

# Fighting Patriarchy, and Fearing Worse From the Taliban

A new generation of career-minded women in Afghanistan fear that all they have fought for will be swept away if the Taliban negotiate a return.

---

By David Zucchino and Fatima Faizi Photographs by Kiana Hayeri

Published Sept. 6, 2020 Updated Sept. 15, 2020

KABUL, Afghanistan — When Gaisu Yari was 6, she was engaged to the 6-year-old son of a pro-Taliban commander in eastern Afghanistan.

After she turned 18, Ms. Yari said, she escaped the forced engagement and fled to the United States with the help of American soldiers. She returned to Afghanistan five years ago with a master's degree from Columbia University and now works as a government civil service commissioner.

But Ms. Yari, 32, fears that her prominent position — and all her achievements — could be erased if the Taliban return to power now that they have signed a deal that started a U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

For employed women, whose positions barely existed under Taliban rule, the possible return of the extremists is especially alarming. Thousands of Afghan women have moved into jobs and public roles in the 19 years since the American invasion toppled the Taliban and ended strictures that had confined women to their homes and brutally punished them for violations.

The peace deal envisions intra-Afghan negotiations that would return the Taliban to political power in a postwar government. The Taliban's deputy leader has said that "the rights of women granted by Islam" would be respected. But that was the same principle cited during the Taliban's harsh rule.

Just four of the 21 members of the Afghan government's negotiating team are women. One female negotiator, Fawzia Koofi, survived an assassination attempt by unknown gunmen in Kabul on Aug. 14.

Ms. Yari and three other women spoke to The New York Times about their concerns. All said that even as they worry about a Taliban return, they are already struggling to navigate a patriarchal society deeply hostile to equal rights for women.

**Gaisu Yari, government official**



When Ms. Yari saw the first television report of the peace agreement, her thoughts flashed to her father.

The same pro-Taliban commander who had forced her father to agree to Ms. Yari's engagement with his son then demanded Ms. Yari's older sister as a bride, she said. When her father refused, she said, he was kidnapped in 2000 and has not been heard from since.

Her father's fate is a reminder of how far she has come, Ms. Yari said, and how common it still is for Afghan women to be treated as property.

"The environment here in Afghanistan is still not friendly to women, to say the least," she said.

Even in Kabul, the capital, women who do not fully cover their hair or who appear in public with a man who is not a family member are sometimes cursed or attacked by men. Child marriages are common in rural areas. Hundreds of thousands of Afghan girls do not attend school.

Ms. Yari has a prominent job: She reviews human rights and civil rights cases brought by civil service employees in the American-backed government in Kabul. It is a position that would have been inconceivable for a woman under Taliban rule, but it is no insurance against harassment or harsh judgments, Ms. Yari said.

"When I was trying to escape a child marriage, I didn't feel as much stress as I do now," she said. "I still feel pressure at many levels. Do I wear makeup or not? Do I wear my scarf? Do I wear tight or loose clothes?"

Some of her colleagues at the civil service commission adhere to traditional views of a woman's professional role — that she should stay in the background and defer to men, she said.

"I feel like I'm always introduced as an angry woman who came from the West and is trying to implement feminism in a way that is not possible here," she said. "People get upset with me, but I don't care."

Ms. Yari said she was heartened when women were included on the team of Afghans selected March 28 for negotiations with the Taliban. But she said she would watch closely to determine whether the women proved to be more than token representatives.

After she returned to Afghanistan in 2015 with a master's degree, Ms. Yari said she feared retribution from the commander and her spurned fiancé. She said she stayed off social media and refused media interviews until she learned that the two men had been killed by a rival faction.

Now she speaks openly of her journey from arranged child marriage to professional woman.

"I'm a survivor," she said. "I came a long way to get where I am right now. I refuse to go back."

**Hasiba Ebrahimi, actress**



In Afghanistan, one colloquial synonym for actress is prostitute.

"The best way to call someone a bad or immoral woman is to call them an actress," said Hasiba Ebrahimi, who has defied social customs and her own family by working as an actress on TV dramas in Kabul.

Ms. Ebrahimi, 24, said she has been insulted on the street and vilified on social media because of her career. Afghans have posted bold red "X's" over her face on her Facebook page. She has been referred to, dismissively, as "the girl in the film."

"That's the same as saying, you know, the prostitute," she said.

Performing as an actress was unimaginable under the Taliban, who did not allow women to leave their homes unescorted. But nearly two decades after the extremists were removed from power, actresses like Ms. Ebrahimi still struggle to shed images as dissolute women.

