

# Women in Afghanistan: A Tumultuous Twentieth Century

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*“Anytime there is a revolution in our country, it is bad luck for the women.”*

- King Amanullah’s sister<sup>1</sup>

A woman shrouded in a blue burqa, her face seen only vaguely through mesh netting: it is an image that the entire world has come to recognize as a symbol of the oppression of women in Afghanistan. After September 11, 2001, when attention focused on Osama bin Ladin, the leader of the fundamentalist Islamic group Al Qaeda in Afghanistan upon the invitation of the Taliban rulers, the world suddenly turned its eyes towards Afghan women. To the western world, it seemed as though these women had been hidden behind the veil, silent and subjugated, forever. History tells another story, however. Afghanistan immersed in the first decades of the twentieth century as a progressively modern state with a leader dedicated to the advancement of women. In the middle decades women began to gain ground in women’s rights with small, but significant, steps. However, internal reactionary forces and external forces created turmoil that all but destroyed Afghanistan. Women’s rights or lack thereof, became a key issue in the region, often used as a marker for various factions’ political platforms rather than a cause in and of itself. Geopolitical motives, religious fundamentalism, traditional patriarchal structures hinged on economics and honor, ethnic and tribal conflict all contributed to the history of women’s rights in the region—issues that are still not resolved today. This paper highlights the progress of women’s rights in Afghanistan and its impediments from 1919 to the emergence of the Taliban in the mid-1990s.

## A Brief Overview of Afghanistan

Afghanistan is in a region that is always at the center of political upheaval. The country was in fact an arbitrary creation of British colonialism. In ancient times, Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan both passed through and conquered its people as part of their conquests. Its key geographic location has made it an area of intense interest first to Great Britain, Persia, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire, and later to the United States, the Soviet Union, Iran, and Pakistan. During the days of colonialism, Afghanistan was valued more for its strategic location than its resources – and as a result, little infrastructure was built, as with other British colonies. Afghanistan’s borders were arbitrarily drawn up by British civil servants to coincide with current geopolitical needs. Despite the various ethnic and tribal groups suddenly finding themselves grouped together, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the people of Afghanistan began to conceive of themselves as a nation and desire their own sovereignty. After a series of wars with the British, Afghanistan was able to claim its own independence in 1919 under Amanullah Khan.

Islam serves as a unifying force in Afghanistan society. Afghan law, both local and national, is historically based on the *Shari’a*, or Islamic law. Reactionaries and fundamentalists interpret Islamic law as a means of subjugating women, though in reality it is patriarchy, not Islam that dictates the inequality between men and women.

The patriarchal structure of Afghan society is vital to understanding the antagonism toward women’s rights in the region. It is tied to honor and economics. Families consist of the eldest male heading over a large extended family that includes cousins and kinship ties through marriages, which are always arranged. A man’s honor is hinged on his control over his property. Women are considered property, and so control over a woman, particularly her sexual propriety, is crucial. The segregation of women is a primary way of enforcing this. Women gain honor primarily through

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1. Deborah Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 184.

the bearing of sons. In terms of economics, women are an asset. They contribute to a large portion of the household work and bring high bride prices, which are a firmly engrained tradition in Afghan society. Thus for women to go outside the family sphere for education, employment, or for other causes not only causes dishonor to her family, but is also viewed as economically crippling. These patriarchal practices are viewed as Islamic practices, even though they are not stipulated in the *Qur'an*.

When looking at women's rights in Afghanistan, one has to distinguish between urban and rural, as well as the upper, middle, and lower class. About 85% of the population is rural. Most are extremely poor, making their living as small farmers. They are disconnected with urban centers. Because Afghanistan's infrastructure is extremely weak, the government's political power was guaranteed only in Kabul and other major cities, dependant upon the loyalty of tribal and religious leaders. In the early twentieth century, authority was in the hands of powerful tribal leaders and local law was dictated by them. During the Cold War the United States and the Soviet Union viewed the country as both a strategic and ideological battleground. They began investing in building an infrastructure, though much of it has been damaged by civil war. Kabul, however, was a modern city by the 1950s, with a minority of highly educated middle and upper class women. The idea of women's rights was much more accepted and understood among these urban elite, and measures in regarding women's equality were spearheaded by them.

