



Afghans
For Progressive
Thinking (APT)



One And a Half Year After Afghanistan's Fall: What Was Life Like Under the Taliban Rule?

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Introduction

Since August 2021, the situation of women changed significantly in Afghanistan. With the return of the Taliban, youth, particularly young women, lost all their rights, and today their voices are suppressed. It is not without danger for the youth to raise their voices in Afghanistan due to the restrictions by the Taliban. Through this Booklet, you will learn the reality on the ground directly from the Afghan women who currently live in Afghanistan. The articles published in this booklet portray the severe challenges that youth face in Afghanistan and, simultaneously, amplify their call and demand from the International community.

Young women who wrote these articles come from different parts of Afghanistan with diverse backgrounds. After completing an online mentorship program with Afghans for Progressive Thinking, women were divided into five groups to write articles in light of the current situation in Afghanistan.

Publishing a booklet of this scope would not have been possible without the extraordinary efforts of Megan Fitzmaurice, Assistant Professor of Communication and Philanthropy at the University of Texas, who edited the articles and provided valuable feedback. Thanks to Ajmal Ramyar for mentoring young women and Abdul Rahman Jalil and Nematullah Akbari for the successful implementation of the program.

Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT)

APT is an Afghan youth-led nongovernment organization that works to promote peace and education in Afghanistan. More specifically, APT provides online coaching events for young women who live under the Taliban regime and trauma management sessions for Afghan refugees who have escaped persecution in the country. APT also organizes collegiate debate tournaments, holds leadership development courses, conducts international exchange programs, and continues to run a school for children in Afghanistan. One of APT's major programs has been the selection of the Afghan Youth Representative to the United Nations since 2018.

With members in 34 provinces of Afghanistan and across the world, APT has impacted more than 50,000 youth and children since its inception in 2010. You may read more about APT at www.aptyouth.org

Following the recapture of Afghanistan by the Taliban for the second time myriads of problems have emerged. What are some immediate problems to tackle and how can the international community prioritize them?

Dreams and aspirations of the Afghan generation for the bright future are on the brink of fading away under Taliban rule. The Taliban, an oppressive and extremist group formed in the early 1990s, first ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001 with the purpose of making Afghanistan an Islamic state by imposing their own view of Islamic Sharia Law ¹. During their first rule, Afghan people, especially women, encountered many challenges. Fortunately, the first Taliban regime collapsed when a US-led military coalition launched attacks in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001 to eliminate the Taliban. However, after nearly twenty years of war and conflicts, Taliban retook control of Afghanistan for the second time, and the former republic government completely collapsed. Following the recapture of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, women's rights violations, security challenges, and humanitarian crises have escalated. This article argues that the most vital issues and challenges facing Afghanistan are the limitation of women's rights, the violations of human rights, and national insecurity, that require immediate action from the international community.

After the collapse of Afghanistan by the Taliban, they made many steady restrictions for Afghan women and girls including curtailing access to employment and education and restricting the right to peaceful assembly. The Taliban also searched for high-profile women and denied them freedom of movement outside their houses. The Taliban believe that they are implementing the sharia of Islam but that is not the truth, they are using the name of Islam for their profits. After 20 years they came back and said that they will allow Afghan women and girls to study and work equally as boys, but on September 18, 2021, the Taliban authorities announced that secondary schools should only be reopened for boys. Then, after a couple of weeks, the Taliban's leadership announced that women can no longer do some occupations such as teaching male students, being civil activists, holding political positions, and being a journalist ². But there is still hope. Afghanistan and Afghan women are different in many important ways from the last time when the Taliban took power in Afghanistan. "There has been significant progress in Afghan women's and girls' access to education, jobs, and political participation. Most notably, literacy rates among girls have doubled. Of the 9 million students enrolled in school in 2018, 3.8 million were female. When compared to 2001, when virtually no girls were enrolled in school, this represents enormous progress" ³. Moreover, there are

more women-run businesses than there were 20 years ago, and there have been meaningful improvements in women's participation in the Afghan Parliament, police, and judiciary. While surely not enough, these are nonetheless important milestones of progress. The United States, European Union, and other governments should not recognize the Taliban unless they provide women with all their rights as a human.

