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SPECIAL FOCUS ROUNDTABLE: GENDER, WAR, AND REVOLUTION

Between Veil and Vanguard: Ideological Battles over Afghan Femininity

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Abstract

This article examines the historical evolution of gender concepts in modern Afghanistan, tracing its development from nation-state building in the late nineteenth century through the revolutionary influences of Socialist and Islamist movements, and into the transformations prompted by the U.S. invasion in 2001. While situating the topic within its broader historical framework, the analysis centers on two archetypal figures of iconoclastic women in twentieth-century Afghanistan: those affiliated with communist parties under the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) and those associated with Islamist mujahidin groups. Drawing upon the traditional Afghan archetype of the heroic-poet woman, the discussion explores how warfare—both in theory and practice—reconfigured gender identities via a recurring cycle of uneven advancement and regressions. These shifts were driven largely by elite, top-down strategies that positioned urban women as symbolic agents enlisted to fight entrenched gender norms, rather than to transform them through meaningful reform. The article further addresses the roles of migration and regional ideologies in this process, underscoring how such dynamics often disregarded the lived experiences and needs of ordinary Afghan women. This oversight contributed to the rise of novel iterations of the poet-heroine archetype, which paradoxically sought to dismantle conventional notions of femininity. Ultimately, the article advocates for a viable feminist approach in Afghanistan grounded in local histories, geographies, and social realities—moving beyond rigid binary frameworks to achieve genuine relevance and effectiveness.

Keywords: Democratic Republic of Afghanistan; gender identity; Islamist mujahidin; iconoclastic women; Afghan Women

Since the late nineteenth century, when the architecture of modern Afghanistan's political structure began to take shape, war, revolutionary ideologies, and gender roles have played an interconnected and vital role at the heart of

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Afghan polity. This article examines two distinct archetypes of iconoclastic women in twentieth-century Afghanistan: communist parties associated with the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) and Islamist mujahidin. Both groups prioritized revolution over reform and confrontation over negotiation, shaping their activism around radical transformation. This analysis explores the evolution of modern gender identity in Afghanistan and how it was often constructed in isolation from broader societal realities and largely influenced by male actors vying for state control or promoting competing political ideologies. Set against reform efforts over the past 150 years, this study draws attention to a persistent pattern of uneven progress and recurring setbacks characterized by elitist, top-down strategies that positioned urban women as central figures in redefining gender identity. In a country in which the majority of the population resides in rural villages, this narrow focus on urban, elite notions of gender often alienated broader society. Revolutionary movements, despite their stated aims of modernization or liberation, inadvertently contributed to the conditions that enabled today's extremist degradation of women. Importantly, the militant ethos embraced by both communist factions associated with DRA and the Islamist mujahidin between 1970 and 2000 was not merely a consequence of Afghanistan's modernization. Rather, it reflected deeper historical and cultural currents that long preceded the formation of the modern Afghan state.

The poet-heroine ideal

The established historian and preserver of the Afghan cultural heritage Nancy Dupree notes that in Afghan culture the archetype of the warrior-poet for men is complemented by the poet-heroine for women, as exemplified by figures such as Rabia Balkhi.[1] In the tenth century, Balkhi famously wrote a poem in her own blood, protesting against the injustice of being denied the right to marry the man she loved. Afghan history and folklore celebrate the contributions of elite women across generations, including Margile Herawi (eighth century); Queen Gawharshad Begum (fifteenth century); Horra Begum Khutali (twelfth century), the daughter of Amir Sabuktagin; Queen Kaidan (twelfth century), the daughter of King Bidridden Kaidani; and Queen Jowhar Malek (thirteenth century), the wife of Sultan Ghais al-Din Sam, the most powerful king of Ghor among others.[2]

[1] Nancy Hatch Dupree, "Revolutionary Rhetoric and Afghan Women," in *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. M. Nazif Shahrani and Robert L. Canfield (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1984), 312.

