

CHALLENGES TO THE PRESENCE OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL PROCESSES (2000-2020)

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Abstract

The study presents the results of current research in the field of political participation of women in Afghanistan in the context of the challenges they faced during their participation in political process in the last twenty years resulting ongoing situation with the transition of regime once again in the hands of the Taliban. In particular, it deals with different strategies how to remove these barriers for the future empowerment of Afghan women in politics. This study, attempted to examine the barriers to women's participation in political processes (presidential elections, parliamentary elections, provincial election, councils' elections, and peace process), which has been analyzed based on qualitative methods utilizing secondary sources.

The result shows that all the basic challenges in the context of women's political participation are most notably in cultural, historical, and ideological problems of Afghanistan. The current conditions of women in Afghanistan contribute to tribal culture and clan-centric life patterns, characterized by patriarchy, and centered on manhood. Other challenges such as economic dependence, gender gaps, security and hundreds of other challenges also exist but political culture is the root to all challenges to Afghan women's political participation. In order to remove barriers to women's political participation, in addition to the support and pressure of the international community, women themselves must first change their views, and then society and the Afghan government must fulfill their obligations to the political position of women.

Keywords: Women, Political Participation, Challenges, Afghanistan, Women Empowerment

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main issues in development is the level of proper use of women's abilities and talents in society. Women's participation in various economic, social, and political spheres is one of the indicators of the country's progress. However, throughout Afghanistan, women and women's activities have always had many challenges, and now, with the rise of power by an extremist group (Taliban), once again the position of women in relation to their participation in the political and social spheres has raised great fears among Afghan's women and human rights activists all over the world.

The growth and development of a society without the growth and participation of half of its members (women) is impossible. Given that women play an important role in a country and in the growth and excellence of culture in society, Afghan society has always faced many ups and downs. For more than 4 decades, Afghanistan has been in a state of war. From the 1979 Soviet invasion to the civil war of the early 1990s, the rise of the Taliban 1996, then the war since the 2001 US invasion, and now once again the fall of the whole government in the hand

of Taliban, there has been no respite from violence. In this war each period of conflict bringing its own set of challenges but Afghan women have suffered the most, for instance the Soviet war resulted in one million civilian deaths and massive internal displacement, leaving women widowed and children orphaned; the Taliban in their first government period restricted every aspect of women's rights and their access to public life; then the recent insecurity which was resulted in schools shutting down and limiting of women's livelihoods and freedom of movement and finally the current uncertain situation. As a result, Afghan women have the most to lose from war.

Following the fall of the Taliban regime and the formation of a new government in Afghanistan in 2001, the political participation of women in the process of governing was one of the priorities of the formation of the political system of the country and the international partners of Afghanistan, (WCLRF, 2017) But the question is here; what happened that after this two decade's achievements and lots of work in this field, today once again Afghan women became deprived of their fundamental rights and waiting for an uncertain future? This come to the reason that women's political participation in Afghanistan was never stable, Afghan women were deprived of their rights and privileges for numerous reasons and women always had this fear that all their gains may be lost again.

In the past two decades, women gradually emerged as a social, political, and economic force and women were in the cabinet of the government, but their voices for gender equality were hardly heard. In 2017 more than 25 percent of Afghanistan's members of parliament were women, but their demands for women's rights were not taken seriously. Within the last years of this two decades, as the security situation in Afghanistan were deteriorating, the declining presence of women in local government, and the lack of protection and protection for working women, were some of the challenges that were plaguing the political participation of women in Afghanistan. (WCLRF, 2017)

Undoubtedly, to achieve a prosperous and stable Afghanistan, a colorful presence of men and women at all levels is a must. As one of the conditions for the realization of peace is the participation of all the strata and the social, and political groups. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the participation of women as one of the groups that suffer the most from war and violence. As its believes that if more women are in positions of power, the world will be more peaceful.