Despite the Taliban's assertion that Afghanistan is at peace, the reality is one of bloodshed and grave threats to fundamental human rights. Since the Taliban took control in August 2021, there have been over 237 verified extrajudicial executions, including 160 of members of the former Afghan government and security forces⁴. Many attacks were carried out on Afghanistan's Hazara Shia community by the Taliban. On May 8, 2022, three blasts at Kabul's Sayed al-Shuhada school killed at least 85 civilians, including 42 girls and 28 women, and injured over 200 others, the great majority of them were Hazaras⁵. The attack went unreported, yet it took place in a predominately Hazara neighbourhood that ISKP had previously targeted. On October 8, a suicide explosion at a Shia mosque in Kunduz killed at least 72 individuals and injured more than 140 others; the ISKP claimed responsibility⁶. Moreover, At least dozens of former officials and security force employees were killed in retaliation by Taliban fighters in numerous districts. Moreover, rather than relying on continuous engagement with a regime that adheres to a hard and inhumane ideology, the United States, in collaboration with the United Nations and other like-minded allies, should seek other means such as pressurizing the Taliban through economic sanctions to defend Afghan civil society and basic human rights. UNAMA has a rather broad mission and should be a significant actor, but it has yet to find its voice (CNAS, 2022).

Since the return of the Taliban, myriad of problems has emerged but there are several which, if not prioritized, would bring a catastrophe in Afghanistan in the near future. These problems are: violation of women's rights, the collapse of human rights, and unprecedented insecurity. We, the young girls in Afghanistan demand:

- It should be made clear that the Taliban will face additional targeted sanctions until it reforms both its human rights and counterterrorism programs.
- There must also be thorough oversight and responsibility for the distribution of humanitarian aid.

- There are international repercussions in other countries where regimes are brutally suppressing their citizens' human rights, so there should be against the Taliban.
- Senior officials in Washington should refrain from engaging directly with the Taliban

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What strategy or approach should the youth in Afghanistan take in order to promote Afghan women's rights to education, especially the opening of high schools for girls?

Since the Taliban regained power on August 15, 2021, secondary schools have been closed for one year and four months for Afghan girls. The vast majority of girls' schools have remained closed, depriving millions of girls of access to secondary education. The Taliban, since August 2021, have imposed a wide range of abusive policies that rolled back and violated the rights of women and girls. In addition to denying girls and women access to education, the Taliban have banned women from most forms of paid employment and brutally retaliated against female activists who have advocated for the rights of women and girls ¹. This article argues that Afghan youth should advocate for regional countries, the European Union, the United Nations, and other international organizations concerned with Afghanistan to pressure the Taliban to open girls' schools and respect their right to an education. First, this article will explain how international communities can protect the rights of women and girls and promote their access to education in Afghanistan. Second, we will discuss approaches that youth in Afghanistan can take to contribute in providing education for girls in Afghanistan.

Economic dependency of Afghanistan on International Communities provide great opportunity for donor countries and entities to control Taliban's actions. United Nations, European Union, UNICEF, UNAMA, World Bank, and other donor countries and international organizations should identify the leverage they have—through targeted sanctions, aid, political pressure, and other means—and use it to press for concrete commitments on the rights of women that will be meaningful to women and girls and measurable through monitoring ².

Muslim-majority countries can provide positive examples of women's education, leadership, and agency in an Islamic framework ³. Regional countries can play a powerful role in convincing the Taliban that women's rights and education are consistent with Islam. Especially, Pakistan needs to convince the Taliban to abandon so-called interpretations of Islam and preaching a wrong narrative. ⁴

Furthermore, Afghan youth should create campaign groups for advocacy of Afghan women's rights to grip the attention of international communities. Afghan youth who live abroad should protest constantly about the discrimination and violence against female education in Afghanistan. Afghan youth outside

the country can create virtual groups like news networks for informing others about what is going on in our country for the whole world. For example: About 10 youths can come together and set up an account on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other social applications and share all the crimes committed by the Taliban, especially those targeted toward women. They can reach out to internal sources for these stories and reach an audience of both Afghan residents and foreigners.

Youths inside Afghanistan can also take a stand for the education of women and girls. They could hold workshops and exhibitions to convince the Taliban to not waste the ability and talents of girls as an exhibition had been held by the name of “Women, Ability and Creativity” in Kabul. That exhibit the art of school girls and their message was for Taliban and united nation to not let that the talent of Afghan girls waste in house prisons.⁵

Youth in Afghanistan should try to scheme and plan meetings by forming cohesive groups in which women's problems are discussed and solutions should be proposed and sent to “Human Rights Watch” and other involved organizations. They should also try to communicate with other Afghan leaders living abroad, such as: Fatima Peyman, a member of the Australian Senate, Fatemeh Rezaei, a civil activist in the United States, Ayesha Wahab, a senator in the state of California, and other civil, social and political activists, so that each of them can be the voice of these youths in the assemblies and different communities.

