



## Mondica Mondiale Action in Afghanistan: Representing the Struggle of Afghan Women Post-Taliban Return in 2021

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### ABSTRACT

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The Taliban regime returned to power in 2021, overthrowing the United States-created Afghan government and reintroducing restrictive policies on women's rights. These policies included banning female students from universities, dismissing female government employees, and restricting women from traveling long distances alone. In response, Afghan women initiated social movements, forming women's organizations and taking to the streets to draw global attention and resist the Taliban's rights restrictions. Applying feminist theory, this research explores how political decisions influence men's and women's lives and delves into the development of social movements. This descriptive qualitative research, based on secondary data from a literature study, reveals that Afghan women's social movements stem from the Taliban's 2021 policies and garner global attention through media exposure. Movements like Medica Mondiale, dedicated to Afghan women, require increased support from international organizations in terms of financial, technical, and moral assistance to sustain and advance their cause.

### KEYWORDS:

Taliban; Women; Social Movement; Restrictions

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The 9/11 incident, orchestrated by the Al-Qaeda group through the hijacking of planes that targeted the World Trade Center, prompted the United States to invade Afghanistan. This invasion was part of the Global War on Terror foreign policy under President George W. Bush, responding to Afghanistan's perceived support for Al-Qaeda. The conflict resulted in over 2,400 U.S. troop casualties, with approximately 12,000 U.S. troops remaining in Afghanistan. During President Trump's administration, the Doha Agreement was established, aiming to reduce U.S. troops in Afghanistan to 8,600 within the first 135 days. The agreement included the exchange of 5,000 Taliban prisoners for 1,000 Afghan security forces prisoners on March 10, along with efforts to lift UN sanctions on the Taliban (BBC, 2021a). After the signing of the agreement, Taliban leaders asserted that the present government differs from the one in the 1990s, which employed a violent approach, particularly against

Afghan women (Maizland, 2023). Women were actively engaged in the negotiation process with the Taliban to ensure diverse representation and ideologies in Afghanistan, aiming to prevent a singular perspective. This involvement is crucial due to the historical restrictions imposed on women during the previous Taliban regime, where education and work for women were prohibited (Miranti, 2021). The Taliban, while allowing women to work and attend school, imposes restrictions based on Islamic law and Afghan cultural norms. The Taliban's transformation from an insurgent group to a governing body has evoked varied responses from women, despite assurances to uphold the rights of women, religious minorities, and ethnic communities (UN Women, 2022). In the one-year tenure of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, numerous restrictions have been imposed on women's rights, causing apprehension among Afghan women regarding the freedom to exercise their rights. The Taliban, in an alarming move, disbanded the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which was intended to advocate for women's rights in political participation (Agustin, 2021). Women in Afghanistan find themselves defending their fundamental rights amid explicit gender-based constraints, such as restricting girls to secondary education while allowing boys to attend school. These limitations extend to the political arena, where women government employees face dismissals and non-payment of salaries. Consequently, numerous social

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movements have emerged, aiming to advance gender equality in Afghanistan.

This article refers to a previous study titled 'Violations of Women's Rights in Afghanistan During the Rule of the Taliban Regime Based on the CEDAW Convention' by Tsabitah Rizqi Ekanoviarini & Aji Wibowo (2022). The objective of this research is to identify human rights violations against women in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime and assess Afghanistan's responsibility for these violations based on CEDAW. Employing qualitative methods, the study concludes that Afghanistan has breached international agreements, emphasizing the need to hold the country accountable for the actions conducted by its state organs.

