

Women's issue in Afghanistan under the Taliban^{*1}

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the study of the rights and status of women in Afghan society over the past 30 years, after the end of the secular system in the country. A brief overview of the situation since the beginning of the 20th century is given, the place and position of Afghan women in society after the coming to power of the Mujahideen and then the Taliban is shown, the development of education and the process of involving the female population in socio-economic and political life after 2001 and the change in the situation with the return to power of the Taliban are studied.

Keywords: Afghanistan, women's rights, education, Sharia, Taliban, Mujahideen

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Introduction

Women's rights in Afghanistan have always been in the spotlight, but they became especially relevant after the «Taliban»* came to power again in August 2021. The issue is being keenly discussed in the media, reports of international organizations working in this country. There are no special works in the scientific literature devoted to this issue during the period when the «Taliban»* were in power, and only sometimes it is touched upon when considering certain aspects of the life of Afghan society. However, there are articles [2, 3]

¹ *The organization has been recognized a terrorist organization by the Russian Supreme Court. Unified federal list of organizations, including foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation (as of June 25, 2023). Available from: <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm> (accessed: 25.06.2023);18+

in which gender relations under the Islamic Republic (2001–2021) are comprehensively studied on the basis of field materials of the UN and other non-profit organizations.

Materials and Methods

The author used well-known methods of scientific research, such as systemic analysis, synthesis, comparison and comparison of data. The source base was the materials of Afghan information Internet resources, statistics.

Results

The population of Afghanistan according to various estimates is from 33² to 40³ million, of which 49% are women. The role and place of women in Afghan society relate to those issues that, for all governments since the restoration of political independence (1919), were interpreted differently, remaining constantly relevant. The independence of Afghanistan, the Reformer, Amanulla-Khan (1919–1928), made the first attempts to expand the rights of women, in particular, to receive education, employment and so on, but the short-term coming to power of Bachai Sakao (January–November 1929) again limited women in all areas. Since that time, for more than sixty years, that is, until April 1992, when the power was seized by the Mujahideen, Afghanistan managed to take important steps in the matter under consideration. The short rule of the Mujahideen government, and later the appearance of the «Taliban»* movement in the political arena and their seizure of power (1996) returned the country to a state of comprehensive crisis. Hope for the improvement of the status of women in Afghan society appeared after the overthrow of the «Taliban»* regime in 2001, when positive changes took place in the next twenty years under the influence of the outside world. The re-seizure of power by the «Taliban»* (August 2021) has again become painful for the female population of Afghanistan.

The actions of the «Taliban»* to determine the place and role of women in society are surprising not only representatives of the Western community, but also the entire Islamic world. Among Afghans, most of the population is not ready to accept the restrictions imposed by the «Taliban»* authorities on women. Former officials and politicians who are now outside Afghanistan criticize the «Taliban»*'s policy particularly strongly. Among them there are Mujahideen field commanders, their heirs, whose authorities themselves did the same in the early 1990s. In August 1993, for example, the Supreme Court of the Mujahideen Government issued a fatwa as follows:

² Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2020. National Statistics and Information Authority. Kabul, 2021:7–9.

³ World Population Dashboard, Afghanistan. United Nations Population Fund. Available from: <https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population/AF>

Muslim women of our Islamic State still continue to work in government offices, schools, radio and television. They still walk around the bazaars without an Islamic veil. Thus, there are no changes compared to the past. In this regard, we seriously and persistently demand that all responsible persons take immediate practical measures to implement all divine instructions, especially regarding the wearing of the veil and the removal of women from State institutions. Women's schools, in fact, which are hotbeds of adultery and prostitution, should be closed, and all women should be fired from radio and television [1:119–120; 4:170].

The leader of the Islamic Party of Afghanistan, G.Hekmatyar, who is one of those who, while in Kabul, openly advocates women's education and women's right to employment, in the 90s, as prime minister of the Mujahedeen government, ordered women to be dismissed from all state institutions [1:120; 4:171]. Then the problem reached its peak with the seizure of power by the «Taliban»* movement. In the modern history of Afghanistan, this period can be called one of the most difficult, particularly for the female population, but history repeats for Afghan women.

