



# Gender Equality Challenges in Afghanistan

Juwarti Hafsa<sup>1\*</sup>, Yon Machmudi<sup>1</sup>, Maria Puspitasari<sup>1</sup>, Sya'roni Rofii<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Strategic and Global Studies, University of Indonesia, Indonesia

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Corresponding Author:

Juwarti Hafsa

[juwarti.hafsa80@gmail.com](mailto:juwarti.hafsa80@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the impact of restricting women's rights on the development of civilization, focusing on the condition of women in Afghanistan after the Taliban regained power. The method used is qualitative analysis with a descriptive approach based on secondary data from international reports, scholarly articles, and reliable news sources. The study results show that restrictions on women's rights and roles in various aspects of life, such as education, employment, and social participation, negatively affect societal and civilizational progress. The discussion reveals that the systemic injustice experienced by women in Afghanistan not only suppresses individual rights but also slows down the country's social and economic development. In conclusion, policies that limit women's roles can hinder or even halt the progress of civilization, highlighting the need for global efforts to promote gender equality and the protection of human rights.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan; Gender equality; Human rights; Women restrictions

## Introduction

The National Geographic magazine, in one of its editions published in 1984, featured the face of Sharbat Gula. Gula's face graced the cover of the magazine, which is headquartered in Washington, D.C. Gula was an Afghan girl, and in her photograph, she was seen wearing a red dupatta (a long scarf traditionally worn to cover the head in South Asian cultures). In 2002, Gula's portrait was once again featured in the magazine, but with a different appearance—she was now wearing a burqa, completely covered (Khan, 2014).

What National Geographic depicted through Gula was a reflection of the condition of Afghan women in the 1980s and 2000s. Her portrait on the magazine's cover represented Afghan women in two different eras, illustrating the significant changes that took place over a span of approximately twenty years. In the 1980s, Afghan women were able to appear more open, embracing their native Afghan culture. However, by the 2000s, everything had changed—Afghan women became highly restricted and began abandoning

elements of their traditional culture, including in terms of clothing. This transformation is crucial to examine further, as it demonstrates how social and political dynamics can influence women's rights within a society.

The 2000s marked the emergence of the Taliban in Afghan society, along with the implementation of their policies. During this period, Afghanistan experienced political instability. According to Abdulkader Sinno, the Taliban initially emerged as a group of idealistic students. With minimal military training, the group expanded in both numbers and strength. In just five years, they dominated 90% of Afghanistan, eliminating warlords and figures who contributed to division and terror within the state and government (Crews, 2008). This phenomenon illustrates how an extremist ideology can flourish in times of political and social instability, making this study essential to understand its impact on society, particularly on women.

The name Taliban means 'students' in the Pashtun language. Pashtun is one of the largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan. In fact, Sinno, in his book *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (Crews, 2008), states that

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anyone who can mobilize this ethnic group has a high chance of controlling Afghanistan, and the country cannot be governed without their consent (p. 59). It is estimated that the Pashtun ethnic group constitutes nearly half of Afghanistan's population, approximately 25.5 million people (Shiddique, 2019). The oppression and forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Pashtuns in the past have led to major social and economic unrest. The injustice felt by this ethnic group ultimately fueled ethnocentric nationalism, resulting in resentment toward the central government (Lee, 2018). The Taliban's success in seizing power also highlights how ethnic politics play a crucial role in Afghan governance. Therefore, this research is relevant in examining the interconnections between ethnic conflict, politics, and the oppression of women.

According to BBC News, when the Taliban first took control of Kabul in 1996, they imposed strict regulations on Afghan society. The group enforced their interpretation of Islamic law and eliminated any foreign influence. All foreign cultural elements, such as music, television broadcasts, and others, were completely eradicated (Simpson, 2021). Women were among the most affected groups under these conditions. They were banned from working, receiving an education, and even accessing healthcare services. This demonstrates how discriminatory policies against women can have widespread consequences, not only in social aspects but also in economic and health sectors. Therefore, understanding these impacts through research is critical to finding solutions that promote women's rights.

