# The War Against Women in Afghanistan: Is a Surge in Gender-based Violence an Inevitable Consequence of the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan?

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***Note: This paper was written before the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021.***

*U.S. President Joe Biden announced on April 14, 2021, that the U.S. military would exit Afghanistan by September 11—ending a 20-year occupation. Following the announcement, Afghan women worried that as soon as U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces left the country, they would become subject to extreme forms of gender-based violence and abuse. After the U.S. invasion, things improved for women on several counts. Thousands of girls barred from education under Taliban rule went to school. Women were allowed to join the workforce and earn a living after years of being confined to their homes. However, as soon as the president made his decision to end America's 20-year war in Afghanistan, Afghan women worried that all these gains would be lost and they would have to endure the same level of violence that they did in the 1990s when Afghanistan last fell into the Taliban's hands.*

On April 14, 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden announced that all American troops would leave the country by September 11 and that the drawdown of the remaining 2,500 troops would be completed by the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks—a cataclysmic event that had touched off the initial military invasion. Some weeks after al-Qa`ida attacked the United States, President George W. Bush declared that the United States had launched attacks against al-Qa`ida and Taliban targets in Afghanistan to bring them to justice. Inside Afghanistan, the Taliban government and its fighting forces were crushed by American troops by the time 2001 drew to an end.[1]

With the U.S. withdrawal, a mission that has vexed four American presidents will finally come to an end. In the midst of President Biden pledging continued support for Afghanistan and with peace talks at an impasse, the perennial objective of the war remains the same: ensuring that Afghanistan is never used again as a terrorist base to plan and launch attacks against the United States.

In the backdrop, violence has escalated in the country, especially against women—generally a less opaque concern in peace talks. Fear is engulfing Afghan women now that U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces will leave the country. Afghanistan is consistently ranked one of the worst countries in the world for women;[2] it is susceptible to the most extreme forms of gender-based violence and abuse.

After the U.S. invasion, women's rights in the war-torn Afghanistan became a rallying cry and were increasingly prioritized. From a healthcare system completely in shambles where women had very little access to any medical services, 3,135 health facilities had been built by 2018, which 87 percent of Afghans could access (at least in theory as the ever-increasing presence of Taliban, militias, and criminals made travel extremely unsafe). The enrollment of girls in primary schools increased from 10 percent to 33 percent by 2017—still low, but indicative of some progress. Over the same time period, the enrollment of girls in secondary education increased from six percent to 39 percent. Additionally, by 2020, 21 percent of Afghan civil servants were women,16 percent of them in senior management levels; and 27 percent positions of the Afghan parliament were occupied by women (under the Taliban, almost no

1 "The U.S. War in Afghanistan: 1999 – 2021," Council on Foreign Relations, retrieved May 18, 2022.

2 Shamali Madina Kohistani, "Afghanistan Ranked Worst Country for Gender Gap," Tolo News, July 14, 2022.

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women held any political positions).[3] However, despite these gains for—mostly urban—women and a remarkable shift in the role of women in Afghanistan in the post-Taliban political dispensation, institutionalized misogyny and patriarchal customs remain entrenched in the society.

Given the hastened withdrawal of American troops, Afghan women fear that a triumphant Taliban will coalesce on Afghanistan's political scene, take hold of more territory, and ratchet up and reinstitute oppressive measures they enforced under their regime in the 1990s. The specter of violence against women is an enduring problem in Afghanistan. In this paper, I argue that the U.S. withdrawal will inevitably lead to gender-based violence in Afghanistan.

## Theoretical Framework

There are different conceptualizations of violence against women. "Sexual" and "sexualized" violence are construed differently. The argument goes that sexuality and sexual acts—even violent ones—are not just tied to individual preferences; they mirror the power structures in society. The feminist perspective also holds that patriarchal institutions lead to violence.[4]

Some theorists argue that sexual violence and non-sexual violence can be differentiated; sexual violence is distinct from other forms of violence—for example, assault or murder. Alternative debates, however, insist that all violence is gendered. In this view, violence is a direct consequence of patriarchal social relations, and therefore, it should be analyzed from the "sexual violence approach," even if no overt sexual act takes place.[5] Sexual violence against women then includes violence that occurs at home, the workplace, or the street corner; violence based on prejudices such as racism, homophobia, and xenophobia; violence that takes place the world over, including domestic and international trafficking of women; and violence in war.[6]

