

## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN AFGHANISTAN (EDUCATION, LEADERSHIP AND CHALLENGES)

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**Abstract:** Women empowerment in Afghanistan has been a very important topic for the international discussions and debates for the last 30 years in Afghanistan. The mentioned discussions and debates have taken their tremendous angle from their leadership and education viewpoints. Negotiating about the education and leadership along with its current challenges, it's highly recommended that we have to put our finger to the while and post Talibanisation in Afghanistan. Statistical approved records of various human rights and welfare institutions reveal that the level of both literacy and leadership in Afghanistan at the time of Taliban was zero in number, but in 2001 when a new government with the international identity came into practice, fundamental steps were taken in this regard. Today the floor is opened for women to participate election which is one of the most important and significant form of political participation, go to schools and universities to broader the horizon of their education. However, there are still challenges in this aspect and the only silent reason is the low graph of literacy in most of the rural areas in Afghanistan. In addition to women education, women leadership is another indispensable and highly required in the agenda of new government. If we again compare the same concept with the Taliban era, again the women leadership is zero. Today in Afghanistan women found doors to work in the top level of management of Afghan government. For instance, they are governors, ministers, parliament members and so on. based on the historically dominated rules imposed over women, which are referenced from tradition but not from the accepted religious and civil rule are critical challenges for women in Afghanistan. Illiteracy, old informal traditions and security are the biggest challenges stands against women empowerment in Afghanistan.

### **Introduction:**

**Education System, During the Taliban:** The already unstable situation of Afghan women in society was turned completely upside down during the Taliban rule, which began in 1996, right after years of power struggle following the end of Soviet possession of Afghanistan. When the Taliban took the control of Afghanistan in 1996, the status of women specially on women education declined rapidly until women were completely confined to home. At first, Taliban claimed to recognize their Islamic duty to offer equal education for boys and girls and afterward they passed a decree that banned girls above age of eight from receiving education. They promised that this is a temporary decree, but it was permanent and they totally destroyed the education system not only for women but for men too. Education system during the Taliban was zero. The female employment was great felt in the education system. Only within Kabul 106,256 girls and 8000 female university undergraduates were affected. 7793 female teachers were dismissed. These are just visionary estimations, the affected area was huge and lots of school girls were denied from schools and universities were closed for women in Afghanistan. With all those rude situations, a group of women ran clandestine schools within their homes for local children and other women. They took the risk to teach and learner parents were also aware of the consequences if Taliban discover their activities. Taliban era was dark days over the education system for women in Afghanistan. After the new government

on 2001, they felt fresh and free once again and returned back to schools.

**After the Taliban:** The education system is regarded as one of the country's biggest success stories since the Taliban were driven from power. According to estimation of world bank in 2001, children enrollment in primary schools were 21% in 2001 it turns to 97% and among them 36% was girls. New government which is mostly called as Hamid Karzai administration received substantial international aid to restore the education system. Around 7000 schools were operating in 20 of 32 provinces by the end of 2003, with 27000 teachers teaching 4.2 million children including 1.2 million girls. Afghanistan was counted as the country with more illiterate women as per an estimation, 86% of women were reported to be illiterate. When Kabul University reopened in 2002, 2400 female and male student enrolled for higher education, at the same time the other universities of Afghanistan reopened like Kandahar University in south, Nengarhar and Khost Universities in east, Herat University in west and Balkh University in North and started their activities that attracted most of female for higher education. American university of Afghanistan established in 2006 and played a crucial role in educating female in center of Afghanistan.

**Achievements:** 2010, primary school enrollment rose from 1 million to 7 million and the proportion of girls from zero to 37%. Number of teachers in general has risen and about 37% are women. Ministry of women affairs held 6201 literature, English language and

computer tuitions for more than 52425 women on 2007. Construction of 26% preliminary schools, 34% of intermediate schools and 30% of higher schools for girls. 30% of female teachers attended to schools and universities. Establishment of 100s private universities and institutes, and increasement of private universities students to 15% and private universities female faculty to 7%. And in general we had 16% increasement of women literacy.

New government from 2001 brought women back to educational institutes by construction of 100s schools and reopening of universities. Women are happy now that can go back to schools and universities. The doors are opened for literacy of women in Afghanistan. In a situation after the Taliban, these are high achievements' for Afghanistan.