Acting can still be a life-threatening pursuit. On Aug. 25, Saba Sahar, 46, a prominent Afghan actress and women's right campaigner who also works as a police gender affairs official, was wounded in an assassination attempt in Kabul that also injured her driver and bodyguard.

Ms. Ebrahimi said it took years for her family to accept her profession. Her mother invented cover stories when neighbors asked about her daughter's frequent absences from home. A cousin threatened to report her to the Taliban if she continued acting.

**Updates on Afghanistan** Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Her family now supports her career, she said. But to quell criticism, Ms. Ebrahimi agreed to an arranged engagement.

“With a man next to you, it solves a lot of problems,” she said. “You are your husband’s property.”

But she chafed under the arrangement and soon broke it off.

As a single woman shooting TV scenes on the street, Ms. Ebrahimi is a target for harassment by passers-by.

“They make fun of us and ask us what we think we’re doing,” she said. “After a while, I start to doubt myself. Sometimes I dislike my own job.”

Now, with a Taliban return possible, Ms. Ebrahimi feared the worst, and said she would consider fleeing the country.

“I don’t want to have to fight the Taliban,” she said. “I already have to fight my family and society. I can’t fight any more battles.”

**Raihana Azad, politician**



When Raihana Azad ran for a seat in the Afghan parliament, she received no support from members of her own family. In fact, they publicly opposed her.

Ms. Azad, a mother of two who had entered an arranged marriage at age 13, had committed a grave sin in the eyes of her family: She had divorced her husband of 10 years. It is rare in Afghanistan for a woman to file for divorce, and a badge of shame for the woman’s family.

## **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.

Ms. Azad, 37, earned her seat in Parliament by winning the most votes in her province in central Afghanistan, rather than being appointed under a quota system that reserves some seats for women.

Some male members of Parliament challenged her victory. A legislator from western Afghanistan called her a whore and a spy for foreigners. He said she had disrespected Islam by divorcing her husband.

For Ms. Azad, the accusations were a reminder that life for women could become even more precarious if the Taliban returned to government. She said the United States, in negotiating the peace deal, had abandoned gains women have made since 2001.

"The Americans don't care about rights for Afghan women," she said. "This deal happened behind closed doors, and Afghan women were not part of it."

Even after 19 years, the Taliban had not changed, she said.

"They raped women — they whipped them on the streets," she said. "They haven't changed. They represent the same evil as before."

And even with the progress Afghan women have made, Ms. Azad said, they endure daily insults and discrimination.

"The society here is against women," she said. "People still don't believe that women can do whatever they want."

As a member of Parliament, Ms. Azad said, she is trying to set an example as a modern woman willing to challenge Afghan culture and tradition.

"I stand against this culture not just for my own sake, but for the next generation of young girls," she said. "I want my granddaughters to feel like they are human beings."

**Nargiss Hurakhsh, journalist**



After Nargiss Hurakhsh, a television journalist, reported on the details of the American-Taliban peace deal, she concluded that the United States had abandoned Afghanistan.

"They are no longer interested in this country," she said. "The Americans want to leave Afghanistan at any cost. And neither the Americans nor the Taliban care about Afghan women anymore."

For the country's small band of professional women, she said, the peace agreement marked the beginning of a period in which they are struggling to maintain and extend their hard-won rights even as they face a Taliban return that would likely end them.

"We are a small group within society," Ms. Hurakhsh said. "We live a different life — we face unique challenges every day."

She said she treasures her ability to report independently, and to interview men in defiance of Afghan customs that discourage male contact with unmarried women. She has achieved something approaching equality with her male colleagues, she said. She wonders how long it would last if the Taliban returned to power.

Ms. Hurakhsh, 23, is one of seven children. She said her mother, who entered an arranged marriage at age 14, was not permitted to attend school during the Taliban era. But Ms. Hurakhsh studied political science at a university and secured her TV reporting job at a time when American and other Western aid donors pressured employers to hire women.

The most painful part of her job, she said, was covering Taliban car bombings and suicide attacks that target civilians. She has visited families of victims and mourned with them. It has been a life-altering experience.

"After every attack, I feel so old," she said. "I am only 23 but sometimes I feel that I have lived for more than 50 years."

Among those killed in an attack two years ago were two journalist colleagues, Ghazi Rassouli and Nawruz Ali. Ms. Hurakhsh said she still grieved for them and visited their graves to mourn. She blames the Taliban but the Islamic State claimed credit for the attack.

She said she still sought vengeance for their deaths.

"I wish one day I could stand right in front of the Taliban and ask them why they killed Ghazi — what had he done?" she said. "I want to see Taliban fighters in pain. I want them executed right in front of me."