For Afghanistan as a country in war and made up of different ethnic groups and tribes, no government or regime can survive without the participation of all ethnic groups and tribes, or without the participation of women, who make up half the population of a country. During the last 40 years Afghanistan had uncountable ups and downs especially in women's situation. Women in Afghanistan faced a lot of challenges. Though compared to the other regime and time, within the last two decades Afghan women reached a lot of achievements and worked right next to men but still there was lots of challenges for Afghan women to reach these achievements, and this is one of the reasons that their achievements were never stable and today once again women do not have access to their fundamental rights. Therefore, this paper will try to examine the challenges and reasons for the low presence of women in various political processes within the last two decades and then find solutions that provides the ground for the presence of Afghan women in the future.

2. WOMEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Today, the debate on the role of political participation in the development process of countries, and especially the political participation of women in this regard, has attracted the attention of thinkers and politicians. In this regard, all societies strive to take the necessary measures to improve women's political participation and to reduce barriers to women's political participation at all levels. Manifestation of patriarchy is witnessed by lots of societies in the political arena in various forms. Hence, identifying obstacles to women's political participation and seeking to reduce them to lay the groundwork for political development is critical.

It is necessary to recognize the factors influencing women's political activities because they constitute half of the country's population and should be present in politics in proportion to their population, and their participation should accelerate various areas of the development process. Afghanistan as an underdeveloped country, must strengthen political participation in general, and women's political participation in particular, to achieve political development in Afghanistan there are numerous factors that have effect on the forms and degrees of women's political participation, including the level of schooling, the place of residence, and attitudes towards girls and other factors like the type of political structure, economic conditions, educational levels, dominant ideologies and so on. (Meera M. &., 2021)

Political science and sociologist scholars expressed numerous theories about the factors that affect political participation. Among such factors, it is traditional political culture that has influence on the political participation of people in general and women's political participation in particular. Inglehart is one of these theorists who believe that there is a deep link among political participation and political culture. He believes that the relation between democracy, deep-rooted attitude and values is very strong, and that democracy requires encouragement, support, and social inclinations among the general public for progressive development and stability, and that these attitudes and values should be encouraged in public political culture. (Inglehart, 1988)

Another theorist Nikola believes that there is a connection between the type of regime and political system. According to him women participation in politics is directly connected with the type of regime. He argues that; direct democracy strengthens the consensus among different groups with various interests (Teorell, 2006). Leela Devi has focused on the importance of democracy, she believes that participation is a process which all the people see his or her involved in political process and the successful of democracy set up in a community is dependent to the level of participation. She also points out to Swami Vivekananda regarding the women share in politics that says: A nation cannot march forward if women are lifted behind. (Devi, 2017)

One can conclude from the above discussion that political participation is a complex and multi-dimensional concept that is not limited to one species and one level. Political participation as a concept and these theoretical propositions become useful in analyzing the challenges of political participation of women and providing a deep understanding of a society and its political peculiarities, therefore these theoretical frameworks are employed to investigate the interaction and effects of political culture on women's political participation in Afghanistan.

3. PARTICIPATION AND CHALLENGES OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Women in Afghanistan have historically had limited access to political rights. This limitation has varied under different political regimes which compare to the all-time, in the country's newer history, Afghan women have played rather active roles in the political life of Afghanistan. Afghanistan was one of the first countries to ratify the Convention on the Political Rights of Women of 1952, which provides that women shall have all the political rights that are afforded to men, including the right to vote in all elections as well as the right to run for, and to hold public office. (Hellum, 2003)

In Afghanistan for the first-time women formally achieved equality under the 1964 constitution however, these rights were revoked in the 1990s by various interim rulers, such as the Taliban, during the Civil War, especially during the second government, women had very little freedom. since the ouster of the Taliban regime following the 9/11 attacks on the United States, women's rights in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan have gradually improved under the 2004 constitution, which was largely based on 1964 constitution, however, women's rights were still complex, and they had faced lots of challenges, which continues to be of international concern (Azeem, 2018). and these concerns about the future of women in Afghanistan increased when the Taliban regained control of much of Afghanistan in 2021. (Trofimov, 2021)

After 2001, with the arrival of NATO forces in Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban government, the foundations of the system were re-established and a new chapter in women's socio-political participation in the country began. Women, who were oppressed and restricted during the Taliban era, experienced democracy, and a socio-political presence in the post-Taliban era. This new system was based on a democratic government in which all people had equal rights and it could meet the political and social needs of the Afghan people. In the Bonn Agreement, when the issue of women's participation and equitable representation of all ethnic and religious groups in the interim administration and the Loya Jirga (Grand assembly) was raised, it was itself a spark to crystallize the presence and participation of women in political and democratic processes. (Akbari, 2020)