#### **Challenges for women Education:**

**Violence:** violence as an iron wall stands on the way of women education in Afghanistan. Lots of schools are burned and destroyed by Taliban after their rule. In 2008 there were 670 incidents of attacks on education. Violence prevented nearly 5 million Afghan children from attending schools in 2010. And that's why violence is regarded as a main challenge for women.

**Security:** lack of security is counted as another main challenge for women education in Afghanistan, it despair's most of female from going to educational institutions. They can't risk to be kidnapped or to be rapped.

**Old traditional believes:** Old tradition plays an important rule to deny women from education in Afghanistan. Most of people especially in rural areas do not allow girl kids to go to school because they think it's wrong.

**Lack of qualified teachers:** Taliban destroyed the total education system in Afghanistan. Qualified teachers were necessary after the fall of the Taliban. Lack of formal educated teacher is another challenge in front of women education. Qualified teachers were rare and recent years Government is planning to promote the capacity of teachers' education as general and in methodology as specific. We need them for a bright future.

**Harassment:** school girls and universities female students harassed in different ways by uneducated and illiterate males in Afghanistan, they tease a girl while going to school. In general most of female is been harassed by uncivil males in public and it really is a big challenge.

Violence, security, old traditional believes lack of qualified teachers and harassment are regarded as main challenges for women education in the country and they are still on.

#### **Women Leadership During and After the Taliban**

In Afghanistan thoughts are to assume the women weak. From the long days especially from the

beginning of so called Islamic state of Taliban, women really didn't have a good time. Discrimination, preference of men to women and old superstitions are the things that remind in minds. And this thought made Afghanistan one of the hardest place for women.

**During The Taliban:** Taliban, as dark days did whatever they wanted to do against women in Afghanistan. From closing gates of schools to harassing women in public and putting them in jails were all the gifts of Taliban for women in the country. As per estimations the leading power of women was zero same as their education. Women have been sent back to old centuries, they were forgotten and buried inside the deep hole. Women was not an equal member of the society anymore; there were no value for them. Wherever they raised a voice of justice, it turned to silence. If they were trying to raise their voices they would be punished or be shot by bullet. Six years of Taliban era in Afghanistan, burned the roots of women rights in this country that till today they feel it. These six years of Taliban is counted as dark period for women in Afghanistan. Every voice for justice for women was silenced either by hands or by bullet, that's why women couldn't risk their life and they were silent. But hopefully these days don't remain longer and Taliban were fallen in 2001. Women can breathe freely and they are happy.

**After the Taliban:** The floor was opened to the idea of leadership before women in Afghanistan in 2001 when a new government democratic government came into practice along with the international identity. In addition to this, the education and participation of women in government become mandatory and put in the priority of new government. For instance, a ministry post was established under the title of ministry of women Affairs. Women were again allowed to go and get secondary and higher education. Even women were allowed and given chances to study abroad which was totally unacceptable for our mind faculties in the time of Taliban.

Due to the current problems that we have before the leadership of women, at the mean time we cannot deny women have received considerable concentration both from the Afghan government and the international community. Today women are ministers, governors, parliamentarians, civil activists and so on. Today women are professors at the universities, and they actively take part in all those activities which are useful for their personal lives and for the welfare of nation. In last decade we had women that were real leaders, women advocates and were raising their voice for the social rights of their people. Here I put my finger to the names and activities of Active women in Afghanistan, women which are true leaders.

**Dr. Sima Samar:** Sima Samar is a well-known women's and human rights advocate, activist and a social worker within national and international forums, she served as minister of Women affairs from 2001 to 2003. Samar obtained her degree in medicine from Kabul University in 1982, during the Soviet regime she fled to Pakistan and established the Shuhada Organization to take health care of Afghan refugee women in Queta, Pakistan. This organization was dedicated to the provision of health care of Afghan women and girls, training of medical staff and education. "I have no fear anymore; I know that nothing is impossible. I think of the days when I went to Jaghori ( a district in Ghazni province ) , my home town, and I felt I was alone in my endeavor's. Today I enjoy the full support of the Afghan people. "she says that with enough collective effort and determination, things can be done, Change can be happen. Now she is the chairperson of the Afghan independent human rights commission since 2005. She owed lots of national and international awards in her career.

