

Women in Afghanistan: the back story

Afghanistan has a tumultuous recent past. In the last three decades, the country has been occupied by communist Soviet troops and US-led international forces, and in the years in between has been ruled by militant groups and the infamous oppressive Islamic Taliban.



Throughout the changing political landscape of Afghanistan in the last fifty years, women's rights have been exploited by different groups for political gain, sometimes being improved but often being abused. 'Afghan women were the ones who lost most from the war and militarisation.' Horia Mosadiq.

Horia Mosadiq was a young girl when Russia invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Now Horia works at Amnesty as our Afghanistan Researcher. Listen to the audio clip below to hear Horia's overview of thirty years of complex and fraught history, and the impact that occupation and militarisation has had on the women and girls living in Afghanistan.

Before the 1979 invasion

Think of women in Afghanistan now, and you'll probably recall pictures in the media of women in full-body burqas, perhaps the famous National Geographic photograph of 'the Afghan girl', or prominent figures murdered for visibly defending women's rights. But it hasn't always been this way.



'As a girl, I remember my mother wearing miniskirts and taking us to the cinema. My aunt went to university in Kabul.' Horia

Until the conflict of the 1970s, the 20th Century had seen relatively steady progression for women's rights in the country. Afghan women were first eligible to vote in 1919 - only a year after women in the UK were

given voting rights, and a year before the women in the United States were allowed to vote. In the 1950s purdah (gendered separation) was abolished; in the 1960s a new constitution brought equality to many areas of life, including political participation.

But during coups and Soviet occupation in the 1970s, through civil conflict between Mujahideen groups and government forces in the '80s and '90s, and then under Taliban rule, women in Afghanistan had their rights increasingly rolled back.

Taliban Rule in the 1990s



The Taliban are now notorious for their human rights abuses. The group emerged in 1994 after years of conflict. Many of their members were former Mujahideen fighters who had been trained in Pakistan during Afghanistan's civil war in the '80s and '90s. They came together with the aim of making Afghanistan an Islamic state. The Taliban ruled in Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001.

Denying women human rights

Under the Taliban, women and girls were discriminated against in many ways, for the 'crime' of being born a girl. The Taliban enforced their version of Islamic Sharia law. Women and girls were:

- Banned from going to school or studying
- Banned from working
- Banned from leaving the house without a male chaperone
- Banned from showing their skin in public
- Banned from accessing healthcare delivered by men (with women forbidden from working, healthcare was virtually inaccessible)
- Banned from being involved in politics or speaking publicly.

There were many other ways their rights were denied to them. Women were essentially invisible in public life, imprisoned in their home. In Kabul, residents were ordered to cover their ground and first-floor windows so women inside could not be seen from the street. If a woman left the house, it was in a full body veil (burqa), accompanied by a male relative: she had no independence.

If she disobeyed these discriminatory laws, punishments were harsh. A woman could be flogged for showing an inch or two of skin under her full-body burqa, beaten for attempting to study, stoned to death if she was found guilty of adultery.

Rape and violence against women and girls was rife. Afghan women were brutalised in the law and in nearly every aspect of their daily life. A woman in Kabul had the end of her thumb cut off for wearing nail varnish, for example, in 1996.

'They shot my father right in front of me. It was nine o'clock at night. They came to our house and told him they had orders to kill him because he allowed me to go to school. The Mujahideen had already stopped me from going to school, but that was not enough. I cannot describe what they did to me after killing my father...'

A fifteen year-old girl in Kabul, 1995

International intervention in 2001

The US led an international military campaign intervening in Afghanistan immediately following the attacks on September 11 2001.

World leaders, including those from the UK and USA, regularly cited the need to improve Afghan women's rights as justification for the intervention.

'There cannot be true peace and recovery in Afghanistan without a restoration of the rights of women.' UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

'The recovery of Afghanistan must entail a restoration of the rights of Afghan women, indeed, it will not be possible without them.' US Secretary of State Colin Powell

'The conflict will not be the end. We will not walk away, as the outside world has done so many times before.' UK Prime Minister Tony Blair

The Taliban were ousted from power by the end of 2001.

In the years following international intervention, many schools opened their doors to girls and women went back to work. There was progress towards equality: a new constitution in 2003 enshrined women's rights in it, and in 2009 Afghanistan adopted the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law.

But the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in August 2021, and violence and discrimination against women and girls continues - all over Afghanistan. In 2011 it was named 'the most dangerous country' to be a woman.

Now, women are still routinely discriminated against, abused and persecuted. There is lots to be done before the equality of political rhetoric becomes an everyday reality for women in Afghanistan.