In the new era of democracy in Afghanistan, women were able to have a large presence in government after decades. Women's participation was not summed up in the cabinet; Afghan women played a role in most ministries, commissions, departments, provinces, parliaments, and schools. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was established in 2001 under the auspices of the Bonn Conference under the Afghan Interim Administration. The first Minister of Women's Affairs was Dr. Sima Samar, who served from 2001 to late 2002. After that, Dr. Habiba Sarabi and Dr. Massouda Jalal were the Minister of Women's Affairs. In 2006, Dr. Hassan Banu Ghazanfar was appointed Minister of Women's Affairs. With the formation of the National Unity Government in 2013 and the introduction of a new cabinet, Ms. Delbar Nazari served as Minister of Women's Affairs. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was responsible for implementing the government's political and social policy to ensure and develop the legitimate rights of women in the country and the rule of law in their lives in their field of activity. In addition to the Ministry of Women's Affairs several institutions and associations over the past 19 years had been established to support women's rights. For example, The Afghan Women's Network and the Women's and Children's Rights Research Institute worked on women's rights.

(Akbari, 2020). Participation of 114 women out of 504 delegates for the first time ever in Loya Jirga (Grand assembly) which was convened to consider the new constitution proposal by interim government in December 2003, is regarded as the beginning of women appearance in decision making process after the Taliban. (Azad, 2013)

These cases show a significant increase in women's participation compared to previous years, before 2001, however these opportunities were always accompanied by threats such as the invasion of foreign culture. On the other hand, in order to increase the socio-political share of women in Afghanistan, it is necessary to build trust and educate them, as those who are more confident in their part in political decisions are more likely than others to be involved in politics. Although Afghanistan's policy was based on the active presence of women, it was not yet possible for women to participate in certain social situations. In Afghanistan, there were people at the head of the government who did not allow women to rise to better positions. As a result of the traditional and patriarchal culture of this country, women participation in social spheres was under the influence of their husbands or families. (Ahmadi, 2020)

Thus, before the formation of the new power structure in Afghanistan in 2001, the issue of women's rights was raised and considered from the beginning. This became more serious with the formation and preparation of the constitution but still women had lots of challenges in their participation in electoral and peace process. Women's electoral participation has varied widely since the first polls in 2004, dependent largely on the security situation. In the previous three elections in Afghanistan, at least one or two women were running for the presidency, but in the last round no women dared to try their luck with men to reach the presidential palace. Rising violence since 2005 has reduced women's participation. While there was a 20 percent increase in the number of female provincial council candidates in the August 2009 presidential and provincial council elections, voter turnout among women was reportedly low at 38 percent compared to 44 percent in the previous elections. Voters were deterred by insecurity and threats by the Taliban to kill voters or cut off their noses and ears. The election was also characterized by allegations of widespread fraud and ballot stuffing. Thousands of female votes were misused through fraudulent proxy voting, with female registration grossly inflated in some provinces. Meanwhile female-only polling stations were understaffed, deterring women from voting. (Cortright, 2012)

One of the main obstacles to women's political participation during the last two decades was the lack of adequate security and safety. (Sopko, 2021). Female political leaders, including elected members of parliament and councils, were regularly targeted for assassinations, kidnappings, and terrorist attacks. The Taliban and other armed groups had continued to make public threats against female candidates and voters and female election officials. On the other hand, Afghan society is a patriarchal society. Masculinity has caused everything to find meaning with the focus on men, and even the existence of women finds meaning along with the existence of men. Therefore, women's participation in the elections depended on the permission or participation of men in the elections. If the man of the family allowed women to participate in the elections, women might have participated in the elections. Women's participation occurs in two ways. First, Direct participation of women at the ballot box. Second, Indirect participation of women at the ballot box. In most polling stations in Afghanistan, men voted instead of women. The second participation would occur if men allowed their women to

cast their ballots but did not allow them to vote. And the men themselves voted for them. Therefore, it can be said that one of the serious obstacles is the patriarchal structure of Afghan society. (Meera M. &, 2021)

