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## Cultural and Religious Influences on Women's Freedom in Afghanistan

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### Abstract

Women's freedom in Afghanistan has long been shaped by a complex interplay of cultural traditions, religious interpretations, and socio-political structures. The country's patriarchal customs, deeply rooted in tribal and rural societies, often intersect with conservative interpretations of Islam to limit women's rights in education, employment, and public life. This paper examines how both cultural and religious ideologies influence Afghan women's freedom, analyzing their effects on gender roles, access to education, mobility, and participation in decision-making. This study explores historical patterns of gender inequality, the rise of the Taliban regime, and the contrasting reform movements led by women activists and international organizations. The paper discusses the Islam, in its core teachings, advocates for equality and dignity for all humans; however, cultural distortions and political misuse of religion have perpetuated gender-based discrimination. By reviewing recent developments after the Taliban's return to power in 2021, the paper explain the urgent need for global advocacy, education reform, and reinterpretation of religious norms to ensure women's human rights in Afghanistan. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers and educators to promote gender justice through culturally sensitive but progressive frameworks.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, women's freedom, culture, religion, gender equality, Taliban

### Introduction

Afghanistan stands at the crossroads of history, culture, and faith. Its society is built upon centuries of tribal traditions, religious values, and ethnic diversity that together form a complex social fabric. Among the many issues facing this nation, the position of women remains one of the most contested and sensitive topics. Afghan women's lives are shaped by the intersection of two powerful forces culture and religion both of which define their roles, rights, and responsibilities in society. While Islam forms the moral and spiritual foundation of Afghan identity, cultural norms derived from patriarchal tribal systems often influence how religion is interpreted and practiced. This interaction has had profound implications for women's autonomy, access to education, and public participation. Afghan women have played vital roles in society as educators, poets, and leaders. Yet, periods of political upheaval have repeatedly curtailed their freedoms. The 20th century saw alternating cycles of modernization and conservatism from King Amanullah Khan's early reforms in the 1920s to the strict Taliban rule in the late 1990s and again after 2021. Each era reflected a struggle between progressive visions of women's empowerment and traditionalist resistance grounded in cultural and religious discourse.

In contemporary Afghanistan, the question of women's freedom cannot be examined without acknowledging the impact of religious interpretation. Islam, in its essence, upholds the equality of all believers; yet patriarchal interpretations have been used to justify the subordination of women. Religious leaders and political groups have selectively applied Islamic principles to reinforce social hierarchies, often merging cultural customs with religious doctrine. Consequently, Afghan women face restrictions not inherent to Islam itself but embedded in tribal and cultural practices disguised as religious mandates. Moreover, the recent political changes since the Taliban's return to power in 2021 have deepened these gender inequalities. Women have been excluded from public offices, universities, and most forms of paid employment. The closure of girls' secondary schools has reversed decades of progress, while dress codes and movement restrictions further confine women's public

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visibility. Yet, despite these challenges, Afghan women continue to resist through activism, education in exile, and digital advocacy. The seek to explore these tensions by analyzing how cultural and religious influences jointly shape women's freedoms in Afghanistan.

### Historical Context of Women's Rights in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has a long and complex history, and throughout this history, the position of women in society has changed many times. These changes usually happened when political power shifted from one group or leader to another. One of the most important moments for women's rights in Afghanistan occurred during the rule of King Amanullah Khan, who governed from 1919 to 1929. His time in power is remembered as the country's first major effort to modernize both government and society. King Amanullah was influenced by global reform movements happening in the early 20th century. Many countries especially in the Middle East and South Asia were modernizing their legal systems, education, and social structures. Amanullah believed that Afghanistan, too, needed to modernize in order to become a strong and respected nation. A central part of his plan was improving the lives of women, because he saw women's rights as essential for national development. One of the most important reforms he introduced was expanding education for girls. Before his rule, girls' access to schooling was extremely limited and often discouraged by conservative traditions. Amanullah opened new schools and encouraged families to send their daughters to study. Education was seen as a key step toward giving women more opportunities in society.

Another major reform was his decision to ban child marriage. In many parts of Afghanistan at the time, it was common for girls to be married at a very young age. Amanullah saw this practice as harmful and believed that ending it would help protect young girls' well-being. By banning child marriage, he challenged deep-rooted cultural customs that had existed for generations. Amanullah also supported the idea of unveiling women. In many communities, women were expected to cover themselves in public. The king and his wife, Queen Soraya, believed that unveiling symbolized progress and modernity. Queen Soraya herself became a powerful symbol of women's liberation. She appeared publicly without a veil, worked actively to support education for girls, and spoke openly about women's rights. Her public presence sent a strong message about the new direction Amanullah hoped to take Afghanistan (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2016) <sup>[1]</sup>.