**Fawzia Kofi:** Koofi, a lady who left to die in the sun after birth by her mother. But she survived, despite the abuse of her family, the exploitative Taliban regime, the murder of her father, brother and husband and huge attempts on her life, she rose to become the first Afghan parliament speaker . Her women rights engagement is that she made it a priority to defend women's right in Afghanistan. Some of the key women's initiative that she has championed during her tenure as an MP include: the improvement of women's living conditions in Afghan prisons, the establishment of a commission to combat the issue of violence against the children, especially against children. Also she promoted the level of education for women in her homeland Badakhshan (a province in Afghanistan). Law maker, women right advocate and candidate for residential elections. Koofi is a leader with a vision to change Afghanistan into a society that is based on the rule of law, Civility and human rights. Despite numerous attacks on her life, what she most afraid of is being misunderstood by people.

"I am not afraid to die for my values "she says. Afghanistan first female speaker of parliament and the highest ranking woman in Afghan politics. That makes her a target for opponents of women's right in Afghanistan, including the fearsome Taliban. Koofi refused to be cowed. She even plans to run for president in two years . Her priority is to defend women rights in Afghanistan. Her book *The Favorite Daughter*, explains the lifeshehad.

**Shukria Barakzai:** Barakzai is an Afghan politician and journalist. She was born in 1972 in Kabul, in 2002 after the Taliban she founded *Aina\_ee zan* (women mirror), a national weekly newspaper, her mission was improve the understanding of women in society.

She began to publication without any resources lacking even a computer and access to a printing press, hoping to encourage women to fight for their own rights. Barakzai campaigns on issues such as maternal and infant mortality. In 2003 there were areas that have great difficulties which had the world highest proportion of women dying in child birth. She focuses on big issues in Afghanistan saying "in my opinion the Burka is not that important, what is important is education, democracy and freedom". Barakzai also credits technology such as mobile phones that was banned under the Taliban regime. She was elected to parliament of Afghanistan in 2004 and she is counted as one of the influential female leader in Afghanistan.

**Habiba Sarabi:** Dr. Habiba Sarabi was born on 1956 in Mazar\_sharif, a city in north of Afghanistan. In 2005 she appointed as governor of Bamian province by President Hamid Karzai, which made her the first female governor in the history of the country. Previously she served as minister of women affairs as well as minister of culture and education. As a governor she announced that one of her focus will be on tourism as a source of income. To be mentioned that Bamian is named as the national park of Afghanistan. Sarabi was chosen for the Ramon Magsaysay award in recognition of her services and good governance, which is considered as Nobel Prize of Asia.

**Massouda Jalal:** Dr. Massouda Jalal was born in Kapisa province and she emerged after the fall of the Taliban in 2001 as a leading voice for the role of women in Afghan society. She was one of the candidates for presidential elections in Afghanistan in 2004. Dr. Jalal served as minister of women affairs from October 2004 as a part of Karzai's administration. She founded Jalal foundation and their main activities were the development of women capacity, the protection of women rights, the empowerment of women for leadership and political participation, advocacy and mobilization of international support to the cause of Afghan women.

**Farkhunda Zahra Naderi:** Naderi, as one of the women rights activists in Afghanistan, raised the first voice for the membership of women in Afghan Supreme court, and after she took a seat in Afghan Parliament in 2010 by direct and fair voting by people. She shared the idea with the women committee members in Afghan parliament and also presented in the General assembly. The youngest female parliament member in Afghanistan, is the Member of women affairs, human rights and civil society of Afghan Parliament Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, the N-Peace award winner .the international peace network introduces peace award in 2012 among 100 peace builder from 6 south Asian countries ,and Zahra won the award for her efforts for women in behalf of

Afghanistan. Her work, patient and talent made her one of the famous women activist in Afghanistan.

**MalalayJoya:** She was 27 when she sealed a seat in Afghanistan parliament in 2007, for her speeches against Mujahedin she was suspended from the parliament of Afghanistan. She was elected to the Loya\_jerga( An assembly to debate the proposed afghan constitution), when she stood up and publicly criticized the room full of men (Mujahidin). why would you allow criminals to be present? Warlords are responsible for our country situation. The most anti women people in the society who brought our country to this state and they intend. To do the same again "She was called The bravest women in Afghanistan by BBC. Time magazine placed her on their annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world. Foreign policy magazine listed Joya in its annual list of top 100 global thinkers. The Guardian listed her among top 100 women activists on March 2011. "I started working as an activist when I was very young, grade 8". I worked in refugee camps during the war with Soviet Union when family were refugees in Iran. In every house that I went everyone had different stories of suffering. No movie maker, no writer is able to write about these tragedies that we have suffered. Not only in Afghanistan but also Palestine, Iraq. The children of Afghanistan is like the children of Palestine, they fight against the enemies with only stones. These kinds of children are my heroes and heroines "she says". She has much more International peace awards.