Another approach Afghan youth can take in the current situation is to provide online classes for female students, as Angela Ghayour, one former teacher did. She created the Herat Online School after recapture of power by Taliban. Angela states: “When I started the first class, I couldn't believe I recruited more than 700 volunteer teachers using social media in less than a month. I couldn't believe more than 80 psychologists would volunteer to alleviate their emotional pains. Today, more than 2,200 children and young people — 1,500 of them girls — who were deprived of education are enrolled in Herat Online School, learning over 85 topics from creative writing and psychology to coding and history. About 60% of our students are in Afghanistan, and the rest are refugees who fled to other countries when the Taliban took over”⁶.

In conclusion, there are several approaches that Afghan youths can take to use the potential political and economic influence of United Nations, USA, European Union,

UNAMA, UNICEF and other countries and international organizations as main actors to force the Taliban open girl's secondary schools and promote women's access to the education. Youth in Afghanistan should create campaign groups for advocacy of Afghan women's rights and contribute in organizing online classes through attracting funds from UNICEF, the World Bank, and other relevant international and domestic NGOs.

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With the return of the Taliban, educated youth are leaving Afghanistan, what does this mean for the future of the country?

The Taliban, a known terrorist organization, first established a presence and increased their power in southern Afghanistan in 1994. When Afghanistan's government fell in 1992, different armed factions were engaged in a civil war, and by 1994, the Taliban had made their way through the south and took control of many districts. In 2001, a multinational military coalition led by the United States invaded Afghanistan, overthrowing the Taliban-run Islamic Emirate and established the Islamic Republic three years later. Unfortunately, the Taliban retook control of Afghanistan in 2021. The number of internally displaced people has increased since the Taliban have returned. Over half of the 777,000 persons that were relocated from Afghanistan in 2021 were young citizens ¹. This essay will focus on three negative impacts resulting from the young generation fleeing Afghanistan. We argue that Afghanistan will suffer culturally, will face injustices, and will experience brain drain without the presence of its youth.

1. Afghan Culture has been Negatively Impacted by Youth Leaving the Country:

The cultural sector of the country has been negatively affected by youth fleeing the country. Young people play an important role in creating new ideas and making innovations in different sectors. During the last ten years, young people traveled to different countries to continue their education, which allowed them to meet the culture and traditions of other countries and then share their experience with other people upon their return. In recent years, youth have succeeded in implementing their ideas in terms of online businesses, creating restaurants and coffee shops, formation of bookmobiles, and creative activities.

In the future, the political system of Afghanistan will undergo transformations and changes and a new government will be formed; but in the absence of young people and intellectual capital, the new government will face political, economic, and social problems. Good governance has its own characteristics: proper management, entrusting work to professionals, accountability, transparency, and legislation but with the departure of young people and professionals, the country will be isolated day by day.

2. Justice and Rights has been Silenced in the Country without Youth Voice:

Young people in Afghanistan used to run institutions that worked for justice and human rights. But with the departure of these young people and professionals, the voices of justice and rights have been silenced while injustices and violations of rights have increased ². Women and girls have borne the brunt of this deprivation and, like other citizens, their social, cultural and civil liberties have been explicitly violated. For example, some of the women who raised their voice for justice during more than a year in Afghanistan under the slogan of bread, work and freedom, have been threatened and sent to prison. After the recent political developments in Afghanistan and due to the Taliban's different treatment of women, women who request divorce say that their hope for fair decisions in divorce cases has dimmed and they cannot continue to seek their rights ³. A woman who asks for rights and the right to work, education and bread is a manifestation of impurity and must be destroyed or she will be severely punished and suppressed. With the departure of educated young people and professionals from the country, today the media has been left in the hands of the Taliban and they have imposed wide-ranging restrictions on the media. ⁴

3. A wave of brain drain hits Afghanistan:

The phenomenon by which a nation loses its educated and talented individuals, particularly the youth, to other nations through migration is known as "brain drain." ⁵ The causes for brain drain can vary depending on the nation that is suffering from it. Paid positions, political instability, and the desire for a higher quality of life are the key causes of it in Afghanistan. Also, push factors and pull factors can be used to classify brain drain reasons. The push factors are unpleasant aspects of the birth state that function as the catalyst for talented people to migrate from developing nations. In Afghanistan, discrimination, economic underdevelopment, and loss of freedom are some of the push factors. Pull factors are the benefits that the developed nation offers that the immigrant desires to take advantage of.

Furthermore, developing countries frequently suffer greatly as a result of brain drain or the migration of human capital. Since there might not be as many individuals with the same talents, it typically leaves a gap that is challenging to fill. Given that the most talented and capable people fled out of Afghanistan and serve to the economies and educational systems of other nations, this trend is seen as harmful. Due to the inability of people who stayed behind in Afghanistan, the nation

will suffer hardships in terms of weakness in governance and economic factors.