### The Progressive King

In 1919, after the third Anglo-Afghan war, Amanullah Khan ousted the British and claimed independence for Afghanistan. He was concerned with making Afghanistan an independent and modern country, and like most other countries seeking to combat westernization, women's status in society became a vital issue. He introduced reforms in women's rights that were drastically different from the status quo. The targeted issues remained important through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1923, he proposed a new constitution that included women's suffrage. Even his contemporaries, the modernizers of Turkey and Egypt, did not propose such a measure.<sup>2</sup> Concerned with education, he sought to create a class of modern intellectuals. He opened many secular schools and sent many students to study abroad in Europe. Women, as well as men, benefited from these educational programs. In addition, he also sought to curb polygamy and prohibit the bride price.<sup>3</sup>

His wife, Queen Saroya, was also very progressive and advocated women's rights as a means to a new and modern Afghanistan. She and other female members of the royal family founded the Afghan Women's Association in their homes, which later grew considerably in importance. It had its home base in Kabul, and satellite offices throughout Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> In a symbolic gesture, she stood in public and tore the veil from her face, shocking the conservative mullahs.<sup>5</sup> King Amanullah then declared the veil was voluntary.

Religious and tribal leaders considered his reforms un-Islamic, a threat to their power, and an embarrassment to Afghanistan. The newly centralized government imposed measures that took away the autonomy these leaders had historically enjoyed. Specifically, these leaders wanted to retain polygenic practices and bride prices, and they were opposed to education for girls.<sup>6</sup> Because Amanullah had not built up a strong army, these reactionaries were able to easily oust him in 1929. Nine months later Mohammed Nadir Shah came to power.

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2. Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, (London: Zed Books, 1986), 71.
  3. Valentine M. Moghadam, "Revolution, Religion, and Gender Politics: Iran and Afghanistan Compared," *Journal of Women's History* 10, no. 4 (1999): 177.
  4. Nahid Massoud, interview by Diana Trembly, audio recording, 6 December 2003.
  5. Asta Oleson, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*, (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1995), 145.
  6. Moghadam, 177, citing Vartan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969).

## Conservative Changes

King Amanullah's overthrow set the tone for further reforms in the region; it was to be relatively gradual. The exile of the king was caused by his intense "symbolic secularization" of Afghanistan. To negate this secularization, Nadir Shah reversed many reforms regarding girls' schools, polygamy, veiling, and other progressive reforms.<sup>7</sup> In addition, other civil rights such as freedom of the press or the right to organize political parties were heavily restricted until the redrafting of the Constitution in 1964. After Nadir Shah's assassination, his nineteen year old son Mohammed Zahir Shah (1933 – 1973) took power. His prime minister, Mohammad Daoud, overthrew the king in 1973 while he was on vacation in Italy and proclaimed himself president. Daoud showed interest in increasing women's education, employment, and civil rights, as well as hastening Afghanistan's modernization. During these years, Afghanistan's political relationship with the Soviet Union and the United States was dominated by Cold War policy, which meant that it benefited inasmuch as it was regarded as strategically important. Its relationship with Pakistan, meanwhile, grew increasingly troubled, which had ramifications during the civil war. In April 1978, Daoud was assassinated by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, a Communist party that had formed in 1965 after the new Constitution allowed limited organization of political parties.<sup>8</sup> This *coup d'état* would change the course of Afghan history, including women's history.

There was not been a large organized women's movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but various smaller movements impacted Afghan society. The Afghan Women's Association grew to be the largest and most influential women's organization, with various centers around Afghanistan. This organization provided health care, a literacy program, vocational training, a day care center, and even a movie theater that showed educational videos to young new mothers regarding proper childcare. The organization also took women's handicrafts, which they would sell and then reimburse the women to give them some degree of financial independence. Other grassroots organizations also formed in Kabul and urban areas to promote education and health care issues among poor and rural women. At various times women were able to organize protests regarding specific issues.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, students in Kabul began to organize themselves into political and social parties in protest of the status quo. Women played a part in these student organizations and many ended up joining the Communist party, which benefited them during the years of Soviet occupation. The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan formed under communist principles during these years, though they vigorously opposed the occupation.