The Civil-Military Fusion Centre revealed that Afghanistan has the second-highest maternal mortality rate in the world. Every year, approximately 15,000 women die due to complications during childbirth (Zyck et al., 2016). According to UNESCO, in terms of education, only about 17% of Afghan women are literate. The number of unemployed women due to various restrictions also continues to increase annually. According to The World Bank, in 2001, the female unemployment rate was only 1.7%, but within three years, it surged to 12.9%. This data confirms that gender inequality does not only impact individual rights but also affects a nation's overall well-being. With low education levels and a high maternal mortality rate, it becomes difficult for a society to progress. Therefore, this study is crucial in exploring policy changes that can help build a more just and equitable society.

The dynamic situation in Afghanistan has led to numerous issues. As in other conflict-ridden nations, women and children are the most vulnerable groups in such conditions. According to Time Magazine (2010), many Afghan women have fallen victim to the country's unjust legal system. One such example is Bibi Aisha, who was imprisoned multiple times simply for escaping

from her abusive husband. She was also denied access to education, despite living near educational institutions (Khan, 2014). According to Hamid (2022), cases of sexual violence against Afghan women are also alarming, reaching 2,746 reported cases in 2005 (p. 33). These facts reveal that gender-based violence remains a serious issue requiring global attention. Through this research, it is hoped that more effective approaches can be found to empower Afghan women to break free from cycles of violence and discrimination.

In August 2021, Afghanistan experienced another historic event—the return of the Taliban to power. The Taliban, an opposition group known for its militancy, successfully overthrew the ruling regime and its allies. This study arises from the major question regarding the fate of Afghan women, as they are one of the most vulnerable groups under the Taliban's rule. By reviewing various literature sources, including books, journal articles, and online news reports, that provide data and insights into the condition of Afghan women, this study aims to analyze the challenges they face in fighting for gender equality. This research also examines the likelihood of the Taliban fulfilling its promises to uphold women's rights in Afghanistan. The overall significance of this study extends beyond Afghanistan, as it sheds light on how political shifts can impact human rights, particularly for women in conflict-ridden and unstable environments.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using the library research method. Library research is conducted by collecting and analyzing various secondary sources, such as books, journal articles, reports from international organizations, and relevant online news. This approach is chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the social, political, and cultural dynamics affecting the condition of women in Afghanistan before and after the Taliban's rise to power. Additionally, library research provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding the phenomenon within its historical and policy context.

The data in this study are obtained from various widely published and highly credible secondary sources. Some of the primary sources include reports from international organizations such as UNESCO and the World Bank, which provide statistical data on literacy rates and women's participation in various sectors. Furthermore, academic journals focusing on gender, politics, and conflict serve as essential references in analyzing changes in the condition of women in Afghanistan from the 1980s to the post-Taliban era in 2021.

The data analysis technique used in this research is content analysis. This method enables the researcher to identify patterns, themes, and relationships between various factors affecting women's rights in Afghanistan. The analysis is conducted systematically by comparing different sources to assess data consistency and understand how government policy changes have impacted the lives of Afghan women.

To enhance the validity of the study, source triangulation is conducted by comparing various pieces of literature from different perspectives. Academic journal articles serve as the primary reference in this study, while reports from international organizations and online news sources are used as complementary materials to confirm the obtained data. Through this approach, the research aims to provide a more comprehensive depiction of the condition of Afghan women in different aspects of life.

The analysis results are presented in a descriptive and interpretative manner to explain the impact of Taliban policies on women's rights in Afghanistan. Through this approach, the study is expected to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges faced by Afghan women and provide insights into policies that could support gender equality in the future.

