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Lifting the Veil: Uncovering Potentials of Afghan Women's Rights from 1900 to Present Day

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ABSTRACT

Throughout Afghanistan's history, Afghan women have been continually denied access to the public sphere. Traditional Islamic doctrines and cultural practices have conditioned them to be submissive to men, restricted them from equal employment, and barred them from public education. As globalization ushered in novel ideas and values, Afghan women became increasingly aware of their oppression and lack of freedom. Breaking free from their homes, many women from various backgrounds have stepped forward to redefine expected social roles in marriage, occupation, and education. However, these advancements have been constantly faced with backlash from tribal leaders and religious figures, who have viewed the progressive movement as a threat to their rule. Despite the violent retaliation and mounting social pressure, ever since the 1900s, generations of Afghan women such as Queen Soraya Tarzi, minister Kubra Noorzai, and activist Laila Haidari have fought for the promise of liberation. Following in their footsteps, increasing numbers of Afghan girls actively seek the progressive lifestyle gained from personal independence and realize that they too are capable of catalyzing positive societal change.

Origin of Female Oppression in Patriarchal Tribal System

Historically, Afghanistan's rugged mountains and vast deserts limited contact between people and created numerous tribes commonly inherited through paternal lines (Habib, 2001). As people overcame natural divides, inter-tribal marriages served as alliances to create more powerful assemblies, and women became pawns to achieve these goals. While men could have multiple wives, women were pressured to obey their husbands and clan, behave morally, and not initiate divorce. A woman's "honor," her moral and physical chastity, became directly associated with her family's reputation, and failure to preserve it spelled her household's social or physical exclusion. Basing tribal power dynamics on women's symbolic roles removed individual voices and constrained women's ability to pursue roles outside the domestic sphere. In addition, tribal leadership consisted of adult men who imposed increasing limitations on women to preserve social hierarchies ("Honour among Them," n.d.). Thus, practices representing "virtue," such as veiling and physical isolation, not strictly enforced before the early 1600s, were more commonly mandated over time and became well-established standards by the 1900s (Habib, 2001).

Soraya Tarzi: Redefining Images of Afghan Women

After centuries of invasion from the Persian, Mongolian, and Mughal Empires, Afghanistan centralized in the 1700s. Therefore, when Great Britain threatened to conquer Afghanistan to create a buffer zone between Russia and India in the 1800s (*A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan*, 2011), the newly established emirate was pressured to modernize to preserve autonomy. The newly adopted Western values spurred a series of small women's

rights victories. Under the rulers Abdur Khan (r. 1880-1901) and Habibullah Khan (r. 1901-1919), women were allowed to divorce and attend schools with English curriculums (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Habibullah welcomed back previously-exiled radicals, triggering an influx of people and foreign ideas. The reforms peaked under his successor, Amanullah Khan (r. 1919-1929), who believed fully remodeling the socio-cultural environment would catalyze industrialization (Malik, 2011).

His wife, Queen Soraya Tarzi, was not only his partner in marriage but his comrade in arms. Influenced by her father—a prominent leader in modernization—and educated in Syria, Soraya grew up with nontraditional values. After returning to Afghanistan, she became the face of the women's rights movement and one of the most influential women of her time (*Queen Soraya Tarzi: 100 Women of the Year | Time*, n.d.).

Despite gaining power through marriage, Soraya rejected the traditionally passive role and proved Afghan women could thrive in the public sphere. Her marriage broke the long-standing tradition of polygamy and archetypal family dynamic. Compared to previous queens confined within the harem, Soraya governed alongside her husband and appeared at national events, cabinet meetings, and diplomatic trips (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Famously, she unveiled in public and instead wore a wide-brimmed hat (*Italy: King Amanullah And Queen Soraya Of Afghanistan Arrive For State Visit 1928*, 1928), spurring others to follow suit.

She also founded the first female magazine, encouraged education for girls, and advocated for women's participation in politics. Famously, she stated independence "belongs to all of us" and "women should also take their part" (ALIKUZAI, 2015) in nation-building. Her actions exemplified her words, showing that Afghan women did not have to be submissive in marriage nor limited to the domestic sphere.

