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The Women of Afghanistan

The image of a contemporary American woman seems to be perpetuated by a lifestyle of freedom, breaking through male-dominated boundaries and seeking out equality in work, political, and social environments. This ideology of lifestyle is referred to as feminism which has seen several waves of movement throughout the world. Feminism does not argue that women are better than the opposite gender, nor that they must be raised above men in any revered way; only that women should be treated equally with men. Despite gender difference, women and men can be categorized under the collective of humanity. From the often feminist perspective of an American woman, the idea of life lived in the shroud of a burqa or under the submission of illiterate male extremists seems far-fetched and foreign. Yet, roughly 7,000 miles (11,000 km) away from the nation's capital in the realm of Afghanistan, this lifestyle has taken hold. In the mid to later parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Afghanistan women began to experience changes in their way of life. There were opportunities for education, employment, and political status. Social and political freedoms began to more acceptable for females and by 1996 "women had made up 70 percent of Afghanistan's teachers, 50 percent of civil service, 40 percent of the doctors, half the students at Kabul University, and had worked in the government as cabinet ministers and members of parliament" (Armstrong 2-3). With the

advent of the Taliban in the mid 1990s, this lifestyle vanished. Through examination of their once freer lifestyle, the assertion of power by the Taliban and the repercussions of such assertions, brief exploration into the influence of Islam, and comparison of Islam ideology of women to other religious ideology, the culture of Afghanistan women will be observed.

“The legal equality of women in Afghanistan had first been established under King Amanollah Shah in the early 1920s. The reaction against many of his attempts at modernization included a rejection of his policy toward women and led to his exile in 1928” (Mehta 48). Roughly over the next fifty years the political status of women was considered equivalent of men according to the reigning king at the time, Mohammad Zahir Shah. This does not imply they were socially equal and that they were not exploited or taken advantage of in other ways; however the “modern” idea that women should have an equal status to men struggled to take hold as acceptable and practicable. King Zahir Shah went so far as to call a council of representative leaders or “loya jirga” in 1964 to discuss a constitution for a “model for all of the Muslim world.” Part of this council included a “serious discussion regarding the role of women and the extent to which equality should be explicitly spelled out by the new constitution.” Many of the decisions for the 1964 Constitution in regards to women were substantiated by the claim that the term “‘Afghan’ embraced both sexes” (Mehta 48). In the following years, changes in dress and style were more readily observed as the women now had the choice of “how they veiled and how they dressed.” Measures Afghan women took to cover themselves were more dependent on their own piety and socioeconomic status rather than social mores. In the 1960s and 1970s, women were also more voluntarily able to create

their own social identity rather than to just be observed as a collective or simply an additional body to a family name. “Some were educated in Europe, others in Turkey, and in the United States on scholarships. Some women, like men, were educated only by hard work on the farm or as herders and pastoral nomads. Some women were world-class master craftswomen [who gave] great economic value to family and to the country.” As a result of the 1964 Constitution, women could identify themselves through a defined framework including: “family, tribe, geography, and cultural norms” (Mehta 49). “By 1963 the first women graduated from the university’s medical school...and law [school].” Two years later, the first two women senators were appointed and over the next six years, fourteen Afghan women were appointed as court justices throughout the region (Armstrong 55). As a testament of their worldly advancement, the Kabul engineering school allowed coeducational classes in 1965, however American Universities such as Harvard and the University of Notre Dame did not become coeducational until 1972 (Wikipedia). It should be noted that this time of educational, social, and political advances for women is all the more impressive as the country was in upheaval due to the invasion by the Soviet Union into Afghanistan.

During his monarchy, King Zahir Shah had appointed Prince Mohammad Daoud as his Prime Minister. “In the 1960s Prime Minister Daoud began to develop close ties between Afghanistan and Russia [and] in January 1965, the Afghan Communist Party was secretly formed” the same time the 1964 Constitution went into effect (Armstrong 55). Eight years later in July 1973, the king vacationed in Europe and “the government and monarchy were overthrown in a military coup headed by Daoud and the Communist party – called the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)” (Armstrong 56).

