EXTREMISM AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SOUTH ASIA

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2022

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Copy-editor: Bhavini Pant

An IMADR Project supported by The "Upholding Rights: Minorities Beyond Borders" Project of the European Union
EIDHR/2018/400-437

This publication is supported by the European Union.
The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the writers and the partners who implemented the project and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of European Union.

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Afghanistan is the worst country on earth to be a woman[1]. Rising religious extremism and protracted violence has taken its toll on women's fundamental human rights. Taliban's religious extremism is strongly shaped by patriarchal narratives that see empowered women as a threat to the existing social system and antithetical to its traditional tribal cultures. Since Taliban returned to power on August 15, 2021, women in Afghanistan have lost every basic human right. They have lost the right to education, to work, to freedom of expression, of movement, to assemble, to social security, to legal protection and to practice culture and art. All laws that criminalised violence against women have been repealed, including the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW). Women have no access to legal protection or justice.

This paper studies the impact of religious extremism on gender-based violence in Afghanistan, with a focus on Taliban. The paper begins by explaining the social, educational, cultural and theological basis of Taliban to show issues and concepts underpinning the group's formative and definitive structures. These dynamics are discussed in terms of their implications on gender-based violence. Then, the paper discusses women's status from mid-1990s to 2022, i.e., the era influenced by Taliban. The paper concludes by reviewing different types of gender-based violence, highlighting its impact on the actual lives of women of Afghanistan.

INTRODUCTION

Research confirms that gender-based violence is worsened by extremist ideologies—it is nurtured in conflict settings. Extremists' beliefs often intersect with misogyny, male supremacy, patriarchy and toxic masculinity in powerful and mutually reinforcing ways, fuelling violence against women. As the "chief organising principle" of politics, gender has delineated the political identification of extremist groups.[2] Taliban has used gender as a policing force to sustain patriarchy and ensure that women and girls obey the normative order. Additionally, the Taliban has also used specific aspects of Islam to justify marginalising, privatising and delegitimising women and their practices.[3]

Gynophobia or the proven fear of females is a common psychological issue in religiously orthodox, male-dominated societies. Misogynistic ideologies and attitudes stem from this irrational fear.[4] Misogyny has always been at the core of extremist narratives—targeting women is considered a legitimate political ideology.[5] During (and in the aftermath of) conflict, this phobia is utilised to the advantage of extremists. Women are targeted with diverse forms of sexual violence (mass rapes, forced pregnancy, forced prostitution, forced marriage and sexual slavery). Women are also subject to the larger consequences of such targeted

violence in the form of domestic violence, extreme economic vulnerability and secondary victimisation by formal institutions.[6]

Unfortunately, gender tends to be ignored in literature on terrorism and political violence.[7] The world has always been more concerned with the political and military role of religious extremists. Masooda Bano's ethnographic study of Deobandi madrassahs Pakistan finds that "their social milieu is completely ignored."[8] Neglecting the role of madrassahs—and their links to socio-cultural settings where gender-based violence is committed—is amply evident in Afghanistan's case as well. In research, attention has been limited to how women have been reduced to subjects by these institutions; there has been no questioning of the religious fundamentals of Islam that enable these practices in the first place. Amina Wadud puts it perfectly: "the scarcity of works that challenge the paradigmatic basis of Islamic thought for the absence of gender, as a principal category of thought and as aspect of analysis in the articulation of Islamic thought could not be more glaring".[9]

While on one hand, literature is rather silent, I also found little engagement among Deobandi teachings—curriculum of Jihadi groups like the Taliban—with gender and ethnographic literature. Performing these analyses is key to untangling the intersection of gender with extremist groups. This clarity leads to effective and responsive policies that address gender-based violence. I hope this paper succeeds in being a valuable contribution to the knowledge and literature on gender-based violence in Afghanistan.