Since the Mujahedeen came to power in April 1992 and until the fall of the «Taliban»* regime in October 2001, strict norms introduced in the country severely restricted the rights and participation of women in Afghan public life. Over the past two decades, after the overthrow of the «Taliban»* regime and the formation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001–2021), the female part of the Afghan population took a more active part in the social, economic and political life of the country, which was one of the few achievements of the government with the support of the international community. During this time, primary and secondary schools for girls, universities were opened, where women studied along with men, women received seats in parliament, worked in various positions in government institutions, engaged in commerce, worked in the field of art and culture. In large cities and centers, the issue of women's rights was less relevant than in the provinces, which was explained by the security, psychology of the rural population, the lack of appropriate conditions (in the educational sphere, starting from the necessary textbooks and ending with the presence of schools themselves).

Women's rights were officially enshrined and guaranteed at the legislative level. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, adopted in early 2004, stated

“Citizens of Afghanistan, both men and women, have equal rights and obligations before the law” (article 26). The Basic Law guaranteed education for women (the Government is responsible for creating a balance and developing education for women, ... developing and implementing effective programs (Article 44), ensured equal right to participate in elections to the “Volusi Jirga” – the lower house of Parliament (Article 83), allocated minimum quotas for women (2 seats with provincial houses of Parliament), and the President had the right to appoint 50% of the members of the “Meshrana Jirga” – the upper house of Parliament from among women (Article 84).

Women could occupy key positions in many ministries and departments, were hired as specialists and employees of state institutions. To show in which direction the Afghan society

has been moving over these two decades, in which areas and provinces the female population of Afghanistan has been more active, let us turn to the data of official Afghan statistics.

Since 2002, public and private primary and secondary schools have been opened in Afghanistan for both boys and girls, and the number of students has grown rapidly every year. Although there were “dead souls” during the republic both in the reports of law enforcement agencies and the education system, the available information does not reflect the real picture. By 2004, the total number of students in primary and secondary schools was 5,425 thousand, of which 1,306 thousand people⁴, or 24% were girls. By 2010, the total figure increased by 24% and amounted to 7101 thousand students, and the share of girls in it reached 38% – 2710 thousand, which is twice as much as in 2004⁵ According to 2020 statistics, 9135 thousand students attended schools throughout Afghanistan, of which 3561 thousand, or 39% were students of girls' schools⁶.

The indicators varied greatly by region and province. According to the same sources, in Kabul in 2004, about 38% (248.6 thousand) of the total number of schoolchildren in 652 thousand were girls⁷, and by 2010, there was a significant increase – the share of pupils in girls' schools reached 44% (376 thousand out of 854 thousand)⁸ and in the last years of the republic's existence (2020), it increased to 47% (546 thousand and 1148 thousand)⁹.

As for the regions, in 2004 only in three provinces the proportion of girls in primary and secondary schools was higher than 40% (Badakhshan – 44%, Takhar – 41%, Balkh – 40%), and in four others – below 10% (Paktia and Helmand 6% each, Kandahar and Uruzgan by 8% in each)¹⁰. By 2010, the number of provinces with a share closer to fifty had grown to 11 (Badakhshan 47%, Herat – 46%, Nuristan – 45%, Bamyan and Laghman – 44%, Balkh, Daikondi, Nimroz and Faryab – 43%, Takhar – 42%, Panjshir – 40%). In the same year, the indicators for Helmand (20%), Zabul and Paktia (21% each), Paktika (22%) were relatively low¹¹. In ten years, provinces with a large number of female school students have become only one more. In 2020, over 40% of girls in 12 provinces had access to primary and secondary education. The highest rate was in Panjshir (47%), followed by Badakhshan, Bamyan, Herat and Daikondi (46% each), then Balkh – 45%, Sari-Pul – 44%, Nuristan and Takhar – 43%, Samangan and Jauzjan – 42%, Laghman – 40%. The lowest figure was traditionally available in Uruzgan – 11%, Paktika – 15%, Helmand – 21%, Zabul – 22 and Kandahar – 25%¹².

⁴ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2005. The Economic Ministry's Central Statistics Office. Kabul, 2006: 44.