[2] In Afghan folklore, Margile (referred to as Marjila in Arabic sources) was the daughter of Master Sies, a freedom fighter from Herat, Afghanistan, who sought to liberate Khurasan from the control of the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad. Margile supported her father's efforts, attending his speeches against al-Mahdi and fighting alongside him when Harun al-Rashid launched an attack on Herat. She was eventually captured, forced into Harun al-Rashid's harem, and compelled to bear his child, Mamun al-Rashid. Mamun later became a powerful Abbasid ruler, was inspired by Margile, and contributed to the development of Herat. Fawzia Abass Etemadi, *Prominent Afghan Women throughout History* (Alexandria: Window of Peace, 2023), 30–31. Gawharshad, the wife of Shah Rukh, the emperor of the Timurid Empire (1409–47), was a prominent patron of literature, architecture, and cultural and

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Figures like Nazo, the mother of Mir Ways Hotak (r. 1709–15), who liberated Afghanistan from Persian Safavid rule, and Zaynab, daughter of Mir Ways Hotak, a scholar in both Pashto and Dari and political adviser who defended Kandahar during its siege by Persian forces under Nadir Afshar in 1788, are celebrated for their courage and patriotism. Malalay rallied Afghan troops against the British during the Battle of Maiwand in 1880. Ghazi Adi also played a heroic role, rescuing the flag of a dying mujahidin during the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–89).[3] These women are remembered for their wisdom, political influence, and contributions to the arts, as well as for their individuality, bravery, and ability to transcend societal constraints.

Despite Afghanistan's rich legacy of influential women, historical narratives have largely centered on elite figures, leaving the lives and contributions of ordinary women—especially those from marginalized communities—underrepresented. These accounts, often fueled by pride and cultural passion, tend to overlook the broader dynamics of women's empowerment through both formal institutions and informal networks. The role of social systems, including mass and grassroots movements, receives minimal attention beyond occasional references to girls' schools. This selective portrayal persists even amid Afghanistan's political modernization, during which premodern narratives continue to shape twentieth-century discourse. Afghanistan's political modernization began with an elitist, top-down approach, with leaders like Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880–1901), the founder of the modern Afghan state, advocating for nationalist ideology, including the emancipation of women, as essential to projecting a progressive national image.[4] Leveraging religion alongside customary social practices for his political agenda, he banned child marriages, forced marriages, levirate marriages, exorbitant bride prices, and marriage gifts. He upheld widows' hereditary rights, allowed women to seek divorce, and granted wives freedom in cases of nonsupport by husbands. Drawing on Pashtun ethnic

religious institutions. She played an active political role and maintained close connections with many local rulers. However, her political ambitions and involvement ultimately led to her execution. Beatrice Forbes Manz, "Gawhar-Shad Aga," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, November 17, 2024, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gowhar-sad-aga. For more information on Horra Begum, Queen Kaidan, and Queen Jawhar Malek, see Etemadi's book, pp. 48–50, 57, and 59–61, respectively.

[3] Dupree, "Revolutionary Rhetoric," 312–13. In Hazara folklore, Gulbigum, also known as Amma Sangari, is celebrated for her bravery in resisting the discrimination her people faced under the government of Amir Habibullah Khan (1901–19). She and her family took refuge in the mountains, where she actively fought for her cause, using firearms and dressing as a man to take part in the struggle. When I was young, I saw her image depicted in *The History of Shiʿa in Afghanistan* by Husainali Yazdani, also known as Haj Kadim. She was the only female figure depicted in this book, despite the importance of female warriors. The Hazara are considered one of the four major ethnic groups in Afghanistan.

[4] Dupree, "Revolutionary Rhetoric," 306. See also Olesen, who argues that Amir Abdur Rahman's modernization efforts led to an expansion of state authority, which in turn necessitated a confrontation with tribal conceptions of society and norms and the ulama's interpretation of Islam—ultimately resulting in Islamization as a strategy for political modernization. Asta Olesen, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan* (Richmond, VA: Curzon Press, 1996), 61–91; Sayed Hassan Akhlaq, "Afghanistan Nation-Building and Missed Critical Element of Unifying Ideology," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 3 (2022): 54.

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traditions that contrasted with Qur'anic teachings, however, he imposed the death penalty for adulterous women and decreed that men had full control over women, stating, "the honor of the people of Afghanistan consists in the honor of their women."[5] Although his progressive agenda drew justification from religious texts, his conservative leanings were reinforced by deep-rooted ethnic loyalties.