This leads to questions around the behavior of men as a collective group and the benefits they draw from sexualized violence. Scholars employing this perspective say that men, as a group, benefit from wielding sexual violence, or simply its threat, even if they are not direct perpetrators of violence, whatever their social position. Women from across the racial and class spectrum fall victim to sexual violence. Even in the way that state regimes are built, the right of all men to abuse women is preserved. Women are underrepresented in state institutions and therefore have little effect on state policies.[7] Third-world states in particular serve as sites of violence against women. In India, for example, state brutality has obstructed the women's movement.[8]

This paper takes the position that violence is, in fact, embedded in the patriarchal fabric of the Afghan society. The state's patriarchal and misogynistic dispositions and men's unchallenged political and personal power leads to women becoming targets of sexual violence in Afghanistan. The Taliban rule in Afghanistan in the 1990s was largely perceived as illegitimate across the world, and the Taliban fell short in putting state structures in place to protect Afghan women from the ravages of war. The "statelessness" of Afghanistan, in turn, led to a lack of institutional development that was required to perform basic functions of a modern, democratic state, including protecting women against violence. Fast forward to 2021, we see the mantle of the same kind of statelessness falling over Afghanistan all over again.[9] Though the Taliban have formally planted themselves in the government, their rule is widely considered illegitimate because it falls short of providing women their freedoms and basic rights among other reasons.

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3 John R. Allen and Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The fate of women's rights in Afghanistan," Brookings Institution, September 2020.

4 Susie Jacobs, Ruth Jacobson, and Jennifer Marchbank, *States of conflict: gender, violence, and resistance* (London: Zed Books, 2000).

5 Marianne Hester, Liz Kelly, and Jill Radford eds., *Women, Violence and Male Power* (Bristol, PA: Open University Press, 1996).

6 Chris Corrin ed., *Women in a Violent World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996).

7 Ibid.

8 Shirin Rai, *Women and the State in the Third World: Some Issues for Debate* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2013), pp. 13-30.

9 Rubina Saigol, "At Home or in the Grave: Afghan Women and the Reproduction of Patriarchy," Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2002.

## The Advent of the Taliban

In September 1996, from the minarets of mosques in Kabul, the Taliban announced their arrival. Their entry into the government had devastating consequences for Afghan women. The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) drew up an "abbreviated" list of 29 extremely harsh restrictions that the Taliban imposed on women. These included women being beaten in the streets if they wore white socks or walked outside without a burqa and being denied access to voting or participation in politics in any way because the Taliban claimed that they were less intelligent than men.[10]

The way the Taliban served justice was also vicious, barbaric, and utterly absurd. Their notions of meting out justice revolved around flogging and imprisonment for minor infractions, amputating hands for theft, and death by stoning for adultery or "multiple intercourses"—sleeping with two or more men in a month—if four or more witnesses testified.[11] Journalist Jan Goodwin reported a Taliban spectacle that she witnessed in 1998: a decrepit, worn-down Olympics stadium in Kabul thronged with a sea of 30,000 men and boys, costermongers touting nuts, biscuits, and tea to a very eager crowd. These men had gathered to see a young woman, Sohaila, receive 100 lashes because she was found strolling in the street with a man who was not her relative—a crime severe enough for her to be deemed guilty of adultery. Because Sohaila was single, she was flogged; if she had been married, she would have been stoned to death.[12]

Women's freedom of movement was severely curtailed under Taliban rule. Women could not leave the house without completely veiling their entire bodies or a *mahram*, a close male escort. Those who could not afford a burqa or had no male chaperone were not allowed to leave their houses even if it was for basic, everyday things. Several women felt hesitant about seeking medical attention for the fear of being beaten up if they were seen outside without a burqa. The Taliban even declared a hospital's waiting room as "public," which meant that a woman was forbidden from showing up to a hospital without a veil. A woman reported that as her mother's asthma worsened in a hospital ward, she removed her face veil to breathe. A Talib stormed into the ward and gave her mother 40 lashes while she looked on despairingly.[13]

Women were prohibited from seeking employment or going to school; the Taliban decreed that schools were a gateway to hell, and that they eventually led women into prostitution.

