



THE STATE OF AFGHAN WOMEN

AFGHAN WOMEN RISING

BRIEF HISTORY: WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

Until the 1970s, the 20th century ushered in relatively steady progress for women's rights in Afghanistan. Afghan women were first eligible to vote in 1919—only a year after women in the United Kingdom obtained voting rights, and a year before women in the United States (U.S.) attained suffrage. In the 1950s, purdah (gendered separation) was abolished; in the 1960s, a new constitution brought equality to many other areas of life, including political participation and employment, leading women into parliament, medicine, engineering, and education. However, a series of coups, the Soviet invasion in the 1970s, civil conflict between Mujahideen and government forces throughout the 1990s, and Taliban rule from 1996-2001, rendered women's rights dramatically curtailed.

During the brutal reign of the Taliban and its warped interpretation of Islam and Shari'a law, Afghan women and girls were restricted from exercising the vast majority of their fundamental human rights. Punishment for violating these distorted laws ranged from flogging to stoning to death. Concurrently, a culture of violence against women with impunity became rampant.

After the September 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S., an international military campaign was launched in Afghanistan to eradicate the Taliban and al-Qaeda, which the former allowed to flourish under its rule. Another justification for the intervention was the Taliban's unconscionable treatment of Afghan women and girls.

Although the Taliban was ousted from power by the end of 2001, power dynamics have continued to shift throughout the country. The Taliban, insurgent groups, including the Islamic State, and other conservative elements are still trying to re-impose a warped interpretation of Islamic law, restrict women's rights, and reinstitute parallel justice systems. Despite the strides Afghan women and girls have made since 2001, the significant withdrawal of international forces and the ongoing conflict with militants have led to a backslide in some of these gains.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Since the ousting of the Taliban in 2001, steady progress has been made towards gender equality and women's empowerment. Girls have gone back to school in droves and women are breaking barriers in the workplace.

EDUCATION

Rates of girls' education have spiked significantly since 2001. Today, girls' access to education in Afghanistan is a major achievement. Indicators of this success include:

- Around 3.5 million girls have returned to school since 2001.
- By 2015, 120,000 girls graduated from secondary school and 15,000 girls completed college.
- Girls comprise nearly 40% of all students in Afghan schools today and nearly a third of the students in universities.
- As of 2016, 72,600 female teachers are teaching Afghanistan's next generation.

SOCIAL AND HEALTH ISSUES

Decades of conflict decimated the social fabric and healthcare system in Afghanistan. Yet, since 2001, the government has made great strides in protecting and empowering women, as well as in incorporating them into public life. For instance:

- In 2008, the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, a five-year \$50-billion investment initiative, was deployed to reverse women's historical disadvantages by elevating their socio-economic status and providing access to development and poverty reduction opportunities.
- Also in 2008, Afghanistan launched its National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan to eliminate discrimination against women and girls and encourage their leadership in society.
- In 2015, the government established its National Action Plan aiming to empower women in security and peacebuilding.
- By 2016, 3,700 women comprised 20% of the nation's doctors.
- In 2017, the government instituted the National Peace and Development Framework to prioritize women's socio-economic development through its policies and programs until 2021.
- Since 2001, maternal mortality has declined significantly from 1,600 deaths to 327 deaths per 100,000 live births, with more than 150,000 babies safely delivered each year.
- Today, 57% of Afghans live within one-hour from a health facility.

RULE OF LAW

During prolonged periods of insecurity and the bloody Taliban regime, the rule of law and adherence to international norms were eviscerated. However, recent initiatives towards equality and a strengthened legal framework to protect women include:

- In 2002, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, which includes female commissioners, was created to protect and advance human rights.
- In 2004, the new Constitution enshrined women's rights and guaranteed gender equality.
- In 2009, Afghanistan enacted the Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW law).
- In 2016, the Anti-Harassment Regulation was instituted to protect women's rights to movement, education, and work.

PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

Since 2001, Afghanistan has made a concerted effort to incorporate women into government institutions and leadership positions. For instance:

- By 2016, over 22,000 Afghan women participated in over 10,000 community development councils to address local needs and design and implement government grants.
- By 2018, 4,500 women served in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces while the Afghan National Police Strategy seeks to add 5,000 female police officers by 2022.
- Today, there are 184 Family Response Units (FRU) with female police officers in 33 provinces across the country.
- The Afghan Parliament has a higher percentage of female representatives (27.3%) than most established democracies.



CHALLENGES

Despite all these gains, Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a woman. Since the substantial withdrawal of international forces in 2014 and the recapture of significant swaths of territory by insurgent forces, gender-based violence has witnessed an upsurge and women have experienced a backslide in the free exercise of their rights.

EDUCATION

Obstacles still exist to girls' access to education, including lack of female teachers, facilities, and capacities; local traditions and attitudes; economic insecurity; child and forced marriage; and poverty. For instance:

- Nearly half of Afghan children (up to 3.7 million children) are not enrolled in primary school—the vast majority of whom are girls.
- 24% of women are literate, compared to over half of men.
- Women's harassment, discrimination, and lack of access to education result in gaps in the labor market, wherein only 19% of women participate, often earning three-fourths less than men.
- Over 40% of schools lack basic infrastructure and many are too far away for students to regularly attend.

SOCIAL AND HEALTH ISSUES

Performance on most social and health indicators also place Afghanistan amongst the lowest-ranking countries in the world. For instance:

- Afghanistan has the third highest under-five and infant mortality rates in the world.
- One-in-eight mothers will die of pregnancy-related causes.
- Violence against women and girls is endemic, with severe consequences for women's health, security, mobility, and economic and political empowerment.
- Child marriage remains rampant, with over a third of girls married before they turn 18.
- Women represent a high percentage of the civilian casualties in the country's ongoing conflict, particularly as victims of suicide bombings and attacks with improvised explosive devices.

RULE OF LAW

While Afghanistan has made strides in improving its legal framework, implementation and enforcement have been uneven. For instance:

- Authorities have used security challenges as a justification to delay legal enforcement of women's protections.
- Women continue to be imprisoned for so-called "moral crimes"—most of which are attempts to flee abusive situations.
- The 2017 Penal Code failed to include the EAW law, undermining Afghanistan's commitment to this law and its enforcement.

PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

Today's 27.3% female parliamentary representation surpasses the 2004 quota that called for 25% representation. However, many challenges remain at local governance levels. For instance:

- The insufficient capacity of lower levels of government to address local needs and services undermines its ability to support and empower women.
- Women in government face significantly more threats and targeted attacks than their male counterparts.
- Afghanistan's Supreme Court lacks any female members, and female judges are particularly marginalized in provincial courts.

- Anti-government elements, social stigma, and education gaps have relegated female judges to serve in only five of 34 provinces.
- Only two women have been included among the 47 domestic and international representatives involved in peace negotiations.
- Women continue to face obstacles obtaining ministerial posts and female candidates are consistently blocked from higher office by conservative elements in the legislature.

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For information on how [Women for Afghan Women \(WAW\)](#) addresses the challenges facing Afghan women and girls and to support WAW's programs, please visit: womenforafghanwomen.org

