

Afghan Women in History: The 20th Century

By the early 20th century Afghanistan was undergoing a modernization process with many examples of transformative social change, such as the spread of education and progressive changes in the status of women. As in many other countries in the world, in Afghanistan there has always been discrimination against women. The challenges women face have transformed over time, and there have always been sharp differences in the status of women in rural and urban areas, and differences depending on their ethnicity, sect, education and other factors. Yet, Afghanistan has a far more liberal past with regards to women's rights than is often known; and Afghan women have long been mobilizing for greater rights. Afghanistan's diverse population, home to both Sunni and Shia Muslims as well as a small Seikh population, and its diverse traditions have meant changing and competing interpretations of what Islam says about women's rights. This has often meant varied attitudes and behaviour from men towards gender issues.

"It is not about the West wanting Afghanistan to Westernize, it's about wanting Afghans to modernize."

- Nasrine Gross, founder of the Roqia Centre for Rights, Studies and Education, Kabul.

Afghan women's organizations working to secure greater rights have often turned to the multitude of interpretations of Islamic law (sharia) and principles such as the canon that champions women's rights to equality, justice, education and the pursuit of knowledge, and community service.

"If any do deeds of righteousness-be they male or female and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them."

- Sura 4, verse 124 of the Qur'an

"To seek knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim."

- Islamic hadith, declared authentic by Shaikh Muhammad Naasir-ud-Deen Al-Albaani

As early as 1880-1901, the Afghan ruler, Abdul Rahman Khan was making incremental changes to further women's rights. His wife, Bobo Jan, dressed without a veil and represented her husband in reconciliation disputes. The renowned scholar of Afghanistan, Nancy Hatch Dupree has described Bobo Jan as riding horses and training her maidservants in military exercises. She had a keen interest in politics and went on numerous delicate missions to discuss politics between contending parties (1986).

In the 1920s, following the Anglo-Russian agreement which guaranteed independence for Afghanistan, the ruling Emir Amanullah devoted

himself to modernizing his country. He made political and social changes that included extending personal freedom and equal rights to all Afghans. His social reforms included a new dress code, which permitted women in Kabul to go unveiled and gave officials the right to wear western dress. The purdah (screening or seclusion of women to prevent contact from strangers) was discouraged as was the wearing of a veil or burqa. Amanullah said, "Religion does not require women to veil their hands, feet and faces or enjoin any special type of veil." His wife, Queen Soraya, called for women to shed the veil and she did so publicly herself.

"Do not think that our nation needs only men to serve it. Women should also take part as women did in the early years of Islam. The valuable services rendered by women are recounted throughout history"... "From their examples we learn that we must all contribute toward the development of our nation and that this cannot be done without being equipped with knowledge. So we should all attempt to acquire as much knowledge as possible in order that we may render our services to society in the manner of the women of early Islam."

- Queen Soraya, 1926



In the 1920s, the emancipation of women was spreading throughout the world, and Afghans were taking part. The first school for girls, Masturat, which means “covered ones”, was opened in 1921. Among the illustrious graduates were future government ministers, members of the ruling council, and university professors. In 1923, women were legally granted freedom of choice in marriage. Prior to this, women were to marry by their first menstrual period, a fundamentalist practice the Taliban re-introduced during their regime. Amanullah’s sister, Seraj al Banet, was also instrumental in the early women’s rights movement in Afghanistan.

“Knowledge is not a man’s monopoly. Women also deserve to be knowledgeable”... “We must read about famous women in the world, to know that women can achieve exactly what men achieve.”

- Seraj al Banet, 1923

In 1928, the first group of Afghan women left the country to attend school in Turkey. One of them was the mother of the founder of the Toronto-based Afghan Women’s Organization, Adeena Niazi. Adeena explained, “As one of the first Afghan women to be educated abroad, my mother felt very lucky.”

The 1940s and 1950s saw women becoming nurses, doctors and teachers. From 1959-1965, women enrolled in university and entered the workforce and civil service in vast numbers. Women started graduating from the medical school and law faculty at Kabul University by 1963, and women were entering sports in larger numbers. By the 1960s, women with and without the veil mixed freely in the streets of urban areas, and continued to advance into senior government positions. The number of women attending Kabul University increased every year as did the number

of women studying abroad. The first two women senators were appointed in 1965. And from 1966-1971, fourteen women were appointed as judges to courts of Islamic jurisprudence. Statistics from the 1960s show that around 8% of the female population earned income. Most of these women lived in urban centers, and the majority were professionals, technicians and administrators employed by the government. Many worked in health and education. Others worked for the police, the army, airlines, and in government textile, ceramic, food processing and prefab construction factories. A smaller number of women worked in private industry and a few were self-employed.