Backlash to Dissolution of Patriarchy

Despite wishes to engage the general population, education and work opportunities were highly limited to urban and patrician women, many of whom were members of the royal family. For example, the editor of Soraya's magazine was her mother, and many of the female government officials were Amanullah's sisters (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

Moreover, although Soraya and Amanullah believed that modernization was compatible with Afghanistan's tribal system, these radical reforms created strong opposition among the rural population, and conservatives viewed Westernization as corruption of their fundamental doctrines (Malik, 2011). To tribal leaders, Soraya's support for female unveiling and participation in public events was dishonorable, and her championing of monogamy and free marriage threatened the premise of a patriarchal society (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

Her introduction of female education and abolition of the bride price in 1924 especially angered tribal leaders (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). The bride price—in which the groom paid the bride's family—represented the transfer of a girl's ownership from her father to her husband. Delaying marriage for education and abolishing the practice altogether meant the fathers would lose control over his daughters, and the basis of the patriarchy would crumble.

The mounting public unpopularity climaxed after Soraya and Amanullah visited England between 1927-1928. When images of Soraya unveiled abroad widely circulated in Afghanistan, tribal and religious leaders viewed this "loss of women's honor" as utter betrayal (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). For the reactionaries, Soraya was rousing unnecessary destruction, endangering themselves and their families. By rebelling against these changes, they believed they were restoring the rightful order and shielding the delicate women from an unpredictable world. Soon after Soraya and her husband returned, mass rebellions erupted, they were forced to abdicate, and decades of unrest followed.

Starting from the Afghan Civil War in 1928, the throne cycled through many rulers, some who tried to preserve Soraya's changes and others who blatantly revoked them. Despite the reversal of hard-earned freedoms, closed schools, and reimposed veil mandates, thanks to Soraya's initiatives, a new generation of women became aware of their potential (*The Long, Long Struggle for Women's Rights in Afghanistan*, n.d.).

Kubra Noorzai: Breaking Class Boundaries

The political scene stabilized with Zahir Shah's ascension to power in 1933 (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). By the 1950s, Afghanistan began to modernize again with aid from the Soviet Union (USSR) (Payind, 1989), and the government realized women's involvement in the workforce was necessary to maximize economic output. Careful not to repeat Soraya's and Amanullah's mistakes, the new ruler suggested voluntary veiling and emphasized that a woman's involvement in society did not contradict her domestic role. However, as more women stepped out of their homes, there were decreases in veiling and marriage expenses, and women ventured into new professions (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

From 1963 to 1973, numerous females actively engaged in politics. Notably, Kubra Noorzai became the first elected Afghan female minister and served as the Minister of Public Health (1965-1969). The daughter of a wealthy contractor, Kubra was able to pursue higher education at a Franco-Afghan school and later Kabul University, where she discovered progressive ideas advocating for women's liberation. Realizing the transformative power of female schooling, she returned to her secondary school as a headteacher and headed the Women's Faculty at Kabul University (Bonyhady, 2021). Further amplifying her voice and broadening her perspectives, she represented Afghanistan at multiple international conferences and interacted with other female leaders (Bonyhady, 2021). As President of the Afghan Women's Society, Kubra also advanced education for women and provided financial aid to poor mothers (United States. Agency for International Development, 1977).

Her active involvement led to her appointment to the committee that helped review and draft the 1964 Constitution. Prominently, Article 46 stated that the sole requirement for voting and running for office was to be a citizen of good standing (*Afghanistan's Constitution of 1964*, 1964), officially granting women's suffrage and election to office (Dell, 1967). Although the extent of Kubras' involvement with this clause was unknown, she effectively opened new pathways for countless women, including herself (Emadi, 2008).

Following the 1965 election, Kubra was formally appointed Minister of Health. Not a member of the royal family and never married, Kubra pushed the bounds of Soraya's progress and proved that any woman could succeed in the public sphere through education and hard work. To emphasize the significance of the feat and its future impact, the Kabul Times announced, "the appointment for the first time of a woman as a cabinet minister speaks for the increasing importance of the role of women in Afghanistan's development" ("Maiwandwal Fills All Cabinet Vacancies," 1965). As minister, Kubra attempted to spread reforms beyond urban centers such as Kabul, as evidenced by her commitment to constructing "a modern building" for each "province" to "promote balanced growth of health in Afghanistan" ("Three Hospitals to Be Opened Soon," 1967).