BIRTH AND RISE OF THE TALIBAN: RHETORIC, IDEOLOGY AND SOCIO-CULTURAL BASIS

Taliban defines itself as *mujahideen*—fighters in a "holy war" against the occupiers and corrupters of Islamic values. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan towards the end of 1979, mainstream rebel movements appealed to Islam to enhance their legitimacy and mobilise popular support. Taliban's fundamental interpretation of Islam—rooted in ultra-conservative and traditional constructs as a political ideology—had discriminatory and repressive consequences on women. Religious ideas are closely associated with sociological conditions; they do not act independently. Over time, Islam's radicalisation—using an acutely patriarchal interpretation of the religion—has made serious inroads into the social and political thought and organisations in Afghanistan. This has come at a great cost to women's liberty, human dignity and freedom.

Religious radicalisation is not exclusive to Islam—we see it in Christianity and Judaism too. For instance, Jewish women were not allowed to study the Torah, Christian wives were instructed to be "obedient" to their husbands. But the Taliban is unique because its submission to theology is absolute. They derive fundamental principles for everything–from culture, to curriculum, to justice–from religious doctrine. As a result, their approach has been deeply dehumanizing.[10] The Deobandi doctrine is considered "final" and "unquestionable"; it quotes the Quran and *Sunnah* to demand absolute obedience and submission.[11]

During the Soviet invasion, millions of refugees coming from Afghanistan ended up in Deobandi madrassahs in Pakistan. Deobandi madrassah teachers were hardened followers of the Hanafi school of Sunni jurisprudence, which was constructed by Pakistan's Islamic fundamentalist parties and run by *mullahs* (clergy). Orthodox Islamic teaching is gender-discriminatory and represses women. As discussed above, power apparatuses are inextricably tied to sexual relations. In orthodox Islam, sexual relations hinge on the notion of "pious womanhood".[12] Their curriculum sees women as a source of temptation that induces immoral and sinful behaviour, and intimidates male chastity. Women are seen as subjective, dependent on men, deficient in intelligence and possessing a poor aptitude. Orthodox Islam's determination to control women's lives and deny them agency revolves around the same fear—avoiding "sin". [13] Deobandi madrassah students are isolated from people of other sexes and brainwashed with this phobia. Once they graduate, they know nothing but how to punitively restrict women, and are practically unmatched in their zeal.

Taliban's perspectives often adhere to the cultural values of *Pashtunwali,* or what they call "Afghaniat, Afghanism".[14] *Pashtunwali* refers to the Pashtuns' code of conduct. *Pashtunwali* is organised around three principles—it asks men to show hospitality to other men, demands chastity of women to be sacrosanct and insists on revenging any insult upon one's "honour".[15] There is a proverb in Pashtu that says, "*ښځه یا په کور یا په ګور*", which translates to, "a woman should either be in the house or in the grave". When seen in context, each code reinforces the entitlement of men over women and involves different forms of gender-based violence. Code of conducts that demand religious and social responsibility from men revolve around the idea of protecting their "honour", which is defined by sexual monogamy of women in their family. Transgression by a woman violates the relative male's "honour" and is considered a grave embarrassment. It allows men to inflict any type of physical or psychological violence on women.

In Afghanistan, women's actions are continuously associated with the reputation of her family and community. One of the first and most famous decrees Taliban issued was on women's clothing. The decree stated that men would be punished if women failed to dress according to the rule when stepping outside the house. Taliban not only used the publicity it received as propaganda to recruit people but also to consolidate the concept of "honour", tightly binding communities around it.

The protracted military conflict has deeply institutionalised their code within the social and political structure of Afghanistan. Gender-based violence is everywhere in the country. 243 cases of "honour killings" registered between March 2011 and April 2013 by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) shows that of the perpetrators, 39% were husbands, 15% brothers, 9% fathers, 6% brothers-in-law, 5% other family members and the remaining 26% were "relatives".[16]

Badal is a method of revenge listed in the *Pashtunwali*. There is an old Pashtu proverb that goes, "a Pashtun took revenge after a hundred years and said "I took *badal* too"". According to the code of *Badal*, conflicts are resolved by "trading" a female member of perpetrator's family via marriage to a member of victim's family, in exchange for the "crime" committed. She must not have had sex before and needless to say, this exchange happens without her consent. This tradition was designed to bring a permanent end to hostility that would otherwise lead to perpetual bloodshed. As she is held responsible for a crime she didn't commit, the woman suffers physical and mental violence in her new home.

