
THE HISTORICAL
DEVELOPMENT OF
WOMEN'S RIGHT
IN AFGHANISTAN

SHE

SUSTAINABLE
HUMANITARIAN
EMPOWERMENT

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S RIGHT IN AFGHANISTAN

Judge Benafsha A.

Research Fellow and Co-Founder, SHE Institute

Roberta Abdanur

Programme Director and Co-Founder, SHE Institute



CONTENTS

Brief Information about Historical
Period of women rights in Afghanistan:

Modern Monarchies (1880-1901)

Modern Monarchies (1901-1919)

The First Era of Change (1919-1929)

Post-Monarchy Period (1930-1970)

The Second Era of Change (1970-1992)

The Third Era of Change (1992-2000)

The Fourth Era of Change (2001-2021)

Now-Return to the Third Era

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S RIGHT IN AFGHANISTAN

BRIEF INFORMATION ABOUT AFGHANISTAN:

Brief Information about Afghanistan:

- Located at the central Asia and Bordered by six countries as shown here.
- Kabul city is the capital of Afghanistan.
- Total population of Afghanistan is 38.93 million.
- Afghanistan is populated by various ethnic, religious and tribal groups.

Some example of ethnics groups in Afghanistan:

- Tajiks
- Pashtuns
- Hazaras
- Uzbeks
- Aimaqs
- Others

The percentage of religions in the Afghanistan:

- 99% Islam (80% Sunni & 19% Shia)
- 1% Buddhist and other



THE MODERN MONARCHIES

Modern Monarchies (1880-1901)

The birth of modern Afghanistan is attributed to Abdur Rahman Khan who ruled from 1880 to 1901. He tried to change some of the customary laws that were detrimental to women's status such as:

- Abolished the custom forcing a woman to marry her deceased husband's next of kin.
- Raised the age of marriage and gave women rights to divorce under specific circumstances.
- In accordance with Islamic tenets, women were given rights to their father's and husband's property

II. Modern Monarchies (1901-1919)

Upon the death of Abdur Rahman, his son Amir Habibullah Khan took over and reigned for 10 years.

- Habibullah continued his father's progressive agenda by putting a ceiling on extravagant marriage expenses that often-caused poverty in many families.
- Habibullah's most important contribution to Afghanistan was the return of Afghan exiles, and specifically that of Mahmud Beg Tarzi around the turn of the century.
- Tarzi was strongly influenced by modern interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence and by the liberties afforded to women.
- Convinced of women's abilities to engage in public professions.
- Tarzi viewed women as people who deserved full citizenship.
- He claimed that educated women were an asset to future generations and concluded that Islam did not deny them equal rights.

THE FIRST ERA OF CHANGE

The First Era of Change (1919-1929)

- After Habibullah his son Amanullah Khan took the power and he full-fledged modernization period of Afghanistan.
- Amanullah was relentless in his attempts to modernize Afghanistan. His modernizing agenda included the liberation of women from tribal cultural norms.
- Amanullah publicly campaigned against the veil, against polygamy, and encouraged education of girls not just in Kabul but also in the countryside.
- Many women from Amanullah's family publicly participated in organizations and went on to become government officials later in life.
- Amanullah tried to consolidate Islam and state policies but faltered when

he tried to impose rapid changes pertaining to women's status.

- The ethnic tribal leaders in the rural regions grew restless and developed coalitions to protest the freedoms women were experiencing in Kabul.
- They also opposed the education of girls, and by the late 1920s forced Amanullah to reverse some of his policies which schools for girls in Kabul and in rural areas were closed down, and women had to revert to wearing the veil.
- Nevertheless, pressures on Amanullah mounted, and in 1929 he was forced to abdicate and leave the country.

The First Era of Change & Post-Monarchy Period (1930-1970)

- Following the exile of Amanullah, a series of rulers introduced conflicting laws regarding the status of women.
- From total abrogation of gender equality laws under Amir Habibullah to Nadir Shah who ousted him. women saw in the 1930s and 1940s a cautious introduction of rights.
- In 1931 Nadir Shah announced the second Constitution.

POST-MONARCHY

Post-Monarchy Period (1950-1970):

- By mid-century, with massive foreign aid and technical assistance from the Soviet Union, Afghanistan embarked on a modernizing journey.
- By the late 1950's, women's issues were once again given some consideration then Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud did not want to repeat the mistake of Amanullah and declared veiling a voluntary option.
- Women were encouraged to contribute to the economy and in the 1940s and 1950s saw women becoming nurses, doctors and teachers.
- In 1964 the third Constitution allowed women to enter elected politics and gave them the right to vote.
- The first woman Minister was in the health department, elected to the Parliament along with three other women.



