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ISTANBUL KULTUR UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION OF

AFGHAN WOMEN POST-2001

Master of Arts Thesis by

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Department: International Relations

Program: International Relations

Supervisor: Asst. Prof. Dr. Nazlı Çağın Bilgili

January 2022

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ABSTRACT

Women in Afghanistan lived a life full of ups and downs throughout history. Despite their strengths and capabilities, they have always been the victims of cultural and traditional restrictions and conservatism. But when they were given a chance, they played extraordinary roles in different stages of life and proved to be as capable as men when it came to socio-political development.

This study investigates the position of Afghan women throughout the twentieth century and in post-2001. It describes the supports provided and reforms initiated by different governments to empower women and enhance their participation in the power structure. At the same time, it highlights the challenges resulting from conservatism and extremism that hindered women's empowerment in Afghanistan and restricted them from practicing their rights and freedoms.

The primary objective of this thesis is to reveal the improving conditions of Afghan women after 2001 as a result of supports provided by the international community and reforms initiated by the governments. Meanwhile, it evaluates women's political and socio-economic participation after 2001. It also analyzes the external and internal factors that led to women's empowerment and enhanced their participation in the power structure.

This study mainly uses secondary data and follows a qualitative approach to analyze the findings.

Keywords: Afghan women, Women empowerment, Women's Socio-political participation

KISA ÖZET

Afganistan'daki kadınlar tarih boyunca inişli ve çıkışlı bir hayat yaşamışlardır. Güçlü yönleri ve yeteneklerine rağmen, her zaman kültürel ve geleneksel kısıtlamaların ve muhafazakarlığın kurbanı olmuşlardır. Ancak kendilerine bir şans verildiğinde, yaşamın farklı aşamalarında olağanüstü roller oynamış ve sosyo-politik gelişimi konusunda erkekler kadar yetenekli olduklarını kanıtlamışlardır.

Bu çalışma, 20. yüzyıl boyunca ve 2001 sonrasında Afgan kadınlarının konumunu araştırmaktadır. Kadınları güçlendirmek ve güç yapısına katılımlarını artırmak için farklı hükümetler tarafından sağlanan destekleri ve başlatılan reformları açıklar. Aynı zamanda, Afganistan'da kadınların güçlendirilmesini engelleyen ve onların hak ve özgürlüklerini uygulamalarını kısıtlayan muhafazakarlıktan kaynaklanan zorlukları vurgulamaktadır.

Bu tezin temel amacı, uluslararası toplumun sağladığı destekler ve hükümetlerin başlattığı reformlar sonucunda 2001 yılından sonra Afgan kadınlarının iyileşen koşullarını ortaya koymaktır. Aynı zamanda kadınların siyasi ve sosyo-ekonomik katılımını 2001 sonrası dönemlerde değerlendirmektedir. Ayrıca, kadınların güçlenmesine yol açan ve güç yapısına katılımlarını artıran dış ve iç faktörleri de analiz etmektedir.

Bu çalışma esas olarak ikincil verileri kullanır ve bulguları analiz etmek için nitel bir yaklaşım izler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afgan kadınları, Kadınların güçlendirilmesi, Kadınların Sosyo-politik katılımı

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACDEO	Afghanistan Capacity Development and Educational Organization
ACSFO	Afghanistan Civil Society Forum-organization
AISA	Afghanistan Investment Support Agency
AGO	Attorney General Office
ANDS	Afghanistan National Development Strategy
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
AWBF	Afghanistan Women Business Federation
AWC	Afghanistan Women's Council
AWCCI	Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CWWA	Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan
DOAW	Democratic Women's Organization of Afghanistan
EU	European Union
EVAW	Elimination of Violence Against Women
FRUs	Family Response Units
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IEC	Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan
KHAD	Afghan intelligence services
LEAD	Leading Entrepreneurs for Afghanistan Development
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education
MOWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
MP	Member of Parliament
NAPWA	National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan
NEXA	National Examination Administration
NGOs	Non-government Organizations
NHLP	National Horticultural and Livestock Project
NRP	National Reconciliation Policy
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
RAWA	Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan

SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WAW	Women for Afghan Women
WEE-RDP	Women Economic Empowerment Rural Development Program
WIE	Women in the Economy
WLD	Women's Leadership Development



CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction

Half of the population of Afghanistan consists of women. What could be the country's future if this half of the population faces social, political, economic, and familial discrimination, with an increased threat of violence, assaults, and other kinds of problems just for being female. A country cannot be developed if a significant portion of its citizens is ignored and remain undeveloped. A society with fifty percent of women should be taken for granted to be developed and evolve faster if all men and women equally take part in its development rather than women held captive and designated to family responsibilities only.

In today's world, women's empowerment is becoming more important with the advancement of modernizations and globalization. The developed nations around the world are significantly progressing by considering essential roles for women and enhancing their participation at all levels, including political, social, and economical. We have also witnessed considerable accomplishments and developments in Afghanistan after 2001 due to the attention paid to women's empowerment and their socio-political participation. It is proved that if they are given chances, women are as capable as men in contributing to the reconstruction and development of the country. Women were even superior to men when it came to taking big responsibilities because they were not only able to fulfill their familial responsibilities but also played a constructive role in the power structure in Afghanistan.

Taliban is back in power, and the prospects for women's political and social participation seem gloomy; but in the meanwhile, the recent history of Afghanistan tells us a different story. The conservatives and fundamentalists may disrupt the process of women's participation, but each time women come with more enthusiasm and stronger determination to conquest new fronts in the struggle for their rights.

Taking the above discussion into consideration, it's important to analyze the two decades of democracy, how women's political and social empowerment was initiated and led after 2001, and the factors behind women's empowerment in Afghanistan.

This research examines major factors that contributed to the sociopolitical emancipation of Afghan women. Moreover, it analyzes internal and external factors in materializing social and political reforms that enabled women to study, work, own properties, and run for the Presidential election. Based on the aim of the study Chapter two looks at the history of Afghan women's participation throughout the 20th century and the opportunities and challenges they faced. The historical account within this chapter reveals that even before 2001, the story of Afghan women had its own ups and downs. Chapter three digs into one of the most important eras of Afghan women's empowerment and participation, 2002-2021. These two decades were the remarkable times when the international actors cooperated with the modernizers in the country to make significant changes, especially in the reforms were made in this time period, it should also not to be forgotten that this was a controversial time of imperial control over Afghanistan. Hence the period certainly needs to be discussed in future length. Chapter four analyzes these two decades in the further details and discuss internal and external factors that facilitated women's empowerment. Finally, the conclusion wraps all this discussion up and aims to make suggestions on what needs to be done under current circumstances so that women don't suffer completely.

1.1 Goals and Objectives of the Research

All scientific researches are essential according to their goals and objectives. The main reason I have selected this thesis topic is to reveal the accomplishments and developments in the areas of women's political and social participation and empowerment in Afghanistan. As an activist who worked for various women's empowering civil society organizations, I aim to investigate

and highlight the relationships of the relevant variables through this research and contribute to other future studies to be conducted on women's participation and empowerment.

The main goals and objectives of the study are:

- To study the influence of external and internal factors on women's empowerment in Afghanistan
- To explore the relationship of empowerment with the women's socio-political participation
- To investigate the effects of women's participation in the power structure on Afghanistan's development.

1.2 Methodology

The research methodology is a systematic procedure used to identify and select a research topic and analyze the findings related to it. The methodology section of the research helps readers to evaluate the overall validity and reliability of the study.

This research is a historical-based study conducted mainly using secondary sources, including books, academic articles, online data from prestigious websites, reports, news articles, and biographies. More than a hundred sources have been analyzed and referenced to complete this research. Since it is historical research, thus a qualitative research approach has been adapted to analyze the findings. According to (Historical Research A Qualitive Research Method, 2015) historical research implies the process of systematically exploring past events to reveal and evaluate the account of happenings in history. It is not just the description of the happenings and accumulation of dates, but it is a dynamic and flowing explanation of past events with an interpretation and analysis of occurrences, their implications, and the ideas that have influenced these occurrences. In line with the above definition, this research does not only describe the past happenings with regards to women's position in Afghanistan, but it also analyzes and

interprets the findings and highlights the factors that affected women's empowerment throughout history.

A background literature review is also conducted to comprehensively review and evaluate the perspectives of various scholars on women empowerment and its importance for enhancing the participation of women in all spheres of life. Furthermore, in accordance with the goals and objectives set, the study analyzes the relationships between variables such as the factors that influenced women's empowerment in Afghanistan and the positive effects of empowerment on enhancing women's participation in socio-political areas in the country.

1.3 Women Empowerment

Women empowerment is a hot topic and a global phenomenon in today's world. After the establishment of the United Nations Organization, the concept of women empowerment attracted the attention of scholars from around the world and became a top priority in the political agendas of many countries worldwide. Considering the importance of the concept, The UN declared 1975 as the "Women's Decade," and following that, the year 2001 was proclaimed as the "International Year for Women's Empowerment." (Mandal, 2013, p. 18)

The common fact is that, in every society, women assume unequal treatment and position in all spheres of life. Therefore, it is critical to empower women by giving them equal opportunities and facilitating their participation at all levels of life similar to men. There have been many studies that show women are equal and even more superior to men in the areas of managing a family, providing better education to their children, expanding their household income, and ensuring welfare in the family. In fact, empowering helps women have strong engagement and control in decision-making, which eventually results in attaining an equal foundation with men in all spheres of life, including political, social, economic, and cultural.

1.3.1 Definition of the Term Empowerment

The term empowerment refers to a social process of multi-dimensions that helps people have control over their lives and provide them with power to use in all spheres of life, community, and society on important issues. Moreover, empowerment is a process of strengthening communities and individuals in social, political, and economic fields. (Keshab, 2006)

Many scholars have tried to explain the definition of the term empowerment from their own perspective. This term has different meanings in political, social, cultural, and economic contexts. Exploring local empowerment-related terms around the world always involves a wide range of definitions. These terms include self-power, self-control, self-reliance, self-strength, personal choice, ability to fight for one's rights, freedom, independence, decision-making power, and so on. These definitions are entrenched with local values and beliefs. Empowerment has both intrinsic and instrumental values. The most common meaning of the term empowerment is to enhance the power of the low-power groups to equal with the power high power groups. (Bhadra, 2001, p. 61).

According to Aspy & Sandhu (Empowering women for equity: A counseling approach, 1999, p. 24), empowerment is the process of possessing control over one's own life and at the same time supporting and enabling others to gain control over their own lives. Arundhati Chattopadhyaya (2005) refers to empowerment as a multi-dimensional process employed to expand freedom of choice and actions to shape one's life in all spheres such as social, political, economic, etc. Goodrich defines empowerment as a gracious but unilateral dealing in which one person enables another person to feel competent and take actions (Patricia, Darlington, & Mulvaney, 2003, p. 12). Furthermore, World Bank describes empowerment as a process to increase the capacity of people and individuals to be able to make choices and convert them into actions and outcomes. It implies actions that build collective and individual assets and the same time, enable the organizations and institutions to fairly and efficiently govern and use these assets (Chattopadhyay, 2005, pp. 123-156)

As far as women empowerment is concerned, Sushama Sahay (Women and Empowerment: Approaches and Strategies, 1998) defines this term as "an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life." It means the power and authority are

decentralized to enable the powerless and deprived women to participate in the decision-making process and implement programs and policies related to social and public matters. Kiran Devendra (2001) stresses that women's empowerment is the process to equip women to be self-reliant and economically independent and have the self-esteem to be able to face difficult situations and participate in the decision-making process and developmental activities. Empowered women can play a significant role in the formulation of favorable policies and the effective implementation of programs in a country. Thus, women empowerment it is not only important but also a pre-requisite for the overall development of a country.

1.3.2 Types of Empowerment

The above discussions highlight that scholars have tried to define empowerment from various perspectives. It ranges from participation in all spheres to the formulation and implementation of policies and developmental programs. Considering these discussions, we can break down women's empowerment into many types and categories. This study specifically focuses on discussing women's empowerment in social, political, economic, and educational areas.

1.3.2.1 Social Empowerment

Social empowerment implies enhancing women's position in social structure and strengthening their social relations. Social empowerment addresses the existence of discrimination in society based on religion, race, ethnicity, or gender. From a sociological perspective, K.D. Gangrade (2001) considers women's empowerment as equal opportunity, status, and freedom provided to a woman to develop herself. Women are almost oppressed in every society. According to Srivasta's observation from a perspective of women's vulnerability for different kinds of exploitation and oppression, it is necessary to empower women socially, economically, and politically in order to enable them to claim equality with men and break away from male domination. (Srivastava, 2001). Furthermore, Griffin (1987) explains women's social

empowerment as the ability of women to make contributions at all levels of society and not only at home.

1.3.2.2 Political Empowerment

Women's participation in the political sphere and decision-making process is an important leverage for empowerment. Indeed the inclusion of women in power structure ensures the actual enhancement of women empowerment. Alida Brill (2000) states that "Without our own voices being heard inside the government areas and halls of public policy and debate, we are without the right to accountability – a basic establishment of those who are governed." Women worldwide have been struggling to eliminate subjugation, oppression, violence, and all other kinds of the ill-treatment they face in society and within their families. Without having them in the power structure where they can formulate and implement policies and programs, it is impossible to ensure women's empowerment and give them rights and freedom. According to Pam Rajput (2001), to achieve development and peace and the goals of equality, women's empowerment in all areas, particularly in the political area, is highly important, which ensures the foundation of gender equality and advancement of women in society. Without women's political participation, it is very difficult for them to enhance capacity, increase effectiveness and challenge a power structure dominated by a patriarchal ideology.

1.3.2.3 Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is the severe need for women; indeed, it helps the poor, oppressed, and deprived women of all societies to be self-reliant and independent and free from all kinds of deprivations. Women can directly enjoy the benefits of markets and easily fulfill their economic requirements. More importantly, they can have jobs and run their businesses to generate their own income, properties and assets, and positive self-esteem, which helps them have a decisive say in society. Without access to the ownership of properties and economic resources, it is not easy for women to raise their voices and enhance their visibility. According to Promilla Kapur (2001), Women's empowerment is a process that helps women gain more significant share over resources such as human, intellectual,

and, more importantly, financial resources. By having access to money, women can gain greater power and have a stronger influence on the decision-making process in the home, society, and nation. Economic empowerment can be achieved through equal employment opportunities, organizational benefits, and equal treatment at work. Furthermore, self-employed women with self-reliance and financial independence can raise effective voices for the rights of poor and exploited women in the country. Women with income have the security of work, own assets under their names, and feel economically strong. (The Kurukshetra, 2005, p. 39)

1.3.2.4 Educational Empowerment

Educational empowerment is the most important tool for socio-political and economic evolution. In traditional concepts, higher education is recognized as an instrument of personal development that helps to grow individuals' intellectual horizons and enhance their potential and well-being for empowerment. Women empowerment is not possible without proper and equal education for all girls and boys. An educated girl benefits the family more than an educated boy because she becomes a mother and takes bigger responsibilities towards her children and family. This fact has been realized by administrators, national leaders, and policymakers. According to (Rao, 2001), it is very important to provide free and compulsory education for women in order to make them capable of knowing their rights and privileges, of fighting for their freedom, and of significantly contributing towards the development of their country by taking an active part in the power structure. As Napoleon Bonaparte said, "Give me an educated mother, I shall promise you the birth of a civilized, educated nation." Moreover, education helps a person to have self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-sufficiency; further, education increases religious, cultural, intellectual, political, and social consciousness; it also enhances tolerance and removes all kinds of superstition and narrowness that lead to positive changes in public opinion.

Taking the above discussions by different researchers into consideration, women's empowerment is an important area to be studied and explored. Therefore, this research is aimed to further investigate the topic of women empowerment with an emphasis on the socio-political participation of Afghan women in the power structure and explore the factors that influenced empowerment and resulted in significant accomplishments in the country.