Religion and tradition are the other obstacle to women's participation in elections. Clerics, religious teachings, mosques, and religious customs prevent women from participating in elections. The patriarchal structure of Afghan society had led to religious teachings being understood and interpreted in favor of men. Masculine interpretation makes the participation of women forbidden by some clerics. For example, in one of the provinces, in a parliamentary election, a cleric issued a fatwa stating that "voting for a female candidate is prohibited in the presence of a male candidate." This fatwa shows that the institution of religion could prevent women from participating in elections. A religious institution with authority in Afghan society could issue a fatwa banning women from voting in elections. The Taliban had repeatedly issued such religious fatwas on women's participation in elections during all elections in last two decades (Meera M. &, 2021). Moreover, according to traditional beliefs, women believe that men are their guardians. Women consider men as rulers and themselves as submissive. This belief prevents women from running in elections without the permission of men. Therefore, the traditional beliefs that govern Afghan society were also one of the serious and fundamental obstacles and challenges to women's participation in elections. (Azad, 2013)

There were several other key trends in electoral violence against Afghan women. Social media is one of them which used to amplify and disseminate attacks against women and their families to national audiences; character assassinations through social platforms were widely used by political opponents to discredit, humiliate or otherwise harm women candidates, and in so doing, destroy a woman candidacy for political office. They used from the two specific tactics include sharing women candidates' private photos - in which they were not covered by a veil online and spreading false statements about the promiscuity of women candidates and their daughters. Moreover, High rates of sexual harassment against women in politics perpetuate the negative perception that women politicians are immoral. This was another electoral violence used against women. Women's lack of financial resources in particular exposes them to sexual abuse by other electoral stakeholders. Women candidates repeatedly cited examples of police, elected officials, party leaders and election administrators demanding sexual favors in exchange for financial or political support. Overall, although the legal framework and political obligations regarding the right to vote and to be elected by men and women were considered equal, but the opportunities that women enjoyed as candidates and voters were far more unequal and limited than the opportunity for men. (Bibler, 2019)

From the other side, while one of the conditions to the realization of peace is participation of all strata, and social, and political groups but unfortunately, in Afghanistan the lack of stabilization of women and their presence in the High Peace Council and peace talks led this trend not to result. From the beginning of peace talks, women in Afghanistan had made valuable strides in pushing for their rights and for their voices to be heard but despite political rhetoric on inclusivity and women's contributions to local-level peacebuilding, women were still excluded from meaningful participation¹ in the country's peace processes and their participation remained very limited. Out of 67 formal and informal talks between 2005 and 2020, only on 15 occasions (22%) were women present. Women's participation remained an

important source of contention for the Taliban, and there was a risk that including women in the intra-Afghan peace process is perceived by the Taliban as conditioning talks from the start. (Kamminga, 2020)

Women's participation in the Afghan peace process within the last two decades faced many problems and challenges. The opposition of the Taliban, the dominance of the Taliban mentality, the existence of the patriarchal ideology of Afghan society, especially among the members of the High Peace Council and the negative views of some of its members towards women are as the main reasons for the low presence of women in the peace process. (WCLRF, 2017)

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In Afghanistan, after two decades of relative security, a half-assed economy and addressing human rights, women's rights, girls' education, and other achievements, once again the fate of women is in jeopardy, and they are waiting for a dark and uncertain future. Today, once again, all the achievements of women are in danger and there is no hope for tomorrow. It does not matter in which job and profession; From deputy ministers, lawyers and senior government officials to women entrepreneurs, business owners and even media workers, everyone is unemployed and frustrated.

After the fall of Kabul to the Taliban on August 15, 2021, Afghanistan retreated terribly. This setback can be seen in all areas but, women, who have always been discriminated against in overt and covert forms due to the existing traditions and patriarchal culture in Afghanistan, have suffered the most. These challenges have dashed the hopes of Afghan women for their future, and women fear losing their 20-year achievements. However, after the fall of the first round of Taliban's rule in 2001, in the aftermath of 9/11, women found themselves somewhat abandoned but the reality is that for the past 20 years, the Taliban have not been the only obstacle to women's social and political participation in Afghanistan for example the electoral behavior of women in Afghanistan in the last two decades was a subordinate behavior and mainly based on the wishes of their husbands or fathers, and it can be said that many Afghan women did not have independent political behavior and political participation. Regarding the constitution and the acceptance of women's rights to participate in political affairs although the right to equality and freedom was guaranteed to women in the new 2001 constitution, but issues related to women's rights remained largely on paper.