## Result and Discussion

### *Gender Equality in the Perspective of Islam and Human Rights*

According to BBC News Indonesia, cases of violence against women in Afghanistan immediately appeared in the news shortly after the Taliban declared control of the Afghan capital, Kabul. From the news reports, it was illustrated that there was almost no safe place for women there. The testimony of an Afghan female journalist, Arghand, expressed that as a journalist, she no longer has freedom. Let alone to speak the truth, just holding the profession is very dangerous for her. She admitted that she repeatedly faced threats from Taliban militants (Simpson, 2021).

Kompas.com informs that women's accessibility was again limited after the occupation of Kabul by the Taliban, even in terms of health and public facilities. Pregnant women who are about to enter labor are not treated well, so many of them end up depressed and die. In fact, a woman had to be beaten in public by her own husband just because she told her real name to the doctor who treated her when she suffered from covid 19 (Iswara, 2021).

Another testimony came from Khatira. This policewoman lost one of her eyes while returning home from duty. She was attacked by three armed men from the Taliban group (Davies, 2021). However, the ferocity of the Taliban group does not only target women with

professions that they consider "dangerous", but also women who work in the humanitarian sector are not immune from threats. BBC News Indonesia reported that a midwife named Nooria Haya was forced by the Taliban to completely stop her activities on the grounds that she often met, interacted and discussed with male doctors on a daily basis to discuss patient care and the management of priority clinics for residents (Davies, 2021).

The above cases are a small reflection of the current condition of Afghan women. Women for the Taliban are not a group that should be prioritized in any way and even locked up their freedom to actualize themselves socially. This situation was created in the name of enforcing Islamic law by the Taliban and the reason for maintaining and respecting women's rights according to their version of Islamic law. The Taliban imposed harsh rules and laws on women even when they were children. The Taliban restricted women from obtaining formal education from an early age.

What the Taliban did to women in Afghanistan is contrary to the concept of *Rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy for all nature). God created humans (men and women) as *khalifatullah fil ardh*, i.e. creatures who have the obligation to create prosperity and safety for all creatures on earth (Rusli, 2011). Islam is present to teach humans to maintain a balance of equality and justice values to advance human civilization. Islam rejects injustice, and values harmony, and harmony. Justice in Islam means proportion, which is putting something according to its place and portion, not equally or equally.

Islam teaches to glorify women, but not by limiting their movement and even imprisoning them at home or prohibiting them from developing themselves. Instead, Islam ennobles women by giving them the freedom to hone and actualize themselves properly (Mulia, 2014). Opening access for them to get education, proper health services or giving them the opportunity to participate in becoming leaders, is a way of honoring women according to Islam. Islam has never prohibited women from playing an active role in politics, as long as they do not forget their nature as women, namely carrying out their domestic roles (Romzy et al., 2020).

Getting an education is not a scourge or a sin for women in the view of Islam. Islam is very open to science. History has proven that many Islamic figures contributed to the development of science and technology. This historical fact shows that Islam has never been antipathetic to the development of science and technology.

Men and women have the same rights and obligations in carrying out their roles as humans in social life. There is never a single verse or sentence in the Quran or hadith that mentions the prohibition for women to play an active role in society. On the contrary,

the Quran suggests that women are allowed to be active in their social roles, such as pursuing various professions. In a book entitled *Engendering Democracy*, Phillips (1999) expresses her views on the need for genderization for women in the private sphere, domestic sphere and public sphere simultaneously (Sidik, 2021).

In short, gender justice in Islam is a fair condition for women and men to equally actualize and dedicate themselves to society. Islam teaches gender equality based on the principles of justice, which is to position men and women equally because they are both servants and creations of God. Men and women can exchange roles, but still understand and realize their respective natures.

According to Nasaruddin Umar in Rusli (2011), a professor of Sufism as well as an expert editor of Islamic studies journals from the Islamic University of Jakarta, that the Qur'an has a number of verses that indicate the principles of gender equality, including; QS al-Zariyat (51-56) about the same opportunities that men and women have to become ideal servants of God, QS al-Hujurat (49: 13) about the same opportunities for men and women to be able to reach the degree of *mutaqun* (the pious), Q. S al-An'am (6:165) and Q.S al-Baqarah (2:30) about the affirmation that men and women are equally positioned as caliphs on earth (Rusli, 2011).