1.4 Afghanistan, A Brief Overview

Afghanistan is a land-locked country located at the junction of South and Central Asia. It is categorized as a low-income nation of more than 37 million (World Bank DBI, 2020) and women make about 48.68% of the population (World Bank, 2020). Afghanistan's location has influenced its demographic and cultural combination, and it has also played a major role in forming its social sphere and political history. Searching for a brief introduction of Afghanistan in history books and encyclopedias, one would end with reading phrases that highlight the country's location, the invasions of great powers, and the ruins they have left. "Lying along important trade routes connecting Southern and Eastern Asia to Europe and to the Middle East, Afghanistan has long been a prize sought by empire builders, and for millennia great armies have attempted to subdue it, leaving traces of their efforts in great monuments now fallen to ruin" (Britanica, 2021)

1.5 Position of Afghan Women Under Different Political Regimes

1.5.1 The Modernization of Afghanistan

Afghanistan's recent history is a tale of consequent waves of foreign influences from the north through Central Asia, i.e. The, USSR invasion, and from the south, through South Asia, i.e., British India, Pakistan, and US invasions and interferences. These events have made both negative and positive effects on the country. About a century ago, in 1919, for the first time in the history of Afghanistan, a group of politicians who were fighting for the modernization of

the country took power after the murder of Habibullah Khan (20 February 1919), the Afghan King who had established the first modern school named after himself, Maktab-e Habibiya (Habibiya School) in 1903 (Obaidi, 2010). Habibiya Schools was only for male students.

The then leader of the education scheme under King Habibullah Khan was an Indian scholar, Dr. Abdul Ghani, who was assigned to regulate and establish the modern schooling system. The fight between modernism and conservatives began early those days when local officials, mullahs, and other conservative figures who were educated in the traditional madrasa system felt threatened. According to Dr. Ghani, The Habibiya School, and the primary schools, in the meantime, made rapid progress, far beyond his expectations. "It surprised the local officialdom, and excited jealousy." (Ghani, 1921, pp. 76-77). The harsh reaction by those opposing the modern education resulted in the imprisonment of Dr. Ghani and dozens of others. "Of the Afghans, who had supported me," writes Dr. Ghani, "seven were immediately put to death, and the rest, about sixty, were put in prison." The conservatives persuaded to the Amir Habibullah Khan that Dr. Ghani and his friends were working hard to overthrow his regime and that they aimed at the establishment of a Constitutional Government with Dr. Ghani himself as its president (Ghani, 1921, p. 66).

After Amir Habibullah Khan, the fight between conservatism and modernism was taken to new fronts; while modernists aggressively pushed for liberal changes, including the endorsement of equal rights of education for boys and girls, rights of ownership, freedom of the press and other civil rights (Jafari F. , 2019, p. 69). The leader of these reformists was Amanullah Khan, the son of Amir Habibullah Khan, who reigned from 1919 to 1929 and instituted substantial reforms in an effort to modernize the nation. Amanullah Khan was married to an educated woman, Queen Soraya, and opposed polygamy, contrary to his predecessor and father who had "more than one hundred women in his harem, with dozens of illegitimate children. (Ghubar G. , 2018, p. 19).

1.5.2 Women Step Forward

Queen Soraya, also known as Soraya Tarzi, played a major part in liberating Afghan women. She was born in Syria and educated by her father, Mahmud Beg Tarzi, an Afghan influential leader and intellectual (Runion, 2007, p. 155). Soraya was the first Muslim wife of a political leader who appeared in public together with her husband. She accompanied the King in the hunting parties, riding on horseback, and even in some cabinet meetings. (Wadsam, 2012)

King Amanullah Khan publicly campaigned for the freedom of women and encouraged the education of girls. (Ghosh, 2003) The women of the royal family, particularly Queen Soraya, acted as the role model of the change. She founded the first women's magazine, *Irshadul Naswan* (Guidance for Women), as well as *Anjuman-i Himayat-i-Niswan* (Organization for Women's Protection), the first women's organization in Afghanistan for the purpose of women's advancement and freedom. Led by Princess Kubra, Amanullah Khan's sister, the organization supported women to voice their grievances. It also fought against injustices and oppression of Afghan women. Moreover, "Organization for Women's Protection fought for women's rights and freedoms – the right to education, the right to individual freedom, freedom of speech, the right to work and rest, right to participate in political and civic activities, gatherings, and trips abroad" (Bamik, 2018, p. 4) Meanwhile, Queen Soraya established the very first school for girls (Masturat School in 1920), the first women's cinema in Paghman, and the first women's surgery center (the Masturat Hospital in 1924) (Reddy, 2014, pp. 124-143). In 1927-1928, Soraya and her husband Amanullah Khan visited Europe. Returning from Europe, Amanullah Khan called a Loya Jirgah¹ to endorse his program for reforms. In the Jirgah, Amanullah Khan argued for women's rights to education. He said that "Islam did not

¹ A Loya Jirgah is a special type of official gathering, or legal assembly, based on the traditional code of laws of the Afghan people. It is mainly organized for appointment of a new head of state in case of emergency or sudden death, adopting a new constitution, or to settle significant national or regional issues such as a war or natural disaster.

require women to cover their bodies or wear any special kind of veil" and asked his wife to remove her veil. At the conclusion of the speech, Queen Soraya put off her veil in public, and the wives of other officials present at the meeting followed her (Ghosh, 2003). Conservatives objected to the unveiling of women but did not contradict openly at the meeting. Instead they began to mobilize public opinion after their return from the meeting (Emadi, 2002). It was also alleged that the conservatives were further provoked by the British agents distributing international publications showing Soraya without a veil, dining with foreign men, and having her hand kissed by the leader of France, Germany, etc. among tribal regions of Afghanistan. (Gornall & Salahuddin, 2020)

1.5.3 Reactionary Revolt

The revolt against Amanullah Khan began in November 1928 when Shinwari tribesmen besieged Jalalabad, an eastern city bordered by the then British India (Ali, 1933, p. 15). The rebels prepared a statement of ten grievances, five of which related to Amanullah Khan's policies regarding the status of women (Muhammad & et al, 1999, p. 15). The revolt expanded soon and the reformist government of Amanullah Khan collapsed to his successor Habibullah Kalakani in February – August 1929. The short tenure of Kalakani was spent in chaos, the schools were closed and "domestic and foreign trade, with agriculture and craftsmanship, went into decline" (Ghubar G. , 2018, p. 15).

Kalakani was overthrown by Nadir Shah (1929-1933) another conservative, who harassed Afghan intelligentsia, banned all female schools, institutions, and Jarideh-e Zanan (Journal of Women)- the only newspaper published by the Afghan women. Nadir Shah's government returned the female Afghan students from Turkey, imposed the veil on the Afghan women again (Ghubar G. , 2018, p. 43). On November 8, 1933, a 17 years old student of Nejat School killed Nadir Shah during a ceremony held in the palace to give awards to school students. His murder was the reaction of the elites who supported liberal reforms. The two opposing forces continued

to fight and according to Ghubar (2018, p.44) Nadir Shah's assassination deeply affected Afghanistan's future administration, and his successor Zahir Shah (1933-1973) gradually allowed reforms, including the reopening of girls' schools.

The 1964 constitution was a major achievement for human rights advocates and women's rights fighters. Zahir Shah continued ruling the country for ten years after the endorsement of the 1964 constitution, which is known to have created the Dah-e Democracy (the decade of democracy) in Afghanistan. The achievements of this decade highly influenced the following developments in the country. According to Larson (2011, p. 9) "the Constitution of Afghanistan prepared during the post-Taliban Bonn Process was built on the 1964 Constitution of Zahir Shah's era of democracy." As such, it is incorrect to assume that the so-called Bonn Process came out of nowhere. Many institutions that established during the Taliban period in Afghanistan were in fact, the developed versions of the earlier examples. Why was this decade so important in Afghanistan's modern history, and what did Afghan women achieve?

1.5.4 A Decade of Democracy; Women Fight Back

Zahir Shah was only 19 when he was declared King in 1933, some hours after the assassination of his father. His uncles were actually exercising power through the powerful office of Prime Minister during Zahir Shah's early years of reign. Before he could manage to begin his own power to the full in 1963, his cousin Mohammad Daoud headed the government for a decade (1953-1963).

One year after the resignation of Daoud Khan, Shah promulgated "reforms which provided for a parliament, elections and a free press. Members of the royal family were also banned from holding public office. Parties were not strictly legal but tolerated. Social reforms included attempts to improve the status of women." (Judah, 2001) During the Decade of Democracy, women were allowed to vote and participate in social and political activities. Although the first parliament was established under Amanullah Khan in the late 1920s, the first-ever

parliamentary election was held in 1954 (Larson, 2011, p. 9). Few women, including Ruqaya Habib, Anahita Ratebzad, Khadija Ahrari, and Masuma Ismati, won seats in the parliament (1965-1969 and 1969-1971). Aziza Gardizi and Humaira Saljuqi were also appointed members of the senate. (Jafari F. , 2019, p. 73). For the first time, a lady, Kubra Noorzai, was included in the cabinet in 1967, and later, the second female minister, Shafiq Ziazi, was allowed to enter into the council of ministers, which was traditionally considered as men's exclusive domain. In short, the 1964 constitution transformed Afghanistan. The country experienced elections that were relatively free, women could win seats in the parliament, civil and political rights were protected by the law, and emancipation of women and universal suffrage were admired.

Women organizations such as Afghan Women's Alliance, Mirmano Tolona, and the Afghan Democratic Women's Organization encouraged women's participation in social, economic, and political processes and thus helped strengthen their position in Afghan society. Women actively defended their rights against the conservatives. In 1964, a group of conservative members of the Lower House of the parliament lobbied to pass a law prohibiting Afghan girls from getting education abroad, which triggered protests across the progressive groups of men and women, and hundreds of women protested and considered the proposal unconstitutional. Conservatives retreated, and the parliament abandoned the proposal.

These confrontations got heated year after year. Religious fundamentalists also got organized, and in 1970 members of an extremist organization called Jawanan-e Musulman (Muslim Youth) opened fire "at women and girls wearing short dresses and sprayed acid on some of them." (Bamik, 2018, p. 5). The horizon for women's rights started to get dark, and a long period of chaos began in 1973 when Zahir Shah was visiting Europe and his cousin Daoud Khan overthrew the King in a relatively peaceful coup and announced his "Republic on Government".

1.5.5 A Republican Punch

Daoud Khan, who declared himself as president of the Republic, imposed strict restrictions on political opposition to his rule, and therefore his republic was much more authoritarian than the monarchy of Zahir Shah (Rubin, 2004, p. 8).

He opposed Zahir Shah's constitutional parliamentary system, which he blamed for slow progress. He abolished the 1964 constitution and disbanded the parliament (Kamali, 1985).

Daoud Khan pushed for economic and infrastructural developments at the cost of political freedoms, which angered the oppositional groups and encouraged them to resort to brutal approaches. Schools and universities continued to grow, and the presence of women in social lives was not harmed, but the dynamic and lively environment for the political movements did not exist anymore. In the beginning, his foreign policies leaned towards USSR, which angered religious fundamentalists, who started armed insurrection. Later, Daoud Khan tried to lessen his dependence on the Soviet Union. To promote a pro-western foreign policy, Daoud visited western allies and anti-Soviet states in the Middle East for aid (Emadi, 2001) This angered Moscow and resulted in the deterioration of the relations between Daoud and the powerful pro-USSR party of Khalq (People's Democratic Party) in Kabul. He finally ended up confronting communists, liberals, and conservatives at the same time. The pro-Moscow leftists led a coup attempt on 28 April 1978 against Daoud's self-proclaimed republic and assassinated him and most of his family members.

Despite his desire for authoritarianism, Daoud was a progressive figure and tried for social, economic, and cultural advancements. During his presidency (1953-1963), the first Afghan female voice was broadcast on the radio. In 1959, he ordered the female participants to appear without burqa in the ceremonies on the Independence Day. He also established the first Midwifery School. (Kazem S. , 2005, pp. 313-314)

1.5.6 Caught Between the Two Extremes

Daoud Khan's four years and nine months of reign had a bloody end, and once again, after Amanullah Khan's time, the country was split into two extremes, and moderate voices were silenced. Religious extremists strongly opposed the presence of women in public life, while pro-Soviet leftists were advocating for a radical change and eradicating all traditional and religious barriers against gender equality. Both sides resorted to violence, and soon after the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan's (PDPA) Coup in April 1978, the two extremes, fundamentalists and leftists, found themselves in bloody confrontation that lasted for decades, killed about 1.5 million people and forced 32% of the population to emigrate into refugee camps in Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere (Khan I. , 2012, p. 4).

On 18th October 1978, about five months after the coup, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan issued a decree on women's rights known as Decree No. 7, which shocked the conservative segments of Afghanistan and angered religious fundamentalists. The decree was supposed to "promote equal rights between men and women... and eliminate unjust patriarchal and feudal relations between wives and husbands, and to further strengthen good family relations." The most controversial parts of the decree were articles 3 and 5. Article 3 said: (Gazette, 1978, pp. 14-16) (

"The girl or her custodian shall not receive cash under the title of dowry that exceeds 10 Sharia Dirham, which according to the rate of silver in the Bank does not surpass 300 Afghanis".

Article 5 banned child marriage:

"The engagement and marriage of girls before 16 and boys before 18 are not allowed."

Article 6 of the decree prescribed six months to 3 years of imprisonment for the violators and added that "the cash or material received in violation of this law shall be confiscated." This and other radical policies of the Khalqi regime provoked a national resistance led by religious conservatives and extremists. Under the Khalqi regime, women enjoyed extensive reforms in

favor of their political and social participation, while in rural areas and refugee camps where conservative mujahidin and extremist groups ruled, women were deprived of education and other basic rights (International, 1999).

During the Khalqi regime, social liberties spread across the society, and women from different walks of life benefited from the reforms, contrary to Zahir Shah and Daoud Khan regimes when only females from noble families and aristocracy could exercise the rights prescribed in the laws (Jafari, 2019).

Despite radical decrees, the Khalqi regime failed to implement its reforms across the country and was forced to retreat from its aggressive position.

In Kabul and some other major cities, the reforms were welcomed by the urban population, and women's representation in the social and political field dramatically increased, and people like Anahita Ratebzad², Masuma Esmati-Wardak³, and Saleha Faruq Etemadi⁴ served in important executive positions during the Khalqi regime. A large number of urban women were enlisted to the functionaries and militia groups of the PDPA party and the Democratic Women's Organization of Afghanistan (DOAW). (Hyman, 1992)

DOAW and its successor, All Afghanistan Women's Council (AWC), promoted the government's plan for female empowerment. According to official figures, AWC had approximately 150,000 members across the country. The AWC supplied welfare schemes for Afghan women, implemented literacy and education programs for women, and provided technical training courses (Whimpelmann, 2015). In 1991, the last year of the Khalqi regime, approximately 7,000 women were enrolled in universities, and approximately 230,000 girls were enrolled in schools throughout Afghanistan. Approximately 190 women lecturers and 22,000 women educators were employed in the country (Akseer & et al, 2017).

² Anahita Ratebzad, was among the first women elected to the Afghan legislature, served as the country's deputy head of state from 1980 until 1986.

³ Masuma Esmati-Wardak served as the Minister of Education in Dr. Najubullah's government.

⁴ Saleha Faruq Etemadi served as the Minister Labor and Social Affairs in Dr. Najubullah's government.