If we look only at the context of the constitution, we can say that on paper, the problems of Afghan women in most areas, including political participation, were largely resolved according to the provisions of the Afghan constitution, but in reality, the situation of Afghan women and their position in Afghan political participation has always been with many challenges. Today, with the re-emergence of the Taliban, these challenges are emerging as a solid wall against Afghan women. In many parts of Afghanistan, there is still a tribal system with its own laws that is completely patriarchal and hierarchical and does not provide equal status for women. Political participation, especially by women after the fall of the first round of the Taliban government, was not due to value changes in society, but due to international pressures that today with the transformation of the regime into the hands of the Taliban and in

the absence of international pressure, the patriarchal system has become more powerful and the situation of women in this country is declining again.

The patriarchal mentality, fundamentalist religious thought and traditional political culture have always been among the most important obstacles to women's participation. Today with the re-emergence of the Taliban women fear that the Taliban do not accept Afghan women. A limited number of those at the helm of government may allegorize the admission of women and give women a small share in their government, but many of them, who deal with the people every day, would never listen to their elders because this group has been fought for twenty years with this motive, to get the power and limit Afghan women to the rules they want.

Women's political participation can be increased with the removing of all those barriers and obstacles, they face during their participation. As identifying the challenges to women's political participation and enhancing opportunities for women's political engagement can in turn augment people's political participation, deepen democracy, strengthen political vision, and lead to political development and a sustainable, inclusive society.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The quality and type of political participation of citizens is influenced by various factors such as education, political culture, political awareness, education, media literacy, type of political system, ideological, intellectual, and behavioral contexts. The great power of women, in addition to being a wife-mother, has a great impact on society. Women by carrying out social and cultural activities and interactions, can play an effective role in society. At the same time, the history of Afghanistan shows that, the political participation of women and their activities in the political process has always faced problems and challenges. In the last twenty years after the presence of the international community, holding several rounds of parliamentary and presidential elections, the formation of a new political system in the country and the drafting of a new constitution, although culturally, socially, economically, and politically the status of women in society changed, and it brought many changes regarding women but still the achievements of women remained fragile.

Fundamentalist religious thought and traditional political culture in Afghanistan are the most important barriers to women's political participation. Women are captivated by the patriarchal mentality in many parts of Afghanistan, especially in places where ancient traditions and beliefs are influential. These social relations of the patriarchal system of Afghanistan are an important obstacle to women's political participation. And at the end, it is women who play the most important role in reproducing the patriarchal system and perpetuating the wrong social relations and customs and traditions of the past. Men of tomorrow are raised by women today. In the last 20 years, in many parts of Afghanistan, women did not want to vote for themselves, instead they were asking their husbands and fathers to vote for them. They did not want to vote because they either felt powerless to vote or the tribal custom caused them to have low expectations of the government. And the interesting thing is that in many cases this was done by women and girls themselves. The women themselves perpetuate the wrong thoughts and traditions of the past and instill their mentality in their daughters. In fact, the issue of women is a cultural issue and its solution, along with the enactment of laws and the institutionalization

of women's affairs in law requires cultural work and institutionalizing and stabilizing the presence of women in the minds of people in society.

The biggest challenge facing Afghan women is the lack of security, traditions, patriarchy, and misogyny in the Taliban. Over the past two decades, Afghanistan has made progress in legislation and policy frameworks to ensure that women's rights are met in line with international standards, and that women's political and social participation has increased in some areas. Today, with the Taliban takeover, while Afghan women fear to lose their twenty years gains and return to dark days, it is important to examine their political participation, especially the role of elite women in the new Afghan system. One of the most challenging issues between the Taliban and other groups in Afghanistan is the issue of women and their role in society. The Taliban's attitude towards women is rooted in their traditional and discriminatory beliefs about the status of women, who do not equate them with men in terms of human dignity, and since their inception in the years before 9/11, the Taliban have given no role to women and no plans to give them a share. One of the obstacles to women's active participation in politics is economic factors. It would not be possible to work in politics without financial resources and political experience. Talabani's thinking legally, culturally, socially, and politically reproduces the same superior, inferior characteristics of men and women. The traditional beliefs of the Taliban, by dividing work and leaving housework to women, practically deprive women of the opportunity to participate equally.

