

Handout 1 ▶ P. 1

The Taliban's War Against Women³

Report on the Taliban's War Against Women

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

November 17, 2001

The day was much like any other. For the young Afghan mother, the only difference was that her child was feverish and had been for some time and needed to see a doctor. But simple tasks in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan today are not that easy.

The mother was alone and the doctor was across town. She had no male relative to escort her. To ask another man to do so would be to risk severe punishment. To go on her own meant that she would risk flogging.

Because she loved her child, she had no choice. Donning the tent-like burqa as Taliban law required, she set out, cradling her child in her arms. She shouldn't have.

As they approached the market, she was spotted by a teenage Taliban guard who tried to stop her. Intent on saving her child, the mother ignored him, hoping that he would ignore her. He didn't. Instead he raised his weapon and shot her repeatedly. Both mother and child fell to the ground. They survived because bystanders in the market intervened to save them. The young Taliban guard was unrepentant — fully supported by the regime. The woman should not have been out alone.

This mother was just another casualty in the Taliban war on Afghanistan's women, a war that began 5 years ago when the Taliban seized control of Kabul.

Abuses of an Oppressive Regime

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. In 1977, women [made up] over 15% of Afghanistan's highest legislative body. It is estimated that by the early 1990s, 70% of schoolteachers, 50% of government workers and university students, and 40% of doctors in Kabul were women. Afghan women had been active in humanitarian relief organizations until the Taliban imposed severe restrictions on their ability to work. These professional women provide a pool of talent and expertise that will be needed in the reconstruction of post-Taliban Afghanistan.

³ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/6185.htm>

Handout 1 ▶ P. 2

The Taliban's War Against Women

Islam has a tradition of protecting the rights of women and children. In fact, Islam has specific provisions which define the rights of women in areas such as marriage, divorce, and property rights. The Taliban's version of Islam is not supported by the world's Muslims. Although the Taliban claimed that it was acting in the best interests of women, the truth is that the Taliban regime cruelly reduced women and girls to poverty, worsened their health, and deprived them of their right to an education, and many times the right to practice their religion. The Taliban is out of step with the Muslim world and with Islam.

Afghanistan under the Taliban had one of the worst human rights records in the world. The regime systematically repressed all sectors of the population and denied even the most basic individual rights. Yet the Taliban's war against women was particularly appalling.

Women are imprisoned in their homes, and are denied access to basic health care and education. Food sent to help starving people is stolen by their leaders. The religious monuments of other faiths are destroyed. Children are forbidden to fly kites, or sing songs... A girl of seven is beaten for wearing white shoes.
— President George W. Bush, *Remarks to the Warsaw Conference on Combating Terrorism, November 6, 2001*

The Taliban first became prominent in 1994 and took over the Afghan capital, Kabul, in 1996. The takeover followed over 20 years of civil war and political instability. Initially, some hoped that the Taliban would provide stability to the country. However, it soon imposed a strict and oppressive order based on its misinterpretation of Islamic law.

The assault on the status of women began immediately after the Taliban took power in Kabul. The Taliban closed the women's university and forced nearly all women to quit their jobs, closing down an important source of talent and expertise for the country. It restricted access to medical care for women, brutally enforced a restrictive dress code, and limited the ability of women to move about the city.

The Taliban perpetrated egregious acts of violence against women, including rape, abduction, and forced marriage. Some families resorted to sending their daughters to Pakistan or Iran to protect them.

Afghan women living under the Taliban virtually had the world of work closed to them. Forced to quit their jobs as teachers, doctors, nurses, and clerical workers when the Taliban took over, women could work only in very limited circumstances. A tremendous asset was lost to a society that desperately needed trained professionals.

As many as 50,000 women, who had lost husbands and other male relatives during Afghanistan's long civil war, had no source of income. Many were reduced to selling all of their possessions and begging in the streets, or worse, to feed their families.

Denied Education and Health Care

Restricting women's access to work is an attack on women today. Eliminating women's access to education is an assault on women tomorrow.

Handout 1 ▶ P. 3

The Taliban's War Against Women

The Taliban ended, for all practical purposes, education for girls. Since 1998, girls over the age of eight have been prohibited from attending school. Home schooling, while sometimes tolerated, was more often repressed. Last year, the Taliban jailed and then deported a female foreign aid worker who had promoted home-based work for women and home schools for girls. The Taliban prohibited women from studying at Kabul University.

