

A Taliban spokesman urges women to stay home because fighters haven't been trained to respect them.

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When the Taliban were last in power, Afghan women were generally not allowed to leave their homes except under certain narrowly defined conditions. Those who did risked being beaten, tortured or executed.

In the days since the Taliban swept back into control, their leaders have insisted that this time will be different. Women, they say, will be allowed to work. Girls will be free to attend school. At least within the confines of their interpretation of Islam.

But early signs have not been promising, and that pattern continued on Tuesday with a statement from a Taliban spokesman that women should stay home, at least for now. Why? Because some of the militants have not yet been trained not to hurt them, he said.

The spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, called it a “temporary” policy intended to protect women until the Taliban could ensure their safety.

“We are worried our forces who are new and have not been yet trained very well may mistreat women,” Mr. Mujahid said. “We don’t want our forces, God forbid, to harm or harass women. Mr. Mujahid said that women should stay home “until we have a new procedure,” and that “their salaries will be paid in their homes.”

His statement echoed comments from Ahmadullah Waseq, the deputy of the Taliban’s cultural affairs committee, who told The New York Times this week that the Taliban had “no problem with working women,” as long as they wore hijabs.

But, he said: “For now, we are asking them to stay home until the situation gets normal. Now it is a military situation.”

During the first years of Taliban rule, from 1996 to 2001, women were forbidden to work outside the home or even to leave the house without a male guardian. They could not attend school, and faced public flogging if they were found to have violated morality rules, like one requiring that they be fully covered.

The claim that restrictions on women’s lives are a temporary necessity is not new to Afghan women. The Taliban made similar claims the last time they controlled Afghanistan, said Heather Barr, the associate director of women’s rights at Human Rights Watch.

“The explanation was that the security was not good, and they were waiting for security to be better, and then women would be able to have more freedom,” she said. “But of course in those years they were in power, that moment never arrived — and I can promise you Afghan women hearing this today are thinking it will never arrive this time either.”

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.

Brian Castner, a senior crisis adviser at Amnesty International who was in Afghanistan until last week, said that if the Taliban intended to treat women better, they would need to retrain their forces. “You can’t have a movement like the Taliban that has operated a certain way for 25 years and then just because you take over a government, all of the fighters and everyone in your organization just does something differently,” he said.

But, Mr. Castner said, there is no indication that the Taliban intend to fulfill that or any other promises of moderation. Amnesty International has received reports of fighters going door to door with lists of names, despite their leaders' public pledges not to retaliate against Afghans who worked with the previous government.

"The rhetoric and the reality are not matching at all, and I think that the rhetoric is more than just disingenuous," Mr. Castner said. "If a random Taliban fighter commits a human rights abuse or violation, that's just kind of random violence, that's one thing. But if there's a systematic going to people's homes and looking for people, that's not a random fighter that's untrained — that's a system working. The rhetoric is a cover for what's really happening."

In Kabul on Wednesday, women in parts of the city with minimal Taliban presence were going out "with normal clothes, as it was before the Taliban," said a resident named Shabaka. But in central areas with many Taliban fighters, few women ventured out, and those who did wore burqas, said Sayed, a civil servant.

Ms. Barr, of Human Rights Watch, said that in the week since the Taliban said the new government would preserve women's rights "within the bounds of Islamic law," the Afghan women she has spoken to offered the same skeptical assessment: "They're trying to look normal and legitimate, and this will last as long as the international community and the international press are still there. And then we'll see what they're really like again."

It might not take long, Ms. Barr suggested.

"This announcement just highlights to me that they don't feel like they need to wait," she said.