THE SECOND ERA OF CHANGE

The Second Era of Change (1970-1992)

The second era of intense women's reform occurred in the late 1970s.

- The 1970s saw a rise in women's education, faculty in the universities, and representatives in the Parliament.
- Along with abolition of bride price the age of marriage also were raised. In October 1978 a decree was issued with the explicit intention of ensuring equal rights for women.
- Minimum age of marriage was set at 16 for girls and 18 years for boys.
- The coercion of women into education.
- During this era women were employed in significant numbers in Universities, private corporations, the airlines and as doctors and nurses.
- Based on Hanne, 1990, again, the revolutionary pace of social change caused concern among the mullahs and tribal leaders in the interiors that resulted in massive backlash from the rural population.



THE THIRD ERA OF CHANGE

The Third Era of Change (1992-2000)

In 1989, when the Soviets left Afghanistan, the country was in disarray and became the site for civil war with the government transfer of power in 1992-1996. That year the Mujahideen took over Kabul and declared Afghanistan an Islamic state.

- According to the US Department of State (1995), in 1992 women were increasingly precluded from public service.
- In conservative areas in 1994, many women appear in public only if dressed in a complete head-to-toe garment with a mesh covered opening for their eyes.
- Women were forced to wear the burqa and fewer women were visible on television and in professional jobs.

Later in 1996, the Taliban took the power from Mujahideen

The Taliban made sweeping changes in the social order and used the radio to broadcast its new laws (televisions were banned).

- They listed the changes men and women needed to make to conform to the new fundamentalist regime.
- For women, this meant no longer being able to go outside except to buy food.
- If women leaved home, they had to be accompanied by a *mahram* (male relative).
- Women had to wear the burqa and no makeup or fancy shoes.
- White shoes were forbidden since that was the color of the Taliban flag.
- Women and girls could not go to school neither visit male doctors.

Human rights groups have described the living conditions of Afghan women during the Taliban era as one of the worst in the world.

THE FOURTH ERA OF CHANGE

The Fourth Era of Change (2001-2021)

In September 2001, the United States, led by an international coalition, entered Afghanistan, by the end of 2001, the Afghan government was fallen to the new government. Many schools in the country reopened by the following year.

- In 2003, the rights of women and girls to education were recognized based on a new law.
- In the field of women's employment, the principle of equality between men and women was adopted in the new constitution of Afghanistan.
- For the first time, women won 33% of the seats in parliament,
- The number of female judges reached 270
- Women were employed in the cabinet and hired as diplomats to foreign countries.



SUMMARY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS



The following is a brief look at the social and political rights of Afghan women in the constitution:

Equality and the denial of discrimination: Afghan citizens had equal rights and duties.

The right to education: The government was obliged to design and implement effective programs in order to create balance and development of education for women.

Citizenship: Equality of citizenship and citizenship for men and women.

Right to work and employment: Women were equal to men regarding employments right to have all job benefits.

Right to health: Women, like men, had the right to have all the benefits and health services of the country in a fair and equal manner.

Marriage age: The minimum age for marriage to girls was between 15 – 16 with the permission of the father in the relevant courts. After the age 18, a girl could have the right to get married legally.

The right to participate in political and managerial affairs: Women could also be nominated and elected at the highest political-managerial level of the country even at the presidency level.

Right to Judge: The conditions for membership in the Supreme Court, which is the highest pillar of the judiciary, and the fact that women could judge.

Economic law: No person was prohibited from acquiring or possessing property; women could take the benefits of their own rights accordingly.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Afghanistan may be the only country in the world where during the last century kings and politicians have been made and undone by struggles relating to women's status.

The honor of the family, the tribe, and ultimately the nation is invested in women. Moghadam (1997) accurately points out that, the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan has been historically constrained by two aspects:

- a) The patriarchal nature of gender and social relations deeply embedded in traditional communities.
- b) The existence of a weak central state, that has been unable to implement modernizing programs and goals in the face of tribal feudalism.

REFERENCES

Ahmed-Ghosh, Huma (2003). A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4(3), 1-14.

Rostami-Povey, E., & Poya, M. (2007). *Afghan women: Identity and invasion*. Zed Books.

Sarvarzade, S., & Wotipka, C. M. (2017). The rise, removal, and return of women: Gender representations in primary-level textbooks in Afghanistan, 1980–2010.

Comparative Education, 53(4), 578-599.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S RIGHT IN AFGHANISTAN



SHE SUSTAINABLE
HUMANITARIAN
EMPOWERMENT

SHE

S U S T A I N A B L E
H U M A N I T A R I A N
E M P O W E R M E N T