In addition, Rusli (2011) explains that there are still verses in the Quran that also imply the meaning of gender equality, such as; QS al-A'raf (7:172), Q.S al-Isra' (17:70), QS al-Baqarah (2:35), QS al-A'raf (7:20), QS al-A'raf (7:23), and QS al-Baqarah (2:187). In fact, there are three suras whose verses explain the equal potential for men and women to achieve, such as; QS Ali Imran (3:195), QS an-Nisa (4:124), and QS an-Nahl (16:97).

Islam does not differentiate the treatment of men and women in matters of social life (Juwita, 2018). In essence, Islam has practiced to position women equal to men in their rights and responsibilities. Although the term gender is not mentioned in the holy book, the practice of respecting the dignity of women is very clearly indicated as in a number of verses mentioned above (Hermanto, 2022). In fact, the Quran discusses women in detail in a special surah, *An-nissa*, which means 'woman'. The surah discusses the rights of women in full along with the regulations that Islam imposes on them, including issues related to the institution of marriage, the family, and other sectors of life (Fatmawati et al., 2024).

The conception of gender is different from sex. Sex is a direct gift from God that cannot be negotiated, while gender is a value formed by social construction. Sex is God's nature, while gender is not. Gender is not carried by humans from birth, but is learned as they interact and socialize with others in their social environment. Gender is formed by the division of roles and human behavior

through a long socio-cultural process. Because gender is not God's nature, gender cannot be absolutely associated with sex although there are exceptions in the special roles of men and women that cannot be replaced due to biological factors, such as; giving birth and breastfeeding. Only women can do that, or fertilize which can only be done by men.

Nasaruddin Umar revealed that the Quran was revealed with the mission of eliminating all forms of oppression and discrimination against humans. The revelation of the Quran is proof of how Islam wants all its people, especially women to live without the shadow of oppression in any form. This is so that all creatures on earth live well and properly. God presents Islam in the midst of humans to create benefit, compassion and justice as a whole (Maulana, 2018).

Dwi Edi Wibowo, a lecturer at the Faculty of Law, Pekalongan University, argues that gender differences in the view of feminists are not a big problem as long as these differences do not cause inequality (Wibowo, 2012). Gender injustice is a system and structure in which both men and women are victims of the system. Gender injustice according to Faqih (1996) is manifested in various forms such as marginalization or the process of economic impoverishment, subordination or insignificance in political decisions, the formation of stereotypes or through negative labeling and so on.

Confusion about the concept of sex and gender still occurs in society, no matter what religion they follow. One of the misunderstandings that result in social inequality is often caused by culture and theological understanding that is not comprehensive. In this world, there are several philosophies and social constructions that are negative towards women, namely: ancient Chinese (Taoist) philosophy, Jewish culture and beliefs, ancient Roman and Greek philosophy, Persian philosophy, Hindu (Indian) culture and religious philosophy, cultural philosophy and beliefs in the Book of Genesis (3,12,16), and pre-Islamic Arabic cultural philosophy. The views of society in these cultural philosophies place women in a low and marginalized position, and even refer to women as the source of problems.

In Islam, Nasaruddin Umar in Maulana (2017) said that classical *mufasir* (interpreters) interpret QS an-Nissa verse 1 that Allah created Eve as the wife of Prophet Adam from his left back rib. In addition, in the same Surah in verse 34, the classical *mufasirs* agreed to interpret *qawwamun* as leader, ruler, responsible and protector. Thus, this argument legitimizes the duties of men over women. This view then becomes an argument for some people to discriminate against women, while positioning them as second-class.