⁵ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2011-12. Central Statistics Organization. Kabul, 2012: 6.

⁶ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2020. National Statistics and Information Authority. Kabul, 2021:61.

⁷ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2005. The Economic Ministry's Central Statistics Office. Kabul, 2006:44.

⁸ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2011-12. Central Statistics Organization. Kabul, 2012:80.

⁹ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2020. National Statistics and Information Authority. Kabul, 2021:61.

¹⁰ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2005. The Economic Ministry's Central Statistics Office. Kabul, 2006:44.

¹¹ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2011-12. Central Statistics Organization. Kabul, 2012:80.

¹² Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2020. National Statistics and Information Authority. Kabul, 2021:61.

In public and private higher education institutions, the situation was slightly different, since in 2004, according to statistics, out of 39.5 thousand students, the female part was 8.3 thousand people (21%)¹³, and by 2010, the total number of students became noticeably more (84 thousand), and the number of girls although relatively increased (15 thousand), but in the overall indicator its share decreased (18%)¹⁴. The number of students also grew significantly by 2020, reaching 388 thousand, of which 109 thousand¹⁵, or 28% were female.

There is also information on the number of people employed in Afghanistan: out of 276 thousand employees of state institutions in 2004, 18% were women. Traditionally, their activity (except for the Ministry of Women's Affairs) was the highest (25% and 21%, respectively) in the two largest number of employees – education and healthcare¹⁶. Here, too, a comparative analysis shows a slight increase in subsequent years: in 2010, 20% of all employed in state institutions were women, in particular, 25% in education and 22% in health care¹⁷, and in 2020, respectively, 26%, 33% and 24%. In 2020, in two other ministries, women made up the majority of the employed: this is the Ministry of Labor and Employment – 65% of all employed in 6080 people, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs – 54% of 789 employed¹⁸.

These data indicate the progress achieved during the existence of the Islamic Republic (2001–2021) in the involvement of the female population in the socio-economic life of society. However, the movement in the opposite direction began from the first days of the re-seizure of power by the «Taliban»* (August 2021). Over the past year and a half, the «Taliban»* authorities, as the situation in the country relatively stabilized, allowed the opening of secondary schools, but only for boys, and girls over the sixth grade could initially attend classes only in Herat, Balkh and some other provinces. Representatives of both sexes continued to attend classes at universities, and women could partially find a job. By the end of 2022, gradually restricting the rights of Afghan women in all spheres, the «Taliban»* closed their access to higher education institutions. Thus, today the rights of Afghan women are the most painful issue of concern to both the Afghan society and the outside world.

Recall that the problems related to the rights of Afghan women and the processes that are currently taking place in Afghanistan took place in the second half of the 90s of the last century in exactly the same form as today. As then, the current authorities present a variety of arguments in defense of the decisions taken by the leadership: some explain this by the need to comply with Sharia law, others talk about the economic side of the issue, others associate restrictions with the customs and culture of Afghans. At the first press

13 Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2005. The Economic Ministry's Central Statistics Office. Kabul, 2006:64.

14 Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2011-12. Central Statistics Organization. Kabul, 2012:46.

15 Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2020. National Statistics and Information Authority. Kabul, 2021:87.

16 Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2005. The Economic Ministry's Central Statistics Office. Kabul, 2006:27;35.

17 Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2011-12. Central Statistics Organization. Kabul, 2012:24.

18 Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2020. Central Statistics Organization. Kabul, 2012:54.

conference held in Kabul on August 17, 2021, «Taliban»* spokesman Zabiulla Mujahid stated that “the «Taliban»* respect the right of women to education and work, but this activity will take place within the framework of Sharia law”¹⁹.

The reasons for this attitude of the «Taliban»* movement to the women's issue are considered in different ways. An Afghan expert who has already died, Wahid Mujda (in the 1990s he was an employee of the «Taliban»* Foreign Ministry), saw the roots of a tough solution to the women's issue in the social origin of members of the movement. He said:

“The «Taliban»* came from rural areas of the country, and there was a negative attitude towards the city among the villagers. Many believed that the urban system contributes to the growth of godlessness... This group of villagers looked suspiciously at the students of secular schools. There were no girls' schools in remote villages. The «Taliban»* came to the city with the same mindset, and among them those who had a more modern worldview also fell under the influence of the majority, who did not want to dissolve into the urban environment, accept the values of the urban system, and tried to turn the city into a village” [5:109].