On the other front, Jihadis were burning schools, killing teachers, and preaching the women's rights for education, work, and ownership as non-Islamic practices and the plans of communists and pro-west liberals. Different factions of conservatives, jihadis, and extremists were fighting against the Khalqi regime. A minority of pro-democracy and liberal resistance fighters who opposed USSR occupation, but supported women's social and political participation and other civic values, were under pressure both from the Kabul regime and the fundamentalists. Meena (1956-1987), the founder of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), was one of those who resisted the occupation and as well as struggled for women's rights. She was assassinated in a plot that her followers' claim was executed by agents of KHAD (the Afghan Intelligence Services) and fundamentalist accomplices in Quetta, Pakistan, on February 4, 1987. (RAWA, 2003). Meena launched Payam-e-Zan (Women's Message) magazine in 1981, through which her organization RAWA was projecting the cause of Afghan women. She also established Watan Schools for refugee children, a hospital, and handicraft centers for refugee women in Pakistan to support Afghan women financially.

On April 16, 1992, the Khalqi regime collapsed, and a fundamentalist regime took power in Kabul. Jihadi factions could not agree on a common procedure to share the power and began a devastating civil war that ended only when the Taliban conquered Kabul in September 1996. Women were deprived of their basic rights during the Mujahedin regime, and warlords abused and sexually assaulted women across the country, and at large during the civil war in Kabul (Akseer et al., 2017).

The Taliban movement emerged in Afghan politics in 1994 when they conquered Kandahar City. It took about two years for them to occupy the capital Kabul, in September 1996. As expected, they put strict restrictions on civil and political activities; banned women's schools, political organizations, music, and dancing. Their ultraconservative ideology is described as an “innovative form of sharia combining Pashtun tribal codes” (Martin, 2003).

Fatima Jafari believes that women faced the most severe and unjust treatments during the Taliban rule, and they were deprived of their basic rights such as education, ownership, free movement, and even going to the market without a custodian (Jafari, 2019).

In August 1998, Taliban supreme leader Mullah Muhammad Omer issued a decree on women's rights that was limited to marriage and family affairs. It denounced the tradition of Baad (Marrying a girl to a man or a boy without her desire, only to end the animosity between the two families or tribes). It also allowed a widow to choose another husband without the interference of her late husband's family members. However, the decree ignored to mention the women's rights for education, work, ownership, and other civil and political rights (Official Gazette, Issue 788, P 76).

Women were often treated with extreme violence for breaking decrees. For instance, in October 1996, the Taliban cut off a woman's thumb tip for wearing nail varnish (Griffin, 2001, pp. 6-11). In another incident, the Taliban announced that they had seized and punished 225 women in December 1996 for violating the sharia code of dress. (Amnesty International, 1997) And Zarmina, whose images of assassination in Ghazi Stadium were published in 1999 and shocked the world, became an iconic victim of the Taliban's policy against women. This mother of five children was accused of killing her husband and executed in the famous football stadium of Kabul. The playground was packed with 30,000 spectators that day (Antonowicz, 2002). The scene radically changed in October 2001, when the US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan and overthrew Taliban government in December 2001.

1.5.7 Democracy Prevails For Another Two Decades

Two years after the fall of the Taliban, 502 members of the Constitution Loya Jirga approved the constitution of the "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan" on 4 January 2004, which was officially promulgated on 26 January of the same year. Five other constitutions were introduced and annulled since Amanullah Khan introduced the first in 1923. The new constitution was one

of the final steps and a road map to “reestablishing permanent institution of government” outlined in Bonn Accords of 5 December 2001(Rubin, 2004). It mandated a highly centralized presidential system with unprecedented rights for women. Article 7 required that the state observe the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and covenants to which the government is a party, while article 22 declared the legal equality of men and women. Articles 43 and 44 guaranteed women’s right to education. Article 83 declared that at least 27 percent of seats in the lower house of the parliament should be filled by women MPs. (Constitution of IRA, 2004) Later on, several other laws and regulations were endorsed to ensure women’s rights, some of which were challenged by conservative members of the parliament. The parliament did not pass the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women, and the President endorsed it by a decree on 20 July 2009. In this Law, 22 instances of violence against women were listed, including underage marriage, forced isolation, prohibiting the right to education, work, and limited access to health services.

The reformed legal framework the post -2001 as well as a great enthusiasm for change among the urban middle class and a great number of individuals and families returning back to Afghanistan, realized great improvements in terms of political and social participation of Afghan women. In 2004 for the first time, a woman, Masooda Jalal, ran for the Office of the President and placed 6th among 17 male candidates. Schools and universities were opened for male and female students in 2020, across the country, and student enrollment grew from 900,000 male students in 2001 to more than 9.5 million students, 39 percent of whom are girls. (USAID, Education, 2020) Women’s presence gradually increased in offices, sports, education centers, factories, and markets. According to the World Bank, in 2014, women made up 16.1% of the labor force in Afghanistan. A great number of women became ministers, deputy ministers, army commanders, governors, mayors, entrepreneurs, athletes, diplomats, MPs, and university professors.

However, the path towards success remained bumpy for Afghan women in the conservative society, and they had to fight against discrimination, harassment, violence, and a great variety of cultural, institutional, traditional, and legal barriers. Cases of honor killing, forced marriages, and domestic violence remained high. In 2012, the country recorded 240 cases of honor killings. These killings were committed by victims' husbands, brothers, fathers, or other relatives. (Ghanizada, 2013)

The tragic murder of Farkhunda Malikzada, a 27-year-old woman, shocked Afghans and the world. On 19 March 2015, a large mob of Kabul boys and men lynched Farkhunda near Shah-e Do Shamshira shrine, a few kilometers away from the Presidential Palace. The murderers claimed that she had burned the Quran, which later proved false and investigations revealed that she was a religious teacher, not an infidel. The mob was mobilized by Mullah Zainuddin, who was selling amulets in front of Shah-e Do Shamshira, the practice on which Farkhunda had argued with him (Goldstein, 2015). Farkhunda's murder was a sign that all these efforts to modernize Afghanistan had their limits and this was not easy task. While certain groups in the society could keep up with the reforms and changes easily, a large part of the society was stuck with its traditions and early teachings. Indeed, when the US troops were withdrawn in August 2021, the Taliban reoccupied the country, abolished the 2004 constitution, and established their self-proclaimed Imaret.

1.5.8 The Taliban Return

In February 2020, the US signed an agreement with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, which agreed provided for the withdrawal of all US-led allied forces from Afghanistan, and the Taliban promised that "Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies," and that they will take the necessary steps to "prevent any group or individual, including Al-Qaida, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies". (Doha, 2020).

As the US and NATO forces kept withdrawing from Afghanistan, Taliban attacks against Afghan security forces increased, and the insurgents started to capture major parts of the country during an attack that began in May 2021. They took control of Kabul on 15 August 2021, and hundreds of thousands of people rushed to leave the country in fear of Taliban reprisal. Images of residents rushing towards Kabul airport shocked the world.

The Taliban started to roll back the hard-earned civil and political rights of Afghans, especially women's rights, which triggered a series of protests inside Afghanistan and among Afghan expatriates across the globe. On 17 August 2021, only two days after the return of the Taliban, small groups of women gathered in Kabul, demanding equal rights for women (Kennedy, 2021). Despite promises of moderation, the Taliban put strict restrictions on women, closed girls' schools, and banned female employees from returning to their jobs. On 24 August, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid told reporters that working women must stay home until proper systems are in place. He promised that the procedure was a temporary measure (BBC, 2021). But as time passed and new events unfolded, more restrictions were imposed. The Taliban's Amir, Hibatullah Akhundzada, published a decree on women's rights similar to that of Mullah Omer, issued in the 1990s. The decree limited women's rights to choosing husbands, obtaining Mahar (dowry) from their husbands, and having inheritance rights. Not a single word was mentioned about their ownership rights, politics right or participation in education and the labor force. The decree has six articles, the second of which begins with an unusual phrase for Taliban, saying "a woman is not a property, but a real and free person". This sounds promising but follows with another phrase saying, "no one can give her to anyone in exchange for peace and/or to end animosity," pointing to the tribal custom of Baad. Considering the context of the decree, the term "being a free and real person" means a female member of the family must not be sold as common property and that her consent is necessary for marriage. Being a free and real person in this context does not mean a woman to be equal to a man in terms of rights. A

woman under Taliban is not entitled to civil and political rights that other free persons enjoy in modern societies. (Decree on Women, 2021). Anyhow, the circumstances changed, and the country is not anymore, the place where the Taliban ruled in the 1990s. People keep resisting and women will not stop pushing forward. In the 1980s, Mina, the leader of a women's organization, RAWA, was fighting for democracy and opposed reforms imposed by invaders and as well as by the radical reactionaries inside. She wrote the following poem to demonstrate her determination to fight for a just society:

Oh compatriot, no longer regard me weak and incapable,
My voice has mingled with thousands of arisen women
My fists are clenched with fists of thousands compatriots
To break all these sufferings, all these fetters of slavery.
I'm the woman who has awoken,
I've found my path and will never return.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0 Afghan Women in the Twentieth Century (1919-2001)

Women empowerment in Afghanistan has been the subject of debate and conflict for more than a century; with changing regimes, the position of women has also changed, and one of the reasons for the collapse of the regimes is the position of women, which moved ahead with ups and downs. Some of the critical eras within the 20th century that significantly influenced the role of women in the country are listed below:

Ruler	Movements
The Era of Amanullah Khan and Queen Soraya (1919-1929)	Westernizing reforms in 1919 and the first step towards women's empowerment.
Muhammad Nadir Shah (1929–1933)	Re-veiled females and revoked several other reforms and a reactionary revolt.
Zahir Shah (1933 to 1973)	Innovative legislation in 1964 granted women the right to vote and run for political offices.
Muhammad Daoud Khan (1953)	Extensive the speed of progressive changes
Soviet Era (1979-1989)	Extreme steps for female empowerment and new decrees to support the role of women
Mujahedin Regime (1992-1995)	A challenging era for women due to civil war and extremism.
Taliban Regime (1996-2001)	The darkest era which caused deprivation and exclusion of women

Table 1: Critical Eras in chronological orders within the Twentieth Century

2.1 Pre-Soviet Era (1919-1979)

Women's empowerment in Afghanistan has been the topic of controversy and struggle. attempting women to develop their positions were accompanied by measures to pull them down. King Amanullah Khan, who governed the nation for a decade beginning in 1919, campaigned for Western-style changes to modernize the nation. Influenced by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the Republic of Turkey's leader and first president, he created modern legislation that intended to ensure equal privileges for men and women (Sokhanwar & et al, 2017, pp. 632-644).

Before the time of King Amanullah Khan, women had been absent from the public sphere. They were limited with the walls of their houses. At the beginning of the 20th century with the Kingdom of Amanullah Khan, the position of women in the Afghan society started to change. On the day of the Independence, during the celebrations in 1919, Soraya Tarzi, the king's wife, appeared publicly and that was an important step to mark the beginning of changes in Afghan women's lives. (M.Ghobar, 2018)

Since his boyhood, King Amanullah had been a devoted disciple of Mahmud Tarzi⁵ (father of Queen Soraya). And therefore of, Tarzi's ideas and thoughts form the ideological basis of the Amani period. Tarzi always emphasized the empowerment of women, and in one of his writings entitled "What is the role of women in the family?" he explicitly stated that "Women were the base and the backbone of the family, and progress was impossible until they were educated." (Tarzi, 1912, p. 23).

Queen Soraya started working under the influence of her father's ideas and with the support of her husband with the help of her mother and other afghan ladies; this was one of the first steps towards empowering Afghan women. (Kazem S. , 2005, p. 141)

⁵ Mahmud Tarzi was a politician and thinker from Afghanistan. He is often regarded as the "Father of Afghan Journalism."

King Amanullah Khan crafted a new constitution for Afghanistan that endeavored to guarantee civil rights for all citizens, without any gender discrimination – stringent conventional clothing rules illegal, Queen Soraya served as a role model by taking her hijab off in a spectacular show. Modern institutions for both boys and girls were established, especially in the rural regions; the statutory maturity for a girl to be engaged was increased; forced marriages were prohibited, and Amanullah Khan worked to put a stop to the practice of polygamy. (Selthun, 2020). Queen Soraya founded Afghanistan's inaugural women's newspaper, Ershad-e Niswan (Women's Guidance), which pushed for equality of the sexes. Other women's periodicals quickly joined the suit.

Such accomplishments gained Amanullah Khan worldwide praise as a visionary reformist – he and Queen Soraya were both awarded posthumous titles from Oxford University – but they also sparked a reaction domestically. Tarzi had cautioned his son-in-law, but Amanullah Khan was anxious, and his ambition offered grist for a conservative uprising. In 1929, he was deposed and driven into seclusion. He was replaced by, Muhammad Nadir Shah (1929–33) and his conservative allies who closed the girls' institutions, re-veiled women, and revoked several other changes (Selthun, 2020).



Figure 1: Queen Soraya Tarzi in a Western-style Dress

Amanullah Khan's administration started its reforms by promoting secular(non-madrassa) schooling, opening the earliest elementary institution for girls, Masturat School, in Kabul in 1921, with the sponsorship of Queen Soraya⁶ of Iran. From 1920 to 1927, two elementary schools and one intermediate school for girls with a total enrollment of 700 pupils were built in Kabul (Kakar & Schiwal, 2021). These low numbers of enrollment, nevertheless, indicate that, notwithstanding Amanullah Khan's overwhelming support, the majority of Afghans were reluctant to allow their girls to acquire secular education. Moreover, the development of girls' institutions was restricted to metropolitan regions such as Kabul and Herat, failing to empower the women in the periphery. (Kakar & Schiwal, 2021).



Figure 2: The First Group of female students sent to Turkey by King Amanullah Khan in 1928

⁶ The second wife of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Soraya Esfandiary-Bakhtiary was the queen consort of Iran.

While several people of the metropolitan elite embraced such institutions for their girls, Amanullah Khan's advocacy of a mixed education for girls and boys, with the founding of Kabul's Amaniya Institute (named after him), was met with suspicion and criticism. In 1928, fifteen women from Masturat Middle School alumni, the offspring of influential Kabulis, were transferred to Turkey for further study. Moving teenage virgin females out of the nation sparked concern in various places, and this incident served as an additional evidence that the government was ready to challenge socio-cultural conventions in its drive to Westernization (Kakar & Schiwal, 2021).

In the same manner, his reign faced many controversies regarding the provision of women's rights in the country. For instance, Amanullah Khan enacted the Nizamnamah- ye- Arusi and Nikah (A Guideline for Marriage) governing marriages in August 1924. Whereas Amanullah Khan's father had implemented marital changes, they were seen as considerably more extreme. The Nizamnamah emphasized gender equality in marriages and provided a legal age for marriage. Moreover, there were clauses included in the wedding contracts intending to give women constitutional security (Kakar & Schiwal, 2021). The country's promotion of Afghan females to sue their spouses if they were abused was viewed as subversive and dangerous by the conservatives all the country.

The proposed regulations fell flat in many conservative regions, particularly the Tribal heartland, which comprised Kandahar, Nangahar, Khost, Paktia, Paktika, and Ghazni. This reaction from the conservative circles was already expected yet, what would be more important for the government was that these new regulations were also disliked by many of the city's most liberal and better-informed residents, who were the government's only faithful electorate. Nonetheless, the administration looked to be unconcerned by the societal pressure and pursued its planned reforms. Such initiatives were frequently interpreted as the preferences of

intellectuals who were isolated from the Afghan society in general and unaware of the strong cultural values among the society. (Kamrany, 2016, p. 12)

In its extreme position, the Amanullah Khan-led administration attempted socio-economic reforms that would eventually collapse since they were imposed on the population without input or respect for the spirit of the era. Even though the authorities wanted to reproduce culture along with the patterns of Ataturk's Turkey by calling for bold societal transformation, they were unaware of the intrinsic hazards of such hasty endeavors (Kamrany et al., 2016).

Amanullah Khan was overthrown and forced into exile in 1929. Reforms for female empowerment raised during Amanullah Khan was taken back by Nadir Shah (1929-1933). Nader Shah, with traditionalist supporters, closed schools for girls, repealed the Amani reforms for ladies. Women were again veiled, and the girls studying abroad were all brought back to the country. (Levi, 2009)

The majority of Amanullah Khan's efforts were revived, although more carefully, by Zahir Shah, Afghanistan's final monarch who reigned from 1933 to 1973. Women assisted in drafting innovative legislation in 1964, which granted them the right to vote and run for a political post. They obtained employment rights, started companies, and went into parliament. Conflicts with religious conservatives remained, although women opposed any violations of their privileges (Kamrany et al., 2016).