Muttaqin (2016) says that an interpretation is inseparable from the ideology of the interpreter, as well



as the social construction in which the interpreter lives. The violent Taliban represents the Islamic ideology of a sect that it adheres to. In its history as revealed in the book titled *Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present*, the first ideologically driven militant movement in the Pashtun region was Tariqa-yi Muhammadiyah, better known as the Wahabi movement led by Sayyid Ahmed, who hailed from Rai Bareilly in northeast India. The movement was inspired by the teachings of Shah Waliullah. The movement has militant views and thoughts. Its followers are called 'Hindustani fanatics' or Indian mujahideen. The designation depends on who is calling them, Indian Muslims or British (Lee, 2018).

Soumya Awasthi, a security expert at the Vivekananda International Foundation, a think tank in New Delhi, calls the Taliban ideology a 'neo-deobandi' school of Islam because it has deviated from the true teachings of Deobandi Islam, and there are Wahabi thoughts in it (wartaekonomi.co.id). This ideological similarity is one of the reasons a number of conservative Islamic countries support the Taliban. The Wahabi sect is well known for its harsh teachings and wants Islam to return to its glory days with the application of original Islamic law. This belief and spirit is quite difficult for the Taliban to abandon.

Everything that Afghan women are experiencing today is actually a human tragedy. The Taliban, with its conservative Islamic ideology, does not believe in the existence of contextual elements in the teachings of Islam so that it tends to consider the current Islamic teachings to be wrong because they are different from the "original" Islam and have undergone many distortions. This school tries to apply the teachings in the holy book of the Qur'an as the conditions of the era when the book was revealed, namely the time of the Prophet. The Taliban's treatment of Afghan women is a picture of human life in the era of jahiliyah.

From a human rights perspective, what the Taliban did to Afghan women also falls into the category of violations. Referring to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), what is experienced by Afghan women is actually a form of gender-based violence. The Taliban has put Afghan women in a lower position than men. Gender-based violence is a manifestation of historical inequalities in the pattern of power relations between men and women that result in domination and discrimination against women by men and barriers to their progress (Harnoko, 2013).

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said that women's rights are an issue that must be highlighted. Bachelet stated that the Taliban proved not to respect the rights of women to get education and work (dream.co.id: news, 2021). The UN

also said that Afghanistan still fails to protect women victims of violence in the country (Davies, 2021).

In the context of human rights, prohibiting women from getting an education and actualizing themselves in professions and jobs is a form of discrimination. Discrimination itself means the restriction of rights based on ethnicity, race, religion, gender, religion and others (Hamida, 2022). The birth of the concept of human rights as an important issue occurred because of the emergence of human awareness of the importance of recognizing, respecting and realizing the existence of human humanity as a whole (Jamil, 2014).

Human rights are natural rights given by God to every human being, and with these rights attached, every human being can live as a true and dignified human being (Kamil et al., 2007). Human rights include civil rights, political rights, economic rights, social and cultural rights. Human rights are universal, transcending national borders, religion and gender. In the perspective of human rights, all human beings, regardless of gender, have the same rights to obtain various things in an effort to fulfill their needs, including the right to freely express and express opinions, interact with other humans, and even obtain education and health services for a decent life for their future.

What is happening in Afghanistan, especially regarding the restriction of women, is an illustration of the denial of the progress of the times where the denial of the progress of the times is the same as negating the development of science. The Taliban have dichotomized and diametrically positioned science versus religion. Such conditions greatly open up opportunities for the spread of discourse on extremism that has the potential for anarchist actions and even terrorism.

### *Afghan Women through the Ages*

The right to vote for Afghan women was first granted by the government in 1919, just a year after the British and Americans did the same. At that time, Afghan women also had the right to start getting an education (Agustina, 2021). Launching the official statement of the United States state department published in Liputan 6.com, Afghan women in 1920 had experienced significant progress. The atmosphere of tolerance and the era of openness was also very pronounced there, and women contributed quite well to national development at that time (Miranti, 2021).

Afghanistan experienced modernization around the 1920s under the leadership of Amanullah Khan. His consort, Soraya Tarzi, also served as Minister of Education. Both were committed to improving education for women. At that time, the King and Queen also campaigned against the practice of polygamy for men and did not require veiling for women. The Queen

also opened a special school for women during her husband's leadership (Barrow et al., 2022).