The following research, titled 'The Triangle of Violence, Human Rights, and Afghan Women in the Era of Taliban Leadership' by Rafika Wahyu Andani (2022), seeks to identify and explore the sources of violence against Afghan women perpetrated by the Taliban, aiming to propose a comprehensive solution. Utilizing qualitative methods, the study reveals that violence against Afghan women encompasses direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence. The recommended solution involves optimizing the role of existing international organizations to exert pressure on the Taliban, urging them to eliminate regulations discriminating against women, halt acts of violence by state or non-state actors, reinstate the Ministry of Women's Affairs, ensure justice for women victims of human rights violations, and promote gender equality in public and domestic spheres. Concluding the references, the research titled 'Women for Women International (WFWI) Strategy in Empowering Women in Afghanistan' by Gilang Agung Septiadi (2019) investigates the efforts to empower women in Afghanistan through Women for Women International (WFWI). Employing qualitative methods, the study demonstrates WFWI's success in empowering Afghan women. The positive outcomes are marked by the transformation of women's lives from previously confined to private spheres to active contributions in public life, including areas such as healthcare, education, and employment.

The existing research has not delved into the emergence and ongoing efforts of the Medica Mondiale women's movement, which persistently advocates for Afghan women's basic rights following the resurgence of the Taliban regime in 2021. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how Afghan women's movements for rights unfolded and evolved after the Taliban regained power in 2021. The backdrop for this movement was set by the withdrawal of United States military troops in 2021, leading to the Taliban assuming control and implementing restrictive policies. These policies included the prohibition of women from pursuing secondary and higher education, along with changes to the curriculum, prioritizing religious content. The research seeks to uncover the catalysts behind the emergence and development of Afghan women's struggle

movements post the establishment of the Taliban regime in 2021.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Feminism Liberal Theory*

The employed theory in this article is Liberal Feminism, which advocates for women's autonomy in shaping their lives. Liberal feminism attributes the restriction of women's agency to the gender system, evident in entrenched traditions and institutions subscribing to patriarchal norms. The persistence of these institutions maintains the belief that women should actively engage in movements aimed at recognizing and reforming this system (Rapport, 1991).

Feminism extends beyond traditional considerations of appearance and behavior associated with male and female gender stereotypes. In the realm of international relations, encompassing diplomacy, states, and war—a crucial facet of global politics—gender exerts significant influence. Feminist theory has made substantial contributions to the study of international relations, revealing normative biases inherent in conventional theories (Chiaruzzi, 2017). Rosemary Foot (1990) highlights the crucial role women play in global politics, challenging prevailing assumptions. Enloe's analytical approach explores how global politics affects the actions of men and women, emphasizing the role of gender identity (Smith, 2018).

Liberal feminism contends that a just state must ensure individual freedom, necessitating the state's involvement in advocating for women's freedom. To achieve equality in the democratic governance process within a liberal society, significant efforts can be made to support women's freedom socially and politically. In this context, liberal feminism views the state as a potential ally in implementing anti-discrimination laws, affirmative action, and other state programs to ensure women's independent and democratic participation in governance (Oxley, 2011).

The decline in women's human rights following the return of the Taliban regime can be analyzed through the lens of Liberal Feminism. The oppression faced by women in Afghanistan is rooted in the curtailment of political inclusiveness and various other rights. The imposed educational restrictions on women are deeply concerning. Additionally, stringent regulations on women's clothing and personal belongings further restrict their freedom. Women in Afghanistan are evidently engaged in a struggle to secure and regain equality, which is unequivocally jeopardized by the discriminatory rules imposed by the Taliban. Feminism serves as the fundamental framework for understanding the concrete manifestations of gender injustice and inequality in Afghanistan.

### *Social Movement*

The paper employs the concept of a social movement, characterized by community-driven initiatives with the goal

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of advocating for changes in government institutions and policies perceived as unsatisfactory by a segment of the population. As defined by Cohen in Haris et al. (2019), social movements represent organized, collective endeavors with the objective of instigating change. These organized efforts seek to bring about institutional changes through collective challenges, focusing on public policies that aim for broader transformations in the structure of social and political institutions, the distribution of social security, and the conceptualization of social and political rights and responsibilities.

The Taliban regime's restrictions on women in Afghanistan have sparked numerous social movements aimed at advocating for women's rights and challenging the regime's impositions. These restrictions include limiting women's education, dictating dress codes, and segregating workplaces based on gender. Women in Afghanistan must sustain these social movements continuously, receiving support from various actors beyond the movement itself to achieve their goals. The effectiveness of these women-led social movements hinges on establishing strong alliances, particularly with those in authority, such as the Taliban regime. Without these connections, lobbying and communication become challenging, hindering the realization of their objectives.