The effort to advance women's rights and enhance their quality of life continued into the subsequent century, albeit marked by uneven progress and recurring setbacks. Amir Abdur Rahman Khan's son, Amir Habibullah (r. 1901–19), advocated for women's education, believing it strengthened families and advanced the nation.[6] This was influenced by the intellectual publications of Mahmud Tarzi (1865–1933), the father of Afghan journalism. However, it was Habibullah's son, King Amanullah (r. 1919–29), who made a serious attempt to institutionalize reforms for women. He sought to enforce his grandfather's policies, advocating for monogamy, the removal of the veil, an end to seclusion, and compulsory education for girls. Amanullah's queen, Suraya, and his sister, Siraj ul-Banat, were the first Afghan women to publicly speak out for women's equality. In 1923, Siraj ul-Banat said, "Knowledge is not man's monopoly. Women also deserve to be knowledgeable. We must on the one hand bring up healthy children and, on the other hand, help men in their work. We must read about famous women in this world, to know that women can achieve exactly what men can achieve."[7] Although these reforms were reversed by a successful rebellion that led to Habibullah Ghazi's (Bacha-i-Saqaw) nine-month rule, subsequent leaders Nadir Shah (r. 1929–33) and his son Zahir Shah (r. 1933–73) took a pragmatic and cautious approach to women's progress—a stance explored in greater detail in the works of Dupree and Burki. This included reopening some urban girls' schools with approval from tribal and religious leaders, establishing elementary schools for girls nationwide, granting women the right to vote and run for office in 1964, appointing the first female cabinet minister of public health in 1966, and including three women in parliament and a female senator. Women's employment began in fields like education and health, where contact with men could be limited, but during Prime Minister Daud Khan's tenure (1953–63), job opportunities for women were largely confined to urban areas, such as air stewardesses, government receptionists, and telephone operators. Although the concept of women's participation in national development was introduced as a national policy, in practice it widened the gap between urban elites and the rural population, in a country in which most of the population lived in villages under the tribal and religious leadership of maliks, khans, and mullahs, who also were angered by the loss of tribal subsidies.[8]

[5] Dupree, "Revolutionary Rhetoric," 306, 324.

[6] Ibid., 306.

[7] Ibid., 307.

[8] Shireen Khan Burki, "The Politics of Zan from Amanullah to Karzai," in *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women*, ed. Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 51–53.

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It is important to recognize that the traditionalism, localism, and conservatism often associated with Afghan society are not simply vestiges of ancient customs. Rather, they are partly shaped by the way Afghanistan was integrated into the modern state system—particularly through its interactions with neighboring colonial powers such as tsarist Russia and British India. As I have discussed elsewhere, Afghan society contains numerous critical and historical elements that challenge rigid identity politics and instead point toward more inclusive notions of civic and collective identity, as well as cultural citizenship.[9] Afghanistan's ambiguous relationship with modernity—marked by both attraction and apprehension—combined with the imperial agendas of external powers has complicated the formation of a coherent national identity. The country's role as a buffer state meant that it received financial aid and military support from its colonial neighbors, which diminished the incentive to engage with or reflect the aspirations of the broader population. As a result, the tension between conservative and modernist forces was less a grassroots ideological divide and more a contest among elites over the scope and direction of centralized state authority.[10]

This divide also extended to the concept of gender, with elites and ordinary people holding distinctly different views. The elite perspective, which has been recorded in various books and passed down by different regimes, contrasted with the everyday experiences of ordinary people, who defined gender roles within the confines of tribe, local culture, personal ambition, religious traditions, and daily life. However, two revolutionary movements—the communist parties associated with the DRA and the mujahidin Islamists—played significant roles in redefining gender, particularly through the ideal of the warrior woman, who not only redefined the meaning of war but also reached a wider audience, paving the way for new definitions of gender that remain closely tied to politics.

Women of the DRA

The rise of the first iconoclastic women pushing for radical change paralleled the emergence of a communist-inspired regime advocating social transformation in Afghanistan. The USSR-supported Saur (April) Revolution in 1978 led to the establishment of the leftist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), which, within twelve days, issued the "Basic Lines of the Revolutionary Duties of the Government of the DRA." Article 12 of this document guaranteed "equality of rights of women and men in all social, economic, political, cultural, and civil aspects."[11] Anahita Ratebzad, a member of the Revolutionary Council and Minister of Social Affairs, translated this into action by emphasizing the duties of women as mothers who shaped the future of the country. She encouraged women to "take steps to consolidate your revolutionary regime as bravely as the heroic and brave

[9] See Akhlaq, "Afghanistan Nation-Building," 51–78.

[10] Deniz Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan," *UNRISD Occasional Paper* 4 (2005): 3–4.

[11] Dupree, "Revolutionary Rhetoric," 312.

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men of this country."[12] Although women were still primarily assigned traditional, stereotyped roles as mothers tasked with supporting the family and nation, the DRA elevated these long-standing poetic heroines as political models.