“The Taliban has clamped down on knowledge and ignorance is ruling instead.”

— *Sadriqa, a 22-year-old woman in Kabul*

As a result of these measures, the Taliban was ensuring that women would continue to sink deeper into poverty and deprivation, thereby guaranteeing that tomorrow's women would have none of the skills needed to function in a modern society.

Under Taliban rule, women were given only the most rudimentary access to health care and medical care, thereby endangering the health of women, and in turn, their families. In most hospitals, male physicians could only examine a female patient if she were fully clothed, ruling out the possibility of meaningful diagnosis and treatment.

These Taliban regulations led to a lack of adequate medical care for women and contributed to increased suffering and higher mortality rates. Afghanistan has the world's second worst rate of maternal death during childbirth. About 16 out of every 100 women die giving birth.

Inadequate medical care for women also meant poor medical care and a high mortality rate for Afghan children. Afghanistan has one of the world's highest rates of infant and child mortality. According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 165 of every 1000 babies die before their first birthday.

Further hampering health, the Taliban destroyed public education posters and other health information. This left many women, in a society already plagued by massive illiteracy, without basic health care information.

In May 2001, the Taliban raided and temporarily closed a foreign-funded hospital in Kabul because male and female staff allegedly mixed in the dining room and operating wards. It is significant to note that approximately 70% of health services had been provided by international relief organizations — further highlighting the Taliban's general disregard for the welfare of the Afghan people.

“The life of Afghan women is so bad. We are locked at home and cannot see the sun.”

— *Nageeba, a 35-year-old widow in Kabul*

The Taliban also required that windows of houses be painted over to prevent outsiders from possibly seeing women inside homes, further isolating women who once led productive lives and contributing to a rise in mental health problems. Physicians for Human Rights reports high rates of depression and suicide among Afghan women. One European physician reported many cases of burns in the esophagus as the result of women swallowing battery acid or household cleaners — a cheap, if painful, method of suicide.

Handout 1 ▶ P. 3

The Taliban's War Against Women

Fettered by Restrictions on Movement

In urban areas, the Taliban brutally enforced a dress code that required women to be covered under a burqa — a voluminous, tent-like full-body outer garment that covers them from head to toe. One Anglo-Afghan journalist reported that the burqa's veil is so thick that the wearer finds it difficult to breathe; the small mesh panel permitted for seeing allows such limited vision that even crossing the street safely is difficult.

While the burqa existed prior to the Taliban, its use was not required. As elsewhere in the Muslim world and the United States, women chose to use the burqa as a matter of individual religious or personal preference. In Afghanistan, however, the Taliban enforced the wearing of the burqa with threats, fines, and on-the-spot beatings. Even the accidental showing of the feet or ankles was severely punished. No exceptions were allowed. One woman who became violently carsick was not permitted to take off the garment. When paying for food in the market, a woman's hand could not show when handing over money or receiving the purchase. Even girls as young as eight or nine years old were expected to wear the burqa.

The fate of women in Afghanistan is infamous and intolerable. The burqa that imprisons them is a cloth prison, but it is above all a moral prison. The torture imposed on little girls who dare to show their ankles or their polished nails is appalling. It is unacceptable and insupportable.

— King Mohammed VI of Morocco

The burqa is not only a physical and psychological burden on some Afghan women, it is a significant economic burden as well. Many women cannot afford the cost of one. In some cases, whole neighborhoods share a single garment, and women must wait days for their turn to go out. For disabled women who need a prosthesis or other aid to walk, the required wearing of the burqa makes them virtually homebound if they cannot get the burqa over the prosthesis or other aid, or use the device effectively when wearing the burqa.

Restrictions on clothing are matched with other limitations on personal adornment. Makeup and nail polish were prohibited. White socks were also prohibited, as were shoes that make noise as it had been deemed that women should walk silently.

Even when dressed according to the Taliban rules, women were severely restricted in their movement. Women were permitted to go out only when accompanied by male relatives or risk Taliban beatings. Women could not use public taxis without accompanying male relatives, and taxi drivers risked losing their licenses or beatings if they took unescorted female passengers. Women could only use special buses set aside for their use, and these buses had their windows draped with thick curtains so that no one on the street could see the women passengers.

One woman who was caught with an unrelated man in the street was publicly flogged with 100 lashes, in a stadium full of people. She was lucky. If she had been married, and found with an unrelated male, the punishment would have