Liputan 6.com reported that in the 1960s, Afghanistan had even drafted a constitution that regulated gender equality. This is evidenced by the large number of women who occupied seats in the legislature and worked in the public sector (15%) at that time. It was also revealed that in the early 1990s, around 70% of teachers in schools, and 50% of government employees and students, and around 40% of doctors in Kabul were women (Miranti, 2021).

Agustina (2021) revealed that in the 1970s, Afghanistan began to experience conflict, but at that time Afghanistan's political conditions were relatively stable until the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1978. At that time, Afghan women were very open and quite modern. Many of them became politicians, teachers and university professors. Many of the women in Afghanistan had a good economic life.

Freedom began to diminish when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and gave support to the Mujahideen (Villadsen, 2015). The powerful Mujahideen groups, backed by the Soviet Union, began to commit many acts of violence, especially against women. They began to kill and rape, and tried to seize power in the government system. Things got worse when the Mujahideen clashed with the Taliban. In this dispute, the Taliban won (Agustina, 2021).

In the 1990s, as the Afghan people developed trust in the Taliban, a number of cases of violence against women emerged (Rani et al., 2014). Major Sangeeta Tomar's account reveals that in May 1994, a pregnant woman was reportedly captured by Hezbe Wahdat soldiers (one of the political factions supporting the Taliban) on her way back home. Her family could not find her for a long time (Tomar, 2002).

Tomar (2002) mentions that in that year, the condition of Afghan women also became very difficult, due to the arbitrary treatment of the mujahideen. They kidnapped, beat and even harassed them. She also mentions that there were many cases of women being forcibly taken from their family homes by the mujahideen even though they exchanged them for money. Some of them were taken as wives by their commanders, and others were sold to prostitution rings locally and outside Afghanistan, such as Pakistan (Febriana, 2021).

The year 2001, the historic tragedy in America (September 11), brought a new chapter to Afghanistan. This happened following the rejection of the American request to the Taliban to hand over Osama Bin Laden, the al-Qaeda leader who was considered most responsible for the tragedy that shocked the world. The American entry into Afghanistan slowly minimized the Taliban's power. But the Taliban did not disappear, they

moved to the outskirts of Afghanistan, some of them hiding in caves. Nevertheless, the group continues to spread its influence and remains active in gathering strength, especially in terms of finance. The Taliban remain active in the narcotics trade, mining activities and tax collection (BBC News Indonesia, 2021).

The condition of Afghan women during the American occupation (from 2001 to 2021) is beginning to open up again. Women have regained their freedom to move outside the home, such as school and work. The fulfillment of their needs for food and clean water has also begun to improve. However, after the United States withdrew its troops from Afghanistan since August 2021, women are again worried about their fate. Kompas.com reported that Afghan women began to worry about the return of Afghanistan's conditions to the past, 1996-2001, where the Taliban held power in Afghanistan. They are worried that the Taliban's policies will bring them back to 1996 (Puspaningrum, 2021).

After its success in taking control of Kabul and making the United States withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban began to reimpose its policies on the Afghan people, especially women (Purnomo, 2021). Kompas.com reported that restrictions on activities for women were manifested in the prohibition of activities outside the home for women, listening to western songs or films, dressing up and wearing modern clothes. Not only that, death threats began to be felt by women who occupied strategic positions in the government, as stated by Zafira Ghafari, a female mayor in Afghanistan who is well known as one of the activists defending women's rights (Puspaningrum, 2021).

Tirto.id reveals that discriminatory treatment in various aspects has been the experience of women in Afghanistan for approximately 50 years under the leadership of the Taliban. They were not only limited by cultural traditions and a patriarchal system, but also a government that adhered to hardline Islamic ideology. Then, the arrival of America brought a breath of fresh air that gave hope to women in the country. But unfortunately, it has only been about two decades since women in the country have been improving themselves to continue the process of equalization, the dream must be buried again because the American troops who have been sheltering them have left Afghanistan. Conditions are increasingly felt to be worsening by some parties because the Taliban managed to take back the reins of government in the country nicknamed The Graveyard of Empire (Haryanto, 2021).