Hence, this research study examined the consequences of youths fleeing out of Afghanistan. The departure of young people caused the country to weaken both economically and culturally. From an economic point of view, since a large number of youth migrated from the country, the foundations of the country's economy are destroyed in both the private and public sectors. Also, the departure of young people and professionals from the country has caused the country to face political and social problems day by day. The most important issue is the loss of labor force and brain drain from the country. But now the youth and civil activists who are in the country must stay in the country under any conditions and fight against the problems. Lastly, this research established that as a result of youths fleeing, Afghanistan will face a wave of brain drain which causes a severe crisis in terms of economic and government.

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How can Afghan women's peaceful demonstration under the Taliban regime improve the situation for all women in the country?

Afghanistan is a country where women suffered the most during past decades of devastating war. However, things got worse in 1996, after the Taliban took control for the first time. They imposed specific restrictions on women and girls. The group of Taliban closed the doors of schools and universities, forbid women to work, and limited their basic rights. After the collapse of the Taliban's government, the situation of women got better and after 2001, doors of schools and universities were opened, women had the right to work and were leaving home without a male accompanying them. They led businesses and appeared in national and international associations. They even participated in demonstrations to raise their voices. After two decades of work and effort, Afghan women were able to prosper as an important part of Afghan society, with remarkable achievements. But in the end, the dark repetition of history occurred; the Taliban took control of Afghanistan for the second time. Women are again the most vulnerable group in Afghanistan. The Taliban have implemented many regulations, reminiscent of their past rule, including banning women and girls from schools and universities, hindering their employment, and limiting their basic rights. In this paper, we will talk about women's peaceful demonstration and how it can improve the situation of all women in the country.

Today, women in Afghanistan are excluded from public life. Their access to civil rights and liberties is radically cut. However, women in Afghanistan are aware of their rights and they will fight for their rights at any cost. Though the Taliban banned them from work, freedom, and education, they will find a way to eliminate these restrictions and get their rights by raising their voice. They have been at the front line of resistance to Taliban oppression. They have held peaceful demonstrations demanding equality, rights, justice, and peace. Women's demonstrations can have a huge impact on the Taliban regime. The inclusion of women in public life plays a vital role in the recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate government both internally and internationally. However, these demonstrations are not without peril. When 40 women marched through the Afghan capital demanding rights, the Taliban started firing in the air, seized their mobile phones, and imprisoned several of them ¹.

The Taliban has always tried to suppress women and stop the demonstrations by shooting aerial bullets. However, so far this has not any impacted the spirit of the protesters because Afghan women never give up. Even after imprisonments

and threats, a number of women held a demonstration in the Charai Sedarat area of Kabul, where they called for justice and for the upholding of women's rights.²

Women are holding peaceful demonstrations against the Taliban to advocate for the rights to education, work, vote, travel, and live independently. Women in Afghanistan want to express their opinion freely. They want a life without any mental and physical torture. The Taliban should know that Afghan women are not slaves anymore. Every woman is entitled to these rights. Scholars have acknowledged that girls have a higher propensity to participate in politics in the future after being exposed to a stronger legislative presence of women. For example, seeing women run for political office and serve as elected officials also helps girls to envision themselves as political leaders³. However, women in Afghanistan are excluded from public and political life and their basic rights are on the verge of being wiped out altogether. This will have a far-reaching repercussion in Afghanistan. On 24th of December 2022, the Taliban banned universities and ordered the national and international NGOs to stop their female staff from coming to work. Once again women held demonstrations in different provinces. The women's strike is a sign of independence and courage in this tough situation. Women striking for equality and against prejudice could stop many Taliban abuses, for example, the demonstrations against the ban of universities, and employment resulted in the opening of schools from one to sixth grade. Furthermore, scholars have acknowledged that social movements influence the attitudes of those adults that participate⁴. Social movements can be the most powerful steps to vital changes. A successful social movement support the social goals and objectives, enabling Afghan women to bring a vital change for good. It allows Afghan women to come together, speak their mind, and make people aware of the issue. They can practice their constitutional rights while making a difference.

Afghanistan is a country where women suffered the most after four decades of a tragic war. In past the decades, women have become one of the most vulnerable groups in Afghanistan and are once again excluded from public life. Their access to civil rights and liberties were radically cut and their presence diminished. However, the women in Afghanistan are not the same women as those in 1996. They are literate and stand for their rights amid perils. Since the fall of Afghanistan, women have been at the front line of resistance to the Taliban oppression. So far, they have held dozens of peaceful demonstrations demanding equality, rights, justice, and

peace with the slogan “Education and work is a woman’s right.” Afghan women desire to be involved in political, social, and economic sector, exercising independence and power. Girls and women participate in demonstrations so that the international community may hear their voices and put pressure on the Taliban to end their tyranny.