However, he gave the «Taliban»* a twofold characterization, which indicates the contradictions between the values and the actual actions of many members of the movement. In theory

The world to which the young «Taliban»* were accustomed consisted of uniform people. ... In order to look like a proper Muslim in the eyes of people, they sought to have an appearance corresponding to Sharia. ... A woman had no right to enter their environment. An educated city woman was considered a dangerous being, ... [however]... the inner world of the majority of the «Taliban»* was inclined to another, different from all this. After the capture of Kabul, Mazar-I-Sharif and Herat, many «Taliban»* married city women and educated girls [5].

Mullah Muhammad Gauss, one of the leaders of the «Taliban»*, as Foreign Minister, told a group of doctors from the international organization Doctors without Borders: “It is not true that they say that the «Taliban»* opposes education for women. I myself dream that my future wife will be a doctor!” [5:33].

In those years, as today, the leadership of the movement, using sometimes extremely primitive arguments, tried to justify the decisions made regarding women's access to education and employment before representatives of other countries and various organizations. Thus, the «Taliban»* Foreign Minister at a meeting with a United Nations delegation explained the restrictions on women's rights in this way:

We have obligations to our fighters, one of which does not allow women to study and work. If we violate this commitment, the soldiers will leave the front and return to their villages. Therefore,

19 For Afghan women, the Taliban is more than a matter of life and death). Independent Persian, 19.08.2021. Available from: independentpersian.com

as long as we have opponents in front of us and we need warriors from villages and tribes to fight them, we are forced to continue this policy. It can be changed when the war ends" [5:110–111].

The outside world offered its help to get out of the situation. When once again the leadership of the movement referred to economic problems that prevented the provision of safe and Sharia-compliant education to women, the international community, which did not put up with this discrimination, tried in various ways to force the «Taliban»* to change their policy, including by the fact that the European Community agreed to pay the costs of five girls' schools in Kabul on the conditions put forward by the «Taliban»*. Representatives of the «Taliban»* authorities in Kabul said they were ready to accept the proposals received, but each time "the question was rejected by Kandahar" [5:110–111].

Representatives of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, during a meeting in Kandahar, asked high-ranking «Taliban»* officials to point out the existing Sharia norms that do not allow women to be trained in order to discuss together "whether the problem is Sharia, political or social," but here Kandahar could not give a clear answer, and according to tradition, the deputy Foreign Minister of the «Taliban»*, Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanakzai explained in Kabul that this is not the official line of the «Taliban»*'s policy towards the female population, but temporary measures [5:111]. Then, indeed, individuals from among the ministers and deputy ministers understood the absurdity of many decisions, but the radical wing of the movement had always greater influence and strength [5].

Statements by representatives of the movement seems to show that the «Taliban»* is divided into two groups: the first, consisting of officially appointed persons who had previously participated in negotiations with the United States and other countries, is in Kabul, and the other, headed by the emir and his entourage, is in Kandahar. Politicians from Kabul, judging by their speeches, can be called moderate, more progressive, and politicians from Kandahar, conservative. Kabul sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly expresses dissatisfaction with some of the decisions taken by Kandahar, in particular, on the women's issue. However, there is an opinion that this is just a game of the «Taliban»* to divert eyes, delay time and "there are no serious disagreements and conflicts between the «Taliban»* leaders about the education of girls." Consequently, the division of the «Taliban»* into "moderates" and "radicals" has been used for many years "by a number of political activists and experts who feel close to the movement, but anyone who is familiar with the structure of the «Taliban»* organization knows that decision-making in the leadership of the «Taliban»* is in the hands of several people in Kandahar, and if some of the top officials have objections to Amir al-mu'minin, his opposition will not change anything. In such a situation, it is pointless to talk about moderate and extremist «Taliban»*. It should always be remembered that the «Taliban»*'s decision-making is strictly centralized and focused on Kandahar." Thus, by their very nature, the «Taliban»* categorically oppose the presence of women in society, they want to spread the "backward values of the rural environment" to the entire Afghan society, especially to the city²⁰. To some

extent, this opinion is justified, since it is based on mentality: judging by the statistics given, most of the girls' schools with the highest attendance were in non-Pashtun regions.