The outcry was short-lived. Most of Amanullah Khan's proposals were progressively accomplished throughout the prolonged rule of Muhammad Nadir Shah's son and predecessor, Muhammad Zahir Shah (1933–73). As he earned the power to rule after a serious conflict with his uncle, his relative Muhammad Daoud Khan charted a reforming program for the nation. The Afghan administration hired international consultants, reopened girls' institutions, built a modern university, and subsequently enacted revised legislation that provided a democratic

environment and allowing Afghan women to vote and run for parliamentary election. (Sarvarzade & Wotipka, 2017).

Zahir Shah, a pragmatic leader unlike his father, commenced strengthening Afghan women by expanding access to schooling by establishing literacy schools for women across the country. The first female college was established in Kabul in 1950 on the grounds of Malalai School, initially known as Masturat. Herat's inaugural women's high school was founded in 1957. Following the third legislation, females were guaranteed the opportunity to ballot and run for political office in 1964. Kubra Nurzai became the first female minister of public care in January 1966, and Shafiqah Ziyai succeeded her in 1969 (Sarvarzade & Wotipka, 2017).

Women's employment, on the other hand, was only promoted in areas like teaching and medical care, where interaction with men could be limited. When Muhammad Daoud Khan, Zahir Shah's cousin and brother-in-law, became Prime Minister in 1953, he increased the speed of progressive changes. Nonetheless, it was still far from Amanullah Khan's extreme attempts in the 1920s. Thus, in the 1950s, an era of women's emancipation started, which lasted until the Soviet-sponsored People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan left the government in 1992 (Sarvarzade & Wotipka, 2017).

Beginning in the early 1950s, the high degree of development and progress was experienced in the country thanks to the enormous external borrowing from the U.S. and the Soviet Union for projects of infrastructure Across the nation, Both of the superpowers anticipated “advancement” in female positions as a prerequisite of their financial offerings to Afghanistan and supported girls' institutions and academic initiatives that included women (Sarvarzade & Wotipka, 2017). In that regard, it won't be wrong to argue that the motivating international actors were important in female empowerment in Afghanistan even back in 1950s.

During the term of Prime Minister Daoud Khan (1953–1963), the government started to promote women pursue non-traditional roles once more. Women were provided jobs in

metropolitan areas for instance as air hostesses for the national Ariana Airlines, as office staff in state offices, and as customer service representatives for the public service. Daoud was confident that the moment had come to launch a more comprehensive renovation program because there had been no massive political reaction to the steps taken (Sarvarzade & Wotipka, 2017).

Daoud and the ruling elite of the time were confident that Afghanistan had achieved a tipping moment in terms of societal dynamics. They felt that the public was in general ready of biggest steps and felt the courage to abolish the practice of mandatory hijab wearing in public. On August 24, 1959, during the ceremonies of Independence, spouses of army officers and female members of the imperial family attended the event. (Mehrangiz Najafizadeh and Lindsey, 2019).

Women in the metropolitan elite and middle classes supported Daoud's ideas, and the lack of resistance encourage the Daoud's administration to expand the import of these projects. Daoud, like Amanullah, met significant resistance when he attempted to imitate metropolis development initiatives in rural regions, particularly in the eastern and southern Pashtun ethnic communities. When the authorities forced regional cab and pony carriage owners to reject to carry covered females in locations like Pul-e-Khumri, the capital of the northern province of Baghlan, the Pashtun community was outraged (Mehrangiz Najafizadeh and Lindsey, 2019). Revolution erupted in December 1959, headed by ethnic and spiritual groups including the Maliks, Khans, and Mullahs in Kandahar, Jalalabad, Khost, and Wardak. The removal of regional payments and levies, as well as the federal administration's attempts to enforce gender "equality," were blamed for the emergence of bloodshed around the country. (Mehrangiz Najafizadeh and Lindsey, 2019).

Measures to incorporate consensual unveiling in 1959 had little influence on daily practice during the rule of King Zahir Shah and Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan. Nevertheless,

many legislative changes, like women's entitlement to cast a ballot in the 1964 legislature and encouraging women's right to schooling and involvement in democratic processes as was done by Loya Jirga, generated greater achievement in women's position in the Afghan society from the 1960s to 1970s (James and Jacoby, 2016). Here it also needs to be mentioned that while opening up spaces for women in politics, economics or education is highly appreciative yet forcing unveiling is no different from forced veiling in the terms of women's rights and liberties. The decade of democracy started in 1963 with the commencement of a revolutionary initiative by then-King Mohammed Zahir Shah, who prepared a radically modern legislation that gave his citizens freedom of opinion, speech, and association while restricting the authority of his imperial dynasty. For the first time in the history of Afghanistan, elections would be held to choose representatives of the reformed legislature, and the country started to positively change in the cultural and sociopolitical aspects (Mehrangiz Najafizadeh and Lindsey, 2019). The "decade of democracy" finally ended in 1973, when Mohammed Daoud Khan, the king's cousin, made a nonviolent coup and proclaimed himself the first president of the new government.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Daoud Khan governed the country as the first President for four years and nine months. He actually initiated certain reforms including the adoption of a new constitution via Loya Jirga in 1976, which ensured democracy and facilitated considerable roles for women.



Figure 3: Afghan Women in the Decade of Democracy

2.2 Soviet Era and its Influences (1979-1989)

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and established a Communist puppet government in 1979. During the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan's (PDPA) communist administration from 1979 to 1992, the country deliberately sought the backing of women in their hopeless search for empowerment. The government used force to persuade women to join education in rural villages as part of its commitment to adopt and execute what was seen as un-Islamic social changes. (Emadi, 2015) Worried that the program would turn their girls into communists and hence enemies to Islam, fundamentalist and agrarian groups set fire to the educational institutions and other governmental facilities.

Similarly, the government's oppressive and authoritarian techniques exacerbated an already tense environment and culminated in provincial revolt. Concerned about the degree of antagonism, the administration backpedaled and concentrated solely on executing its measures of “women liberation” in Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif, where the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan's (PDPA) had an iron hold (Emadi, 2015). Women made up more than 70% of educators, 40% of physicians, and 50% of university graduates throughout the country; women were also becoming popular in conventionally masculine fields like legislation and architecture (Emadi, 2015).

Nevertheless, the status quo in the periphery stayed securely in its place. The PDPA failed to raise sufficient monetary and personnel capabilities to carry out its socio-economic transformation goal throughout the country. Additionally, as the Mujahedin-led insurgent groups that were against the PDPA and its Soviet backers damaged the peace and order in the rural parts of the country as the government force used relocation and forcible deportation in these villages to be able to stop these groups (Larson, 2013). A half of Afghanistan's inhabitants (about 5 million people) are reported to have been compelled to abandon their homes as a result

of Soviet military operations that did not differentiate between fighters and innocent civilians (Larson, 2013).

However, women struggled throughout this time for their rights, and the Soviets provided various opportunities to Afghan women as well. During the conflict, the Soviet army engaged at least 20,000 females as civilian contractors, including battlefield medical staff, commanders, and combat lawyers (Singh, 2015). During the decades of conflict all the way to 1990s, females in the Afghan army achieved several achievements. For instance, Khatoon Mohammadzai⁷ was the first female in the nation to be qualified as a paratrooper in 1983 (Singh, 2015). She refused fighting duties; therefore, she worked as an educator during the conflict, preparing men for paratroop and commando tasks. Latifa Nabizada⁸ and her sister Laliuma were the first two female pilots to attend the Afghan Air Force's training academy in 1989, despite being rejected in many occasions due to "physiological reasons." On the other hand, some Afghan women were known to rise to notoriety badly due to their military involvement against the communist takeover, such as Bibi Ayesha (Singh, 2015).

The Soviet incursion was also greeted with opposition by several women's liberties organizations. "Soviet and Afghan feminism sought – and mostly unsuccessful – to interact with each other at a time when it looked feasible to build a secularism socialism modernism in Afghanistan," according to Timothy Nunan of Oxford University (Singh, 2015). After the assault, Meena Keshwar Kamal⁹, an Afghan student leader, formed the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan and launched a movement opposing Communist soldiers and the Soviet-backed Afghan government. Kamal was killed in Quetta, Pakistan, in

⁷ Khatoon Mohammadzai is a brigadier general in Afghanistan's National Army. During the 1980s, she was commissioned in the military of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

⁸ Latifa Nabizada serves as an Afghan Air Force helicopter pilot. She is one of just two women pilots in Afghanistan who are qualified to operate the Mi-17 helicopter. By 2013, she had risen to the rank of colonel in the newly formed Afghan Air Force. Latifa Nabizada's own military career in Afghanistan has motivated more women to join.

⁹ Meena Keshwar Kamal, also known as Meena, was an Afghan revolutionary political activist, feminist, women's rights campaigner, and the founder of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan. She was killed in 1987.

1987, allegedly on the instructions of Afghan Intelligence Service (KHAD) and hardline Mujahideen commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (Singh, 2015).



Figure 4: Afghan Women During the Soviet Era, teaching male Students, working with male co-workers, fighting for their rights and attending public event.

With the influence of the Soviet Union, there has been a shift in the administration of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)¹⁰ resulting in the appointment of Najibullah Ahmadzai as the President of the country which later on was endorsed by the Loya Jirga in 1987. Many other reforms were also enacted by the Loya Jirga. These featured electoral reforms, in which the state returned to its pre-1978 title (Republic of Afghanistan); Islam was endorsed as the state religion, despite the government's desire to retain secularism; and the PDPA renaming to the Watan Party (Khan and Samina, 2013). It began to try to offer participation to 'non-hizbis' (non-PDPA members), and attempts were undertaken to distance the party from the government (Khan & Samina, 2013).

Following these reforms, Najibullah Ahmadzai started a consultative approach to adopt the National Reconciliation Policy (NRP)¹¹ to terminate the conflict and end the war with Mujahedin.

The NRP was adopted in the mid-1980s when the Soviet Union sought to reduce its influence in Afghanistan. The NRP attempted to terminate the fight with the mujahidin by negotiating parameters for a permanent democratic solution. It blended customary Afghan socio-economic norms for dialogue and ruling with a realistic governing philosophy to gain both local and global support. When dealing with resistance forces and Mujahedin, the government used NRP as a multifaceted strategy to develop a regional non-aggression or ceasefire (Khan and Samina, 2013).

¹⁰ The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was an Afghan Marxist–Leninist political party founded on January 1, 1965. Four members of the party gained seats in that year's legislative elections, which were reduced to two seats in 1969, both before political parties were completely legalized.

¹¹ The NRP was established by President Najibullah's government in the mid-1980s, when the Soviet Union sought to reduce its influence in Afghanistan. The NRP intended to terminate the fight with the mujahidin by negotiating parameters for a comprehensive political solution. It merged traditional Afghan sociopolitical traditions for dialogue and decision-making with a realistic political approach aimed at gaining both internal and global participation.

2.3 Mujahedin Regime and the Position of Afghan Women (1992-1995)

Najibullah Ahmadzai's government collapsed, and the Mujahedin took power in Kabul in 1992. Before that, the Mujahidin fled to the highlands and waged a ferocious insurgency battle against a far more formidable Soviet force for many decades. In the mid-1980s, Mujahedin emerged and started operations against the governments. The vanquished Communists then departed from Afghanistan in 1989, following ten years of continuous conflict. Rather than tranquility and forming a new, secure administration in Kabul, Afghanistan descended into a lengthy, violent civil war (Swenson, 2017, pp. 114-151).

Legislative control reverted to local and tribal forces: the parties that had acted together to oppose the Soviets had now split apart and attacked each other. This was the commencement of the darkest time for Afghan women. The nationalist commanders utilized every means at their disposal to pander to the mass of their warriors, and the mistreatment of Afghan women was entrusted in the disposal of ill schooled tribal reactionaries (Swenson, 2017). During the Afghan national war, there was minimal law enforcement: men were killed in enormous numbers, widowed were relegated to begging, an assault was rampant, and depressed women committed suicide at an alarming rate (Swenson, 2017).

Mujahedin's first action against women was making the hijab mandatory. They allowed girls to continue to study, but they banned female news reporters visually shown on television. When the women reporters read the daily news, the screen just showed a red rose. After a while, even their voice was banned (Samar, 2019). During Mujahedin, the state of Afghan women went from bad to worse. The poverty levels exacerbated the people nationwide, and Afghan families started forcing their daughters for marriage for financial gain because they felt like they wouldn't be able to protect them (Kazem, 2005, pp. 417-421).

The civil war that intensified in 1992-1995 period changed the living circumstances for women. Each group of Mujahideen fought against each other inside Kabul. They harass the general

public for thinking that they support the opposition group; with such conditions in Kabul and other cities, the lives of women were in danger, and no one dared to leave the house because women were kidnapped by fighters and raped. Afghan women suffered the brunt of the invasion. Their bodies became a weapon of war for fighters. (Samar, 2019)



Figure 5: Afghan Women During the Mujahedin Era

2.4 Taliban Regime “The Darkest Era for Afghan Women” (1996-2001)

The Taliban emerged in the early 1990s as a religious student organization that finally got a stronger edge (Emadi, 2015). From one side they gradually spread their influences on the conservative people in rural areas using the Islamic preaching methods and from other side they kept fighting against the dismantled government and ethnic security forces those were already in conflict with each other. Eventually by 1996, they had seized power throughout the country. This was accomplished through widespread use of bribery and weapons. While unappealing to many Afghans in their approaches and the methods used, they offered an option that looked to be safer and more predictable than civil conflict. However, this provided almost no relief for Afghan women. Several regulations by the Taliban are more restricted than even the most

stringent readings of Shariah (Muslim law), as they rely on norms and ideas inherited from Pashtunwali, the ancient cultural rule of the Pashtun tribe (Swenson, 2017).

It is due in part to the fact that, while the Taliban is originally not a "Pashtun" organization, most teenage boys who have entered the Taliban are culturally Pashtun. As the Taliban gained confidence as a result of their combat triumphs, the condition of Afghan women living in the regions where Taliban control worsened. For long, the Taliban had formalized the worst sexist aspects of their culture as legislation, with the claim that they were rooted in the Qur'an (Sokhanwar et al., 2017).

Under the Taliban, women and girls were disgraced in many ways just for being born as a girl. Under the Taliban regime, women have become second-class citizens, from the age of eight onward, girls were not allowed to go out or to be in direct contact with males other than close blood relative, like father, brother, husband, or in-laws (Mahram), and should not be seen in the streets without wearing a burqa. (Kazem, 2005, pp. 444-447)

Girls were not allowed to go to school after the age of eight they didn't have the chance to join the work force. Women were compelled to protect their faces and bodies in-crowd, such as their cheeks (Sokhanwar et al., 2017). They were prohibited from talking noisily in public, their pictures and images were blocked from the tv, and it was counted a crime for women to take a job. Countless numbers of intelligent women who had worked extensively as contributing elements of civilization were forced to wear hijabs and were barred from engaging in community affairs. (Sokhanwar et al., 2017).

Women's mortality rates have risen. Their access to healthcare was hampered by limitations imposed on the basis of gender segregation and there was the necessity to utilize women-only clinics and units. Women were barred from participating in any kind of public activity. Simple activities such as going out without mahram (male member of the family), not wearing burqa, wearing high heels, wearing nail polish, getting dresses made by male tailors were counted as

crimes and those who committed were punished by public beating. Crimes like having a relationship with a man before marriage and prostitution were even punished by public executions (Emadi, 2015).