During the rule of King Zahir Shah from 1933 to 1973, Afghanistan experienced slow but steady reforms that affected many parts of society, including the lives of women. One of the most important steps forward was the creation of the 1964 Constitution, which gave Afghan women the right to vote and to take part in political life. This was a major change because it recognized women as active citizens with a voice in the country's future. The 1970s, these reforms began to show results, especially in urban areas like Kabul. More women started attending universities, working in offices, and entering different professions such as medicine, teaching, and government service. These opportunities helped women gain confidence, education, and a sense of independence. However, progress was not equal across the country. In many rural areas, traditional beliefs and strong patriarchal customs continued

to limit women's rights. Girls often had fewer chances to attend school, and social rules kept women mostly inside the home. This contrast between urban and rural life created a divided experience for Afghan women (Moghadam, 2021) <sup>[9]</sup>.

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, the government introduced many programs aimed at increasing education and literacy. One of the main goals was to help both men and women learn to read and write. As a result, more women began working in fields such as education, healthcare, and government offices. These changes created new opportunities for women, giving them access to jobs and public life in ways that had not existed before. However, not all Afghans supported these reforms. Many conservative communities believed that the changes were being forced on them by a foreign power. They felt that encouraging women to work outside the home or attend school went against their cultural and religious values. Because of this, there was strong resistance, and some families refused to participate in the new programs (Barakat & Wardell, 2019) <sup>[3]</sup>.

After the Soviets withdrew in 1989, Afghanistan entered a long and devastating civil war. Different groups fought for power, and the country became unstable and dangerous. During this time, women suffered greatly. Many were displaced from their homes, lost family members, and struggled to access basic services. Violence, insecurity, and poverty increased, leaving women particularly vulnerable and with very limited protection or support.

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, they enforced extremely strict rules on women's lives. Under their rule, women lost many basic rights that they had previously gained. One of the most serious restrictions was the ban on education for girls. Schools for girls were closed, and women were not allowed to study at any level. This greatly limited their future opportunities. The Taliban also required women to wear the burqa, a full-body covering that hides the face and entire figure. This was strictly enforced, and any woman who did not follow the dress rules risked being beaten or punished. Another major restriction was that women could not leave their homes without a male guardian, such as a father, husband, or brother. This rule made it difficult for women to work, visit doctors, or even buy basic necessities. As a result, many women became isolated and dependent. Women were also banned from working in most professions. Only a few female doctors and nurses were allowed to work, because their help was needed to treat other women (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

After the U.S. intervention in 2001, Afghanistan entered a period of rebuilding, and many rights for women were restored. The 2004 Constitution gave women legal protection and allowed them to return to school, work, and public life. Girls' schools reopened, and women became active in universities, government offices, and community organizations. Women also began to take part in politics more than ever before. By 2018, women held 27% of the seats in the Afghan parliament, which was considered one of the highest levels of female political participation in the region (UN Women, 2023). This period gave many Afghan women a sense of hope, opportunity, and social progress.

However, this progress was largely reversed when the Taliban returned to power in 2021. One of their first actions was to ban secondary education for girls, preventing teenage girls from attending school. This decision affected millions

of students and closed off future career paths for them. Women's employment was also severely restricted. Most women were no longer allowed to work, except in a few areas such as healthcare and primary education, where female workers were considered necessary. The rights and freedoms women had gained over two decades were lost almost overnight, creating a major setback for gender equality in Afghanistan (UN Women, 2023).

### Cultural Foundations of Gender Roles

Afghanistan is a deeply patriarchal society, where gender roles are strongly shaped by tribal traditions, family expectations, and local norms. Among the Pashtuns, the Pashtunwali code remains the foundation of social behavior. This code emphasizes concepts such as family honor (*nang*) and female modesty (*namus*), dictating strict control over women's behavior. Actions perceived as dishonoring the family whether related to marriage, education, or personal choices can result in social ostracism, forced marriage, or even violence (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2016; Dupree, 2002) <sup>[1, 6]</sup>.

In rural areas, cultural practices such as purdah or female seclusion further limit women's mobility and visibility in public spaces. The practice is often enforced from puberty, restricting women to the domestic sphere and discouraging public education and professional engagement (Moghadam, 2021) <sup>[9]</sup>. Early marriage is frequently justified as a mechanism to protect family honor or to secure economic alliances, curbing girls' opportunities for education and self-development. Women's labor is predominantly confined to household responsibilities, including childcare, cooking, and household maintenance. This segregation reinforces social hierarchies and maintains male dominance, as women's work is undervalued economically and socially (Najafizada, 2020) <sup>[10]</sup>.

While these gendered norms are primarily cultural, they are often rationalized using selective religious interpretations. Traditional elders frequently claim that Islam forbids female leadership or public participation, although there is no explicit Qur'anic or Hadith-based prohibition against women's engagement in education or governance (Barakat & Wardell, 2019) <sup>[3]</sup>. Consequently, cultural norms and religious authority often merge to form barriers to women's autonomy, with tribal traditions cloaked in the legitimacy of religion.