Kubra's rapid integration into the existing governmental structure showcased women's potential for equal performance in positions traditionally dominated by men. For the first time, participation was not limited to the elite, marking a transition to more widespread women's rights movements.

Backlash to Perceived Anti-Islam Movements

Even with Kubra's push for inclusion, women in the countryside continued to lack proper schooling and were sequestered from society (Allen & Felbab-Brown, 2020), and women's literacy rates were capped at 4% in the 20th century (Pourzand, 2003). Additionally, the movement became associated with anti-Islam, elevating the issue beyond the rural-urban divide. As religious and tribal leaders banded together, resistance and violence escalated. During a demonstration in 1964, a religious leader threw acid on several women who advocated for equal rights to men (Skaine, 2010).

Further escalating the tension, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overthrew the monarchy in 1973. Under the direction of the USSR, the PDPA forcefully implemented radical policies with "brutal disregard for societal and religious sensitivities" (Marsden, 2002). The conservatives viewed these new

laws as "unbearable interference[s] in domestic life" (Christensen & Development, 1990). They became convinced that they were fighting a "jihad," or religious war, to preserve Islamic values (*Afghanistan - Country Gender Assessment : National Reconstruction and Poverty Reduction - the Role of Women in Afghanistan's Future*, 2005), and guerilla movements soon broke out.

To protect the crumbling communist rule, the USSR invaded Afghanistan on December 24, 1979 (Editors, n.d.). During the decade-long Soviet-Afghan War, most of the battles occurred in the countryside, causing mass destruction and famine and affirming beliefs that reforms such as the women's rights movement led to chaos. Over time, more Afghans joined the "jihad" under the impression that they were fighting to protect their home, and preserving conservative values became associated with national identity (Parenti, 2001). Between 1980 and 1985, there was an estimated net increase of 94,000 guerillas (Allan & Stahel, 1983).

Eventually, multiple guerilla groups banded together to form the Mujahideen, who vowed to defend Islam and overturn the communist rule (*A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan*, 2011). With external aid from the United States and Great Britain, who fought to curb the spread of communism, the Mujahideen expelled the Soviets and established an Islamic state in 1992 (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Using strict interpretations of the Quran as justification, the Mujahideen completely restricted women's access to education and jobs, and decades of progress were lost. The United States Department of State reported, "many women appeared in public only if dressed in a complete head-to-toe garment" (Refugees, n.d.). This period saw "unprecedented barbarism" where "killings, rapes, amputations and other forms of violence" became daily occurrences, and young women resorted to suicide to avoid rape and forced marriages (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

Modern Day Oppression

Warring between Mujahideen factions led to escalated violence and instability, and people searched for alternatives (*Taliban Government in Afghanistan: Background and Issues for Congress*, 2021). In 1995, the Taliban, a militia promising peace and preservation of Islamic values, rose to power. The changing regime meant little for women's rights. Reverting to the pashtunwali, a traditional social code, the Taliban enforced more severe restrictions on women than Islamic law (*The Long, Long Struggle for Women's Rights in Afghanistan*, n.d.). Furthermore, to quell insurgent ethnic groups from the north and south (*A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan*, 2011), the Taliban relentlessly intensified the laws through public executions and amputations and maintained firm control over social life by banning television.

Women's education and literacy rates plummeted during the Taliban regime. Following the expulsion of the Taliban in 2001, women were allowed to reenter school, but the setbacks meant fewer girls could pursue higher education. According to a 2018 UNICEF report, there was a wide discrepancy between male and female education in Afghanistan, and the gap grew with ascending levels of education in lower secondary level schooling (Figure 1). This illustrates how present day Afghan females are more likely to terminate their education in their early adolescent years. Contrastingly, males are more likely to drop out of school at the tertiary level, displayed by the decreasing gap between male and female attendance rates. Overall, Afghan females are ending their education earlier in life than Afghan males, widening the gap between highly educated males and females in Afghanistan.