Figure 6: Taliban publicly beating Afghan Women for going out and publicly shooting a woman for killing her husband as a reaction of self-defense

The Taliban prompted another round of female dissidents to flee. Numerous intelligent women fled the nation immediately, dreading murder and persecution. Many of those went on to be activists in neighboring nations, Europe, or the United States. Notwithstanding the Taliban's harsh prohibitions against females, several famous campaigners, like Suraya Parlyka, Shafiqah Habibi, General Suhaila Siddiq, and hundreds more, chose to remain (Sokhanwar et al., 2017). There are several instances of females who fought the Taliban, and it is necessary to compile all of these experiences. There are even stories of women confronting the “vice and virtue” policemen, carrying volumes of the Quran with them and asking the Taliban to demonstrate them the chapter where females are not permitted to leave the apartment or wear veils. One especially well-known anecdote in Kabul speaks of a lady called Sajida who stripped naked in opposition to the Taliban's harsh regulations on women's clothing. The Taliban pushed us to the sidelines, but they couldn't quite Afghan women—at least not forever (Kearns, 2017, pp. 491-505).

Indeed, the Taliban era was the darkest era for women in the history of Afghanistan. Afghan women were deprived of receiving all rights and privileges and remained backward and uneducated due to unfavorable circumstances.

In conclusion, the twentieth century was full of ups and downs for Afghan women that actually strengthened their ability to move forward under any conditions and fight for their rights without giving up.



CHAPTER THREE

3.0 Post-2001 and The Women Empowerment in Afghanistan

3.1 Political Participation of Afghan Women

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack (The blow of the World Trade Center in New York by Al-Qaeda) centered the international community's attention into Islamist terrorism and its so-called center, Afghanistan and Pakistan. As a reaction to these attacks the USA decided to launch a military operation in Tora Bora and Eastern parts of Afghanistan to demolish terrorist organizations settled in the mountainous shelters of the country (Karbalaei, 2009).

The initial response to the 9/11 incident was the main reason to overthrow the Taliban and establish a new government in Afghanistan. With the US-led NATO invasion and the elimination of Islamic Emirates, the plan to form a new government in Afghanistan was initiated at the Bonn Conference. The Bonn Conference Agreement led to the coalition of International Security Forces and the integration of anti-Taliban domestic forces in Afghanistan into a coalition which paved the way for radical, political and social changes in the country. Actually, the Bonn Agreement served as a platform for the establishment of democracy, which was practiced in the form of mechanisms such as the adoption of the constitution, holding presidential and parliamentary elections, etc. (Hekmat, 2009, p. 308). The Bonn conference highlighted several factors such as human rights, women's rights, freedom of speech, and of press, which in the end created a new Afghanistan with democracy.

The Bonn Conference was the first platform in the 21st century that facilitated the participation of women in an important decision-making process about Afghanistan. Out of the 61 official and non-official representatives, five were women who significantly advocated for the role and participation of Afghan women in the new power structure (Kazem S. A., 2005, p. 506). Following the Bonn Conference and the establishment of new the government, the participation of Afghan women in the power structure has enhanced and they have had a say in political and

social affairs. Two women were included in the cabinet; Dr. Sima Samar as one of the five Vice-Presidents of the Interim Government, who at same time served as the Minister of a newly established ministry for women "The Ministry of Women's Affairs", and Dr. Soheila Seddiqi as the Minister of Public Health within the Interim Government. Furthermore, the women played an important role in the establishment of a transitional government by participating in the Emergency Loya Jirgah (that was organized from June 10-16, 2002 with the purpose to endorse the establishment of a transitional government and appoint the President of the Transitional State of Afghanistan for 2 years). Out of 1,501 representatives of the Emergency Loya Jirga 160 were women and Dr. Sima Samar was the first women in the history of Afghanistan to be elected as the 1st Deputy Speaker of the Loya Jirga. As per the Bonn Agreement the government of Afghanistan organized the Constitutional Loya Jirga in December 2003 with the purpose to drafting and adopting the new constitution of Afghanistan. Out of 500 representatives who participated in the constitutional Loya Jirgah 87 were women who significantly contributed to drafting and adoption of the constitution that preserved considerable rights and privileges for the Afghan Women (Kazem, 2005, pp. 506-526).

As illustrated in Table 1, women have voted and run for the presidential elections of 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019 as well as the parliamentary elections of 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2018, in addition to the provincial council elections in 2005, 2009, 2014, and 2018. About 10 to 25 percent of the candidates were women in these elections. Meanwhile, millions of women have voted for their favorite candidates and practiced their rights defined by the constitution. According to Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan (IEC), females accounted for 36% of those who voted in the Presidential Election of 2014. After the 2014 presidential elections, the foreign minister of the United Kingdom, William Hague, asserted that it was a wonderful recognition from the Afghan people. Female and male voters older than 18 used their ballots. Despite the threat of brutality, a large majority of individuals have acted in support of

democratization and in accordance with the new direction of the nation. Anders Fogh Rasmussen (NATO Secretary General 2009-2014) saluted Afghanistan's millions of men and women from all over the nation for enthusiastically voting in the parliamentary and the presidential elections, which led to a massive turnout.

Election	Total Numbers of Voters (Million)	Women Voters (Percentage)	Total Candidates	Female Candidates
Presidential 2004	7.3	37%	18	1
Presidential 2009	5.9	39%	3196	2
Presidential 2014	6.9	36%	11	0
Presidential 2019	1.8	31%	18	0
Parliamentary 2005	5.9	41%	2775	335
Parliamentary 2010	4.2	39%	2577	406
Parliamentary 2018	4	34%	2504	401
Provincial Council 2005	6.4	41%	3025	247
Provincial Council 2009	5.9	39%	3196	328
Provincial Council 2014	6.9	36%	2591	291

Table 2: A brief statistics of the Women voters and candidates participated in the elections.

Source: (Jafari, 2019, p. 86-87)

Furthermore, women played crucial roles in the successful accomplishment of the elections listed during the last two decades. Two out of the 9 Independent Election Commissioners were women. Hawa Alam Nuristani was the first woman to be elected as the Chairperson of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) in 2019.

Afghanistan's Parliament is divided into two houses: Wolesi Jirga¹² (The Lower House) and Meshrano Jirga¹³ (The Upper House). As per Articles 83 and 84 of the Afghan constitution, 27 percent of the seats in Meshrano Jirga and a minimum of 25 percent in the Wolesi Jirga are reserved for female candidates. Thus there are 69 women out of the 249 members of the Wolesi Jirga and 28 women out of the 102 members of the Meshrano Jirga (Bhalotra, Clarke, Gomes, & Venkataramani, 2020, p. 121). The presence of women in Parliament is considered as a balancing factor of political power. However, experiences reveal that the power to stand up is more important than the number of seats held by women. In the Afghan Parliament, whenever female MPs raised their voices loud, they faced intimidation and verbal attacks by the majority of the religious and conservative members of the Parliament, and the other female colleagues have gone silent at such times. Malalai Joya¹⁴, a female MP from the Afghan province of Farah, was toppled from the Parliament (Wolesi Jirga) in May 2006 due to her harsh criticisms against the conservatives and domestic militias. In 2003 she had publicly spoken out against tyrants participating in the Constitutional Loya Jirga. Several analysts state that it is not just the Taliban but also domestic militias and their planned agendas pose a serious threat to women's rights in Afghanistan. These female representatives are certainly not immune from these types of attacks (Najafizadeh & Lindsey, 2018).

¹² The House of Representatives of the People (the Lower House), also known as Wolesi Jirga, consists of 249 members elected by the people.

¹³ The House of Elders (The Upper House), also known as the Meshrano Jirga, consists of 102 members (Two Third of the members come from the provincial and district councils, and the President nominates one-third of the members).

¹⁴ Malalai Joya is an Afghan protester, columnist, and political figure. She was a member of Afghanistan's National Assembly from 2005 until early 2007, when she was fired for publicly criticizing the appearance of feudal lords and mass murderers in the Afghan National Assembly.

Since 2001, women's engagement in politics, governance, and the judicial system has expanded dramatically. The quota system ensures women's participation in both houses of the parliament, in which the percentage of female representatives is presently 25% and 27%. As per Public Prosecutor estimates, the percentage of women engaged in the judicial process has risen from 3% to 20%. Women make up 21% of all public defenders in the country, and 265 of 1951 magistrates are women (Najafizadeh & Lindsey, 2018).

A significant number of strong Afghan women have served in the government between 2001-2021. Among them, Shukria Barakzai, Fauzia Gilani, Nilofar Ibrahimi, Fauzia Koofi, and Malalai Joya, Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, Rangina Kargar, Anarkali Honarya, Nahid Farid, and many others were the members of Parliament who have always raised their voices strongly and advocated for the rights of Afghan women. Likewise, according to the Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CWWA) some prominent women who served as cabinet ministers include 1) Dr. Sima Samar, the Vice-president of Interim Government and Minister of Women's Affairs (2002-2004), 2) Dr. Soheila Seddiqi, the Minister of Public Health (2002 - 2004), 3) Amina Afzali, the Minister of Youth (2004-2006), 4) Masooda Jalal, the minister of Women's Affairs (2004-2006), 5) Dr. Husn Banu Ghazanfar, the minister of Women's Affairs (2006-20014), 6) Sediqa Balkhi, the minister of Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disables (2004-2006), 7) Dr. Suraya Dalil the minister of Public Health (2010-2014), 8) Dr. Salamat Azimi, the minister of Counter Narcotics (2015-2019), 9) Nargis Nehan, the minister of Mines and Hydrocarbons (2017-2020), and 10) Masooma Khawari, the minister of Technology and Telecommunication (2020-2021).

Habiba Sarabi became Afghanistan's first female governor. She was also the Minister of Women's Affairs. Uzra Jafari¹⁵ was appointed as the first woman mayor of Nili District in the

¹⁵ Uzra Jafari is a journalist and novelist from Afghanistan. President Hamid Karzai named her as Afghanistan's first female mayor in December 2008. She was appointed as the mayor of Nili, a town in Afghanistan's Daykundi Province.

provincial capital of Daykundi in 2008. Roya Rahmani was the first woman to be appointed as the ambassador of Afghanistan to the United States in December 2018. Afghanistan's seat in the United Nations was also given to a woman (Adela Raaz) in 2020 for the first time in the history of the country. Accomplishments such as these are seen as the "signs of improvement for a nation once infamous for institutional sexism (Akseer et al., 2017)." Even more strikingly perhaps, women started to hold more and more positions within the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), including the Afghan National Police. Gen. Khatol Mohammadzai¹⁶ is a Brigadier General in the Afghan National Army. In 2012, Nilofer Rahmani became the Afghan Air Force pilot instructional project's first woman navigator flying alone in a fixed-wing airplane, pursuing in the footsteps of Colonel Latifa Nabizada¹⁷, the first Afghan female captain to soar an armed forces chopper (Akseer, et al., 2017).

¹⁶ Khatool Mohammadzai is a brigadier general in Afghanistan's National Army. During the 1980s, she was enrolled in the army of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

¹⁷ Latifa Nabizada serves as an Afghan Air Force helicopter pilot. She is one of just two certified female pilots serving in Afghanistan.



Figure 7: The Political participation of the Afghan Women post-2001

3.2 Social Participation of Afghan Women

Afghan women have actively participated in social activities post-2001 owing to the freedom of rights provided by the government and international community in the country. However, the reforms initiated by the government and international community were important and effective on many dimensions, at the same time yet changing the social circumstances for women was perhaps the hardest. As has been stated earlier, political history of Afghanistan had ups and downs for women. Yet women's presence in the social arena has always been limited due to highly conservative, cultural and traditional restrictions. Afghan women, especially uneducated and rural, could not even recognize the gender discrimination as they were not educated and the patriarchal culture was also highly powerful on them. After the fall of the Taliban regime, in the post-2001 the new government adopted favorable laws to secure the women's rights. Though it was not possible to change the national culture and transform social institutions in a short time, but a conducive and favorable legal framework helped alleviate inequalities and deep differences between men and women. Non-organized and scattered activities of women during the last decade have helped to respectively solve discrimination and deprivation cases and practices, but could not address the traditional gap between men and women in Afghan society. It's clear that after the fall of the Taliban women have been able to practice their role and presence in political and social activities and achieved considerable accomplishments in various fields compared to Taliban era (Zaki & Shedenova, 2014, pp. 99-100).

One of the achievements in post-2001, to facilitate a conducive environment for civic activities, was the emergence of many civil society organizations. These organizations were mandated to support, expand, and institutionalize civic values such as human rights, democracy, freedom of speech. (Zaki & Shedenova, 2014, p. 105). So far, more than two thousand civil organizations and Non-government Organizations (NGOs) have been established and registered with the

Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Culture with the mandate to perform civic and cultural activities in different areas of civil rights. A large number of women joined all these entities and performed their activities to support civil society. Many of these institutions are pro-women and even led by women. According to the Ministry of Women's Affairs, around 133 women's organizations have registered with the Ministry of Justice which are working in the sectors – education, healthcare, work, entrepreneurship, urban and rural development, cultural awareness-raising, violence against women, etc.

Moreover, numerous Afghan women have devoted their lives to fight for women's rights and privileges, including Shaharзад Akbar, the chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Fatima Gailani, the chairperson of the Afghan Red Crescent Society, Malalai Kakar, the head of Kandahar's Department of Crimes Against Women, Fawzia Koofi and Nahid Farid (both the former parliamentarians and women's rights activists), and Suraya Pakzad¹⁸. who significantly contributed to the enhancement of women's social participation. (Najafizadah & Lindsey, 2018). In addition to the above accomplishments and as a result of the role that Afghan women played to facilitate a better environment, there have been tremendous women-led achievements in many other sectors in the society including entertainment, sports, social networks, etc. Robina Muqimyar, also known as Robina Jalali, a former Olympic sprinter athlete, was the first Afghan woman to compete in the 100-meter sprint at the 2004 Olympics in Athens and 2008 Olympics in Beijing and 30 other international Sports events. She later ran for parliamentary elections and succeeded in taking a seat in the Lower House. Alongside Robina, Friha Rezayee, a Judo athlete, was another woman to represent Afghanistan compete in the 2004 Olympics in China (Archdeacon, 2021) .

¹⁸ Suraya Pakzad is an Afghan activist for women's rights. She founded Voice of Women in 1998, which began by teaching girls to read and has since expanded to provide women with shelter, counselling, and job training. Because of the Taliban, the organization operated secretly until 2001.

In 2010, another Afghan woman, Mozhdah Jamalazadah, a Canadian-Afghan-Canadian pop star, launched a TV talk show under the name “Mozhdah Show,” which was inspired from the Oprah Show, thus was also called the “Oprah of Afghanistan.” The concept behind the Mozhdah Show was to address the issues related to women and children and raise the awareness of the people on the rights and privileges of women and children. This show significantly contributed to women’s empowerment and provided an opportunity to openly discuss the issues related to women and children. Therefore the show became a hot subject for international media as an influential contributor to social existence of women in the Afghan Society (Macdonald, 2010)

Furthermore, in 2019, Zahra Elham was the first Afghan female contestant to win the 14th edition of the popular Afghan Star (the Afghan version of American Idol) after male contestants took the prize for 13 consecutive years. In an interview with Tolo TV, the producer of Afghan Star, Elham said: “I was very proud of myself but at the same time shocked to be the first woman to win the contest” she also said she would fight the Taliban with her music. She was the only singer in her family and was inspired to sing by watching videos of her idols such as Arian Sayeed (the famous pop singer of Afghanistan); likewise, she was hopeful to inspire other girls. (TRTWorld, 2019)

There are so many similar success stories on Afghan women’s social participation. In many cases, due to the instability and insecurity and the ongoing traditional and cultural barriers, these stories were not easy to create. The civil society organizations certainly played an important role in defending civil rights and civil liberties during the last two decades. However, with the return of the Taliban, limitation started to be imposed on these organizations which still keep fighting for women’s rights and liberties and advocating for their political and social participation in the country.