Above: Afghan women arriving to classes in Kabul during the 1960s.

In 1973, a prince and cousin of the ruling king, Mohammed Daoud Khan, overthrew the monarchy and took power of the country. Khan had been prime minister from 1953-1963 and had already been working to introduce reforms for women’s emancipation. The reforms continued into the 1970s, along with Khan’s two five-year modernization plans. However, during

this time fundamentalist extremists started working against Daoud and his reforms. The Soviets invaded in 1979, and a communist government was installed. The communists were repressive of political dissidents but they promoted women’s rights while they were in power during the 1980s.

When the Afghan communist government fell in 1992, civil war raged in Afghanistan and women’s rights were an early casualty, as mujahideen factions turned on each other. Women’s free mobility was reduced due to the war, and educated Afghan women were fleeing with their families to refugee camps in neighbouring countries and some migrated to the West. The education sector was decimated, and the formerly upward trend of women’s rights began its downward spiral. Poverty worsened as incomes dropped, infrastructure was destroyed, and the country became increasingly unstable. Sexual violence by armed forces was reportedly widespread and the rule of law eroded, as a governance vacuum spread over the country, paving the way for warlordism.

“Prior to the rise of the Taliban, women in Afghanistan were protected under law and increasingly afforded rights in Afghan society. Women received the right to vote in the 1920s; and as early as the 1960s, the Afghan constitution provided for equality for women. There was a mood of tolerance and openness as the country began moving toward democracy. Women were making important contributions to national development.”

- US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2001

In 1994, the Taliban emerged in Kandahar and then took power in Kabul in 1996. They immediately imposed their notorious ‘gender apartheid’ rules over women and girls, shutting down girls’ schools and demanding that women leave

their jobs and stay home. Women were stripped of their rights, not even allowed to leave their homes unless accompanied by a male relative and fully enveloped in the burqa. Women were imprisoned, tortured and executed for “moral crimes” like prostitution or infidelity, and were commonly whipped in the streets by Taliban police for showing skin such as wrists or ankles. The Taliban’s Department for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice became all powerful, charged with ruthlessly enforcing the rules against women and girls. Although it was illegal for women to leave the country at this time, many more women and their families fled Afghanistan and the Taliban’s brutality.



The Taliban executing a woman in a sports stadium in Kabul

Afghan Women: 2000 and Beyond

The modern Afghan women’s movement has inherited a country with a long legacy of suffering, and an overwhelming number of challenges for restoring and protecting the rights of women. Nevertheless, the movement has made significant progress and is sophisticated in its strategies and advocacy efforts. It is estimated that there may be as many as 800 women’s organizations in the country. There are at least two major networks uniting some of these groups, including the Women’s Political Participation Committee and their 50% Campaign, and the Afghan Women’s Network. Many women’s organizations had operated in exile and have returned

to Afghanistan and launched services to assist women, such as literacy, health, livelihoods, and skills training. Women are represented in parliament, and exceeded a 25% quota for the Lower House. A female candidate, Masooda Jalal, ran for president; and there is a female governor in Bamiyan province. Important legal reform efforts are underway, such as a new family law code, and a law criminalizing violence against women. Girls’ schools are reopening, though there remains a dire shortage of female teachers and many upgrades are needed in the education sector. Women remain the target of Taliban violence, and of persistent patriarchal practices. Women newscasters, politicians, teachers, police and elections workers have been murdered. There is also growing anxiety over negotiations with Taliban insurgents, or any power-sharing deal made with the Taliban, and what this will mean for women’s hard-fought rights. Yet women activists are bravely continuing their fight for greater rights into the 21st century, building on the foundations laid by their predecessors.

“The will of the Afghan people is to move toward modernity, even at the risk of their lives. Consider the girls in Kandahar who were attacked with acid. They continue to go to school, encouraged by their principal. Girls’ schools have been burned down...and rebuilt. Women from the south who are prey to Taliban terror are not looking to negotiate with the Taliban. They know what will happen to their rights if they do.”

- Patricia Lalonde, March 23, 2009

“The rebuilding of a peaceful Afghanistan requires a commitment to protecting the human rights of all Afghan citizens, including women.”

- Human Rights Watch, 2002

“I am struggling just for her future, for other girls in my country for their future. Really I want to see my daughter as a strong woman. I laugh here when everybody asks her what do you want to be and she says I want to be the President of Afghanistan.”

- Shinkai Kharokhail, Afghan member of parliament, 2006