Parallel to the judiciary, an informal justice system operates as a legitimate conflict resolution mechanism in Afghanistan. This system comprises of local councils known as *shuras* and *jirgas* which are led by elderly male members of the community. These "judges" investigate cases and issue rulings without formal legal training, basing their decisions on local customs or ultra-conservative interpretations of the *Shari'a*.[17] *Shuras* never include women of the community as members or even participants, as a result of which their decisions often ensure severely discriminatory outcomes with fatal consequences for women. Prominent rulings issued by *shuras* include sentencing women to flogging, death by stoning or lashing. They tend to focus on community reconciliation over individual rights.

There is no formal written or legal regulation followed by *shuras.* Any manner perceived practical by the local community is used to resolve the disputes. For example, the practice of *badal* is one of the most prominent means of conflict resolution. Taliban has been using *shuras* as ad-hoc *Shari'a* courts to deliver justice when issues of "moral crimes", "honour killings", or "land disputes" come up.

Throughout the modern history of Afghanistan, tribal linkages and religious authorities have been stronger than the formal authority of an elected government. When Kabul introduced reforms that contradicted tribal or religious customs, it often failed to enforce them or convince the opposition. Because Afghanistan's Central Government lacked strong social presence and failed to maintain the rule of law, they had to appease religious authority. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has documented multiple incidents where survivors' families, NGOs and EVAW law institutions redirected cases of violence against women to resolution via informal mediation. In many cases, EVAW law institutions either coordinated or participated in these mediation processes.[18]

UNAMA also found that Afghan police often fail to forward these cases—particularly of "honour killings"—to prosecutors. Throughout this highly fraught process of redressal, women face an additional risk of abuse. The Judiciary fails to operate properly, discouraging citizens from relying on law enforcement institutions. As a result, a widespread culture of impunity has discouraged women from reporting.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN FROM MID-1990S TO 2022

First Era of Taliban: 1996-2001

After the Soviet Union invasion in late 1979 and the bloody civil war that followed, Taliban took power on 30 September 1996. They debarred all laws that protected women's rights or respected the dignity of women, basically imprisoning women within their houses overnight.

Taliban practises the most medieval and brutal form of gender politics on earth. on taking power, Taliban banned girls from going to school, working, leaving the house without a male "chaperone" and political participation. Women were not only denied basic human rights but were also violently prohibited from appearing in public spaces. Severe social restrictions and lack of free movement meant women had no access to healthcare and widows and their children were effectively sentenced to starvation.

In first era of Taliban from 1996-2001, the life expectancy of a woman went down to 45 years, mortality during childbirth raised to 1,100 per 100,000 childbearing women, and the number of women going to work or attending formal school went down to zero.[19] The Taliban perpetrated egregious acts of violence against women including rape, abduction and forced marriage.[20] Unfortunately, these massive violations committed during this period remain largely undocumented due to an embargo on foreign media by Taliban.

The "Ministry of Vice and Virtue" was and still is Taliban's state agency responsible for supervising public morality. Their ultra-conservative "morality and modesty" norms were centred entirely around women's dress, hair length, movement without a male "chaperone". The Ministry ruthlessly enforced these restrictions on women and men using public beatings and imprisonment.[21] The Ministry's officials were widely known for arbitrarily using violence and abuse in public spaces against women and girls. The Ministry's militiamen, known as "religious police" were authorised to impose punishment on the spot without any due process, resulting in instances where they beat women or arrested them for not covering their ankles properly. In research conducted by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), 22% of the respondents reported being detained and abused by Taliban. 72% of infractions reported were related to alleged violation of Taliban's dress code for women.[22]

To build an atmosphere of fear-induced compliance, Taliban often publicly punished women by accusing them of adultery and murder without due process. In November 1999, Taliban shot and killed Zarmina in front of 30,000 people in Kabul football stadium.[23] They announced the prosecution over public radio and asked people to assemble at the stadium to witness it. On May 2000, Suriya was stoned to death by Taliban at a sports stadium in Mazar-e-Sharif in Northern Afghanistan.[24] They accused her of adultery and announced it on Radio Shariat, a station operated by Taliban. No one knew what happened to her male partner.

