

THE GRIP OF EXTREMISM: A CALL TO DEFEND THE RIGHTS OF AFGHAN WOMEN

The world we live in, despite the challenges, is full of beauty, diversity and freedom that every human being is entitled to enjoy. Music, poetry and the freedom of expression among other elements, make life meaningful. These simple joys, including dressing in a way that reflects one's identity are inherent to the human experience, being expressions of our individuality, our creativity and our freedom. It would be a sign of pure hatred and a total disregard for equality and humanity in general to be systematically stripped of these basic human rights, like the women in Afghanistan are, under the Taliban's rule.

The Taliban is a group that emerged in 1994 with the aim of making Afghanistan an Islamic state. They ruled from 1996, until they were overthrown in 2001 with the help of the United States. During this period, they banned women and girls from going to school or studying, working hence denying them economic independence, leaving the house without a male chaperone reducing them to mere shadows, showing their skin in public, accessing healthcare delivered by men (this meant healthcare was virtually inaccessible as women were forbidden from working) and being involved in politics or speaking loudly. Women were essentially invisible in public life. In Kabul for instance, residents were ordered to cover their ground and first floor windows so women inside could not be seen from the street. Men could beat, injure or kill their female family members with impunity, while women who had been raped were accused of moral crimes and could be executed. They had their thumbs cut off for wearing nail varnish, and men who stood up for them were killed.

They returned to power in 2021, and their recent laws by the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Crime still deny and violate women's rights. They are in a 114-page 35-article document with Article 13 relating to women. It says it is mandatory for a woman to veil her body at all times in public and that a face covering is essential to avoid temptation and tempting others. Clothing should not be thin, tight or short. They should veil themselves in front of all male strangers, including Muslims and in front of all non-Muslims to avoid being corrupted. Their voices are deemed too intimate and so should not be heard singing, reciting poems or reading aloud in public. They are forbidden to look at men they are not related to by blood or marriage. Transportation of solo female travellers has also been banned.

This system is a gender apartheid where women are systematically segregated, silenced and subjugated. It is maintained through violence, fear and religious dogma twisted to justify the oppression of women, and a deliberate calculated attack on their existence as equal human beings, creating a society where they are invisible, powerless and devoid of rights. If as a woman I cannot speak in public, then I cannot speak when I am being harmed or violated in public. If my male relative can kill me and go unpunished, then I also have no voice in private. This system threatens a possible erasure of women from the Afghan society, one that could lead to loss of generations of women who could have contributed to their nation's culture, economic and political life. The silence of the international community is less of a political oversight and more of a moral failing that we must urgently address.

To add on to that, misogyny is not unique to Afghanistan. Is it a global issue, perpetuated by cultural, media and institutional forces that teach, normalize and reinforce discrimination against women. X user, @ *QueenEs23524315* says that in the early 90s her manufacturer's son told her that in school, girls were forbidden to look at boys because girls don't have a soul. He was 9 years old. The Taliban's extreme manifestation of this misogyny is an urgent reminder of the dangers posed by systems that value some lives over others based on gender. These systems cannot be dismantled by targeting individuals alone; the entire structure of oppression must be attacked.

Misogyny also manifests in religious extremism through strict and brutal interpretations of religious texts that seek to control and suppress women's rights and freedoms. In the case of the Taliban, these laws that dictate what women can wear, where they can go, how they can speak, and even whether they can receive an education or work, are often justified as being in accordance with their religious beliefs to maintain religious purity but they are deeply rooted in maintaining patriarchal power structures that view women as inferior, subordinate, and in need of control. They serve primarily to subjugate women, stripping them of autonomy, dignity, and basic human rights. This form of religious extremism enshrines misogyny into culture. Women are relegated to a status that is less than that of men, with their primary role being to serve the men in their lives-whether fathers, brothers or husbands. It perpetuates a system where women are seen as property rather than individuals with their own rights and freedoms, because it controls every aspect of their existence.

Afghanistan is a signatory of the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**. Article 2 places an obligation on states to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women. Article 7 requires that women have the right to participate in the political and public life of their country. Article 10 requires states to ensure equal rights for women in education. Article 11 mandates that states ensure women's rights to work and access to the same employment opportunities as men. Article 12 obliges states to ensure that women have access to healthcare services, including family planning. The **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** (Article 18) protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, but allows for limitations where necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the rights and freedoms of others, in this case, women.

As an organisation, we understand that misogyny in religious extremism does not exist alone; it is reinforced by political, cultural and economic factors. Therefore, the fight against religious extremism is also a fight against broader systems of oppression that sustain and are sustained by this extremism. We believe that gender inequality particularly when enforced through violent and oppressive norms often leads to broader social unrest and conflict. Extremist ideologies that oppress women can also oppress other marginalized groups leading to an unstable and unjust society. They rob societies of the contributions that women make to their growth and prosperity.

We therefore insist on a comprehensive global strategy that includes diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions and support for grassroots women's organisations in Afghanistan. The international community must hold the Taliban accountable for their actions and ensure that Afghanistan upholds its international obligations. We must support Afghan women in their fight for freedom and dignity. Their low status and the resultant power imbalances between men and

women are the underlying reasons for harmful and discriminatory practices and physical and sexual abuse against girls and women.

This is not just about Afghanistan. It is about the fight for women's rights worldwide. Misogyny, extremism and gender-based oppression must be confronted head-on with a commitment to restructuring the systems that perpetuate these injustices. We must stand with Afghan women and women around the world who face similar threats to their freedom and inequality, and we must do so now before erasure becomes irreversible. We also call upon international feminist actors to be aware of insights on the part of both Afghan men and women that equate women-centred and gender-targeted programs as a direct challenge and erosion of traditional culture and religion.