Within three months, 63 schools were closed, affecting 103,000 girls. Women who previously worked as teachers and medical workers were cast into unemployment, illicit labor, and penury. They were often reduced to beggars on the streets, selling all their possessions to make ends meet. Many women turned to prostitution while trying to eke out a living. Women were even restricted from laughing or talking too loudly so that they would not sexually excite males. High heels were banned because their sounds were perceived as provocative. Makeup and nail varnish were also banned; a woman's thumb was cut off because she wore nail polish. The Taliban went so far in impeding women's mobility and contact with the outside world that they forced women into painting their home windows black, depriving them of even the ground-level view of the street. A Taliban minister was heard saying that there are only two places for a woman—her husband's bed and the graveyard. Even small acts of defiance—often unintentional—resulted in harsh punishments such as whipping, public beatings, and stoning to death.[14]

RAWA suggests that suicide escalated among Afghan women under the Taliban because of experiencing depression that resulted from cabin fever. They were cooped up within four walls and suffered assaults on their bodies and honor. Their endurance slowly crumbled, leading to a wave of self-immolations among Afghan women. RAWA gives the example of Lida, a 20-year-old girl, who doused herself in kerosene and set herself ablaze because of the overwhelming feelings of depression she felt under the Taliban rule. RAWA's anecdotal evidence was confirmed by

10 Rosemarie Skaine, *The Women of Afghanistan Under the Taliban* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002).

11 Ibid.

12 Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi eds., *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

13 Ibid.

14 Skaine; Crews and Tarzi.

a survey of Afghan women conducted by the Physicians for Human Rights (PHR). The survey revealed that 97 percent of the women experienced depression and 86 percent of the women demonstrated symptoms of anxiety because of the daily violence that they faced at the hands of the Taliban.[15]

The Taliban rule ensued till 2001, after which their government was toppled by American troops in retaliation of the September 11 attacks.[16]

## Different Frames of Violence

Gender-based violence in Afghanistan takes two forms: "legitimate" and "non-legitimate." Legitimate forms of violence are lent legitimacy through tradition and religion. These include "forced marriage," "child marriage," and "marital rape." Non-legitimate types of violence are seen with reproach, and include "rape," "gang-rape," and "prostitution."[17] Afghanistan is a patriarchal society, where women often find themselves vulnerable and prone to extreme forms of violence. A study conducted in 2015 revealed that 90 percent of women in Afghanistan fall victim to gender-based violence, mostly perpetrated by close family members.[18]

Afghanistan is a country weary of war. In each war, violence against women has been used as a weapon.[19] State repression against women increased dramatically with the beginning of the mujahideen era. The president at the time, Burhanuddin Rabbani, issued religious decrees preventing women from holding office in the government, working in the media, and forcing them into wearing a veil.[20] Most of these mujahideen have persisted in positions of authority, conserving the gender order constructed by the Taliban. Women are far smaller in stature than men in the current political structures, which are sewn with threads of misogyny; to them, women are "second human."[21] Under the rule of the mujahideen, rape, kidnapping, tearing off women's breasts, and cutting open wombs of pregnant women were commonplace.[22]

Marriages were—and still are—an important and extremely politicized institution. Forced marriages have often been used to win political alliances; in case a political proposal was turned down, consequences fell on women. For example, when a 17-year-old girl refused to marry a 58-year-old commander, he stormed her house and took her away by force. Public rapes have also been used to achieve political ends; they have often been used to smear the sexual purity of women in war. During the civil war in 1993, Karima was raped while she was four months pregnant. The militants raped her and her sister-in-law when they tried to escape from home because of the war. She was so severely traumatized that she attempted suicide several years afterward.[23]

After the U.S. invasion, violence against women changed its face. Although there was an emphasis on "de-veiling" women and sending them back to school, these objectives have mostly remained unfulfilled. Even after the Taliban's downfall, all political institutions remained plagued with misogyny. Women's testimonies were blatantly disregarded. The law was deaf to their pleas. One such example was of a woman named Khatera. She was repeatedly raped by her father and later became pregnant. Her testimony, however, fell through the cracks. Rapists have frequently escaped punishment because they have been supported by the police or local commanders.[24] The violence became more militarized after the United States invaded Afghanistan and the opium trade thrived. The relentless dissemination

15 Crews and Tarzi.

16 Lida Ahmad and Priscyll Anctil Avoine, "Misogyny in 'Post-War' Afghanistan: The Changing Frames of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence," *Journal of Gender Studies* 27:1 (2016): pp. 86-101.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Suk Chun and Inger Skjelsbæk, "Sexual Violence in Armed Conflicts," *PRIO Policy Brief* 1 (2010).

