

## *After Afghan Women Asked #WhereIsMyName, a Small Victory*

Mothers' names will be printed on national identification cards, a step in normalizing women's public presence in a country where it remains taboo.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghan citizens will soon have their mothers' names printed along with their fathers' on their national identification cards, the government said on Tuesday, after years of campaigning by activists to do away with the shame associated with female names in public.

The victory, even if symbolic, is seen as a small boost for women's rights at a time when the future of women's role in Afghan society hangs in the balance amid imminent government negotiations over a power-sharing deal with the Taliban. When it was in national power in the 1990s, the Taliban's Islamist government largely confined women to their homes and stripped them of basic rights like education and paid employment.

Afghanistan has made major improvements in expanding women's role in public in the two decades since the toppling of the Taliban. Millions of girls attend schools and universities across the country, and women hold important government jobs. But activists say a misogyny justified by religiosity still runs deep, with the Taliban's bullying of women emblematic of a wider problem.

The old Afghan taboo over women in public runs so deep that young schoolboys often get into fights if someone even mentions the name of their mother or sister, an act seen as a dishonor. In a country of war and widows, women struggle to assert themselves as legal guardians of their children in government offices or carry out business transactions in their own names without the presence of a man. Even most women's graves never include their names — only those of male relatives.

The Afghan cabinet's legal committee headed by one of the country's two vice presidents, Sarwar Danish, said a proposal to amend the census law to include the mother's name on the national identity card had been approved in a committee meeting on Tuesday. While the amendment still requires parliamentary approval and signing into law by the president, a spokesman for the vice president said officials expected those steps to be smooth.

"The amendment changes the definition of identity — the new identity would comprise of the person's name, last name, father's name, mother's name, and date of birth," said the spokesman, Mohamed Hedayat. "In the old definition, mother's name was not part of the identity."

Afghanistan lacks an accurate census of its population, with the last one conducted in the 1970s, before four decades of war and upheaval. The country introduced a long-delayed electronic ID system in 2018 with iris and biometric scans to help law enforcement better identify citizens. But the process of issuing the IDs quickly faced controversy over whether an individual's ethnic group should also be included.

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Voters showing their national identification cards while lined up at a polling station last year in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Ghulamullah Habibi/EPA, via Shutterstock

Rights activists saw an opportunity in the debate: While ethnic groups were jostling for recognition, women — roughly half of the country’s population, and representing all ethnicities — had long been denied their basic identities, and the cards offered a new opportunity on that front. A hashtag campaign on social media, #WhereIsMyName?, was already underway, and it quickly began gaining ground.

While Afghan social media has been full of celebration since Tuesday over the announced change, many also feared that its introduction would deter people in conservative rural areas from registering for the national identity cards.

### Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Laleh Osmany, one of the earliest supporters of the #WhereIsMyName? campaign in western Herat Province, said they were fighting a deeply rooted misogyny that used religion as cover. From a young age, girls are conditioned to believe they are an appendix to a man, known in relation to the men in their families, with no independent identity of their own.

“Most of the limitations on women in society have no foundation in religion, and I realized the depth of that in my four years as a student of Islamic law,” Ms. Osmany said. “In Islam, there is nothing that limits women’s identity. But in our society they associate every limitation — even on women’s identity — with religion.”

The change to the ID system “is about restoring the most basic and natural right of women that they are denied,” Ms. Osmany said. “By printing her name, we give the mother power, and the law gives her certain authorities to be a mother who can, without the presence of a man, get documents for her children, enroll her children in school, travel.”