#### *The Road to Gender Equality*

Today, the Taliban are touting through the media that they have changed from the Taliban of old. One of their promises that has come to public attention is that this organization will pay attention to women's rights

and put women in a good position without discrimination while still basing it on Islamic law.

The Taliban with its new authority promised five things to the Afghan people. These promises include; 1) respecting women's rights, 2) pardoning all those who are their opponents/enemies, 3) providing security for foreigners and their embassies in Afghanistan, 4) Will not allow its members to fight in the Afghan state, and 5) End drug production (opium) in Afghanistan. Among its promises, the Taliban placed its agenda to respect and care for the rights of Afghan women at the forefront. However, the group emphasized that the rights in question would be determined by the Taliban's version of rules and laws (Kompas, 2021).

Pros and cons have emerged in response to the Taliban's promise. Some of them believed, but many others did not. Most of the country's women think that the Taliban's promise is just a hoax, especially women from professional and activist circles (Rosdiawan et al., 2022). They believe that the Taliban's sweet words are deliberately thrown out only to lure women out of hiding, then subsequently sentenced.

The Afghan people's doubts about the promises of the Taliban, which has transformed into a new organization, and is different from the Taliban when the United States did not occupy Afghanistan, are reasonable (Purnomo, 2021). These doubts are based on many factors. The fact of physical, psychological and sexual violence certainly leaves a deep trauma that is difficult to heal (Tomar, 2002). After a short period of American occupation to help heal some of the trauma, the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, so it is only natural that fear would return (Sairwona, 2024).

Women leaders who have experienced the scars of the Taliban's behavior and have subsequently dedicated themselves to humanitarian activities, express their doubts about all the promises of Afghanistan delivered through the television media. They saw that some of the facts on the ground that occurred after the Taliban's control of Kabul some time ago were not much different from when the Taliban first emerged in 1994. It is this reality that ultimately makes them completely distrust the Taliban's promises and will remain in a position to oppose the group's policies at any time (Lestari, 2021). They say that Afghanistan will never return to normal. Gender equality will never be realized there as long as the Taliban are in charge (BBC Indonesia, 2021).

The record of the condition of Afghan women since Taliban control in the 1990s, records many cases of discrimination and physical and sexual violence against women. Taliban rules, which tend to be one-sided, have created a large gap between men and women in the country. Bans on schooling, working, and even segregated hospital facilities for men and women were a

common sight. Women were treated as if they were merely fulfilling the needs of men (Tomar, 2002).

Distrust of the Taliban's promises also came from foreigners (non-Afghanistans). John Simpson, a senior American journalist, was quoted on the BBC website as having been in Afghanistan in the first years of the American occupation there. He described that the conditions in Afghanistan at that time were very dire. According to him, Afghanistan became the most extreme dictatorial country in history. He also revealed that even though at this time, the year had changed, and the Taliban promised to be more moderate and tolerant of Afghans as soon as this group declared itself in control of Afghanistan again, Simpson remained pessimistic that this would be realized (Liputan6.com news read, 2021).

Since the 1990s, a number of women's activist organizations focused on fighting for women's rights and justice for them have been born. However, their existence has been hampered by many obstacles, one of which is that they do not have the full support of Afghan women themselves.

Rumadaul's research revealed that the UN found many obstacles when trying to protect the rights of Afghan women. These obstacles are caused by several factors in addition to past traumatic factors, namely (Rumadaul, 2017); 1) Afghan traditions that do limit the role of women, 2). Weak rules relating to women's empowerment in society, 3). Weak legal protection of gender equality, 4). Low family and community support for gender equality, and 5). Women's limited knowledge about gender rights.