### Religious Interpretations and Gender

Religion is central to Afghan identity, and Islam profoundly influences social norms, legal structures, and gender expectations. The Quran explicitly emphasizes equality between men and women. For instance, Qur'an 4:1 states that all humans are created from a single soul, symbolizing intrinsic equality. Additionally, Islamic teachings encourage the pursuit of knowledge for both sexes (Qur'an 96:1–5) (Esposito, 2005) <sup>[7]</sup>. Despite these egalitarian principles, the practical application in Afghanistan is often patriarchal. Afghan society often reflects the interpretations of local clerics (*ulema*), who are educated in conservative madrasas. These clerics promote selective readings of the Qur'an and Hadith to reinforce gender hierarchies. The Taliban regime (1996–2001, 2021–present) is the most extreme example: their interpretation of Sharia law fuses religious principles with tribal norms, emphasizing women's obedience, segregation, and domestic confinement while marginalizing their social and political rights (Rashid, 2022) <sup>[11]</sup>.

The other Muslim-majority countries have successfully balanced Islamic values with gender equity. Indonesia, Tunisia, and Morocco, for example, have integrated religious principles with progressive legal reforms, ensuring women's access to education, political participation, and employment (Moghadam, 2021; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007) <sup>[9, 8]</sup>. These cases demonstrate that Islam itself does not mandate the restrictions seen in Afghanistan; rather, political misuse of religion, combined with entrenched cultural patriarchy, enforces women's subjugation (Barakat & Wardell, 2019) <sup>[3]</sup>. Furthermore, Afghan women scholars, including Fawzia Koofi and Malalai Joya, emphasize that reclaiming religious discourse is crucial for reform. By educating communities on authentic Islamic teachings, women can challenge patriarchal interpretations that legitimize discrimination (Amnesty International, 2023). Reinterpreting Islamic texts locally could foster a balance between cultural values and human rights, empowering women while respecting Afghan identity.

### Intersection of Culture, Religion, and Politics

In Afghanistan, politics frequently exploits religion and culture to consolidate power. The Taliban, for instance, present themselves as guardians of Islamic morality, yet their governance often relies on coercion rather than consensus (Amnesty International, 2023). Religious rhetoric becomes a tool to enforce political authority, particularly in controlling women's behavior, dress, and mobility, creating a system where compliance is enforced rather than willingly embraced.

During reformist periods, such as the early 2000s under the Western-supported Afghan government, efforts were made to separate religion from tribal influence and modernize society. However, these attempts faced strong backlash from conservative rural clerics who labeled modernization as "anti-Islamic" (Barakat & Wardell, 2019) <sup>[3]</sup>. Women's rights thus became a symbolic battleground between competing political ideologies: Western-supported modernization versus religious conservatism. Prominent Afghan women activists, such as Malalai Joya and Fawzia Koofi, challenge this false dichotomy, arguing that Islam itself promotes justice, compassion, and equality (Moghadam, 2021) <sup>[9]</sup>. Their work highlights that the struggle for women's rights does not necessarily contradict religious values but can be framed as a call to reinterpret religious texts in ways that support emancipation and human rights.

### Impact on Education, Employment, and Mobility

Education is often the most visible indicator of women's empowerment and, consequently, a primary target under restrictive regimes. Under the Taliban (2021–present), secondary and higher education for girls has been banned, affecting over one million students (UN Women, 2023). This educational regression risks creating a "lost generation" deprived of intellectual, social, and economic agency. Prior to the Taliban's return to power, women were actively employed as teachers, doctors, journalists, and politicians. Female entrepreneurs also played significant roles in local economies (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Today, women's employment is largely limited to health and humanitarian sectors, often under segregated and heavily regulated conditions.

Mobility restrictions further isolate women, as they are



forbidden from traveling long distances without a male guardian (mahram). This limitation not only curtails social interaction but also restricts economic participation. Psychologically, these policies contribute to widespread anxiety, depression, and a sense of hopelessness, particularly among young educated women (Amnesty International, 2023). Such systemic exclusion is not only a human rights violation but also weakens Afghanistan's social and economic fabric by marginalizing half of its population from meaningful contribution to development.

### Resistance and Women's Movements

Despite extreme repression, Afghan women continue to demonstrate resilience and ingenuity in defending their rights. Since 2021, secret schools have been established in private homes across multiple provinces, allowing girls to continue their education under the threat of severe punishment (Barakat & Wardell, 2019) [3]. Social media campaigns like #LetAfghanGirlsLearn and #StopGenderApartheid have amplified global awareness, pressuring international actors to respond. Female journalists and teachers risk imprisonment to document abuses, while others have fled abroad and formed networks in exile that advocate for education and digital empowerment (Amnesty International, 2023). Organizations such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) and the Afghan Women's Network maintain underground activism, demonstrating that women's agency persists even under extreme oppression. The diaspora community plays a critical role in lobbying international bodies such as the United Nations, representing a transnational form of feminist activism that extends Afghanistan's struggle into global digital and political spaces.