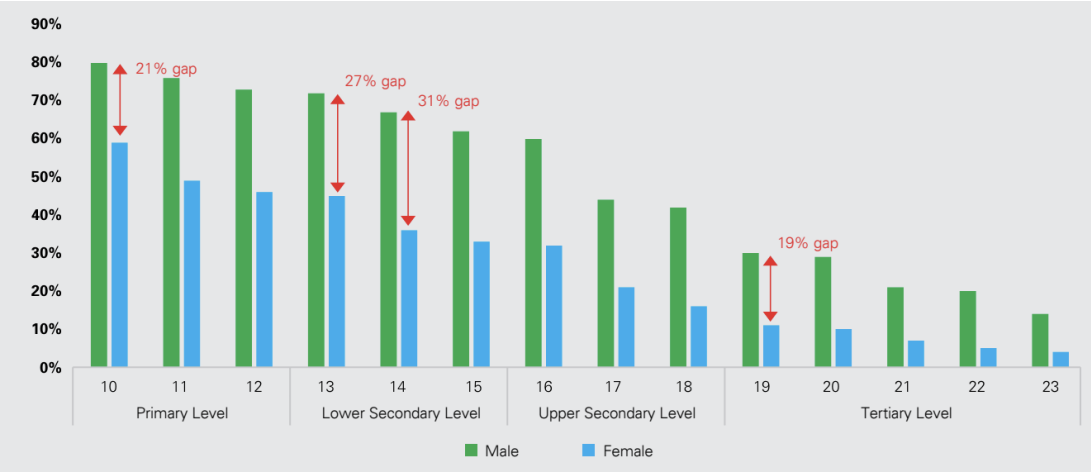

Figure 1. Differences in school attendance rates by gender and age in Afghanistan in 2016-2017. Ages 10 to 12 are included in Primary Level schooling, ages 13 to 15 are included in Lower Secondary Level schooling, etc. The gap in school attendance between genders generally increases before age 15 and decreases after age 15.

For both genders, excluding nomadic Kuchi girls and children with disabilities, those in poorer, rural areas had lower attendance rates than those who were wealthy and urban. However, socioeconomic impact was stronger for females, since the only schooling some females could obtain was costly private education (2018). The report explained, "social norms, tradition and religious beliefs [forbade] access to secular education for many girls. Child marriage, although in decline, also [remained] a major obstacle to education" (Figure 2). These societal expectations explain the overall decrease in attendance rates for Afghan females entering secondary school, regardless of residence and socioeconomic status.