During these years, Taliban imposed a media blackout on Afghanistan and foreign journalists were not allowed to interview women. Journalists were always escorted by a *Talib* to ensure that these rules were enforced. Therefore, there is not enough data to present a statistical analysis on gender-based violence during this time. One of the rare studies that took place was conducted by PHR. In their 1998 survey that covered 160 women, 77% reported poor access to healthcare, 20% reported no access at all, 71% reported a decline in their physical condition, 81% reported a decline in their mental condition, 97% met the diagnostic criteria for depression, 86% showed symptoms of anxiety, 42% met the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder and 21% reported having suicidal thoughts "extremely often" or "quite often".[25]

Democratisation and Efforts to Eliminate Gender-based Violence: 2001-2021

After Taliban was overthrown in 2001, many gender-specific restrictions were lifted and women's rights experienced significant improvement. Millions of girls enrolled in schools, women returned to the workforce and ran for office. Afghanistan's Constitution was adopted in 2004 which recognised equal rights for women and the country joined different international conventions including the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Various affirmative action legislations were adopted to guarantee the presence of women in civil service and political positions. For instance, the 2005 Affirmative Action law allocated 30% of Parliament seats for women. Since Afghanistan's economy was highly dependent on foreign aid, the Government had to meet certain indicators toward gender equality.

In 2009, the EVAW law was adopted by a Presidential decree and reconfirmed in 2018. The law recognised 22 acts of abuse towards women as criminal offences including rape, battery, forced marriage, preventing women from acquiring property and prohibiting a woman or girl from going to school or work.[26] Though as early as the 1960s, the Afghanistan Constitution assured equality for women, this was the first time that a broad range of abuses (including rape) were defined and criminalised by law. Noticeably, the law did not address religiously defined "moral crimes" under which most women are persecuted.[27]

The law had to be passed via a Presidential decree because it never succeeded in being passed by the Parliament. Over half of the Afghanistan Parliament consisted of men who had fought as *mujahideen* and supported a broadly conservative agenda. Barring a few members, the remaining non-*mujahideen* had been raised in a steeply patriarchal setting and refused to see women as equal human beings. In 2013, the Parliament revised electoral law to reduce the number of seats reserved for women down to 20%.

Post 2001, a variety of laws and policies were introduced, often due to funding requirements of international donors. But Afghanistan continued to remain the worst country for women because its conservative socio-cultural structures

kept resisting these laws. A highly centralised and corrupt government—mainly focused on Kabul—failed to enforce the law in rural areas, where around 71% of Afghanistan's citizens live. There was no formal legal system. [28] Prosecutors and judges practicing in rural areas were unaware of the EVAW law and were constantly pressurised—by familial loyalties, threats, bribery or because a religious leader had declared the law "un-Islamic"—to release defendants. Female victims faced stringent reprisal ranging from imprisonment to extrajudicial murder.[29]

Second Era of Taliban: August 2021-Present

On August 15, 2022, women in Afghanistan lost all their hard-won rights when Taliban recaptured Kabul after 21 years. Since then, Taliban has issued and enforced over 40 decrees severely limiting women's rights. Once again, women have lost the right to education, to work, to freedom of expression, to freedom of movement, to assemble, to social security, to legal protection and to practice culture and art. Taliban has also deprived women of all cultural and artistic rights, erasing women artists in poetry, literature, music, drama, cinema and painting. All laws that criminalised violence against women have been repealed, including the EVAW Law. Once again, women have no access to legal protection and justice.

As I write this paper, more than a year has passed since the Taliban's ban on girls returning to secondary school. Afghanistan is the only country on earth where girls are not allowed to go to school or attend sports by law. Women's presence in the public sector has shot down to 0% except for the health sector. 95% of women journalists have quit or been forced out of their jobs since the media is banned from featuring women.