For example, Sultana Umayd, director of Kabul girls' schools, criticized previous regimes for promoting Afghan women's rights not out of genuine concern but for manipulative purposes. She argued that these actions had harmed women's dignity and stifled their potential. Communist revolutionaries sought to discredit their predecessors in order to legitimize their own actions, resulting in an ironic scenario where those who had benefited most from earlier initiatives–often serving as principals and administrators in positions of authority, particularly in education and medicine–now turned to criticize those same predecessors and their policies.[13] In June 1978, the president of the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women declared that "All injustices and slavery have been eliminated, and Afghan mothers can rear heroes and heroines like Malalay" (1861–80), symbolically linking contemporary women to the nineteenth-century archetype.[14]

The newly emerging archetype of the revolutionary poet-heroine was largely cosmetic rather than substantive. After the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power on April 27, 1978, and established the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), joining the party became fashionable, albeit for less honorable reasons. Prospective members were enticed by promises of government positions and promotions. Young girls were told that joining youth groups would cleanse them of the stigma of having parents associated with past regimes. As party members, they could grow up with pride as true daughters of the revolution, dedicated to serving the motherland. However, there was little recognition that women should be allowed to develop into a distinct group capable of identifying and addressing issues specifically related to women. The ideology was still male-dominated, and the women's movement was expected to align with common political goals.[15]

In "Revolutionary Rhetoric and Afghan Women," Dupree details how, despite the absence of clear policies or empowering programs to improve the status of women, the period was marked by heightened rhetoric and vocal admiration for women's roles. The youth and women's organizations had committees responsible for indoctrination within government ministries and city wards, maintaining close links with the PDPA's central hierarchy. Members were instructed to establish control over their sections and exploit latent female frustrations to increase membership. Internal power struggles between factions within the PDPA further complicated the situation for women. Women prominent in the party no longer made public appearances, and no woman was appointed to subsequent cabinet or other substantive positions. First ladies primarily fulfilled ceremonial roles. The elevation of women's status was frequently employed as a political tool by leaders seeking legitimacy within a non-communist national

[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 314.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 320.

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framework and aiming to consolidate their power. Yet these initiatives, often at odds with prevailing cultural norms, failed to foster genuine legitimacy or lasting authority. Instead, they widened the divide between the ruling elite and the general population, while exposing deeper contradictions and inconsistencies in the broader pursuit of women's empowerment. Although the president believed that "without the participation of toiling women no great movement relating to the toiling classes has achieved victory," in reality much energy was spent on meetings, marches, and volunteering for activities like street cleanups, leaving little room for constructive planning.[16] As a result, a new identity emerged for Afghan women: the warrior woman who fought on behalf of ideological ideals against her history, tradition, and people.

In contrast to the USSR-backed movement, a new Muslim female identity emerged, shaped by the mujahidin (1979–92), who were bolstered by American support. Initially formed to fight communist forces, this identity later turned to challenging liberal democratic ideals. It began as a loosely structured and ideologically fragmented construct, developing as a by-product of broader militant currents. Over time, it has continued to evolve in response to shifting forms of Islamism—from the mujahidin to the Taliban—each leaving distinct imprints on its trajectory.

Women of the Islamist mujahidin

Although a few Western scholars, such as Ludwig Adamec and Allen Doren, refer to the communist takeover of Afghanistan as a revolution, Islamic movements in the country are rarely characterized in similar revolutionary terms.[17] However, I use this term deliberately for several reasons. First, these movements sought profound and rapid transformation—a radical overhaul of political, social, and economic structures. Their strategies involved mass mobilization, direct confrontation with existing systems, and the use of violence to establish an alternative vision of justice. Unlike conventional noninstitutionalized actions such as protests, strikes, and uprisings, their approach was more systemic and ideologically driven. Although they ultimately failed to achieve their stated goals, their impact was significant—particularly in reshaping identities, especially religious ones. Contemporary Islam in Afghanistan differs markedly from its earlier forms, as seen in shifts in political authority and practices such as the wearing of the hijab. Moreover, the key figures involved in the jihad (mujahidin) against the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan regime and the Soviet invaders referred to their movement as a revolution and embraced the label of revolutionaries. For instance, Burhan al-din Rabbani (1940–2011), the president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan and a leader of the jihad, frequently referred to the jihad period as the Islamic Revolution in his writings.[18] Many Islamic parties published books on

[16] Ibid., 317–20.

[17] For further reference, see the works of Adamec and Doren: Ludwig W. Adamec, *The A to Z of Afghan Wars, Revolutions and Insurgencies* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010); and Allen E. Doren, *Countering the Revolution: The Mujahideen Counterrevolution* (New York: Afghanistan Forum, 1989).