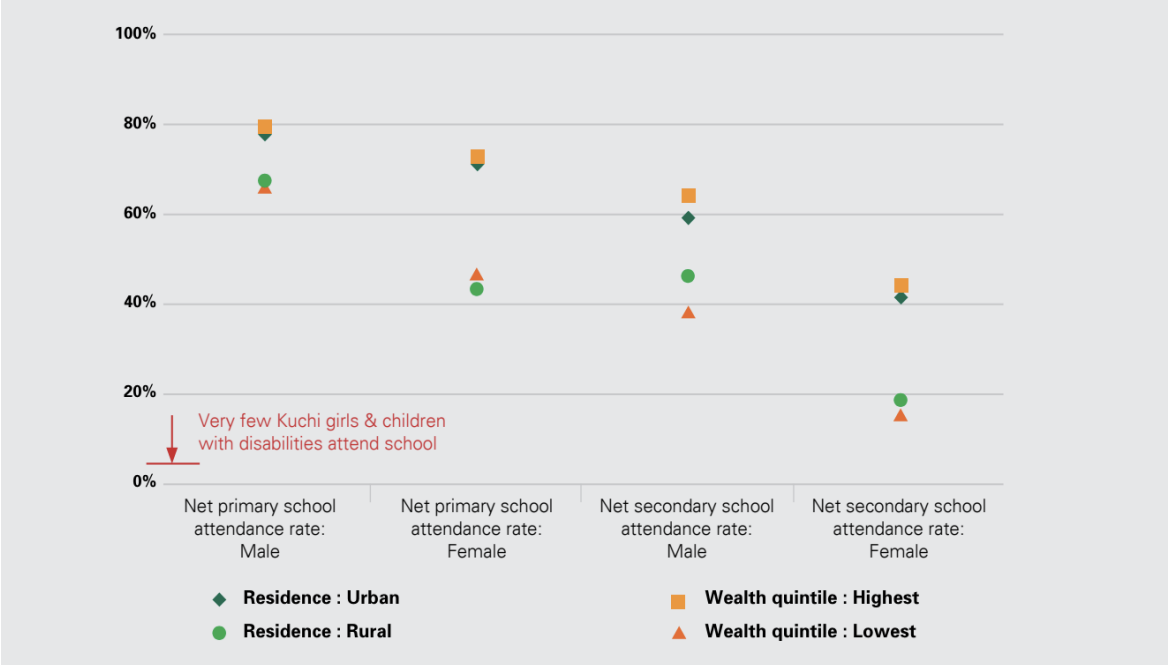

Figure 2. Overview of school attendance between urban/rural and wealthy/poor populations. Afghan females consistently have lower attendance rates than similarly aged Afghan males, and Afghans in rural areas with less wealth have lower attendance rates than similarly aged Afghans in urban areas with greater wealth.

When the Taliban regained power on August 15, 2021, even minor advancements for women's conditions were reversed (Bahous, 2022), and Afghan women's situation became even bleaker. Right after Taliban's resurgence, schools were shut down again for girls (Rasmussen, 2022, p. 202), and a student living under the Taliban's regime described how "women cannot get knowledge, carry books, [or] even go outside. They do not have any rights" (*Unnamed Student Living in Kabul. Interview by Sophia Lee. Telephone Interview.*, personal communication, February 7, 2023).

Laila Haidari: Serving the Underrepresented

Countless women continue to risk their lives to protect and build upon the work of past female leaders. One of many activists today, Laila Haidari founded the Mother Educational Center for Girls in Afghanistan and champions female literacy. At only age 13, Laila was a victim of child marriage and was forced to submit to her husband. Nevertheless, she secretly pursued education when her husband was away (Lamb, 2023). In an interview with Laila, she describes Afghanistan as a "prison" for women, especially for the younger generation. She warns that "depression among women will become a pandemic" that perpetuates injustice for "millions of illiterate women who cannot defend their rights" (L. Haidari, personal communication, February 6, 2023).

An Afghan native, Laila espouses "gradual change" (L. Haidari, personal communication, February 6, 2023) to not fundamentally disrupt culture. Realizing that historical efforts were limited by geographical accessibility, Laila is first building a strong foundation in Kabul before continuing her work beyond the city. As described by activist Ahmad Shah Karimi, Laila currently "serves hundreds of girls in one of the most underprivileged areas of Kabul" and is looking to expand her programs to rural settings (A. Shah Karimi, personal communication, February 5, 2023). Thanks to Laila's programs and others like her, more Afghan women are becoming connected to female support networks that provide them with resources and encouragement to step out of their homes. More than ever, females are expanding their presence in society, and despite the Taliban's restrictions, as noted by activist Jawad Zawulistani, increasing numbers of communities now "highly support girls' education and welcome female participation in public life" (J. Zawulistani, personal communication, February 6, 2023).

A Continual Fight

A joint effort from Afghan females across all socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds is critical for change to be realized and sustained. Though the movement was originally led by royals and limited to urban populations, it is now driven by civilians and self-propagating to underprivileged and rural communities, promising greater potential for uprooting gender biases deeply ingrained within Afghan culture and history. With each passing generation, more women persist through opposition and fight against social exclusion. Already, Zainab, a nineteen-year-old currently studying in Qatar, is working to provide free online courses for girls across Afghanistan (Zainab, personal communication, February 5, 2023). Countless younger girls attending Laila's centers are also inspired by past activists and are determined to make an impact. One such girl named Fatima asserts, "I want to study with all my rights, and I will never give up. One day I will wear my uniform and open the door of our school" (Fatima, personal communication, February 12, 2023). With more young Afghan women advocating for their rights, the potential grows for them to finally surmount the frontier barring them from society. Especially with Afghan girls from all social classes united in this common effort, the time for change is now. Fatima urges, "Women in Afghanistan can have a life full of honors if they fight for their

rights as a human. If we continue waiting for each other to start a great insurgence, nothing [will ever] be done" (Fatima, personal communication, February 12, 2023).

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