In rural areas, there was not a woman's movement, for several basic reasons. First, women were traditionally isolated from outside society and thus had little access to new ideas such as women's rights. Fathers and husbands often sought to quell any household rebellions by secluding women and keeping them dependant upon men for survival. Thus, challenging the traditional patriarchal structure upon which their livelihoods were based made little sense for most women. In addition, the lack of infrastructure meant that telephones, roads, telegraphs, and other means of communication and transportation were simply not available. Few women outside the cities were literate during these years, making even basic communication over distances difficult.

Women, starting in the 1950s and continuing into the 60s and 70s, began to take advantage of the political opportunities slowly opening up to them. Often women were selected to serve in diplomatic positions, such as in 1958, when Afghanistan sent their first woman delegate to the United Nations.<sup>9</sup> The new Constitution of 1964 allowed women to vote. The first elected parliament, in 1964, had four women out of its 216 members, a mere 1.85 percent, but it was a

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7. Oleson, 180.

8. Moghadam, 177

9. Ellis, xii.

start. By 1977, the parliament was composed of over 15% women.<sup>10</sup> It was created with women delegates on the Loya Jirga. The Loya Jirga (Grand Council) is a highly respected council in Afghan society, consisting of notables from various backgrounds who make important decisions regarding legislature, foreign policy, and other key administrative issues. One woman objected to the draft of the Constitution because she wanted women's rights stated explicitly. However, the committee disagreed with her objection, saying "Afghan" stood for both men and women, not merely men, upon which the woman withdrew the objection.<sup>11</sup> While equality in the eyes of the law between the sexes was theoretically included, it was not actually applied.

Promoting literacy in rural areas in the 60s and 70s became a primary goal of reformers, despite its difficulty to implement. Education has never been very strong in Afghanistan, even for males: in 1967 it was estimated that the literacy rate was around only 10 percent.<sup>12</sup> In 1931, the Constitution made education mandatory for all children.<sup>13</sup> This had two implications: children would receive some secular education, as opposed to purely Islamic religious instruction, and girls were legally included in this plan. Yet, this was hindered by the fact that rural areas often had no schools close by and if they did, fathers did not want their daughters attending. In the fifties more serious efforts began to be made in the way of education as more schools were constructed in these areas with women teaching and the Afghan Women's Organization encouraging education.

It was in the 1960s that the Women's Democratic Organization (WDO) began to form as grassroots women's organization with literacy as its primary goal. Later it would come under the wing of the Communist government and many of its members would become disenchanted with the forced literacy programs implemented. Fahima Vorgetts, a women's rights activist for Afghan women remembers:

We worked in the community, trying to persuade women and their fathers and husbands that everybody has the right to education. We quoted verses from the Qur'an that praise the value of reading scripture and allude to the importance of education for both sexes. This approach was effective. Many previously apprehensive men were willing to allow their wives and daughters to be educated, and women in turn were eager to learn.<sup>14</sup>

WDO effectively used Islam to support literacy among girls, as opposed to suppressing Islam while supporting literacy among girls. Rural religious families were often willing to accept women's education as long as they did not feel it contradicted with their religious beliefs. It would be the later association of suppressed religion along with forced literacy that helped create such an aversion to forced literacy programs.

For those in Kabul and other urban centers, access to primary education was easier and more accepted, with the ultimate goal of higher education. Women benefited from the establishment of Kabul University, taking advantage of their legal right in 1959 to learn alongside Afghan men.<sup>15</sup> Women studied engineering alongside their male counterparts at Kabul University in 1965. By 1979, 60% of the teachers at Kabul University and 50% of the students were women.<sup>16</sup>

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10. Arline Lederman, "The Zan of Afghanistan: A 35-Year Perspective on Women in Afghanistan," *Women for Afghan Women*. Mehta, Sunita, ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 47.