### **III. RESULTS**

The discourse surrounding the withdrawal of United States troops from Afghanistan emerged during President Barack Obama's tenure. In his second term, Obama initiated a reassessment of the War on Terrorism policy and its implications for deploying U.S. troops to the Middle East, including Afghanistan (Obama, 2015). The deployment of U.S. troops incurs significant costs for logistics and other requirements. Following the 2008 financial crisis in the United States, the federal government began scrutinizing various expenditures deemed expendable in the ensuing years to curb central government borrowing. Consequently, the U.S. Congress passed the Budget Control Act (2011), a law designed to restrict the federal government's spending to manage the country's financial deficit (Kenton, 2023).

President Joe Biden, continuing his policy trajectory, particularly domestically within the United States, reinforced the reduction of troop concentrations in the Middle East upon assuming the presidency in 2021. In addition to the financial considerations, a prominent factor for withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan was the significant number of casualties, particularly among the youth—the nation's best and brightest daughters and sons—stationed there. According to the Statista report spanning 2001-2021, the total fatalities among U.S. troops in Afghanistan reached 2,465 (Statista, 2023). This figure, by no means insignificant, raises substantial concerns and played a pivotal role in reshaping U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

Biden subsequently adopted a more measured policy regarding the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban reached a peace agreement. A crucial aspect of this agreement was the phased withdrawal of U.S. troops and their NATO coalition counterparts from Afghanistan (Iswara, 2020). While the initial troop withdrawal began four months after the agreement, August 2021 marked the final deadline for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. troops and their coalition partners (Iswara, 2021a).

In a speech, Biden outlined several key policies that prompted the troop withdrawal. The U.S. government observed a shift from military operations targeting Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan to an extensive 'nation-building' endeavor within a few years (CNN Indonesia, 2021a). The Afghan government grew overly reliant on safeguarding U.S. troops in the country. Following the agreement, the Afghan Military Commander opted to flee Afghanistan, setting a detrimental precedent for indigenous efforts. The resources and support extended by the United States proved futile, forming the foundational rationale for the decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

On August 15, 2021, less than two weeks after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, Taliban forces successfully seized control of the capital, Kabul. The presence of Taliban troops in the capital compelled the existing government to step down. Subsequently, the Taliban unilaterally declared themselves the new regime in the Afghan government (Saju & Suhartono, 2021). The resurgence of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan revived the nightmares that had haunted the Afghan people.

#### *The Taliban: Values and Struggle*

The Taliban, initially known as 'Pashtun', originated in the 1990s among Islamic boarding school students in Northern Pakistan. Originally formed with the vision of resisting and expelling the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, the group later aimed to uphold fundamentalist Islamic law. This included requirements for men to grow beards and women to wear burkas, values that were implemented during their rule of the Afghan government from 1996 to 2001 (Iswara, 2021b).

There were no significant differences for women and children in Afghanistan during the Taliban rule, whether before or after the United States-backed government. All restrictions on women and girls, including the prohibition of work, sending girls home from school, regulating dress codes, and banning music, persist under both past and present Taliban regimes. These restrictions garnered attention from the international community. The Taliban responded to inquiries about these restrictions by citing the need to adhere to Islamic principles and citing a lack of physical facilities and shortages of textbooks.

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has sparked widespread fears and concerns, particularly among women. On August 15, 2021, the Taliban regained control of the Afghan

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presidential palace, prompting many Afghans, especially women, to rush to the airport in an attempt to leave the country. They sought to avoid experiencing the harshness of Taliban rule once again. Consequently, some families felt compelled to send their daughters to Pakistan or Iran to shield them from Taliban atrocities. The Taliban imposed severe restrictions on women's mobility within the country through their established policies.