As for the relations within the leadership of the movement, it is impossible to fully agree with the conclusions of the Afghan author: there are many people in power in Kabul who disagree with the decisions of the top leadership from Kandahar. The current «Taliban»*, at least the officials in Kabul, are undoubtedly radically different from those who ruled Afghanistan in the second half of the 1990s, there is visible progress on many issues, but the position of the supreme leadership of the movement regarding women's rights remains the same rigid. There is no reason to believe that the problem is economic, since the «Taliban»* accept material assistance from the outside world, as it is willingly done in other directions. That is, everything speaks of the unwillingness of the leadership of the movement to make any compromises on the women's issue. Several versions can be put forward regarding the reasons for the persistence of the «Taliban»*. Perhaps the leadership of the movement intends to demonstrate a new, under the slogan of "correct Islam", a special model of governing society, to embody something unusual that did not exist under the previous government, or not in other Muslim countries. In other words, it seems that in Afghanistan there is an attempt to conduct another unsuccessful experiment, similar to those that the Afghan society repeatedly experienced during the first Anglo-Afghan War (1838-1842), reforms of the administrative and tax systems, the army under the rule of the People's Democratic Party (1978–1992), etc. These are, for example, unsuccessful land reforms, the last 20 years of the rule of the Islamic Republic before its collapse and the intervention of the United States and its coalition allies in all spheres of life. But the current "experiment" associated with the complete renunciation of the female population from socio-economic life is unique and can become a serious problem for both its authors and residents. On the other hand, it can be a political combination, thanks to which it is possible, hiding behind the problem of women's education, to push the issue of inclusive government into the background.

By imposing such bans, Afghanistan may lose significant resources. It is enough to cite the results of the UN assessment, according to which the Afghan budget may lose up to \$1 billion annually from such a policy²¹. It is obvious that the actions of the «Taliban»*, regardless of the goals they pursue, can create a crisis in socio-economic life in the future. The displacement of women from the health care system, firstly, leads to the closure of an entire social sector, and secondly, will force the population to travel to neighboring countries, primarily Pakistan, for examination and treatment, and Afghanistan will lose income. But the leadership of the movement is not interested in the opinion of international organizations, on whose humanitarian and economic assistance the future successes of the current Kabul depend, statements of Muslim scholars from other countries, because they understand that external assistance will still come. It is clear that a complete ban in the conditions of access to the Internet, which makes it possible to obtain distance

²⁰ Talibanism and its close association with misogyny. 8 Sobh, 03.10.1401. Available from: <https://8am.media/talibanism-and-its-close-connection-with-misogyny/>

²¹ Restrictions on women's employment will cost the Afghan economy one billion dollars. 8 Sobh, 27.08.1401. Available from: <https://8am.media/restrictions-on-womens-work-will-harm-the-afghan-economy-by-one-billion-dollars/>

education, will not work. Over the past 20 years, a generation has grown familiar with modern communication technology, which allows you to gain new knowledge distantly. Nevertheless, all Afghan families will suffer from such a policy, especially those in which a female representative is the only breadwinner, and there are many such in the country. If the «Taliban»* expect that with the help of limited financial resources they will be able to compensate for the losses in their families, it is unlikely that this will work. The problem also lies in the fact that representatives of the movement, apparently not having professional specialists in their ranks, underestimate the losses from their actions.

Conclusions

Whatever the goals of the «Taliban»* on the women's issue, one thing is clear: they look at women's rights from the point of view of religion, while being guided solely by their own interpretation of Sharia. The restrictions imposed by them on women's rights are based on the views of the leaders of the movement themselves, but are presented as the requirements of religion. Perhaps gender policy will change after a change of leadership, with the coming to power of representatives of a new generation who have been in contact with the outside world, as well as under the onslaught of socio-economic needs and realities of life. Facing economic and social problems in the future, the authorities will have to change their attitude to the women's issue, otherwise the country will face a deeper economic and political crisis than today.

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Contribution of the author

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