11. *Ibid.*, 48.

12. Oleson, 193.

13. *Ibid.*, 181.

14. Fahima Vorgetts, "A Vision of Justice, Equality, and Peace," *Women for Afghan Women*, 94.

15. Ellis, xvii, citing Edward Giradet and Jonathan Walker, *Essential Field Guides to Humanitarian and Conflict Zones: Afghanistan*, (London: Paul and Co, 1998), 55.

16. *Women for Afghan Women*, 24 citing "What are the conditions of women in Afghanistan, and how do they view the U.S. military campaign and the possible political options in Afghanistan?," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 11 November 2001, <[http://www.fpif.org/faq/0111afghwomen\\_body.html](http://www.fpif.org/faq/0111afghwomen_body.html)> (December 2003).

The practice of sending Afghans abroad to study higher education was first widely implemented by King Amanullah, and continued with subsequent kings. This practice benefited Afghanistan immensely. Afghanistan was the leading nation of students who returned home after studying abroad.<sup>17</sup> In 1968 it was suggested by some members of the Kabul University board that women be excluded from studying abroad, which resulted in hundreds of women organizing a protest against such a measure.<sup>18</sup> Nahid Massoud, today a nurse in Southern California and member of Human Rights Watch, was part of a small highly selective program, funded by the U.S. in 1977 and supported by President Daoud, to send Afghan women abroad to the American University in Beirut to study the field of nursing. The goal was to have the women return to Kabul University to establish a bachelor's program of nursing. This was a major step in trying to revolutionize health care in Afghanistan and recognizing the importance of women's involvement in the field of health care. However, due to the political unrest in both Lebanon and then Afghanistan that prevented the students from returning, the goal was never accomplished.

From the 1950s onward, women increasingly entered the workforce. The vast majority of educated women sought employment, and various fields were opening up to them. In 1959 women first became flight attendants for Ariana Airlines, where they worked unveiled. Before the civil war, statistics showed that 70% of schoolteachers, 50% of civilian government workers, and 40% of healthcare workers were women. Rural women, however, rarely were employed outside the home. As previously noted, the Afghan Women's Organization set up a program in which poor women could bring their handicrafts in to be sold, for which they were then reimbursed. This granted them at least some economic independence, but the fact remained that they had limited opportunities compared to women in the cities.

Though the burqa is a fixation of Western observers, education and employment were issues that Afghan women themselves were far more concerned with than banishing the practice of veiling. In 1959, the unveiling of women came about from the highest level of government, in a dramatic moment in history designed to deliver a strong message to the reactionary mullahs:

At the celebration of Jashn in 1959, Prime Minister Daoud, other members of the royal family, the cabinet and high-ranking officers appeared at the celebrations, without any prior announcement, with their wives and daughters unveiled. In response, a delegation of religious leaders had an audience with Daoud Khan in which they accused him of being un-Islamic and introducing infidel ways into Afghanistan. The Prime Minister informed the delegation that veiling was going to be a voluntary matter and if they could find incontrovertible justification for purdah and the veil in Islamic Law, he would be the very first to reimpose purdah on his womenfolk. Daoud Khan was on the theologically firm ground here as the Qur'an, hadith, and Hanafi code do not specifically prescribe the veil but rather decency in dress and behavior. The mullahs did not take up the challenge and the public agitation which followed was quelled immediately with imprisonment of the leaders.<sup>19</sup>

The symbolic act of prominent government official's wives appearing unveiled, with the subsequent indignation by religious leaders, demonstrates the power the highest levels of government wielded in urban Afghanistan to influence women's issues by the end of the 1950s. While this moment echoes the move of King Abdullah's wife when she publicly tore off her veil, it met with more success than the first act. The prime minister was in a much more politically stable position to demand change and challenge religious leaders and then punish those who agitated

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17. Lederman, *Women for Afghan Women*, 53.

18. Ellis, xvii, citing Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 651.

19. Oleson, 195

against his actions than Abdullah. By this time, conservative religious forces were not necessarily an obstruction to women's issues, provided that the national government supported it.