Traditions in Afghan society are certainly not formed in a short time. They are also influenced by the beliefs of the people. The Taliban ruled Afghanistan for 50 years, which means that the Afghan people are very familiar with Afghanistan's rule of law. Despite being under American control for 20 years, the Taliban's victory in reclaiming Afghanistan is proof that some Afghans still support them.

Another important factor is domestic. As conservative Islamic traditions are well-established in all aspects of Afghan society, gender equality is again new and perhaps even taboo. Public support for gender equality is low due to their lack of knowledge about it (Maimunah et al., 2010). Women who have been accustomed to living under restrictions in many ways may have been able to accept it and not even object to the situation and conditions. The demand for the obligation to take care of domestic roles alone, has made them dissolve and forget about their obligation to fight for their rights to be equal to men (Mufidah, 2018).

History records that the presence of the Taliban once promised a breath of fresh air to the Afghan people, including its women around the 1990s. These promises

were recorded in the Taliban's agenda of struggle when they took action against the ruling government at that time. However, the situation was exactly the opposite when the Taliban had succeeded in taking over the government. Afghanistan became a country that abandoned modernity until America came in 2001.

The arrival of the Americans at that time was actually related to the events of September 11, 2001 in America. Osama Bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, became the most wanted party by America as the person responsible for the tragedy in the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon at that time (Syafur, 2014). The Taliban's rejection of the American request for Afghanistan to hand over Osama to the Americans for execution, eventually triggered the United States to send its troops there in alliance with the opposing parties to fight the Taliban.

During its occupation of Afghanistan, the US did manage to get the Taliban out of the way, but the group did not really die. The Taliban with its allies (Islamic countries as well as donors), made it still have the strength, especially financially, to keep fighting until it finally managed to reclaim the Afghan government after 20 years of endless conflict.

Another factor that is also taken into consideration is that the existence of the Taliban is recognized abroad as a 'haven' for conservative Islamic militants from all over the world (International, kontan.co.id, 2021). For this reason, it will be difficult for the Taliban to change its identity or leadership pattern in Afghanistan in the future because it is not impossible that supporting Islamic countries will be disappointed and withdraw their support if the Taliban transforms. In addition, there is an alliance between the Taliban and al-Qaeda which is bound by a commitment to jointly carry out a global Islamic struggle with each trying to conquer the government in their respective countries (Mirdad et al., 2018).

## Conclusion

For Afghan women, demanding equality is an agenda that requires time and a long process due to the interconnected internal and external factors that are difficult to unravel. They must be able to 'negotiate' not only with the Taliban but also with society and even with their fellow women. Fighting for equality means challenging rules and eliminating stigma in a society that has long been accustomed to Islamic law, a task that is not easy to achieve, though not impossible. Women in the country have a significant responsibility to raise awareness, especially among fellow women, about the meaning of equality in order to build a more just civilization. Meanwhile, although Islamic countries that

support the Taliban are technologically literate and have embraced modernization, their Islamic ideology remains rooted in conservative teachings that they believe to be the original principles of Islam. Technological advancement does not necessarily align with women's progress, as the governmental systems and the condition of women in these supporting countries indicate that the Taliban will likely find it difficult to abandon their original character. The Taliban will remain conservative in governing Afghanistan, as modernization and technology do not automatically bring changes to laws and policies that support women. By invoking religious arguments, the Taliban will continue to uphold their beliefs based on the conservative interpretations of classical scholars, meaning that the protection of women will likely continue according to their own definition, as belief is something difficult to change. This makes freedom and gender equality, from the perspective of modern society, continue to face a steep path, if not nearly impossible to achieve. Furthermore, this study does not take into account other factors such as health literacy levels, social support, or economic conditions, which also play a significant role in an individual's physical and mental health as well as their ability to perform daily activities. These factors may further clarify the link between health and limitations in daily activities, further highlighting the complexity of Afghan women's struggle for equality.

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Preparation of M.A.A, T.R, B.T., proposals; M.A.A data collection; T.R., Data analysis and preparation of articles; M.A.A, B.T., Correction of data results and article; T.R, B.T., validation; B.T.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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