There are at least 13 Taliban policies that restrict women's freedom: (1) Prohibition of travel between male family members; (2) Forbidden to make friends with men without the permission of family members; (3) Prohibition of interaction with men over 12 years old, excluding family members; (4) Prohibition of attending public schools, limiting attendance to girls' schools; (5) Prohibition of facial makeup, including nail polish; (6) Prohibition of playing music and dancing; (7) If women work, the Taliban will escort them home and allow only male relatives to work; (8) Requirement for women to wear a burqa, covering the entire body; (9) Prohibition of speaking in a loud voice audible to strangers, both in women's meetings and in public; (10) Prohibition of using high heels; (11) Prohibition of sitting on the balcony of the house; (12) Prohibition of displaying images of women in films or other media; and (13) Prohibition of teachers giving lessons to students of the opposite gender (Davies, 2021).

During the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, women faced arbitrary treatment, being subjected to rules imposed by the group that perpetuated discrimination, violence, injustice, and a status akin to slavery. Women in Afghanistan also experienced sexual violence under Taliban rule. The group implemented policies that severely restricted Afghan women, adhering to Islamic Sharia and fundamentalist teachings. According to the Taliban's interpretation, women were confined to their homes to serve their husbands. If women needed to leave the house, they were required to be accompanied by a mahram or male family member. Strict boundaries were enforced between men and women, leading to separated school classes and restrictions on interactions between male and female students. Furthermore, teachers were not allowed to instruct students of the opposite sex (BBC, 2021b).

### IV. DISCUSSION

The authoritarian Taliban government in Afghanistan has prompted the emergence of social movements fueled by dissatisfaction with the restrictive policies affecting women's mobility. Women in Afghanistan are actively engaged in social movements to reclaim fair regulation of both public and private spaces that have been unfairly governed by the Taliban regime. Shared challenges and goals unite Afghan women in their fight for rights, manifesting through social movements as the primary means of expression.

An example of an existing social movement is the formation of organizations like *Medica Mondiale*. This organization provides psychosocial and legal assistance to thousands of women affected by violence (*Medica Mondiale*, 2000). *Medica Mondiale* employs counselors to strengthen women mentally and lawyers to ensure fair treatment under the law if a woman is imprisoned. Humaira Rasuli, a women's activist in Afghanistan, emphasizes the crucial role of international organizations in the Afghan women's movement, necessitating financial, technical, and moral support. Women, united in forming organizations, are taking action to counter Taliban policies violating women's rights, especially after the Ministry of Women's Affairs was abolished.

*Medica Mondiale* identified nine critical issues related to women's human rights in Afghanistan, including (*Medica Mondiale*, 2022): (1) Freedom of movement and dress code; (2) Lack of protection for women in the form of safe houses; (3) Forced and underage marriages; (4) Loss of the right to education for girls; (5) Restrictions on women's movement, leading to fewer work opportunities; (6) Revocation of women's civil rights; (7) Abolition of the Ministry of Women's Affairs

High maternal and infant mortality rates; (8) Discrimination against minorities and the LGBTIQ community.

The Taliban's takeover of power on August 15, 2021, has created challenges in accessing services for survivors of violence against women due to threats they face. This threat has compelled many service providers to close their facilities for safety reasons, even as the demand for these services continues to rise. Afghan women encounter significant obstacles in opposing Taliban regulations, facing threats of violence and even murder when they dare to speak out. Additionally, the Taliban imposes severe restrictions on women's movement, dictating what they can and cannot do. Despite the Taliban's promises to respect human rights and women's rights, all positions in their administration are filled by men. This has led to protests demanding changes in the cabinet's composition and the inclusion of women in the government. Female demonstrators were met with violence from the Taliban, including whipping, to disperse the protests (CNN Indonesia, 2021b).

#### *Medica Mondiale Action from a Liberal Feminist Perspective*

From a liberal feminist perspective, the key to improving the status of women lies in their participation in the public sphere. Adherents of liberalism argue that women, just like men, possess the capacity for intellectual development and moral progress. This implies that women, being rational creatures, have the right to engage in public life, actively contributing to discussions on political, social, and moral issues, rather than being confined to the private sphere of the household and family, which has traditionally been represented by men as heads of households (Steans & Pettiford, 2009).