Finally, Afghan women’s peaceful demonstration under Taliban regime can improve the situation of all women in Afghanistan in different ways: it can amplify the voices of those whose rights have been violated, express the opinion of those who are neglected, and most importantly, it can put pressure on the Taliban to recognize the rights of women in Afghanistan. These peaceful demonstrations are the most powerful weapon for women the international community hear their voice and works for them to eliminate restrictions and help them to achieve their goals.

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With the censorship of TV and radio in Afghanistan, how can social media help the international community to understand the reality on the ground in Afghanistan?

The Taliban took power on 15 of August 2021, and with them came a range of restrictions and laws regulating society from education and health care to media and freedom of speech. One of the controversial topics among many that concerns the international community is the restriction on free media in Afghanistan imposed by the Taliban. The heavy restrictions on the media are concerning as it limits the chances of sharing and accessing credible information for both the people of Afghanistan and the international community. Many people argue that social media can be a better alternative for people to share and gain access to information. Others accuse social media of spreading fake news and propaganda. In this paper, we argue that sharing and accessing information through social media is safe and easy. Furthermore, we will address the counter arguments related to the use of social media particularly the controversies related to fake news and its impact in decreasing trust of both the people and the international community. The main purpose of this paper is to study how can social media help the international community to understand the reality on the ground in Afghanistan considering the censorship of TV and radio.

Sharing and access of information through social media is safe and easy. Users of social media can select their friends, what kind of info to perceive, where to click, and with whom to communicate. Though the Taliban controls all the TVs, radios, and other government social media accounts, Afghan women have never given up. People around the world are becoming aware of women's issues in Afghanistan through social media. Additionally, social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are giving Afghan women the possibility to connect with each other across distances. Afghan women outside Afghanistan play a significant role here by sharing what's happening inside Afghanistan.

In addition, social media is a powerful tool that is widely used by Afghan people for being politically active, raising their voices, and revealing untold truths. According to TRT World, the usage of social media between 2000 and 2021, have increased from 0 to 22% of its population ¹ According to Foreign policy news, a new generation of Afghans have grown up with a strong sense of social and political responsibility, but as peaceful public protest remains dangerous, they increasingly use social media to participate in political activities ². According to the Heart of Asia

Society Organization report, media organizations are currently either directly being censored by the Taliban or forced to self-censorship for their survival ³. However, social media had a key role in internationalizing the events happening on the ground, as the Taliban are not able to censor it. This dynamic has enabled local voices on social media platforms to hold Taliban regime accountable for their behaviors.

On the other hand, opponents believe information on social media is not always credible and correct. A key component to safeguarding the trust in news stories and the press, in general, is vetting posts on social media that appear as news articles. Companies such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat have a responsibility to maintain a sense of reliability in their news posts. Furthermore, social media accounts that continually post masquerading news stories that purposefully and clearly show incorrect stories should be suspended from use. Basic and attainable rules like these would shield vulnerable social media populations from being coerced and manipulated into believing certain opinions because of false stories. On the other hand, the recent experiences in Afghanistan show that social media has become an essential tool for accessing information to understand the reality on the ground for the international community. The importance of social media in understanding the ground reality in Afghanistan can be seen through the fact that Human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International USA and Mnemonic are calling on social media companies to assist in the preservation of evidence and in archiving content on human rights abuses in Afghanistan ⁴. In addition, the researchers also argue that the government of Afghanistan was accountable to donors due to financial support and “only social media campaigns influenced the donors, government officials would act and respond to the social media campaigns” ⁵. Hence, content shared on social media can help the International Community in understanding the ground reality and can impact their decisions based on the situation of the country.

In a nutshell, since the Taliban returned to power, social media has had a vital role in the disclosure of real facts happening in Afghanistan. The TV and Radio censorship has catalyzed referring to popular platforms like Facebook and Twitter to get updated on day-to-day events in Afghanistan. Safety and accessibility of sharing information on these platforms, its popularity among Afghans, and Taliban inability to control the contents are the main factors for it. On the contrary, the opposing ideas argue that the information in social media is not always credible, and validation is not

done by social media companies. Thus, international society decision-making can be less influenced by them. However, the significance of social media in exposing the occurrences that internal media are forbidden to cover can never be denied, as the essay has provided a lot of examples in this regard.

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