Daoud declared himself leader of the Republic of Afghanistan and banished the idea of a monarchy by creating a new constitution in 1975 in which women still held equal status as men. It was during this time and rise of Daoud that fundamentalist extremists “were working against Daoud and his reforms.” Several years later, Daoud was murdered during another Communist coup and another president emerged along with “mass arrests and torture.” Afghan control of the country was lost to the Soviet Union when they invaded in December 1979 and brought with them a fierce group of secret police which bullied the Afghan people with “a brutal boot-camp rule” (Armstrong 56). Yet despite being devastating and destructive to Afghanistan, the Soviet invasion “brought further positive evolution to the public Afghan woman. Veils in urban areas were almost completely gone, jobs for women were mostly open, and equality was frequently presumed and certainly stated” (Mehta 54). By the time the Soviet forces withdrew ten years after their invasion in 1989 due to Afghan opposition, “the resistance would ultimately claim 40,000 Soviet lives and more than 350,000 Afghan lives” (Armstrong 56). The fierce struggle against the Soviets had been perpetuated by different Afghan freedom fighter groups or mujahideen that were largely unsupported by other nations. “Mujahideen, an Arabic word literally meaning ‘strugglers’ is a term for Muslims fighting in a war or involved in any other struggle. The word comes from the same Arabic root as jihad (“struggle”). In Islamic scripture, the status of mujahid is unequal to qaid, one who does not join the jihad” (Wikipedia). Rather unwisely, the United Nations and other western powers did not aide Afghanistan in rebuilding their country politically or economically after the end of the Soviet control and “left a dangerous power vacuum” (Mehta 54).

This power vacuum was fought over between the “larger mujahideen groups,” and the country became consumed by civil war. “After several years of devastating infighting, a village mullah (Mohammad Omar) organized a new armed movement with the backing of Pakistan. This movement became known as the Taliban, meaning “students”, and referring to the Saudi-backed religious schools known for producing extremism” (Wikipedia). Originating in southern Afghanistan, the Taliban moved through the country and began to capture “most of the southern provinces” (Armstrong 57). “The Taliban captured Kandahar in November 1994, Herat in September 1995, and Jalalbad in 1996. The Taliban’s dominance reached a peak when they took control of Kabul in September 1996” (Skaine 4). The Afghans who populated the country were now considered “trapped” and mourned their plight along with the other 500,000 Afghans made refugees along the borders of the country by the Soviet invasion and occupation. They “were hoping someone would ‘take up our quarrel with the foe.’ But the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, recognized the Taliban and gave them embassy status” (Armstrong 11). Using tanks, guns, violence, and practiced guerilla warfare, the Taliban renamed the country “the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,” and proposed edicts regularly upon its people (Armstrong 11). The Taliban is particularly harsh in these edicts against women with little justification other than by their leader Mulla Mohammed Omar that “A woman’s face corrupts men” (Armstrong 2).

Seemingly, the instant the Taliban took control in different communities, the lifestyle of the people had to change. By announcing in public either through the loudspeakers at mosques, in town squares, or by mere presence, members of the Taliban

decreed “many freedoms for men and women alike [come] to a halt...but the freedoms of formal education, work outside the home, moving about in society, and health care ceased primarily for women” (Skaine 22). A brief summary of several of the edicts and immediate enforcements by the Taliban include the following:

- women are required to stay in their home and will not leave without the accompaniment of a male relative, husband, or son
- women require a permit as well to leave their house
- if leaving the house these women must cover themselves with a burqa and must not reveal any part of their bodies even if on accident including hands, ankles, feet, neck, and wrists
- cosmetics, western style dress, and high-heeled shoes are not allowable
- women are not allowed positions of employment even if their husbands or relatives are dead and no one may provide for them
- “there will be no television, no radio, no singing, dancing clapping, no kite flying, no toys for children,” (Armstrong 6)
- women can only be treated at a medical facility by another woman
- American and British hairstyles are not allowable and men must not shave their beards
- “men shall pray five times a day [while] women are not allowed in the mosques and must pray at home” (Skaine 40)
- education is also not available to women and limited to men as well

These are only a few of the hundreds of overbearing edicts decreed by the Taliban. It seems not to be enough for the extremist group to regulate activity, but they must also go to extremes to ensure such activities do not have a chance to perpetuate. For example, they would “not just [close] down movie theaters, but [torch] the film, [cut] music cassettes, [smash] statues...and [threaten] the most brutal punishments” (Skaine 41).

Ignoring or abusing these rules resulted in violent abuse, rape, beatings, and often death by Taliban members. “A Physicians for Human Rights 1998 survey found that 22 percent of the women surveyed were detained and abused by the Taliban; of these incidents, 72 percent were related to alleged infractions of the dress code...84 percent resulted in public beatings and two percent resulted in torture” (Skaine 40). Story after story has come from Afghanistan’s women and men that share the different extremes of control and punishment the Taliban elicit. A testimony by Amnesty International declared “Afghan civilians have been the main victims of a human rights catastrophe,” and submitted the following report of the experience of an Afghan woman: “During a rare lull in the bombardment of Kabul in 1994, a woman left her home to find food. Two Mujahedin guards grabbed her and took her to a house, where 22 men raped her for three days. When she was allowed to go home, she found her three children had died of hypothermia” (Skaine 73). Also recorded are events such as public shootings, stonings, kidnappings, forced marriages, mass killings, amputations of limbs, gang rape and more. “[A] woman who dared to wear high-heeled shoes was beaten...when she cried out for mercy, they beat her again for making noise.” Under Taliban rule, the thousands of widows in different areas of Afghanistan have become “virtually destitute.” With their men dead from the war with the Soviet Union and the civil war that raged for several

years, women are left seemingly to rot, trapped in their homes by Taliban doctrine.