[18] For example, see his own book in Dari: Burhan al-Din Rabbani, *Inqilab-i Islami Mahsul-i Mubarizat-i Chradasale-i Mardum-i Ma* (Kabul: Idarie Matbu'ati Riyasat Jumhuri, 1375/1996), https://doi.org/10.2458/azu_acku_risalah_ds371_2_ray22_1375.

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the Islamic revolution in Afghanistan, and some, like Harakat-i Inqilab-i Islami (the largest mujahidin group in the early 1980s, led by Maulawi Muhammad Nabi Muhammadi, who eventually recognized and joined the Taliban in March 1995), even included the word "revolution" in their party titles.[19] Additionally, numerous poetry collections were published under titles like "Islamic Revolutionary Poems of Afghanistan."[20]

Although the rise of political Islam in Afghanistan predated the communist regime and had long opposed monarchical rule, it evolved into a jihadist movement as a reactionary force against the communist agenda. This transformation gained significant momentum following the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan on December 24, 1979, which was intended to bolster the struggling regime. Four days later, the United States launched a broad plan, directing the CIA to provide military supplies and humanitarian aid to the Afghan mujahidin. While engaging in a proxy war with the USSR, President Carter's administration also urged the UN to investigate Soviet human rights abuses in Afghanistan.[21] Most US aid to the mujahidin was channeled through Pakistan, but Egypt and Saudi Arabia also played roles. This funding influenced the mujahidin ideologically, particularly through the influence of Saudi Wahhabism, which promoted gender segregation.[22] Many prominent mujahidin also were significantly

[19] The Harakat-i Inqilab-i Islami-i Afghanistan (IRMA) was established in September 1978 as a coalition of opposition mujahidin groups. However, it quickly fractured due to differences between moderates and conservatives. Led by Muhammad Nabi Muhammadi, the movement represented moderate Pashtun Islamists. Muhammadi later served as vice president of Afghanistan in a coalition government headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani following the collapse of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan regime; Jack Covarrubias, "Islamic Revolutionary Movement," in *Afghanistan at War from the 18th-Century Durrani Dynasty to the 21st Century*, ed. Tom Lansford (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017), 220–21. To understand how the mujahidin reconciled the term *inqilab* (revolution) with the Islamic concept of jihad, refer to a speech by one of their prominent leaders and the first head of their Islamic state, Sibghatullah Mujaddidi, "Jihad ya inqilab, Lahore: Namayandagi-i Jibhi-i Milli-i Nijat-i Afghanistan," n.d., https://doi.org/10.2458/azu_acku_ds371_2_29_jeem_yaa_1370. Also consider the following Islamic parties and their publications, which include the term "Islamic revolution" following the party name. Hizb-i Islami Afghanistan: Syed Ishaq Dilju, Masum Poya, and Abuzar Pirzada (eds)., *Zamzameha-i Inqilab-i Islami: Guzida-i Ashʾar-i Inqilabi* (Hibz-i Islami Afghanistan, 1360/1981), https://doi.org/10.2458/azu_acku_pk6878_9_zay74_1360; Harkat-i Islami: Sayed Husayn Anwari, *Inqilab-i Islami Ma wa Risalat-i Jahani-i An* (Kabul: Shora-i Wilayat-i Kabul, 1370/1991), https://doi.org/10.2458/azu_acku_ds371_2_alif99_1370; Niru-yi Islami: M. M. Afghani, *Afghanistan Dar Masir-i Takamul-i Inqilab-i Islami* (Saziman-i Niru-i Islami Afghanistan, n.d.), https://doi.org/10.2458/azu_acku_risalah_ds356_alif76_1364; Hizb-i Wahdat-i Islami: Kumisiyon-i Farhangi-i Hizb-i Wahdat-i Islami Afghanistan, *Tashkil-i Hizb Wahdat-i Islami: Noqti-i Atf-i Muhim dar Tarikh-i Inqilab-i Islami Afghanistan* (Qom, Iran: Ismayiliyan, 1369/1990), https://doi.org/10.2458/azu_acku_jq1769_a8_hay42_1369.