By the sixties, accounts of women visiting Afghan reveal that women in the cities did not wear the burqa, but brightly colored headscarves in public. Nahid Massoud recalls that she never wore the burqa in the 60s and 70s, though she did cover her hair when she entered the mosque or went to religious ceremonies. Again, in rural areas, these reforms had little effect.

Marriage reforms did take place among the educated urban class during this time, but rural practices remained largely untouched. Arranged marriage was the rule, polygamy was a common practice, and girls were frequently married at the age of thirteen or fourteen. The urban elite of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, rarely practiced polygamy, and marriage mates were only suggested rather than imposed upon women. Dating and divorce were not options for any Afghan woman. The bride price is a transaction that occurs before marriage can take place, often the most expensive transaction that families enter into. A woman has economic value, so families expect compensation for their loss. The bride's family, however, pays for the festivities leading up to the marriage. The Marriage Law of 1934 specifically disapproved of and called for limitations on the high bride prices, lavish gifts and celebrations, which were banned in the Marriage Laws of 1921 and 1924.<sup>20</sup> This was a futile attempt to keep families from accruing major debt. The tradition of expensive weddings, however, is not divided among class lines; Ms. Massoud tells how even in the United States affluent Afghan families will spend an enormous amount of money on weddings.

In 1972, Afghanistan crowned its first and last Miss Afghanistan. The pageant was a deliberate attempt to help modernize Afghanistan and it also served to promote the social program of literacy. Zohra Yusuf Daoud, the daughter to Afghanistan's surgeon general, recalls:

As the winner, I was afforded the opportunity to travel to big cities like Herat, Mazaar-e-Sharif, and Kandahar to fulfill my responsibility as Miss Afghanistan: to promote the county's literacy program in areas where there was little encouragement to get an education...I witnessed the few things that would change me the most as a young woman...I learned that there were places in Afghanistan where men and women did not stand on equal ground...a stark contrast to my own experience. In Kabul, I had taken equality between men and women for granted with respect to religion, culture, and law."<sup>21</sup>

Zohra Yusuf Daoud was representative of many of the young upper-class urban women of Afghanistan during this time period. She enjoyed a life of relative equality among men, with little or no knowledge of the status of women outside of major cities such as Kabul. There was limited possibility of organized aid by urban women to rural women in terms of issues of status and rights simply because urban women were unaware of the issues that rural women faced.

### **Political Upheaval and National Devastation**

When the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) took power in 1977, it began what would be known as the Saur Revolution. The PDPA immediately instituted a number of reforms with a communist agenda. A year later, groups throughout Afghanistan, who would become known collectively as the Mujahideen, began organizing militarily with the intent of removing the new government from power. The U.S., Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, and Pakistan supported the Mujahideen for various reasons, but primarily the U.S. and Pakistan did so because of their aversion to a Communist government in power. The United States and other countries provided foreign aid and weapons, while Pakistan allowed the Mujahideen to base themselves in its country and set up refugee camps. In the meantime, factionalism broke out in the PDPA and in

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20. Ibid., 182

21. Zohra Yusuf Daoud, "Miss Afghanistan: A Story of a Nation." *Women for Afghan Women*, 104-105.

September of 1979, President Taraki was killed by his top aid, Hafizullah Amin, then took power. In response to the Afghan threat to the PDPA and increasing factionalism, Soviet forces entered Afghanistan in December of 1979.<sup>22</sup> Though there were a number of Afghans who welcomed the Russians and their ideology, the majority of Afghans sought to have them and the PDPA removed. The subsequent fighting that occurred was extremely complex and outside the scope of this paper; warlords fought amongst each other and against the occupation, with loyalties changing daily, while foreign powers played politics in an attempt to gain the upper hand in the region.

The Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan is often likened to the United States' Vietnam. When the Soviet forces finally pulled out in 1989, Afghanistan was in ruins and in a power vacuum—allowing fundamentalist warlords to take power and further devastate the country. Recently elected president, Sayid Mohammad Najibullah, remained at the head of a government that had essentially ceased to function. Afghanistan was ruled by the Mujahideen warlords.

