

Afghanistan's shrinking horizons: 'Women feel everything is finished'

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The Taliban claim to have changed, but the crackdown has begun for women across the country

In two months, Parwana estimates she has crossed the threshold of her home perhaps four times. She used to leave early in the morning, for work that supported her entire family, and then go on to an evening degree course.

After the Taliban took over Kandahar, her manager told her not to come to work and her university hasn't yet sorted out how to put on the gender-divided classes they demanded.

Many people have welcomed the calm that settled over the city after the war abruptly ended, but for Parwana, as a single young woman, streets patrolled by Taliban soldiers are filled with menace. "Now I'm scared to go out. I wasn't before."

"I thought I was somebody, I could do something for my family and help others. Now I can't even support myself," she said. "Women here feel like everything is finished for them."

The Taliban leadership, eager for international recognition and funds, has for years been courting the world with promises that the group has fundamentally shifted its positions on women's rights.

When their fighters seized Kabul, spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid pledged within days that women would have rights to education and work, within an Islamic framework the group has yet to define.

As the weeks have passed, with no further clarification, the evidence from the ground in Afghanistan suggests they envisage a form of gender apartheid. Women may be offered some rights, but will be expected to study and work in a sphere so totally detached from that of men running the country, the economy and all major sectors that their lives will still be severely curtailed.

Niamatullah Hassan, the new Taliban mayor of Kandahar, says he has two women back at work in his administration, out of a 1,200-strong municipal team. He will allow more women employees, once they can be isolated from men and the central government approves.

"I am willing to increase the number of women workers, we are planning to prepare a separate workplace for them, a safe environment for them," he said.

Health and education workers are mostly still at their offices, though some in Kandahar have been ordered to wear burqas, but all other women have been ordered to stay home indefinitely for "security" reasons. The Observer has pressed senior officials around the country in interviews for a date when women will be allowed back to work nationwide. Most defer the question or offer a vague promise of "soon". Afghan women are sceptical; in the 1990s the group used the same excuse to ban them from work for the five years they held power.

In education too, there are many promises from the leadership, but women's experience is of restrictions. Although some private universities have opened, with students strictly segregated by gender, a shortage of female teachers, or female students, will close off many subjects to women.

In Kandahar, Zainab is one of two girls on a science degree course and her university has already said it's not economical to teach them separately from men. She's one semester away from finishing, but doesn't know if she will ever get the degree. "I am so sad, so disappointed."

Gulalai is glad to be studying medicine, because the Taliban are allowing female doctors to work, but she is bleak about her degree quality. "There aren't many women students, so we are not going to get expert teachers, we will get the young, inexperienced ones."

Some state universities say they simply can't cope. "The Taliban are talking about segregation but we are one of the biggest and best equipped universities in Afghanistan, and still don't have capacity to do that," said a professor at Herat University, which used to have had a majority of female students; many have already dropped out.

It's OK if they won't let us go to the bazaar. But they have to let us work, because how else will we feed our children?

Parwana, student and part-time worker

"There are some departments which don't have a female professor at all or have only a few of them, but with a lot of women students. How can we function if we have to have a female professor for women and male for men?"

Nor is the devastation only in the cities. Women in one of Kandahar's most violent districts, who had been working on an education programme with Parwana, rang her in tears. The Taliban leadership's promises of primary school education for girls mean nothing to the hardcore fighters who control their area. "They said 'it was just a dream for us, for one and a half years, that our girls could get an education'. Now they must go back to just following every order they receive from men, and doing chores."

There is no question that the Taliban have shifted on women's rights compared with when they ruled Afghanistan 25 years ago, when they barred women from any education and almost all work. But their old regime was so appallingly misogynistic that even the reformed Taliban still leaves Afghanistan with the worst systemic oppression of women in the world. There is no other place where a near-blanket ban has been placed on women working, where politics has been placed off limits by an all-male cabinet and the future of women's high-school education is unclear.

"It is important that the international community not be too eager to applaud if and when the Taliban make some concessions, such as allowing girls to attend primary school," said Heather Barr, deputy director of the women's rights division at Human Rights Watch. "We have to keep our eye on the fact that what is happening in Afghanistan right now is a massive rollback on women's rights, from how women and girls were living just a month ago. It's devastating - and unacceptable - that

we could be watching that happen in 2021.”

Promises of a changed approach to women’s rights are driven by old-timers and pragmatists in the leadership, who saw what happened to Taliban Afghanistan in the 1990s when it was isolated internationally and cut off from the foreign aid that funds much of the country’s health, education and other critical services.

The message from Taliban leaders in all layers of the new government is clear. “We need the international community to do investment here and fund us, for development projects in the city, we really need their support,” said the Kandahar mayor Hassan.

The memo has made it all the way down to Panjwai, a rural district of tobacco fields and pomegranate orchards outside Kandahar, and one of the first Taliban strongholds.

“The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is willing to work with the international community to create an inclusive government. We will support women education, we will support women’s work,” said Panjwai district commander Faizani Mawlawi Sahab, who had spent 20 years fighting in the district, losing hundreds of men in the name of a hardline vision of Islam.

“We all listen to our leadership and obey any decision and orders. We will give the rights of every human being in the country, men women and children.”

Yet a growing gulf between these promises and the harsh reality for women on the ground has been recorded around the country, Deborah Lyons, head of the United Nations mission in Afghanistan, told the UN security council this week.

“We are receiving increasing reports where the Taliban have prohibited women from appearing in public places without male chaperones and prevented women from working. They have limited girls’ access to education in some regions and dismantled the Departments of Women’s Affairs across Afghanistan, as well as targeting women’s NGOs.”

Afghan women have repeatedly said they are willing to compromise in many areas, but not the right to educate themselves and earn a living.

“Many, many women lost men in this conflict, the only option for them is to work,” Parwana said. “It’s OK if they won’t let us go to the bazaar, or to enjoy a picnic. But they have to let us work, because how else will we feed our children?”

A reminder of the power of international pressure came in an apparent retreat, or at least pause for thought, on women’s cricket. The Taliban said it would not allow women’s cricket, Australia said it would cancel an upcoming men’s Test match if the ban was confirmed, and then the Afghan Cricket chair said no final decision had been made.

In Kandahar, women see this pressure as perhaps the only hope for change. “Tell the world to put more pressure on the Taliban to remove these rules, to change their attitudes,” Gulalai said. “If I have no job, and I am not allowed to study, I don’t care about security. This security is only for the Taliban.”

Emma Graham-Harrison in Kandahar

P.S.

- The Observer. The Guardian. Sun 12 Sep 2021 07.15 BST:
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