A highly sexualised dress code has been imposed on women.[30] Taliban's most recent decree has instructed male members of the family to "chaperone" women family members outside the house and ensure they observe "modest dressing" (a black hijab that covers the wearer from head to toe). The decree states that if men fail to ensure that their women family members follow these rules, they will be punished and even imprisoned for three days.[31] With one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the world, Taliban has authorised men to "control" women in their families. Women have nowhere to go in case they—or their children, elderly relatives—face life-threatening violence.

In mid-September 2021, Taliban forcibly took 70 protesters (40 were women) to Mazar city. Nine women have not returned yet.[32] The bodies of eight women were found in various locations across the city. Released detainees reported that they suffered torture, rape and assault in Taliban custody. Right after a media report on this incident, the dead body of activist Hanifa Nazari was found outside her house. [33] Initially Taliban denied having abducted her, but later their spokesperson confirmed to *New York Times* that they had ordered a sweep of women activists to "bring them to justice". In October 2021, the Taliban forcibly took Alia Azizi, the head of Herat's female prison. She is still missing. On the night of the 19 January 2022, Taliban forces raided houses of protest organisers and

kidnapped Parwana Ibrahimkhil, Zahra Mohammadi, Mursal Ayar, Tamana Zaryab Paryani and her three sisters. On 11 February 2022, Taliban raided a safehouse for female protesters and arbitrarily imprisoned them.

Women in Afghanistan have completely lost access to justice. However, they continue to gather and protest in closed settings without showing their faces, and share their videos online.

Prevalent Types of Gender-based Violence in Afghanistan

Domestic Violence

It is often said that "the home is the most dangerous place for women in Afghanistan." Domestic violence is the most prevalent form of violence against women. 9 out of 10 women experience at least one form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime.[34] The AIHRC received complaints confirming that 95.8% of cases occurred at home.[35] Data from the Ministry of Women Affairs came to the same conclusion, and reported that the most prevalent form of violence was battery and laceration. Of 4,541 registered cases, 371 were of femicide. Violence has become so deeply internalised within society that 92% women believe that a spouse is justified in hitting or beating his wife. Going out without telling the husband (78%), accidentally burning food (21%), wearing inappropriate clothing (63%), and refusing sex are among the reasons that respondents believed a husband could beat his wife.[36] Data for other countries shows that these rates change with women's level of education. Unfortunately, 82% of all women in Afghanistan have no education. Their understanding and exposure mainly come from their families and communities, which predominantly live according to conservative or ultra-conservative religious norms.

Due to cultural normalization and denial of domestic violence as a "family matter" such crimes often remained unreported. Only a small number of domestic violence cases which result in harsh physical, sexual and psychological harm are reported.

Femicide

After domestic violence, femicide is the second-most frequent instance of violence reported in Afghanistan. AIHRC's data bank shows that 277, 234 and 167 cases of murder were registered within the first months of 2020, 2018 and 2017 consecutively.[37] In 2020, the Ministry of Women Affairs also documented 371 cases of murder of women. A majority of these cases were reported to be "honour killings".

There is a strong culture of impunity surrounding "honour killing", both legally and informally. Article 398 of the Afghanistan Penal Code recognises "honour killings" as a minor crime. It states that a "man who sees his wife or other family members in a compromising position and kills or injures one or both of

them in order to defend his dignity and respect will not be prosecuted for violent assault or murder."[38] In case the man's actions result in death, the law specifies a maximum of two years punishment. AIHRC reports show that in early 2020, perpetrators of 158 out of 167 cases escaped trial by not being prosecuted properly by law enforcement agencies. Between January 2016 and December 2017, UNAMA monitored 280 cases of "honour killings" and found that only 18% received some punishment. The rest ended in impunity for the perpetrator.[39]

Between January 2016 and December 2017, UNAMA also found that the police only forwarded one-third of documented cases over to prosecutors, encouraging the remaining victims to follow informal forms of redressal via *shuras* and *jirgas.* As discussed earlier, using *jirga* as a means of conflict resolution results in the increased defencelessness of women and continued impunity since the code of conduct followed by these bodies—the *Pashtunwali*—is severely patriarchal.