### Reinterpreting Islam for Women's Empowerment

A sustainable path toward women's empowerment in Afghanistan requires reinterpreting Islam through inclusive scholarship. Progressive Muslim thinkers, such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, argue that patriarchal interpretations are rooted in cultural biases rather than divine revelation (Moghadam, 2021) [9]. They advocate for *ijtihad* independent reasoning which allows reinterpretation of religious texts in light of contemporary social realities. In Afghanistan, empowering local religious scholars, including women, to teach egalitarian interpretations of Islam could reduce resistance to gender reforms. Educational curricula could highlight the historical contributions of Muslim women, such as Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, the Prophet Muhammad's wife, a successful businesswoman and influential leader in early Islam. Partnerships among local mosques, universities, and NGOs could foster dialogue between tradition and reform, rooting gender equality in culturally authentic frameworks rather than externally imposed models. This approach emphasizes that gender justice and Islamic values are not mutually exclusive but can be harmonized to empower Afghan women socially, economically, and spiritually.

### Conclusion

Women's freedom in Afghanistan is shaped by the complex interplay of culture, religion, and politics. Conservative traditions and patriarchal interpretations of Islam have long restricted women's access to education, employment, and

public life. Political actors, particularly the Taliban, have used these norms to consolidate power, often framing restrictions on women as moral or religious obligations. These combined pressures have marginalized women and limited their opportunities to participate fully in society.

Despite these obstacles, Afghan women continue to show resilience and determination. Secret schools, underground activism, and social media campaigns reflect their courage in preserving education, amplifying voices, and maintaining networks of support. Even under severe threats, women demonstrate that agency and resistance persist, proving that change is possible when communities organize and innovate.

Culture and religion are not inherently opposed to women's rights. Many patriarchal practices are rooted in social traditions rather than religious principles. By reframing religious teachings to support justice, equality, and education, reforms can gain local acceptance while respecting cultural identity. To advance women's freedom, key measures are essential: expanding girls' education through flexible programs, creating economic opportunities for women, promoting inclusive religious scholarship, and raising social awareness about women's contributions. Support from international networks can also maintain pressure for reform and amplify women's voices. Afghan women's struggle is not merely a cultural, religious, or political issue it is a fight for human dignity and equality. By combining education, economic empowerment, social advocacy, and reinterpretation of traditions, Afghanistan can build a society where women's rights are respected, culturally grounded, and central to national development. Empowering women is essential not only for justice but also for the country's long-term stability and prosperity.

To achieve sustainable progress:

1. Educational reform should prioritize gender-sensitive curricula and religious literacy for both men and women.
2. Local clerics must be engaged in dialogue to reinterpret religious texts supporting equality.
3. International organizations should fund women-led educational and digital initiatives rather than impose external models.
4. Mental health support for women affected by repression is crucial for long-term social recovery.
5. Global advocacy must continue to hold the Taliban accountable while amplifying Afghan women's voices.

Women's freedom in Afghanistan cannot be created through outside intervention alone. Although international support can offer resources, attention, and pressure, it cannot by itself transform the social and cultural foundations that shape everyday life. Lasting change must come from within Afghan society, through the efforts of Afghans who understand their own history, beliefs, and social traditions. For progress to be meaningful, it must grow out of the ways Afghans interpret their faith, practice their culture, and respond to the needs of a changing world.

Afghanistan is a country where religion, especially Islam, holds deep importance in public and private life. Cultural values, tribal customs, and community expectations also play a strong role in shaping attitudes toward women. Because of this, any improvement in women's rights must be grounded in interpretations of faith and culture that support dignity, fairness, and respect. When religious

devotion is understood in a way that honors compassion, justice, and human worth, it becomes possible to imagine a society where women participate fully without feeling that they are moving away from their spiritual or cultural identity. Modernity should not be seen as a rejection of tradition, but rather as a way to strengthen society by expanding knowledge, opportunity, and equality. Modern ideas about education, health, and human rights can work alongside Afghan values when they are introduced through dialogue and community engagement rather than imposed from outside. True progress will require Afghans religious leaders, community elders, women, men, and youth to work together in redefining the balance between devotion and dignity.

Ultimately, women's freedom will develop through an internal process of reflection, reform, and reconciliation. When Afghans themselves take the lead in harmonizing faith, culture, and modern life, they create the possibility of a future in which women can live with security, respect, and full human dignity.

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