20 Carol Stabile and Deepa Kumar, "Unveiling Imperialism: Media, Gender and the War on Afghanistan," *Media, Culture and Society* 27:5 (2005): pp. 765-782.

21 Ehsan Shayegan, "The Invisible Trauma in Afghanistan," *Global Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences* 2:5 (2014): pp. 25-35.

22 Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, "Afghan Women: Stranded at the Intersection of Local and Global Masculinities," Center for Women Studies, 2006.

23 Ahmad and Avoine.

24 Ibid.

of weapons, military training, and the drug trade have radically affected women's lives. The lines between the private and public realms have dissolved; both domains have become breeding grounds of violence against women.[25] The devastating impact of militarization and increased opium consumption are also blatantly visible on women. In 2015 RAWA reported on the case of a woman named Setara. Her husband, an unyielding drug addict, pressured her into providing him money to sustain his addiction. When Setara could not collect enough money, he struck her with a rock and cut up her lips and nose. Because all institutions in Afghanistan are extremely misogynistic, Setara struggled with filing for a divorce.[26]

Although Ashraf Ghani's—Afghanistan's current president—regime is supported all around, it is no surprise that former mujahideen sit in all important positions in the government. His cabinet is comprised of warlords. Having former militants in important political positions means increased social, cultural, and political prejudice against women. They perpetrated violence against women with the materiel they collected during wars.[27] A report by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission estimated that 91 percent of sexual assaults and honor killings that occurred between the years 2011 and 2013 were carried out by gunmen.[28] In 2005, a woman named Sara was gang-raped by three gunmen in her village, Ruyi Du Ab, in Samangan. A local commander, Karim, ordered the rape. There were competing judgments on why the rape was ordered; some reports said that Sara's son raped Karim's relative, and others said that he refused to align with Karim's election campaign. Whatever the reason, it was Sara's body that became a site of combat and vengeance.[29] In recent years, things have marginally improved for women. Several NGOs working with the U.S. Fund for UNICEF for female education and women empowerment in Afghanistan have emerged. These include Girl Scouts of the USA, Delta Kappa Gamma Society, and Women's National Book Association. RAWA has especially proven exceptional in helping women living in Afghanistan and its border regions. RAWA ran several underground schools even during the Taliban era so that women could pursue education unimpeded.[30] Additionally, with the U.S. troop presence in the country, more than 270 female judges worked in the justice system. Special courts with female judges, along with special police units and prosecution offices were established to deal with cases of violence against women. These women brought reform to several courts, especially in urban areas, by sitting in judgment of men and delivering justice to large numbers of women and girls assaulted by close male relatives.[31]

Female education is still not widespread in Afghanistan. The main impediments to women's education in Afghanistan are related to the persistence of violence against women. Some of these problems include criminal behavior such as "warlordism," "drug trafficking," "extortion;" gender-based violence such as "rape," "gang-rape," "murders," "abduction," "forced marriages;" "suicide attacks" and the bombing of girls' schools; ethnic violence—especially sexual violence against Pashtun women in the cities of Kandahar and Mazar.[32]

## Cultural Explanations of Violence

In all instances of violence, the currently available evidence points to a couple of causal commonalities—socio-cultural factors and misogyny. First, the mantle of preserving men's honor falls on women's shoulders. If one woman is sexually assaulted, her entire community feels chagrined. Second, misogyny contributes to and sustains gender imbalance and the inferior stature of women. It is not simply an enduring detestation of women; it is a far more complicated system with far-reaching ideological and political implications. All political and legal institutions in

25 Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75:2 (2002): pp. 339-354.

26 Ahmad and Avoine.

27 Lida Ahmad, "Rape and Gang Rape in War and Postwar Afghanistan," *Revista Temas* 3:8 (2014).

28 Ahmad and Avoine.

29 Ibid.; "'Today We Shall All Die': Afghanistan's Strongmen and the Legacy of Impunity," Human Rights Watch, September 6, 2021.

30 Hayat Alvi-Aziz, "A Progress Report on Women's Education in Post-Taliban Afghanistan," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 27:2 (2008): pp. 169-178.

31 David Zucchino, "Afghan women who once presided over abuse cases now fear for their lives," *New York Times*, October 20, 2021.