3.3 The Role of Afghan Women in the Economy

Afghan women's involvement in the corporate sector as entrepreneurs, businesspersons, and staff members is noteworthy, albeit on a small scale. Women work in a diverse array of industries, including public transport and logistics, building, food manufacturing, architectural style, jewelry making, and future technologies. Afghan women's involvement in the business community remains unparalleled to those of males, but as a result of the establishment of strong advocating organizations such as the Women Chamber the last five years have seen an improved performance in the increasing numbers of women to participate in the business. Businesswomen continue to face obstacles, including obtaining finance to expand their companies or linking to the industry (Davies & True, 2019)

Cultural restriction on women's movement in terms of traveling alone inside and outside the country was a big disadvantage which had negative effects on exploring market opportunities and limited their access to information on how markets function and chances to establish connections with potential business partners. This could explain why several women restrict their manufacturing to the residence, with male family members or brokers handling advertising and marketing. When market participants maintain connections of home production companies with the market, they also serve as sources of finance, which otherwise is difficult for young female manufacturers to obtain.

Nevertheless, donor-funded programs targeting women by USAID and other huge European countries may add value to facilitating access to finance, developing skills for women in the industry, and assisting them in connecting to marketplaces. Nonetheless, it is inevitably the Afghan government's obligation to initiate programs that encourage women's entrepreneurial and industry participation (Awotona, 2019)

Women have shown great interest in business activities in Afghanistan after 2001 owing to the freedom and provision of significant rights. The new PROMOTE program – Promoting

Women's Equality in National Flagship Programs – was launched on November 8, 2014, by USAID, with the support of a handful of European countries. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has dedicated 216 million USD to the program and hopes to elevate another 200 million USD from collaborators. PROMOTE is described by USAID as the biggest women's transformational program in the agency's history, and it is scheduled to become the US premier government initiative in Afghanistan over the next five years (Awotona, 2019). The program primarily targets women between the ages of 18 and 30, preparing them to play an increasingly important role in Afghanistan's development and wealth generation.

PROMOTE heavily focused on the Women's Leadership Development (WLD). WLD targeted to employ 18,000 urban, intelligent professionals to coach them in administration and help them progress into roles of greater professional obligations. Furthermore, up to 7,000 girls obtain management consulting instruction via WLD, allowing them to effectively access the labor force and start contributing to Afghanistan's reconstruction and development (Najeeb, Morales, & Acevedo, 2020). However, with the withdrawal of the US military and return of the Taliban, programs like PROMOTE are under suspension since August 2021, and no clear agenda is foreseen for women's role under the Islamic Emirate.

As a result of reforms and supports provided by the government and International community, we observed a rising trend in women's representation in the industry. The number of businesses registered with Afghanistan Investment Support Agency (AISA) in 2016 made a total of 44,838 domestic companies and 3,307 International Companies, and around 3% of them were owned by women entrepreneurs. 78% of women's participation in the economy was in the form of small size enterprises with one to ten employees (Butler, 2013). The majority of the businesses in the discussion have their primary customer base within the nation, but while several have had achievements linking to external marketplaces and trying to export their product lines.

Zarif Design, a handicraft business owned by Zolaykha Sherzad that seeks to 'maintain and combine Afghan customs and culture with the beautiful design of today,' is one instance of an effective export enterprise (Najeeb et al., 2020). Zarif Design is a company in Zardozi (a handicraft of embroidery using metallic-bound golden threads sewed on various fabrics), a small but efficient one that employs female craftswomen and behaves as an overarching example of innovative women-owned companies.

Zardozi mostly produced by Afghan women, is among high-quality design merchandises , which is mostly exported and generate a good income. Kaweyan Business Development Services, run by Kamila Siddiqi, is another example of a female-led company that deals with a variety of activities such as transportation, consulting, and the export of Afghan products. Another business that has made significant advancements is the high-tech Afghan Citadel Software run by an Afghan businesswoman Roya Mahboob. This is a comprehensive application advancement company headquartered in the province of Herat. Roya Mahboob is Afghanistan's first woman CEO in the IT sector, and Time Magazine included her in the list of 100 Most Powerful People in the World in 2013 for her efforts. People like Kamila Siddiqi, Roya Mahboob, and the small business owners who work with Zardozi are unquestionably significant role models for aspiring Afghan female entrepreneurs (Atifmal, Paris, & Ahmad, 2020).

There are a handful of important barriers to developing women's entrepreneurship, some of which are essentially legal or organizational, but the more effective ones are essentially contextual and social. To overcome the rules that give the responsibility of household choices completely to women, along with the fear of being blamed for immorality, is still difficult. Undoubtedly, fostering women entrepreneurship in Afghanistan, will require long-term peer support and guidance. Meanwhile, core skills, market intelligence, and mentorships, all with a

long-term perspective, are the key factors to constructing best practices from great women business assistance programs.

It is also critical that women's real estate privileges and property ownership are safeguarded and wholeheartedly recognized. Women have conventionally been regarded as unimportant players in the property ownership. Property is a valuable determinant of household revenue and a significant foundation for self-sufficiency and social background. Undoubtedly, property is a social status symbol; possessing more property equates to gaining more wealth and respect. Ownership of property also provides the shareholders with a feeling of self-confidence (Atifmal , Paris, & Ahmad, 2020).

Many organizations were established and mandated to comprehensively address the issues related to women's entrepreneurship and enhance the role of women in the economy, and they were able to make a big difference. These organizations include the Afghanistan Women Business Federation (AWBF), Leading Entrepreneurs for Afghanistan Development (LEAD), which later on transformed to the Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI). AWCCI was established based on a Presidential decree in 2017. Its core mandate was to be a unified advocating voice for Afghanistan's women entrepreneurs and ensure the enhancement of women's participation in the country's economic development. Through its effective programs, AWCCI could achieve a lot in various areas of women's entrepreneurship development such as capacity building, awareness-raising, provision of technical assistance and business development services, investment support, job creation, and eventually ensured the strong participation of women in the economy (AWCCI, 2020).



Figure 8: Afghan Women's participation in the Economy

3.4 Afghan Women in Education

Afghan women have had numerous possibilities to enhance their existences in various fields throughout the last two decades, including education. By 2018, girls accounted for nearly 38 percent of all students across the country (3.8 million); in 2001, only 5,000 Afghan girls were enrolled in schools. Not only has the number of girls enrolled in schools increased exponentially in recent decades, but the number of access to higher education has also increased. Statistics from Afghanistan's national entrance exam, known as Kankor¹⁹, revealed that the prevalence of female Kankor exam takers has steadily increased over the last 20 years (Sarvarzade & Wotipka, 2017).

The numbers from the Kankor data sources also show that there is still a significant gender difference in higher education. However, a stable increase in female test involvement appeared encouraging. As per the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) data, the sex difference in higher education enlistment has narrowed over time, with more female students enrolling in Afghan academic institutions. For instance, there were only 1,000 female Kankor exam takers in 2003, but this number hopped to big increase to – 78,000 – in 2013 (Couch, 2019, pp. 44-60).

Across the country, the percentage of male Kankor exam takers has always outnumbered the percentage of females. However, this is not the case in all provinces of Afghanistan. For example, in Herat, the percentage of female exam participants greatly exceeded the number of male exam attendees. This shift in involvement in a strongly patriarchal culture with numerous barriers to women's education is astounding. As per Kankor data sources from the National Examination Administration (NEXA), female students participated in the national admissions test at a rate of 44 percent in Herat province in 2008, compared to 56 percent for male students.

¹⁹ Kankor is the entrance exam for universities in Afghanistan. Every year, hundreds of thousands of high school graduates take this exam in order to continue their education at public, governmental, or private universities. Kankor encompasses all subjects taught in Afghanistan's high schools.

Nevertheless, the gender gap has progressively been narrowed (Mashwani, 2017). According to 2019 statistics, women's representation in the Kankor assessment test in Herat Province (which is well-known for its historic richness of culture and famous scholars) increased to 53 percent, while men's participation decreased to 42 percent. As a result, Herat province is a truly resounding success for women's education in Afghanistan. Overturning these gender disparities is a remarkable accomplishment in Afghan society.

However, these improvements are now under risk. Well before the Afghan administration collapsed in mid-August, innumerable reports suggested that the country's education system was slipping back into the past and becoming hobbled by economic hardship, rising feelings of insecurity, and the absence of infrastructure development and qualified professionals. With the degradation of the country's situation in recent years, the Afghan government has shifted its spending more into the military and intelligence industries (Noori, 2017).

The year before, the Ministry of Higher Education informed all public universities throughout the country that the administration would need to pull back \$10 million from the ministry's budget to be channeled into the defense and security sectors. For many decades, the education has been sacrificed for security concerns. Following the Taliban power grab, these difficulties appear to have been surpassed by ideological disappointments.

Even pertaining to the most hopeful facts and figures, the percentage of Afghan girls enrolled in school has never risen much above 50%. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) approximated in January 2016 that 40% of all schoolkids in Afghanistan do not receive an education. According to UNICEF, based on Afghan federal statistics from 2010 to 2011, 66 percent of Afghan girls of lower secondary age—12 to 15 years old—are not in school, compared to 40 percent of boys of the same age. The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) wrote in 2016: "The MoE [Afghan Ministry of Education] acknowledges that a significant number of students are not attending school, but

does not recognize how many, who or where they have been, or their upbringings." Funders who want to see their attempts succeeding acted less skeptical of education statistics than they should be (Hawkey, Ussher, & Perz, 2016). And precise track of the number of girls enrolled in school is important, in part even though high and yet incorrect statistics have gotten the impression that the nation is on a favorable pathway when, in fact, degradation is occurring in at least certain areas.

According to the state, the percentage of children enrolled in schools increased in 2015. However the increase stopped and become negligible since 2011, with only a 1% increase in 2015 over 2014. According to the World Bank, participation rates in lower primary schools fell from 56 to 54 percent between 2011-12 and 2013-14, with girls in remote regions being the most likely to be absent. According to government data, the number of female students in some regions is as low as 15% (Daun & Arjmand, Handbook of Islamic Education, 2018). However, women in the country have worked hard despite numerous challenges and accelerated in their educational careers. For instance, Shamsia Alizada, the daughter of a coal miner from Kabul, got the highest score in the annual Kankor examination in 2020 out of 170,000 students. In a nation rife with negative things, news of Alizada's accomplishment ushered joy to multiple people. Alizada's success has come at a critical moment for the country, as the administration was in Doha, negotiating a conceivable ceasefire agreement with the Taliban. Her accomplishment was featured on news programs and expanded like a bushfire on social networking sites. Government leaders, society organizations, media people, and people on social media appreciated her accomplishment extensively, trying to present it as a message to the Taliban that women's rights must be recognized and considered as legitimate. From 1996 to 2001, the Taliban did not permit girls to attend schools or many women to take a job (Daun & Arjmand, 2018). In the same manner, forbidden from in-person classrooms in Kabul, thousands of female students have hustled in recent weeks to sign up for a distant education

program initiated by a California-based charitable organization digital university, entering a new program that commenced on first November and is oriented particularly at women who have been barred from pursuing their education by the Taliban. During the turbulent U.S. withdrawal in August, Shai Reshef, founder and president of University of the People, started worrying about the troubles confronting Afghan women. "We're frightened they won't be able to study," he explained. Around 100,000 students internationally, including many from the United States, attend University of the People, which is credentialed by the United States. (Walt, 2021)

Primary and secondary education is mandatory by Afghan legislation, which bound the individuals to participate up to 9th class . Nevertheless, the officials do not have the resources to offer this standard of education to all children, nor do they have a procedure in place to implement the necessity that all children return to school. They do not inform parents that their children must attend school. In practice, many groups do not have access to schooling, or even if they do, it does not go beyond class 9th. The problem with the mandatory education is that there is no administration process to follow the drop-outs and to reach out to those children and their families. (Najeeb, Morales, & Acevedo, 2020).

Parents who do not send their kids to school face no enforcement. Military struggle and scarcity of assets make it difficult for the Afghan administration to provide widespread direct exposure to education. Beside the institutional and financial reasons, the conservative and patriarchal culture in the country act as a serious challenge to widespread education. When governments force families to send their girls to school, the usually face with serious reaction. In short, the administration has failed to persuade the family members about the importance of school for all of their kids, as well as to guarantee that the education system encompasses all segments of the society. It means that the Afghan government needs to play its vital role to improve women participation in education in the future.

The findings in this chapter highlight that there have been significant achievements towards facilitating a better environment for women's empowerment in Afghanistan after 2001. With the support of the International community, the government initiated important reforms that resulted in the enhancement of women's participation in all areas and enabled women to be the critical players in socio-political development. Once deprived of even their basic rights during the Taliban regime, Afghan women started to regain their position in the power structure and raised their voices for further empowerment. The trend of increase in women's role was highly considerable and improving during the last two decades. They had a strong say in society and played more practical roles within the system. With their ability, skills, and education, Afghan women proved to be equal to men when it comes to playing a role in the development of the country. In the decision-making processes, they were receiving equal treatment as men did. They were no more considered as women who were only bound with the responsibilities of the household activities. They were allowed to go out and establish their own businesses to contribute to the family income and facilitate job opportunities for the people.

However, with the return of the Taliban, all the accomplishments achieved in the area of women empowerment in Afghanistan are at risk; and threatened to be disregarded and annihilated. The Taliban once again started to put restrictions on women in all aspects of their lives; and ban them from receiving their rights and privileges. But the Afghan women are no more the women of the 1990s; they are changed a lot. They are educated, strong and brave. They don't give up and keep resisting the misconducts of the Taliban and strongly advocating for their rights and privileges. But there is a severe need for the support of the International community to leverage the ongoing struggles of Afghan women and convince the Taliban to fully consider the role of women and preserve their rights as explained by the constitution of 2004.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 Factors that Led to Women Empowerment in Afghanistan

4.1 Theoretical Overview

Empowerment is a dynamic and context-dependent concept. It can be imagined at different levels and areas, as discussed by various development agents and feminists (Afshar, 1998, pp. 1-4). However, in the context of feminism, "power" is defined in a more relative manner. It is not defined separately but based on the power divisions between men and women and on the role of women in the society. As Rowland observed, the emphasis is not on "power over," which is an interpretation of "empowerment" from a traditional perspective. Rowland contemplates different interpretations of "power" with the most probable different meanings, changing the terms "empowerment" of women from the usual interpretation of threatening the power of the opposite sex. Some other terms she uses instead of "power over" are "power with," "Power to," and "power within." Interpretations in these other cases are more general, such as "power with" refers to the collective action of confronting a problem, "power to" as the productive or generative power, which creates new possibilities and actions. (Rowland, 1998, pp. 11-34). Taking Rowland's conceptualization of power and considering the position of Afghan women in the family, society/tribe, and ultimately vis-à-vis the government, it is obvious that women's "empowerment" cannot be discussed from the perspective of individuality, but it should be done on the basis of "women's relationship with men, other women, and the society, at large.

According to Dupree (1998, pp. 145-166), Afghan women are not a homogeneous group. Several important social and economic factors contribute to the diversity of women's status in society, including age, education level, and the urban patriarchal rural split. Overall, Afghanistan is a traditional society in which the patriarchal culture surrounds the concept of power: strengthening male supremacy and control over women to maintain the "dignity" of the

family by adhering to accepted “behavioral norms,” which limits the women’s freedom. Women’s empowerment in Afghanistan cannot be discussed in a vacuum but must be evaluated by understanding the complications in the power and the control structures at different levels around.

For Afghan women, there are at least three layers of power hierarchy: at home, in the society/tribe, and vis-à-vis the government. The position of women in the family and the community plays an essential role in maintaining the family's dignity. This not only puts women in a certain restricted position at home but also imposes restrictions at work to respect the values reinforced and reflected by the employer organizations. Another challenge for Afghan women is to cope with these "power-hungry" structures and negotiate, and in some cases, or fight this hierarchy to make their way to independent existence. It is not only men limit the women’s freedom, different groups of women do the same to other members of their sex. Especially elderly women play a highly influential role in decision-making at home and even at the society/tribe level as “peace mediators” and “conflict resolvers” (Barakat & Wardell, 2002). Many other factors impact women’s status in the family and society, including age, experience, and giving birth to a son, which provides women with a “powerful” position.

