public as long as they abide by the “Islamic injunction”. However, the many witnesses of the Taliban’s brutality in the 1990s believe that the extremist group is only misrepresenting itself to gain global legitimacy and will eventually reinstitute similar rules. Therefore, a significant part of the Afghan population is seeking to relocate abroad before the situation worsens. As per The New York Times, at least 30,000 people are fleeing Afghanistan every week, and according to the International Organisation for Migration, there has been a 30-40% increase in the number of Afghans illegally crossing the border since the US troops withdrawal.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

The Taliban are quickly regaining parts of the Afghan territory via intensified military campaigns and have already reclaimed 18 out of Afghanistan’s 34 provincial capitals whilst the statuses of the remaining 16 provinces range from moderate to low threat. They have also tripled their count of controlled Afghan districts since the start of the US withdrawal, taking over 223 of the total 407 districts, which is threatening almost 70% of the Afghan population that is now residing in Taliban-controlled and contested territories.

When the Taliban were in power between 1996 and 2001, they brutally imposed strict social restrictions, especially on women, in the name of Islam. Women were not allowed to leave their houses without wearing a burqa, which covers the entire body from head to toe, with a mesh opening to see through, and without a male member from their own family.
They were forbidden from accessing education, healthcare, and any form of employment. Violating and defying the Taliban edicts and the traditional gender roles resulted in strict punishments in the form of public flogging, stoning, acid attacks, rape and even being gunned to death in broad daylight. These attacks and acts of violence against women in the public sphere were tactics to restrict women’s movements and demonstrate that women should stay home.

Fast forwarding to 2021, and several residents of provinces like Balkh and Kunduz have confirmed to Voice of America (VOA), an American International broadcaster, that the Taliban have distributed leaflets ordering women to follow the same rules and restrictions that they had imposed when last controlling the regions. These measures, again, include the obligation to wear a hijab, and the interdiction to leave the house without a male family member. Considering these new developments, it is difficult to believe that the Taliban will ever be open to changing their hard-line, gender-repressive views despite hinting at a reformed and less repressive regime.

US AID AND AFGHAN WOMEN

On 17th November 2001, Laura Bush, the then First Lady of the US, took over her husband's, President George Bush, weekly radio address to speak out on the Taliban's oppression of women and children in Afghanistan. She described how repressive the regime was and focussed on the plight of poor Afghan women. She also reaffirmed that “the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women”. Although this address brought to light the brutality of the Taliban regime against women, it also projected the Afghan women as poor, vulnerable Muslim women who needed to be saved, rescued, and liberated not only from the regime but also from their own culture. Thus began the portrayal of these Afghan women as symbols who were used to justify the US occupation of Afghanistan.

The Taliban were quickly overthrown during the US invasion of Afghanistan in December 2001 after which a pro-Western government was installed. This new regime allowed women to enter the public realm to study, work, and serve in the government and Parliament, thereby also improving their socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, women’s life expectancy improved from 57.5 years in 2001 to 66 years in 2019, whilst mortality rate during childbirth significantly reduced from 87.6 to 46.5 per 1000 live births between 2001-2019. However, most of this assistance never reached the rural areas of Afghanistan, where up to 76% of the country’s women live, which is why women’s rights improvements and developments have not been consistent throughout the country. Afghan women also suffered under their own corrupt government which has failed them at every step of the way. As per Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, Afghanistan ranked 172/180 in 2007, and it has only moved up to 165/180 in 2020, indicating how little has changed in more than a decade. The living conditions are comparatively better than under the Taliban, but the government also favours a system of impunity that enables soldiers to break into homes, and kidnap, rape, and murder women and children without any fear of punishment. In addition, Afghan society is also highly patriarchal and conservative. About 87% of women have experienced domestic abuse. Furthermore, practices like forced marriage, child marriage, rape, incest, and abductions have also significantly contributed to making Afghanistan one of the worst places to be a woman.
As per the US Department of Defense, the total military budget of the US in terms of combat operations in Afghanistan between October 2001 and September 2019 adds up to $822bn. Additionally, official data shows that the US has also spent $144bn on reconstruction activities in Afghanistan since 2002, out of which about 61% ($88bn) has been for security, 25% ($36bn) for governance and development, and only the remaining 14% ($20bn) for civilian and humanitarian aid. Interestingly, a report overseeing the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan estimated that about $19bn have been lost due to corruption and fraud.

The financial expenditure of the US government is indicative of how assisting the Afghan women and restoring their rights and dignity has only been a secondary objective of the US. Had it prioritised women’s safety, empowerment, and rights from the beginning by transferring more funds for their advancement and development, and made sure that these gains were evenly distributed, American efforts would have been far more useful for the Afghan women. In contrast, the government invested in arms and military equipment to strengthen the Afghan security and forces. It is important to understand that increased militarisation can never be a solution to achieve women’s rights and protect women in war-torn countries. It is like adding fuel to the fire because wars are gendered, they disproportionately affect women vis-à-vis the incessant use of sexual violence and other crimes against humanity - considered as inevitable collateral damage of wars - as a weapon against women.
Additionally, the ‘Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan’ signed by the Taliban and the US on 29th February 2020 in Doha also further supports the argument that the safety of Afghan women has only been a marginal goal of the US. The peace deal does not once mention the fate and future of the Afghan women. Rather, it focuses on the Taliban’s engagement to ensure that its militants will not support terror activities nor ever attack the US and its allies in exchange for the withdrawal of US troops. The deal also prevents the US from interfering in Afghanistan’s domestic affairs, meaning that the Afghan population and especially women will have to manage without any foreign assistance.

LOOKING FORWARD

The US troops have already completed 90% of their removal from Afghanistan. For a war-torn country where human security is threatened not only by the rise of an extremist non-State actor, but also drought, poverty, covid and lack of basic human necessities and rights, it is important to provide as much support to the Afghan population as possible. The US war in Afghanistan was fought to protect the US national security interests. Now that there are no threats to these interests, it is time to move on to securing its ideological interests, which include the ‘universally good’ set of values like human rights, women’s rights, equality, and justice.

Better late than never, but Biden has pointed out that he does not see a military solution to this two decades long war, and intends to support the country via humanitarian and diplomatic assistance. Given how his administration has not directly addressed the situation of Afghan women yet, let us hope the above-mentioned assistance is not just lip service. The US can, for example, assist in strengthening the judicial and legal system of the country to abolish the system of impunity so that whoever violates the basic rights of Afghan women can be brought to justice and prosecuted. Furthermore, a mechanism should be implemented to ensure that funding for NGOs which work to promote and provide essential services to women like medical care, education, and providing shelters in the area is never halted. As per the Afghan government, around 30% of civil servants in the country are now women. These women are at a high risk of assassination and violence from the Taliban which is why their protection should be prioritised. Moreover, it is important to recognise and acknowledge women’s role in not only decision-making but also peace-making. Any peace agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government without women’s inclusion, representation, and participation is doomed to fail.
NOTES: (References)


The Fate of Afghan Women’s Rights amidst US Withdrawal and Taliban Governance

What happened to the American desire to “save” Afghan Women?

Published 04 August 2021

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE IWI: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S INITIATIVE