“When asked how they should cope, the women said the Taliban replied, ‘Let them die’ (Armstrong 6). It is questionable where the Taliban illicit their motivation; so far they claim it comes from the doctrines of Islam.

To say that the Taliban is motivated by Islam is arguable, but to say that they are sanctioned by Islam or carrying out Islamic practices is incorrect. Islam is a peaceable religion. It “has a strong tradition of social activism, and the Qur’an calls on Muslims to oppose vice by working for the welfare of their fellow human beings. Such a struggle is also called a jihad” (Emerick 175). Islamic teachings also forbid terrorism and declare armed struggle can only be justified “to defend [the] community or nation from aggressors, to liberate people living under oppressive regimes, and to remove any government that will not allow the free practice of Islam within its borders” (Emerick 171). In regards to women, Islam tends to be more supportive of equality and preservation than other religions such as Christianity and Judaism. Often, the stereotype of women in Islamic countries is that they have some of the fewest rights and liberties of any women globally. This idea is perpetuated by the Taliban, cultural practices, and the perpetuation of arranged marriages. In reality “Islam does not encourage the oppression of women...[but] call upon men to respect the rights of women.” Some of the laws include: a woman’s property cannot be seized by her husband, she cannot be denied the right to an education, forced marriage is prohibited, spousal abuse is a punishable offense, and women can vote and stand for office (Emerick 251-253). From an Islamic standpoint, “the liberation of women is not accomplished by rejecting their religion, but by actually implementing it. Replacing the current regimes in Muslim countries with



Islamic governments that will rule according to the Qur'an is also essential" (Emerick 253). It is a wonder why the idea that Islam supports oppression of women perpetuates, when other religions have at some point throughout history done the same (Mehta 55).

Muhammad, the prophet and leader of Islam believed and taught that "women are the twin halves of men, or in other words, neither is complete without the other" (Emerick 250). Yet, in Jewish and Christian traditions, it is thought that man's superiority stems from the fact that women are created from men. Also, the fall of man from Paradise, through the story of Adam and Eve is seen as the fault of Eve for giving into Satan's temptation (Mehta 139). "Christian and Jewish texts don't favor or offer more equality to women than does Islam. For example, the Catholic Bible states: 'The birth of a daughter is a loss (Ecclesiasticus 30:3)'" The passage also includes "Keep a headstrong daughter under firm control or she will abuse any indulgence she receives." (Ecclesiasticus 26:10). St. Paul, one of the Christian God's messengers had a blatantly sexist attitude when he stated, "As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission as the law says. If they want to inquire about something they should ask their own husbands at home: for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church" (I Corinthians 14:34-35). In direct contrast of that, the Qur'an states that women can argue with the Prophet (Armstrong 70). Also, unlike in the Islamic faith where a woman may lay claim to her own property whether they are married, divorced, or widowed, Christian women by creed of civil law must give their property and a submissive attitude to their husbands once they are married. This civil law was in effect in American and other western areas until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These are among many examples

which demonstrate that Islam provides more freedom to its women than other religions such as Christianity.

There is no Islamic justification for the actions of the Taliban, yet this extremist group persisted in asserting authority and control over the Afghan people, particularly their women. Despite the Taliban idea that women cause sin and lust among Afghan men, there is not religious ideology that demands this idea must be carried to an extreme and create a society in which women are made nearly invisible. Religions do not provide rules and guidelines for living, but goals for a lifestyle that can be interpreted in multiple ways. It is not Islam that rapes and beats its women and men, but social norms, religious fanatics and extremists, and rationalization of different attitudes. When asked the reasoning behind such abuse towards women, Taliban members replied that such brutalization was for good reason: “We stoned a few bad women to death and every prostitute left the city. We were efficient. No one else could get rid of those women.” “The fact that there was no trial no rule of law and no judiciary didn’t seem to register” (Armstrong 6). It is not the fault of the religion if its rules are not carried out with good intent or are exploited in a harmful way. The Islamic faith should not have to suffer stereotypes and a negative social image. Yet, it is due largely in part to terrorist activities and the abuse of women particularly in Afghanistan that this idea persists.

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