**Challenges that female leaders face in Afghanistan:** Still, after the fall of the Taliban women are not able to fully enjoy the real rights they have, here are some of challenges that female leaders face in Afghanistan. Security, corruption, traditionally dominated society, symbolic rule of women and illiteracy are the main problems for Afghan leaders.

**Security:** Security is considered as a main challenge in front of women in Afghanistan. Most of Afghan women leaders are not safe while leaving home to office, there are lots of illegal armed gangs that can harm a female leader. In recent years we were witness of incidents that female leaders were attacked by unknown gum men and it's a big treat.

**Traditionally dominated rules:** Old tradition is one of the basic challenges for women empowerment in Afghanistan. When a girl finish her school or university and get married, she is not allowed to study or to work further. Most of girls get married when they graduate from school and this cost for their life. They may have dreamed of being a future leader but marriage is the end for them as per old traditions.

**Corruption:** Beside the traditionally dominated rules, corruption is another big problem women

facing in Afghanistan. Corruption takes all the main rights of women that can help them for a better life. Most of their problems are education and human rights. Government failed to give the real justice for women, the justice that they deserve. In most of governmental offices, women rights are violated due to corruption.

**Symbolic rule of women in Government:** Despite their 21% stock in governmental administration and higher posts, most of them are symbolic and artificial. Government gives seats for women to earn international supports and been not accused of government against women. They are discriminated I many ways by men. No one hear what a woman says.

**Illiteracy:** Another issue that challenges women in Afghanistan is illiteracy. Due to lack of education most of women are not aware of their rights. Cause they were confined at home for long years. Women in villages suffer more than women in cities from this challenge. In cities most of girls and women get back to education and in rural areas its big fight to go school or university.

**Anecdotes of Brave Women in the Context of Afghanistan:** These short stories are from brave and champion Afghan women, most of them lost their life to defend women rights in Afghanistan.

**Anisa:** Anisa, 16 years old, 10<sup>th</sup> grade school kid who were working voluntarily for education improvement and health. She was shot outside her house while volunteering to a campaign against Polio. Death of this little angel of peace hurts majority of people on Kapisa province. She was killed for going to school and she was killed for vaccinating children. She may rest in peace.

**Malalay Kakar:** Kakar was the most high profile policewoman in Afghanistan after the Taliban. She was head of Kandahar's department of crimes against women, she received numerous death treat and finally was assassinated by Taliban on 28<sup>th</sup>, September 2008. Kakar joined police force on 1982 and she was the first lady who graduates as a police from Kandahar police academy. She may rest in peace.

**Haifa Safi:** Hanifa Safi was the regional head of the women's affairs ministry of Laghman province in Afghanistan. Since 2008 she worked cases concerning violence against women and were supporting women to overcome violence. She has been killed by a bomb attached to her car while she was leaving home to office on 13<sup>th</sup> July 2012. According to BBC reporter David Lyon, "Hanifa was against the conservative interpretation of Islam practiced by many in Afghanistan and that was the main reason that took her life".

**Seema Joyenda:** Seema Joyenda is appointed as the new governor of Ghor, a province in west of Afghanistan by President Ashraf Ghani on July 2015. After her appointment the religious council of Ghor

requested her to resign from her position and warned that if she did not resign, she is responsible for anything that happens further. Joyenda has been facing backlash from religious leaders for the conservative parties within the province. There are certain old beliefs that are challenges for women, specially, in war zone.

**Conclusion:** Afghanistan when it was a fresh violence between the Red Army and Afghan Mujahiddin, since the mentioned period of time, the approximate level of women education and leadership has progressively experienced its flap down till the time of Taliban. The mentioned period of time was considered to be the dark days by every individual inside the Afghanistan. Taliban who came into power by the celebration of uncountable civilians of the innocent nation has changed their

view of peaceful Islamic movement which they promised with the people of Afghanistan who were suffered of killing ones brother before them into a very severe type of extremist and fundamentalist Islam which is actually against the realistic Islam we have faith on. All in all, the last thirteen to fourteen years of the internationally recognized government of Afghanistan, the image, fiction and social status of women was again taken into the account of Afghan government, and we have seen dramatic changes in this regard in a country where they were banned to go to school at least thirteen years ago into a level where they became to work in the senior management of Afghan government. Let's leave you with this thought that if your female generation rose in such an environment, what would you contribute?

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