However, with the establishment of the new government as per the Bonn Agreement and the transition to a new era of democracy, the environment for women’s empowerment in Afghanistan has positively changed in the post-2001 period. During the last two decades, the government and the International community have initiated numerous reforms in legal, cultural, educational, societal, political, and economic areas. These reforms not only positively changed Afghan public opinion, both men and women, on women’s rights and privileges; but also served as critical factors to enhance women empowerment in the country and ensured the women’s political, social, and economic participation in a broader way.

This study elaborates the factors that enabled women empowerment in Afghanistan after 2001 under two main categories: 1) External factors that the government and International Community leveraged; such as legal reforms and accession to international conventions, international organizations' support, and the role of local and international media; and 2) Internal Factors that existed in the form of capacity and potential within the Afghan women; such as highly skilled and educated women (diaspora) who lived in Pakistan, Iran, Europe, and the US, and repatriated to Afghanistan after the conflict, skilled and educated women in the country who couldn't work and stayed home due to the restrictions during Taliban but continued upgrading their education and knowledge through home-schooling.

4.2 External Factors

As explained above, the external factors played the most significant role in enhancing women's empowerment and encouraged the Afghan women to take part in the reconstruction of their country and prove that they are as capable as men and they own the country as much as men do.

After 2001, various international organizations like the UN, EU, World Bank, USAID, WHO, and other such organizations came forward to support the Afghan women to tackle the challenges and problems they are facing. In the same manner, the Afghan government, with the support of the International Community, initiated significant legal reforms and facilitated a favorable environment to revive the rights and freedoms of Afghan women (Johansen & Bye, 2018, p. 15). Under the light of these reforms, the women could go to school, access higher education, take part in political and socio-economical activities, they could marry men they choose, and many other such rights were given to the Afghan women under these reforms.

Furthermore, as Afghanistan started to become members to several international conventions, these bodies served as platform for Afghan women to become more visible and more effective at regional and international levels. This international visibility and participation were the

major factors that boosted their confidence, and they became politicians, social activists, economists, pilots, doctors, served in national security forces, and etc. We cannot ignore the important role played by the media as well. Numerous local and international media channels like BBC, The Voice of America, Al-Jazeera, Tolo TV, Ariana TV, Zan TV and other such channels covered the challenges faced by the Afghan women, as well as providing an arena for them to raise their voices. Moreover, women's capacities and talents were promoted in these platforms. These channels drew the attention of regional and international Non-government Organizations(NGOs) towards women's rights in Afghanistan, and such organizations worked hard to help the women of the war-torn nation, achieve their basic rights in rural areas and their advanced rights and liberties in urban areas like Kabul (Quie, 2016, pp. 21-44). In the same manner, the role of social media is difficult to neglect in this context, as it empowered the Afghan women by providing them an arena to raise their voice to share their views on various topics, to discuss the challenges they face regionally and globally. Furthermore, the regional and international community, like social workers, reporters, news anchors, NGO personnel, and other such people, also used various social media channels like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to access and help the repressed Afghan women in different parts of the country.

4.2.1 Legal Reforms and Accession to the International Conventions

During the last two decades, many laws and regulations have been enacted to help Afghan women; the most important one is the adoption of a new constitution in 2004, which provide the women with significant rights and roles in various areas and facilitates a roadmap to enact further supporting laws, regulations and policies.

As per article 22 of the constitution, men and women are equal by law, and any kind of discrimination between the citizens is forbidden. Article 43 and 44 provide the women with the rights of education and mandate the government to implement effective programs to provide equal access to education by both girls and boys throughout the country on the expenses of the

government. According to article 48, every Afghan woman is entitled to work according to their own choice. Subsequently, articles 83 and 84 of the constitution ensure women's rights in taking part in the decision-making processes of the government through being elected and voting for their candidates. These articles also specify quotas and allocate seats in the parliament of Afghanistan for women (Constitution, 2004). Benefiting from the provisions in the new constitution, for the first time, an Afghan woman ran for the presidential election in 2004, 75 women occupied parliamentary seats in 2005 elections, and 31 % of civil service employees in 2006 consisted of women. (Jafari, 2019, p. 85)

Further laws, regulations, and strategies were endorsed to broadly implement the constitution and empower the role of women in the country including but not limited to:

- Adoption of **Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS)** in 2008: One of the core objectives of ANDS was to promote gender equality through fighting with any discrimination against women, developing women's human capital, and ensuring the full participation of women in all aspects of the life in Afghanistan. (ANDS, 2008, pp. 147-149)
- Development of **National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA)** in 2007. NAPWA was a ten-year plan, and its main goal was to implement the policies and regulations adopted with regards to women's empowerment and gender equality in the country and ensure the fulfillment of the provisions defined in the signed international conventions for women in the context of Afghanistan. NAWPA specifically focused on security, protection of women's rights, ensuring the political participation of women, women's economy and employment, and eradication of female poverty. (NAPWA, 2007, pp. 13-14)
- One of the most significant laws enacted in this context was the law on **Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW)**. Males and females are recognized as equal

citizens under the post-Taliban constitution, with identical protections and benefits. One significant improvement that appeared with this law was the fact that adultery against women was criminalized for the first time in Afghanistan (Hakimi, 2020, p.52). This law held the government responsible to protect vulnerable adults from being abused, especially preventing girls from forced marriages and teenage weddings, as well as preventing any physical and psychological assaults against women. In line with the benefits of this law, Afghan women, who were becoming more conscious of their rights and liberties, started reporting incidents of violence to the relevant authorities. Yet the majority of decisions on these incidents were made by Jirgahs and Shuras (Local councils and tribunals organized to resolve family matters) headed by local authorities such as elders and authoritarian leaders of villages, in which the decisions were mostly unsurprisingly patriarchal (Hakimi, 2020, p. 54).

Afghanistan is among the countries which have signed various international conventions, i.e. seven out of the nine conventions on human rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Most of these conventions were signed and accepted by the previous governments in the 1980s but remained unratified due to the civil war. After the fall of the Taliban and the establishment of the new government in 2001, in addition to the ratification of the previously signed conventions, Afghanistan has signed two more conventions during the government of President Hamid Karzai (Jafari, 2019, p.98-99)

The Government of Afghanistan (GoA) signed the Declaration on the Eradication of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on 14 August 1980, but the ongoing civil war and insurgency prevented its ratification and implementation until 2003. Thus, the Afghan Transitional Administration took steps to re-access the Convention and officially approved it on 5 March 2003. The adoption of CEDAW by Afghanistan was a significant step forward for

women's freedoms not only in Afghanistan but throughout the Muslim World. The primary goal of accession to these conventions was to encourage and support Afghan women in all aspects of their lives.

Moreover, the Afghan government established significant organizations and entities to enhance women's role in the country. For instance, the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) was a ministry founded by the Interim Government of Afghanistan in late 2001. MOWA was Afghanistan's premier organization for empowering women, protecting their rights, and ensuring the progress of women in all areas. In the same manner, various judicial entities were established in the country to support Afghan women; such as the establishment of a specialized family court in 2006 to deal with family matters and conflicts. (Wimpelmann, 2015, p.103). The Attorney General Office for the elimination of violence against women in Afghanistan was established upon the Attorney General Office (AGO)'s recommendation and President's Decree. And in August 2017 AGO appointed Ms. Seena Shina as Deputy Attorney General for Violence Against Women. (AGO, 2020)

Decades of putting counterterrorism and counterinsurgency ahead of local enforcement have hindered the development of a police force consisting of mainly trained policewomen dedicated to safeguarding females from harm. The police force was responsible for protecting women who are frequently subjected to abuse without the capability and power to address situations of gender-based aggression. More initiatives to react to women's concerns have been undertaken, including the formation of police Family Response Units (FRUs) in provincial headquarters and significant regions (Manjoo, 2013, pp. 240-265).

4.2.2 Supports Provided by International Organizations

Afghanistan's relations with the international community and the international organizations stem from its foreign policy. Due to the challenging history and four decades of war in the country, not only the practice of human rights but also the social and economic life in

Afghanistan have been effected negatively. Therefore many humanitarian assistance projects have been implemented to support Afghan people. Because of the lack of resources, Afghanistan needed extensive support from the International community and organizations; thus, the role of international organizations in Afghanistan's development has been extensively positive. Afghanistan's foreign policy and its strong efforts made it possible to gain membership in regional and international organizations, which provided the opportunity to further explain and share the country's national interest and foreign policy towards other nations.

The role of International organizations for a country like Afghanistan, where there is terrorism and interventions of competing countries on its soil, is highly important in coordinating supports for its people or applying political pressure to the government. Afghanistan needs international organizations as monitoring bodies and advocating forces, which can ensure access to multilateral diplomacy, assist in the country's development, and initiate reforms towards the people's welfare.

Afghanistan's foreign policy and its good relations with the international community helped to attract a great deal of support and assistance from international organizations especially in the field of women's empowerment. During the last two decades, various international organizations strongly supported the women's empowerment in Afghanistan and helped the Afghan women to progress and participate in the reconstruction of their country. These organizations include United Nations, The World Bank, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), European Union (EU) and many others. The contribution of these bodies on the empowerment of Afghan women are separately discussed below.

4.2.2.1 United Nation's Support

The UN is on the top of the list in supporting Afghan women. Over several generations, the United Nations has achieved a lot in promoting and supporting gender equality, notably via

historic accords like the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In Afghanistan's context, the UN Women (previously called UNIFEM) has been working since 2002 and has contributed a lot in developing, monitoring, and implementing policies to promote women's rights. Development of National Action Plan for Women in Afghanistan (NAPWA), laws, and policies to fight violence against women, and inclusion of gender equality in Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) are among the achievements of UN Women at the policy level. UN Women in Afghanistan has established three components (Political, Economic, and Coordination and Advocacy Components) within its organizational structure to better promote gender equality and enhance women's empowerment in the country through allocated resources and programmatic approaches. The approaches entailed lobbying to guarantee that women's freedoms are preserved and encouraged and that Afghan women are not only spoken about but personally heard by. (Stollenwerk, 2018, p.13). The UN Women is dedicated to remaining in Afghanistan and providing support for Afghan girls and women.

Moreover, UNESCO is helping to improve the education of Afghan women. Since 2001, UNESCO has been a trusted stakeholder with Afghanistan's Ministry of Education. It has been assisting the ministry in legal reforms, financial management, upgrading the educational curricula, and developing syllabuses for technical vocational education (Mehrangiz Najafizadeh & Lindsey, 2019 p.20). The three-year literacy program, financially supported by Sweden, allows UIL (Institute for Lifelong Learning) and UNESCO to collaborate with the Deputy Ministry of Education to establish a nationwide program for youth and adult literacy, a nationwide assessment, syllabus for youth and adult basic education, and professional development.

4.2.2.2 The World Bank

The World Bank is among the organizations that have provided considerable support in the area of women empowerment in Afghanistan. World Bank's assistance relatively focused on the enhancement of women's socio-economic participation. Poverty severely affected women's lives in rural areas, and the value of their efforts at home was neglected. Traditional restrictions have made it difficult for rural women to get loans and receive funds to start businesses. Through its programs such as Women Economic Empowerment Rural Development Program (WEE-RDP) and National Horticultural and Livestock Project (NHLP), the World Bank played a significant role in providing opportunities for women in rural areas. WEE-RDP was mandated to reach out to the women in rural areas and assist them in creating their businesses by facilitating access to financial information and small loans. WEE-RDP has operated in 76 districts and approached rural women with business potentials. Likewise, NHLP trained thousands of unskilled rural women on backyard gardening and helped them earn a sustainable livelihood, be independent producers, and have a greater say in the family. (Kerali, 2020)

Furthermore, the World Bank provided financial support and small loans for women-owned small businesses. For example, tailoring is the most prominent conventional job for women in Afghanistan, and a considerable proportion of the population work as skilled dressmakers from home. Many women dressmakers became entrepreneurs by founding their own businesses with the support of the loans provided by the World Bank projects. (Qazi Zada, 2020, pp. 257-283). World Bank supports were not limited to rural areas; hundreds of women in urban areas have also benefited from World Bank programs. Women who have been provided with economic opportunities have significantly contributed to the economic growth and development of the country. By establishing successful businesses, they could help to reduce poverty, create new jobs, and provide a better life for people. After many years of war, the process of development in the major cities of Afghanistan kept advancing, which helped poverty reduction and

employment generation. According to a Survey of National Bureau of Statistics conducted on Living Conditions in Afghanistan, the poverty rate in the country has declined from 49 percent in 2008 to 26 in 2010 (World Bank, 2018).

4.2.2.3 United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

Similar to the UN and the World Bank, USAID as the umbrella organization for all US government-supported programs and projects, has played a vital role in the country's development, including enhancing women's empowerment. USAID has assisted Afghanistan in becoming a more accountable and engaged actor within the region and the global community. Significant progress has been achieved in healthcare and education, reintegrating more Afghans into financial and public engagement. The PROMOTE program that started its activities in 2015, was USAID's broadest program to support women's empowerment at different levels in Afghanistan. This five-year program was considered to support women in four main areas including; 1) Women's Leadership Development (WLD), targeting 25,000 young women to be trained as future leaders. 2) Women in Government, targeting 3,000 university graduates to receive training and internships in the civil service sector and work with various public organizations. 3) Women's Civil Society Organizations and Coalitions (Musharikat); through these components minimum of 5,000 civil activists were targeted to take part in a coalition of civil society organizations and advocate for gender-related issues including access to education, elimination of violence against women, access to information and economic opportunities. And 4) Afghan Women in the Economy (WIE), with a primary objective to increase the capacity of women and ensure their participation in the economy. This component would help women secure employment, create their own businesses, and eventually contribute to the country's economic growth (USAID, PROMOTE, 2021).

4.2.3 The Role of National and International Media

As described earlier in the study, the role of media in women's empowerment in Afghanistan is remarkable. Women's voices were amplified by regional and worldwide media, which supported prominent personalities such as female legislators, community organizers, and reporters. Social networking has been essential in promoting transformation in Afghanistan. The internet's inherent privacy provided excellent prospects for women. Following the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, widespread access to electronic communication services became an actuality in Afghanistan, ushering in significant socioeconomic transformations (Buyse, 2018, pp. 966-988). Millions of Afghans are now linked and among themselves and to the world with smartphones and other electronic gadgets, enabling them to receive content and communicate in political dialogue like they could have never done before.

Despite the fact that the environment for journalism has evolved in post-2001, Taliban fractions persisted in threatening and assassinating journalists who in Taliban's view disobeyed the Islamic rules. As a result, the physical construction of excellent news organizations is sometimes practically impossible or result in hazards for reporters. Besides the difficulties encountered by convention media institutions, social networking enables individuals to comment on developments and present their ideas without getting known. Facebook is the most popular social network platform in Afghanistan, as it is in most other nations throughout the globe (Nwangwu & Ezeibe, 2019, pp. 168-193). The number of Afghanistan-based users reached 2,600,000 in 2016, expanded significantly in the aftermath of 3G digital services, with 86 percent being male and 14 percent female. Prior to the late 2000s development of optical fiber arrays, social networks were restricted to a small number of online chat sites and websites. Blog posts were the earliest form of online networking, and progressive reformers are using them to advocate political agendas today. The establishment of hosting companies in

neighboring Iran cleared the stage for the growth of blogging in Afghanistan (Vadlamannati & Janz, 2018, pp. 222-237).