Forced Marriages and Child Marriages

57% of girls in Afghanistan are married before they turn 16 and 60-80% of all marriages are forced.[40] Due to this, one in ten girls aged 15-19 give birth every year. These girls are deeply vulnerable to death due to pregnancy complications, as they also have to deal with steeply curbed access to reproductive services and information.[41] UNICEF estimates that pregnancy-related mortality ratio of women aged 15 to 19 is 531 deaths per 100,000 live births, compared to 257 deaths per 100,000 live births for women aged 20 and 24 years.

Child marriages are also one of the main reasons for widespread domestic violence. Social systems are highly gender-stratified and minor girls often cannot deliver responsibilities expected of them in the household. Girls also believe in gender-based violence as a norm. 85% women aged 15 to 19 believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife.[42] An estimated 2,000 women and girls in Afghanistan attempt suicide by setting themselves on fire each year, which has been linked to widespread domestic violence and early or forced marriages.[43]

"Moral Crimes"

Half of the total number of women in prisons and all girls in Juvenile Detention Centres were arrested on charges of committing a "moral crime". These crimes include escaping domestic violence, forced marriage and other forms of abuse, and having a sexual affair outside of marriage. Women blamed for *zina*—which means having sex with someone not one's spouse—are actually often victims of rape or forced prostitution but are being punished for it.

Punishing women for moral crimes reveals the dark and dehumanising reality of society viz-a-viz women. It clearly shows how extremists use religious fundamentalism to punish women. Article 427 of the Penal Code makes sexual intercourse outside the marriage punishable by long-term imprisonment. But there is no word in the Penal Code to define "moral crimes" like running away from an

abusive situation. The justice system has continuously failed such women. Instead of getting the help they need, these women face disrespect, criminal charges and imprisonment.

Jirgas and *shuras* impose vicious punishment on women for "moral crimes". These bodies of self-appointed judges often sentence women to lashing, whipping, stoning and execution. For instance:

- In April 2021, a woman was flogged and lashed inside her house because of a punishment issued by the local *shura* who was led by a Taliban judge. In his interview he said, "I recently ordered the flogging of a woman inside her home. Relatives and neighbours came to us and said there were witnesses to this man and woman being together." No due process was followed to investigate the charges.

- In November 2019, a woman was shot dead by her brother and father in Kohistan Faryab. The Taliban officials charged her with "elopement" after it was revealed that she had escaped an abusive situation in her house.[44]

Conclusion

I conclude with what I started this paper with: Afghanistan is the worst country on earth to be a woman.[45] In Afghanistan, structures of extremism are shaped by toxic patriarchal narratives. Threatened by their fear of women, extremists push to protect neopatriarchy by imposing strongly anti-liberal and hegemonic rules on them. The protracted religious and violent extremism has worsened this situation by strengthening a social, cultural and political attitude that is actively hostile towards women. Taliban has nurtured greater misogyny and gender-based violence to their advantage. Their takeover of Afghanistan has accelerated the country's crisis of women's rights where every woman has been stripped of human dignity. For consecutive years, Afghanistan has ranked lowest on every list when it comes gender-based violence and highest in the need for protection of women.

It must be noted that I don't claim that Taliban are solely reducible to radicalised Islamic doctrines, and are the only reason for the rise of gender-based violence in Afghanistan. There are certainly other factors such as the weakness of the state machinery, protracted conflict, hyper-nationalism and tribalism, racism, poverty and illiteracy. These factors are all equally significant in shaping the extreme hostility of religious extremists towards women.

Data on types of gender-based violence presented in the paper are from before August 2021 as we do not have data after that period. Given that women do not have access to legal protection or the means to file a complaint, although we don't have access to data to corroborate the same, I am confident that the situation is far worse than what is presented here.

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