32 Alvi-Aziz.

Afghanistan are built on misogynistic foundations. They give women very little space to seek justice.[33] The successive wars in Afghanistan reconfigured the definitions of masculinity and femininity. The female body became a site of conducting politics and explicitly tied to the "symbolic" and "real" reproduction of a nation. Hence, controlling the body and shrouding it in the notions of "morality" makes it extremely important in "war" and "post-war" landscapes.[34] In Afghanistan, a country ravaged by war, women's bodies became a weapon of war. Many women were raped, abducted, or forced to marry against their will.[35] They also became a site of violence and revenge perpetrated by rival political factions; raping women became a part of their political campaigns.[36]

## Conclusion

After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is completed, the worry is that the Taliban may take back power by force, or through political negotiations with the Afghan government.

Regardless, their hold will ineluctably spread. In a country where a 40-year war drags on, many Afghans fear the beginning of a new, inevitable civil war. The resilience of the Taliban within Afghanistan's political landscape means that women will have to confront the same level of oppression that they did when the Taliban last ruled from 1996 to 2001.

If history is any indicator, a wave of devastatingly regressive laws and edicts targeting women will permeate the society. Given that women are a marginalized group and have been used as expendable political fodder in the past, it is not unreasonable to expect that once again the Taliban and the men of the Afghan government will put women's rights and the progress made so far in a thimble and use it as leverage to satisfy their own ambitions. This time, however, even the American pretension about women's rights in Afghanistan will not be available to provide comfort. And therein lies the real tragedy.

## Recommendations

The world has a responsibility to pull women and girls in Afghanistan out of the current crisis by upholding their rights, and the United States has a special obligation to help women if the world fails in making it a reality. This assistance should include:

• Humanitarian – primarily livelihood opportunities for households in which women were/are the primary wage earners

• Education – allowing women and girls access to education through community-based education programs that are designed and operated by non-governmental groups

• Psychological – trauma and mental health services that provide safe and secure counseling

• Protection – for women and girls facing persecution and gender-based violence, even for women and girls outside of Afghanistan.

## Epilogue: The Taliban in the Future

*Note: This paper was written before the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. The following section outlines the current situation.*

The Taliban took power on August 15, 2021, after waging an insurgency against the U.S.-backed government in Kabul. The successful takeover marked an important milestone in the insurgents' unfaltering efforts to increase their

33 Ahmad and Avoine; Laura Sjoberg and Megan Gerecke, "Explaining Sexual Violence in Conflict Situations" in Laura Sjoberg and Sandra Via eds., *Gender, War, and Militarism: Feminist Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010).

34 Francine Banner, "Beauty Will Save the World': Beauty Discourse and the Imposition of Gender Hierarchies in the Post-War Chechen Republic," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 9:1 (2009), pp. 25-48.

35 Shaista Wahab and Barry Youngerman, *A Brief History of Afghanistan* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2010).

36 Ahmad and Avoine.

stranglehold on the Afghan government. However, ever since the Taliban have regained power, they have been seen stripping away women's hard-won freedoms.

Afghan educators are trying to grapple with the new reality of education. The emerging government has made it clear that it intends to deny women and girls the educational freedoms that they earned over the past 20 years. The system will likely be as—if not more—draconian than when the Taliban last ruled in the 1990s. After schools reopened, only male students were asked to report for their studies from grades seven through 12. The Taliban did not ask girls in those grades to come to school, which they understood as a directive to stay home. Only girls in grades one to six have been allowed to attend school. The Taliban have also made it compulsory for female students to wear a hijab to school and have forbidden male teachers from teaching girls.[37]

The Taliban have banned women going to work, which was seemingly a temporary measure that the Taliban claimed they enforced for security reasons. Consequently, in just a few weeks of the Taliban retaking power, women's earnings vanished, making it difficult for them to make ends meet. The Taliban also used violence to clamp down on women's protests against the Taliban government; Taliban members scared marchers by pointing firearms at them and called them "puppets of the West" and "whores." The Taliban went so far in their quest of crushing women's protests that they used an electric device to shock some of them and physically assaulted several protesters as well.[38]

There is a deep-seated feeling of uncertainty that engulfs Afghan women. Ever since the second iteration of the Taliban came into power, women's morale has sunk even lower, because they are seeing their biggest fears realized: reversion to a society where violence against them was pervasive, and they had very little rights.

37 Victor J. Blue and David Zucchino, "A Harsh New Reality for Afghan Women and Girls in Taliban-Run Schools," *New York Times*, September 20, 2021.

38 Sahar Fetrat and Heather Barr, "Taliban Use Harsh Tactics to Crush Afghan Women's Rights Protest," Human Rights Watch, January 18, 2022.