During the 1980s women in Kabul took advantage of the freedom brought by the Soviet occupation, particularly those in the Communist party. Women became active in the government, with seven female members in Parliament by 1989 and a greater number of women on the Loya Jirga. Women also participated in various organizations committed to a range of goals, such as the Council of Trade Unions; Democratic Youth Organization; the Afghan Women's Council; the Afghan Red Crescent Society; the Peace, Solidarity; and the Kabul Women's Club. Several prominent women emerged at this time, such as Dr. Soheila, who was not only the chief surgeon at the military hospital, but held the rank of general as well. Valentine M. Moghadam describes the changes she witnessed when in Kabul in early 1989, in which women were employed in almost every occupation, from news anchor to policewoman to veterinarian without gender segregation.<sup>23</sup>

One of the PDPA's aspirations was to reform marriage practices in rural areas, which the former government had not been able to do. The government issued Decree No. 7, which included a limit on the bride price, a ban on forced marriage or marriage by deception, and a minimum marriage age of sixteen for women and eighteen for men.<sup>24</sup> In addition, family courts, generally headed by female judges, enabled women to seek a divorce, where issues such as alimony, child custody, and child support were addressed.<sup>25</sup> This all served to threaten both the patriarchal and economic structure, which revolved around such practices.

No reform, however, caused as much conflict as the literacy program. The new government's intense literacy program, led by the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW) sparked much of the early agitation of the civil war. By August of 1979, 600 new schools had been established through the program, but the government had trouble with attendance. The PDPA attempted to enforce it, sometimes through physical force. This inflamed animosity. The aversion to the program so intense that in 1978 refugees entered Pakistan citing the mandatory program as their reason for seeking asylum.<sup>26</sup> The forced implementation of such a program created future hostilities toward women's education both in Afghanistan and in the refugee camps. Opposition to such programs, Asta Oleson explains, came from a reactionary tendency:

Whether justified or not, the equation of the existing social order with Islamic values led with inevitable logic to the equally unfounded assumption or claim that the enemy represented everything anti-Islamic...the enemy was represented as embodying all kinds of godlessness. The struggle was thus transformed from the political level to become a

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22. Moghadam, 179.

23. *Ibid.*, 181

24. *Ibid.*, 178.

25. *Ibid.*, 179.

26. *Ibid.*

struggle between Good and Evil. The same pattern appeared in the anti-Amanullah campaign in 1928 – 1929.<sup>27</sup>

This type of reactionary resistance has posed the most threat to women's rights in the region.

Women suffered greatly at the hands of the Soviet Union, the Communist government, and the warlords. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch documented the abuses of the government against its people, which included imprisonment in deplorable conditions, torture, and sexual assault. The planting of land mines by the government led to numerous civilians wounded and dead and many of these mines still remain today.

During the civil war, a women's group emerged committed to women's equality and the end of the Soviet occupation: the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (RAWA). In 1977, Meena, a health care worker and the daughter of an architect and a mother who was illiterate, founded RAWA. The original goal of RAWA was women's equality. Information about the organization's work was provided through its bilingual magazine, *Payam-e-Zan* (Woman's Message). However, when the Soviets entered Afghanistan, RAWA became one of the leaders of the underground resistance movement, though it was without the blessings of the Mujahideen. RAWA was a Maoist organization ideologically opposed to fundamentalist Islam, and perceived as a threat. Meena, while in Pakistan establishing schools and hospitals in the refugee camps, was assassinated by Islamic fundamentalists on February 4, 1987 in Quetta, Pakistan.

RAWA continued to fight for Afghan women's rights, both underground in Afghanistan and with caution in the refugee camps in Pakistan, which it has continued. RAWA played a significant role for women during these years. Meena was invited by the French government in 1981 to represent the Afghan resistance movement and also met with several other European dignitaries in her efforts, helping to create awareness about the Afghan political situation.<sup>28</sup> According to their website, the organization distributed leaflets, staged demonstrations, recruited for an underground movement, and set up schools and hospitals (namely Malalai Hospital in 1986) in the refugee camps. In response to such activities, "a number of our activists were arrested in Kabul underwent horrible tortures and some of them languished for about eight years in the notorious prisons."<sup>29</sup> On December 7, 1988 they held a demonstration in Rawalpindi decrying the "reactionary fanatics who are savagely suppressing our grieved people."<sup>30</sup> Other demonstrations were often canceled due to threats, however, and the leaders often went into hiding because they could not count on protection from the Pakistan police.