Therefore, considering the mission and importance of the role of women in the political future of Afghanistan, serious attention should be paid to the issue of women's empowerment. Empowerment means that people must achieve a level of personal development that allows them to make choices based on their desires. Women should participate in all programs related to them. Their participation should be commensurate with their number in society. Participation in democratic political processes does not mean merely considering the number of women or women candidates, but rather the changes that elected women can make to improve their legal, political, and social status in society.

After the Taliban regained power, the presence of women and their demands are not taken seriously by this group. So, the question is, what will happen to the future of women with the Taliban in power? Will the fragile achievements in the field of women's rights be preserved or not? Hence, there are many concerns among Afghan women. Some of the challenges facing women in the current situation is security, education, and political culture as the most important deterrents to women's participation in political activities. Hence, elite women, the government, the international community, and human rights organizations must do their best to overcome these obstacles. The cooperation of international community in emphasizing the political commitment to ensure women's participation can be an important facilitator. Women's participation in the political process is vital for the transformation of Afghan society, but it will be gradual and slow in the current context.

Therefore, Strategies to overcome the challenges to the greater political participation of women and to encourage their equitable partnership in the development process broadly require paradigm shifts in the policies, processes, institutions, attitudes, values, and culture of society, with an unequivocal commitment and emphasis on freedom, equality, equity and justice for

women, men, and the others in Afghanistan. Some of the definitive steps that need to be taken up as a high priority include the following:

With the Taliban coming to power for the second time, in these dark days when the Taliban group wants to deprive women and girls of education and work, unfortunately the presence of men alongside women is low. Today, violations of women's rights are happening rapidly in all parts of Afghanistan, and not only has domestic support for women diminished, but also there has been no response from the international community, so in the first place Afghan men must stand up for Afghan women and girls. When we talk about equality and justice, men should raise their voices for the rights of women. In the face of this tyranny against women, we must speak out as soon as possible around the world in support of the women and girls of Afghanistan and not let the achievements of women to be lost.

International actors should leverage their influence to push for political support for women-led and inclusive movements in Afghanistan. The international community, feminists, and all women rights defenders should speak out when the voices of more marginalized movements are silenced. These institutions must have a continuous litigation to improve and maintain the position of women in the political future. External pressures can play an important role in this regard. Over time, the Taliban may adjust their policies to some extent in order to attract foreign aid and recognition. International institutions are expected to provide financial and technical assistance in condition to increase and to provide active participation of women in the development process, security, and political participation. It is the humanitarian duty of the international community to help Afghan women who are half of society; Leaving them alone in this difficult time and situation will be a serious risk for women to lose their twenty years gains. Afghanistan's neighbors, who have a significant influence on the Taliban's decisions, need to be involved in increasing the share of women.

Afghan women want the Taliban or any regime that comes to power to preserve the achievements of the previous 20 years in the next government and to work to strengthen and expand the achievements. The Taliban, as the group currently in power, must recognize that women should be included not only at the level of the country's political leadership but in all areas. Afghan women will not allow any regime to sacrifice women and their position under various pretexts. If the Taliban continue preventing women from participating in government, social and administrative spheres, women will try to put pressure on the Taliban government in various ways and force them to accept the presence of women, which will certainly face many difficulties. But if the Taliban do not compromise on women's political participation and human rights issues and follow the same approach as before in 1996, the result will be a big challenge to the new system of the Taliban and will not be accepted by a large segment of society, which is women and women will defend their rights. Violations of human rights and women's rights are likely to lead to a wider civil war in the country, which in turn could lead to the reconstruction of al-Qaeda or the rise of ISIS and even the production and expansion of other terrorist groups in the country.

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