Both local and international media outlets like Al-Jazeera, BBC, the Voice of America, Tolo TV, and Ariana TV played a significant role in empowering and supporting Afghan women. These channels broadcasted special TV programs about the Afghan women that either targeted their contributions to the progress of the country or revealed the current challenges faced by them. A new TV station called ZAN TV (Women's TV), exclusive to women, was launched in 2017 to commence airing in conservative Afghanistan, in which the media business, like many other sectors, was controlled and dominated by men. The majority of the staff of this channel, including broadcasters and producers, were all women (Hajnal, 2018). They attracted a significant audience as a result of an active publicity campaign on social networking sites and massive posters in Kabul, the capital. Khatira Ahmadi, 20, who worked as a producer at the channel, was excited to show her works to Afghan women. In the same manner, BBC launched the "Our Girl" TV series to highlight the efforts of Afghan women to deal with the challenges regarding their rights. Each episode of the TV show came up with a new heroic Afghan girl with a thrilling life story, showing her struggles in life in a patriarchal war-torn nation (Imran & et al, 2020, pp. 74-93)

4.3 Domestic Factors

The transformation of Afghanistan in the post-2001 was mainly due to the role played by the US and International Community in the country. Yet, this doesn't mean that domestic actors were totally passive. The internal factors that led to this big change in the country was Afghan women's enthusiasm for learning and education, as well as their strength to fight with the difficulties. They did not give up and showed their ability, and potential to play a strong role in reconstructing the country. Moreover, the return of the educated women from the diaspora from Pakistan, Iran, Europe, and the United States made a big impact. They were ready to carry the

developments brought by the international actors even further. The women who remained in Afghanistan throughout the Taliban were also highly motivated for all these changes as they wanted to educate their children and to make it possible for them to seek greater objectives (McDonald, 2015, pp. 909-922).

4.3.1 Local Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) (Supported by International Community)

Moreover, with the support of the International community there has been many local NGOs established and mandated to work on women empowerment and the promotion of women's rights in Afghanistan. These NGOs include but not limited to:

- **Afghanistan Civil Society Forum-organization (ACSFo):** The objective of the ACSFo was "to promote the processes of citizens and government development via campaigning, institutional capacity, and collaboration." ACSFo has also performed studies on "government development in weak contexts," "the cost of conflict," and "the Afghan folks understanding of aggression (Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili, 2016, pp. 230-239). Although this organization did not aim for the female empowerment specifically, their intention was to stabilize the country and the development, the government would also help women and their status in the society.
- **Afghanistan Capacity Development and Educational Organization (ACDEO)** was another important organization to promote women empowerment and protect human rights in Afghanistan. ACDEO, founded in late 2012, was primarily mandated to assist the country's most vulnerable and disadvantaged citizens by enhancing social benefits and publicizing an improved way of life for them and their relatives within the framework of Islam and Afghanistan's constitution. ACDEO provided women and children with schooling and access to rehabilitation and legal services if they needed. ACDEO developed the first household helpline in Afghanistan, initially focusing on

three southeastern regions, but within a few months began getting inquiries from all over the country. The helpline was to provide opportunity for women who are victims of domestic violence, to reach ACDEO to report their problems and seek assistance and guidance (Murtazashvili, 2016):

- Women for Afghan Women (WAW) was another important organization in this context. Women for Afghan Women (WAW) was a community group in Afghanistan and New York devoted to ensuring and safeguarding the interests of underprivileged Afghan girls and women. The organization enabled these women, and young girls to realize their full capacity, exercise their rights to self-determination, and be recognized in all aspects of social life: governmental, economic, and even artistic (Krook & Sanín, 2016). WAW campaigned for equal liberation in line with the international conventions and promoted the provisions of the conventions on women's right.
- Moreover, the Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI), established in 2017, was the umbrella organization to raise the voice of women entrepreneurs and advocate for their rights and privileges. As per HUDSON et al, (2016, pp. 122-139), since 2002, there have been many women-led organizations available to represent the women and advocate for them. Yet their operations and lobbying activities mainly revolved around women's political, economic, and intellectual involvement and liberties in a general. Not any of them specifically has addressed women's entrepreneurial or corporate problems. Thus there was a necessity for a women's chamber to be an umbrella organization to raise the voice of women entrepreneurs and discuss their problems with the relevant government entities. Thus, with the establishment of AWCCI, this necessity was fulfilled, and there have been tremendous achievements in the area of women's involvement in the economy resulting from the activities of AWCCI.

Meanwhile, the international community organized and funded huge number of conferences, summits, advocacy gatherings, and capacity development programs on various topics to promote women's role and empower the Afghan women. And the local NGOs discussed above were among the major participants and beneficiaries of these events and programs. So it needs to be noted that the support of and the cooperation with the international community made these organizations so effective and powerful.

4.3.2 Returning of Skills and Capacities

Due to the conflicts and civil war in the 1990s, millions of Afghans migrated to the neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran, Europe, and the United States, where the young girls and boys got access to quality education and familiarized themselves with the technology and updated their skills. The developments in the post-2001 era attracted those Afghans and made them return back to Afghanistan and take part in the reconstruction of their country. There were thousands of young Afghans among those returnees, including girls highly skilled and educated. (Kazem, 2005. P. 510-512). Their education and skills helped them easily cope with the developments in the country and provided them the opportunities to get high-profile jobs and take part in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. This way educated women, not only started playing an important role in the development of the country but also encouraged the younger generation to idolize them and work hard to get a quality education in order to secure a bright future in their career.

According to MoRR (2007, p. 1), more than five million Afghan migrants have returned to the country since 2002, 48% of which consisted of women, and most of these migrants were living in the neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran. The fact is that the repatriation of diaspora brought competent skills to the country, which was utilized to build further skills and educate more people within the country. Some of the women returnees built NGOs to support other women. They benefitted from the potential funds and resources the international

community provided for Afghanistan's reconstruction, resulting in enhancing women's empowerment in various areas and increasing their participation in politics, society, and economy (Panda, 2018, pp. 315-331).

As per a UNESCO report, the women's education rate in Afghanistan hit 30% in 2018. In Afghanistan, the female literacy among those aged between 15 and 24 is 47 %, lower than the actual adolescent educational attainment in low-income nations. As per the World Bank's database of development index derived from formally approved sources, the female labor force (percent of the total labor force) in Afghanistan was recorded at 21.62 % percent in 2020 (UNESCO, 2021). Although these percentages are not satisfactory but it shows an improving trend compared to the previous years.

4.3.3 Existing Potentials within the Country

The Afghan women showed tremendous courage during the dark era of the Taliban, and they possessed significant potentials such as hardworking, determination, enthusiasm, courage, and other such characteristics. This section discusses their ability to fight the dark age of the Taliban regime, demonstrating the excitement and thirst for seeking knowledge, learning, and receiving education under any challenging circumstances. Hundreds of girls continued their education through homeschooling during the Taliban regime. They did not stop struggling to learn new things, develop their capacities, familiarize themselves with the developing technology (the world of computers), study English so that they can connect with people outside their nation, and other similar attempts (Imran et al., 2020, p.76).

In Afghan society, gender stereotypes are very strong and rigorously established. Men are considered as the primary income generators, whereas women are perceived as housewives. Husbands are supposed to support their spouses and kids financially for the rest of their lives. However, there has been a lot of changes in the male public opinion as; now, women with education and skills in the country are receiving support from male members of their family to

run their businesses and take part in political and social activities. Moreover, the educated women in the country help kids around them to learn basic education and religious education; while they also support the Afghan community and its economy (Farooqi, 2018)(Farooqi, 2018,p.105). Certain skills such as utilizing computers and the new technology, and the world of the internet, are still helping Afghan women to work from home as freelancers, and earn from online jobs. Social media sites are playing an important role in this context.

As the findings and the analysis in this chapter show in detail that the reforms during the last two decades resulted in several positive developments for women's empowerment in Afghanistan. While the role of international community's support and pressure over the government was the major factors driving the changes and enhancing the women empowerment, the role of educated Afghan women and their strong will to build the country also served as critical domestic factors towards the development and reconstruction of the country.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 Conclusion

This chapter will conclude the findings and analysis of the thesis done using secondary sources. In this thesis, I tried to investigate the position of Afghan women under different governments throughout the twentieth century and in the two decades following 2001. The primary aim of this study was to analyze women's empowerment and highlight their political and social participation under the reforms and supports provided by the external and domestic factors. Despite the existence of numerous challenges, the progress on the empowerment of Afghan women in post-2001 is positively underlined in this thesis. While carrying out this study, I have preferred not to comment on the shortcomings of the International community from a political perspective; and only focused on the subject matter which was to reveal the post-2001 accomplishments in the arena of women empowerment and their political and social participation in Afghanistan.

One common finding is that women are held captive in many countries of the world, especially in the least developed and even in some developing countries that are highly influenced by ancient traditions and beliefs. Social relations in the patriarchal system still prevail in these countries, which is a critical challenge to women's empowerment and their socio-political participation. Likewise, Afghan women have always been victims of cultural and traditional superstitions and conservatism inherited from the past, yet did not stop struggling and fighting for their rights and freedoms. Actually, the main issue of Afghan women is the cultural one that manipulates the male members of the society and even female members in rural areas and creates a misinterpretation in their understanding of the roles and responsibilities of women. To fully overcome this challenge, besides the legal reforms and institutionalization of women's affairs, an extensive transformation is needed on cultural reforms and developments through

education, awareness raisings and changing the public opinion on the role of women in today's world.

As described in the study, during the twentieth century, several governments attempted to bring legal reforms and to adopt democratic systems to consider an important role for women in different areas of life. Despite the strong resistance from the conservative segments, these governments did not stop initiating certain reforms that led to women's empowerment. King Amanullah Khan was the first leader to modernize the country and enhance the role of women by establishing modern schools and providing girls with equal educational opportunities as boys. He strongly supported women's social participation. As a sign of motivation and inspiration for Afghan women, he always had the company of his wife, Queen Soraya, on official occasions dressed in modern style. Although these efforts of Amanullah Khan were extremely opposed by the conservatives during his reign and eventually resulted in the collapse of his government and in him being exiled, later on, it served as an inspiration for future governments who believed in democracy and women's empowerment. King Zahir Shah, who ruled for forty years, was another leader who followed Amanullah Khan's strategies with regard to women's freedom. Under Zahir Shah's leadership, for the first time, women got access to higher education and were provided with the opportunity to vote and run for parliamentary seats. Following Zahir Shah, Daoud Kahan kept expanding educational facilities for girls and promoted women's social participation in the country. Under his government, the voice of an Afghan female anchor was broadcasted through national radio for the first time.

After the Soviet invasion, radical changes were applied towards women's freedom, eradicating all traditional and religious barriers against gender equality. These changes were strongly opposed by tribal and religious factions and led to the emergence of Mujahedin, resulting in a bloody confrontation for more than a decade and dragging the country into a civil war. The civil war not only caused the death of millions of Afghans and forced almost one-third of the

population to migrate to other countries, but it also deprived Afghan women of practicing their basic rights. After Mujahedin, Afghanistan entered into a darker era of the Taliban. Afghan women were held imprisoned at home and barred from going out and participating in social activities. They were deprived of even practicing their basic rights, such as going to school and receiving medical treatment from male doctors. This era caused millions of girls to remain uneducated and distanced from social activities. Under the Taliban regime, Afghan women were not only deprived of their basic rights but were also repressed psychologically and felt disgraced for being women and being treated as second-class citizens. Yet they tried their best to benefit from any opportunity that helped them build their capacities and gain education and knowledge through home-schooling facilities. In fact the twentieth century in general was full of ups and downs for Afghan women that strengthened and enabled them to move forward under any circumstances and fight for their rights without giving up.

As explained in the study, the fall of the Taliban and the US intervention in 2001 opened a new chapter and led to the beginning of a new era of democracy in Afghanistan. The presence of the international community representing thirty-four countries provided tremendous opportunities and brought billions of US dollars to be spent for the reconstruction of war-torn Afghanistan. Additionally, the international community played a critical role in supporting the government and initiating comprehensive reforms towards the country's development. These reforms also focused on the facilitation of a democratic environment in which Afghan women could practice their rights and freedoms, which they were deprived of for more than a decade.

The study findings explain that, there were various factors that led to women's empowerment in Afghanistan. The critical factors that helped the enhancement of women's political and social participation and enabled them to play a significant role in the reconstruction and development of the country were the support of the international community to the government and financial and technical assistance provided to the people through prominent international organizations.

These supports were provided because Afghanistan had just come out of almost two decades of conflict and war, which caused the destruction of the entire infrastructure and negatively affected the practice of human rights in the country on serious levels. There were limited resources left, and thus, there was a severe need for the supports of the international community in recovering the country and putting a resourceful system in place to retain and protect human rights.

The help and support provided by the international organizations also focused on women's rights and freedoms because it was a prerequisite for having a well-functioning democracy in place and fulfilling human rights provisions described in the international conventions. Many important programs and projects, generated and announced by international organizations, concentrated specifically on women's empowerment and advocated for their rights and privileges. For instance while the UN focused on empowering Afghan women in the political sphere, the World Bank and United Nation's Agency for International Development (USAID) emphasized women's empowerment in socio-economic sectors. This study has evaluated the supports of international community as external factors that led to considerable reforms and developments in the country.

In addition to the above-explained external factors, domestic factors that contributed to women's empowerment and socio-political participation in Afghanistan have also been evaluated. These factors include the enthusiasm of Afghan women for learning, their strength for sailing through difficulties and fighting for their rights without giving up, the quality of education they received while they were emigrants, the supports provided by families, and eventually, the supports of local non-government Organizations (NGOs) that worked towards women's empowerment in Afghanistan.

The external and domestic factors combined resulted in many accomplishments and success stories in women's empowerment and their socio-political participation. As elaborated in this

study, Afghanistan witnessed considerable progress during the last two decades. Women's participation improved in a several ways; from occupying seats within the cabinet, parliament, and in many other public organizations, including the police force, to representing their country at various international occasions in different arenas such as sports, entertainment, and education. Moreover, Afghan women played an entrepreneurial role in the economic growth contributing to employment and wealth generation. At the same time, their involvement in economic activities also ensured their financial independence and self-reliability, which enabled them to have a powerful voice and action in society because financial independence is a prerequisite for the empowerment of women in any society.

Despite the accomplishments analyzed in the study, there have been many challenges and shortcomings hindering women's empowerment in Afghanistan. The presence of conservative circles within the power structure and in the larger society always hindered women's freedom and involvement in the system. The example of the female MP from Farah province who was threatened and toppled from the parliament in 2006 for criticizing the conservatives has shown that women are always at risk. It is not easy to facilitate a perfect environment in the short run. But Afghan women don't give up and keep struggling because they believe that hard work pays off. Whatever they have achieved so far has mainly resulted from their hard work and struggles and in the light of reforms brought by the government and with the support they received from the international organizations. Ultimately the Afghan women proved that, they are fully capable of fulfilling huge responsibilities at any level if they are given the chance and provided with a conducive environment. They are as powerful and talented as men in any areas of life, whether it is running a public organization or establishing a business or lobbying for the interest of their country.

The unfortunate return of Taliban in August 2021 put all the accomplishments of the last two decades in jeopardy. From the day they took over Kabul, Taliban started imposing restrictions

on women's social activities and political participation and even barred them from practicing their basic rights, such as going to school. In the meanwhile, Taliban makes statements claiming that they have changed and will respect women's rights and freedoms. But their actions prove the opposite of what they say; they have not considered any women in their cabinet while there were always three to four female ministers in previous cabinets.

The protests and resistance the Afghan women showed against Taliban's misconducts reflect their strength and intention to fight for their rights and freedoms under any circumstances and reveal that they are no more the Afghan women of the 1990s; they have changed a lot. They are brave, strong, educated, well-experienced, and capable of running a country; thus they don't give up. However, there needs to be strong support provided by the international community to make the ongoing resistance of women effective and to help Afghan women to reach their goals. The international community should find a way to convince Taliban not to ignore the last two decades' accomplishments and to consider the rights and privileges of women in line with how it is explained in the 2004 constitution.

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