It is unclear to what extent women in Afghanistan participated in the resistance, since the Mujahideen did not look favorably on women's participation and went so far as to assault women they considered deviant. Yet almost every Afghan family was involved in the civil war in one way or another, and women seem to have had some part in aiding the efforts of what were then known as the freedom fighters. For example, in rural villages, sheltering local fighters from the government was a common practice. According to one report, a few women even served as assassins; one woman called Fadia supposedly killed fifteen men, though she was captured.<sup>31</sup> This account, however, is not backed by any other accounts. Women were able to articulate their political stance more freely in Kabul where the Mujahideen had not yet established any power. Numerous women were engaged in protest of the Soviet Union throughout these years—most notably the 1980 killing of fifty high-school students, thirty of whom were girls, during a protest.<sup>32</sup>

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27. Oleson, 279.

28. *Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)*, December 2003, <<http://rawa.fancymarketing.net/index.html>> (December 2003).

29. *Ibid.*

30. Moghadam, 184.

31. Ellis, 8 citing *Afghan Information Center Bulletin*, no 57, December 1985, 10.

32. *Ibid.*

Afghan's civil war and the USSR's subsequent involvement first created the refugee problem that still exists. Refugees of this war went to USSR, Iran, and mostly to Pakistan to escape the turmoil in their country. The exodus of Afghans began in 1979—by the end of the year there were 600,000 refugees, but this was a petty number compared to the 3.7 million refugees in 2002.<sup>33</sup> During the civil war, conditions were unfavorable to women because the Mujahideen were in charge of the camps. In the prisons and refugee camps, they were subjected to inadequate living conditions. The threat of assault, particularly sexual assault, was constant. In 1988 in Peshawar, Pakistan, 104,600 boys and 7,800 girls in the camps were enrolled in school. Women were allowed medical aid only by female health workers, and widows were secluded to their own camps.<sup>34</sup> RAWA and the Afghan's Women Council, however, were able to establish themselves in the camp and create a number of improvements that otherwise would not have been possible.

### A New Chaos

After the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989, President Najibullah remained in power, but by April 1992 the government was taken over by the Mujahideen who established the new Islamic state of Afghanistan. Burhanuddin Rabbani became president of a decentralized government essentially ruled by the various factions of the Mujahideen.<sup>35</sup> From 1975 onwards, these groups had been actively fighting each other, and then the Soviet Union, for power, but at this time they were free to terrorize Afghanistan with no repercussions. The new government had little control over the country or even Kabul, and the fighting not only continued, but grew worse.

The United States faces a great deal of blame for its role in putting reactionary forces into power. The Cold War dictated all foreign policy, so keeping Communism out of Afghanistan became the top objective at the expense of all other considerations. Women rights activists across the globe were vocal in their opposition to the conflict in the region, but they were a decided minority. Gloria Steinem writes of the protests she and other women engaged in 1980 regarding U.S. support for the Mujahideen, "American feminists were ignored, and the United States finally gave a staggering \$3 billion in support of religious extremists and gender apartheid."<sup>36</sup>

In the capital and other cities controlled by the newly established state, the initial impositions on women's freedoms were conservative in nature, but they soon became increasingly severe. Initially, women were able to continue to work and go to school, though they were required to cover their hair when out in public. A year later the Supreme Court ruled that they should be entirely veiled whenever they left their houses.<sup>37</sup> This same year it was also deemed unsuitable for women to learn anything other than Islamic principles in their education, and then to be taught only by male relatives.<sup>38</sup> Educated working women were placed on the periphery of society, viewed as deviant for their participation in what was deemed un-Islamic behavior. As lawlessness became more prevalent in Kabul and other cities, women began to fear leaving their home, particularly for fear of getting hit by stray gunfire or poor accuracy missiles. Education and employment practically cease to exist as priorities, and survival became the main issue. Amnesty International has estimated that 25,000 people died between 1992 and 1996 in the fighting that occurred, the vast majority in Kabul.