Liberal feminism contends that a woman's ability to lead a self-determined life is contingent on specific supportive



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conditions that are often lacking in women's lives. This deficiency is typically attributed to social and institutional arrangements that frequently fail to uphold women's freedom in various facets of their lives and personal development. Within liberal feminism, women are positioned as individuals with complete autonomy. Alison Jaggar, in her book 'Feminist Politics and Human Nature' (1983) asserts that, according to liberal thinking, the essential characteristic of humans is their capacity for rationality. However, in contrast to Aristotle's classic argument that humans are 'animal rationale,' liberals define rationality across various dimensions, placing emphasis on morality and wisdom.

Liberal feminists argue that every human being possesses the capacity for rational thinking and action, including women. They attribute the root of oppression and backwardness in women to their own mistakes. According to this perspective, women must prepare themselves to compete in the world within the framework of 'free competition' and achieve an equal standing with men. However, most liberal feminists believe that women are primarily 'inside' the state as citizens rather than policy makers, leading to gender inequality in politics and the state. Over time, the liberal feminist views on 'equality' have influenced the development of women's influence and equality in political activities, such as policymaking in a country.

The Taliban regime itself serves as the primary impediment to women's development through restrictive policies. As a social and institutional arrangement, the Taliban fails to respect women's freedom to live their lives. For instance, women in Afghanistan face clear restrictions on education—they are limited to secondary level, and universities are prohibited from accepting female students. Education constitutes a fundamental foundation for a country's development, and low educational attainment among citizens, especially women, hinders the country's emergence from a state of underdevelopment.

In Afghanistan, women's needs and interests are insufficiently addressed in the basic living conditions, notably the inadequate health facilities. The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights the precarious state of Afghanistan's health system, which is on the brink of collapse (VOA Indonesia, 2021). Despite having a pre-existing health program called Sehatmandi, funding for the health system was withdrawn after the Taliban assumed power. This withdrawal has impeded the operation of primary care facilities in rural areas of Afghanistan, which were meant to serve 13,340 women of childbearing age and 11,600 children under five. Previously, the Sehatmandi program was funded by the World Bank, the European Commission, and USAID. When culture prescribes identities and social roles based on gender, as seen in Afghanistan under the guise of Islamic teachings guiding policies toward women, it results in an impact on women's access to choices, often leading to injustice (Rhode, 1994). Gender-based disparities in choices

are particularly evident in employment. In Afghanistan, women are restricted from working, unlike in other countries. The Taliban regime permits only men to engage in employment to support their families. This restriction inevitably affects the economic condition of families. If there are only female members remaining in the family, the question arises: who will provide for the family? With no one working, the family is likely to fall into poverty, a condition known to be the root of several significant and fundamental problems in life.

The state, particularly the Taliban regime, actively formulates policies to restrict women's movement, leaving many aspects beyond its influence. In response, women must explore alternative means to improve their situation, exemplified by initiatives like Medica Mondiale. This approach aligns with liberal feminism, which advocates for individual freedom to shape one's life, embracing diversity. Upholding morals, liberal feminist principles resonate well in the contemporary global era.

### V. CONCLUSION

Conclusively, Afghan women are actively engaging in social movements to secure their rights, striving to liberate themselves from the looming threat of discrimination. Women's empowerment signifies a dedicated pursuit of gender equality, emphasizing parity in fulfilling rights and responsibilities between women and men. One persistent advocate for Afghan women's rights is Medica Mondiale. The global discourse on women's discrimination deserves a central place in international relations, warranting attention from policy-makers. Supporting community development through collaborative efforts with women activists or organizations in conflict-ridden regions is crucial. However, there are persistent challenges yet to be effectively addressed. International involvement plays a vital role, given the absence of a comprehensive legal framework safeguarding women's rights within Afghanistan. The sustainability of social movements in Afghanistan hinges on international media coverage, financial aid, technical support, and moral encouragement. The Taliban regime's recognition of the imperative to uphold women's rights remains inadequate, evident in the elimination of women's political participation. Afghanistan appears incapable of self-sufficiency under the current Taliban rule. The restrictive policies curtailing women's freedom of movement present formidable barriers to their equitable development vis-à-vis men.

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