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33. RAWA website citing then UN Coordinator for Afghanistan Eric De Mul. Full report available online <<http://rawa.fancymarketing.net/kill505.htm>>

34. Moghadam, 181, quoting Henry Kamm, "Afghan Refugee Women Suffering from Isolation under Islamic Custom," *New York Times*, 27 March 1988, A1.

35. *Ibid.*, 183.

36. Gloria Steinem, "The Kaleidoscope of Memory." *Women for Afghan Women*, 66.

37. Ellis, xix.

38. *Ibid.*, 42.

Prior to the Soviet withdrawal, these same men were portrayed by the western media as “freedom fighters,” a romantic image of men fighting for their traditions against the Communist threat. It was primarily after 1989 when the atrocities these warlords and their men committed were exposed. Many of the atrocities the Mujahideen committed were related to century-old ethnic and tribal disputes and women suffered the consequences due to the fact that they were viewed as property. Under the terrorism of the Mujahideen, women were subjected to torture, rape, kidnapping, imprisonment, and starvation. Abducted women were generally raped, forced into marriage, sold into prostitution, held for ransom, and/or killed. Rape and forced marriage were used as a terrorist tactic of punishment and intimidation against opposing forces. In addition, such practices were condoned by warlords as part of the spoils of war for their fighters. Ethnic minorities were particularly at risk.<sup>39</sup> Several warlords addressed the complaints from human rights groups, but they were a considerable minority.

A new group of fighters were eventually able to dominate the political situation in Afghanistan. The Taliban arose out of rudimentary religious schools in the refugee camps in Peshawar, Pakistan nurtured by the Pakistani Interservices Intelligence. In 1994, the Taliban took its first major city, Kandahar, and by 1996 they controlled most of the country. The atrocities committed against women under the Taliban are the best documented period of women’s rights in the region. These men had only fundamentalist religious instruction and their oppression of women was immediate and severe. The Taliban imposed some of the harshest measures against women, cutting off education, employment, and health care to women and enforcing seclusion and veiling with harsh punishments that included public beatings and executions.

## Conclusion

The U.S. invasion after September 11, 2001 unseated the Taliban and women’s issues finally received a solid international platform. Numerous groups are working to improve conditions for women in Afghanistan. Worldwide awareness is also a key issue. Misunderstandings abound in the West regarding women in Afghanistan. Afghan women dislike the image of themselves perpetrated in the media as helpless victims brutal male oppressors. They also seek to clarify misconceptions about Islam and the idea that it stipulates female subordination.

The common perception is that Afghan women have been liberated from oppression since the Taliban, but conditions remain unstable. The invasion allowed the same type of Mujahideen warlords to again take control of the countryside. Zoya, a woman who worked underground in Afghanistan during the Taliban occupation describes the current feelings of many Afghans:

No one in the refugee camp was sorry to see the Taliban defeated. But no one rejoiced when the Taliban fled Kabul and the fighters of the Northern Alliance, which included several veteran Mujaheddin fundamentalists, took over the capital..., we all knew that although they now spoke of democracy, elections and even women’s rights, the Northern Alliance leaders who had taken power had blood on their hands. They were the same warlords who had bombed and tortured their own people in the early 1990s.<sup>40</sup>

The future for women in Afghanistan is extremely precarious at this point in time. More research is needed on this topic, particularly regarding the role that women themselves played in creating change during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The well-off urban women as well as the women in the refugee camps have had the chance to tell their stories, but little is known about rural women and their involvement in women’s issues and the civil war.

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39. “Women in Afghanistan: A Human Rights Catastrophe” *Amnesty International*, (London, Amnesty International, 1991).

40. John Follian and Rita Cristofari, *Zoya’s Story*, (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2002), 233.