[20] See two large collections: Daftra-i namayandagi-i muqam-i muʿazzam-i rahbari dar umur-i Afghanistan, *Awwalin wa Dowwomin Majma-i Shʿr-i Inqilabi Islami Afghanistan* (Qom, Iran: Muasisa Farhangi Thaqalayn, 1372/1993), https://doi.org/10.29171/azu_acku_PK6433_alif87_1372; and Daftra-i namayandagi-i muqam-i muʿazzam-i rahbari dar umur-i Afghanistan, *Siwwumin Majma-i Shʿr-i Inqilabi Islami Afghanistan* (Qom, Iran: Muasisa Farhangi Thaqalayn, 1373/1994), https://doi.org/10.29171/azu_acku_PK6433_seen98_1373.

[21] Sima Samar, "Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan," *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 2 (2019): 139–40.

[22] Ibid.

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influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which advocated for the Islamization of women's education.

The civil war forced many Afghans to flee the country and take refuge in camps, creating an opportunity for Islamist ideologues to indoctrinate vulnerable and impoverished populations, including a significant number of women. Over one-third of Afghans were forced to leave their homes, leading to mass displacement that further worsened the status of women. In refugee camps, where education was available, the mujahidin curriculum focused on jihad for boys and preparing girls to support jihadists. Initially, even mentioning education for girls was taboo, partly due to its association with the communist agenda, but the situation gradually improved, and the mujahidin softened their stance over time in Pakistan. By 1988, approximately 104,600 boys were enrolled in UN-run camp schools, compared to 7,600 girls.[23] The situation in Iran differed due to the lesser role of mujahidin groups. About 450,000 Afghan children—roughly forty percent of them girls—attended Iranian schools.[24] Both Islamist educational frameworks, however, reimagined the image of women as poet-heroines, casting them as fighters resisting both modernizing forces and entrenched traditions. These narratives oscillated between portraying women as heroic figures—revered not only for bearing future warriors of God but also for embodying the spirit of early Islamic women who stood against the age of ignorance—and depicting them as vulnerable subjects, easily misled or corrupted by so-called satanic Western influences.[25] This dual representation reinforced a militant and symbolic role for women while simultaneously undermining their autonomy.

For the first time in the country's history, non-Pashtun Afghans could assert themselves, shaping new identities as Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, or Pashtuns, which impacted discussions on female education and gender identity. This shift influenced debates on female education and gender roles, while tribal codes such as Pashtunwali and customary law (*rawaj*) attracted renewed scrutiny as tools for either resisting or reinforcing Islamization. These communities began redefining their identities on their own terms, rather than conforming to the dominant Pashtun narrative. Many boys in Pakistan attended religious seminaries (madrasas), which later gave rise to the Taliban.[26] In Iran, boys and girls attended

[23] Niloufar Pourzand, "The Problematic of Female Education, Ethnicity and National Identity in Afghanistan (1920–1999)," *Social Analysis: International Journal of Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (1999): 78.

[24] Pourzand, "Female Education," 78.

[25] For example, in Peshawar, Pakistan, mujahidin groups expanded their organizational reach by establishing branches such as Tanzim-i Khawaharan-i Jamiyat-i Islami Afghanistan and founding new entities like Tanzim-i Islami Zanan-i Afghanistan. They also published books and periodicals, including *Payam-i Zan-i Musalman*, to promote their vision of the Islamic woman. Some of these materials are archived and accessible through the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (website), accessed December 11, 2025, https://archive.af/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=5197&query_desc=kw%2Cwrdl%3A%20زن%20مسلمان.

[26] Daniel E. Spector and Jerry D. Morelock, "Taliban," in *Afghanistan at War: From the 18th-Century Durrani Dynasty to the 21st Century*, ed. Tom Lansford (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017), 438; Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War and Religion in Afghanistan* (New York: Zed Books, 2002), 61. This does not negate Pakistan's involvement—including that of its military—in supporting the Taliban by enabling

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religious schools and academies, reinventing their self-image as Muslims in the modern world, confronting American imperialism. Female education under Zia's Islamization in Pakistan and the Iranian Islamic Revolution was critical of both monarchy and communism but suggested an alternative modernization rooted in Afghan and Islamic authenticity. All these factors contributed to the mujahidin's attempt to shape a new definition of womanhood—one that was internally ambiguous yet deliberately positioned in opposition to Western norms and the gender ideals promoted by their former communist rivals. This reimagined model was framed as an authentic expression of Islam, distinct from both secular and foreign influences. By 1992, the Kabul regime fell, and the mujahidin seized power in Kabul. They made hijab mandatory but allowed women to continue attending school. Female news reporters were barred from being visually represented on television, and instead, the screen showed only a rose image while women read the daily news. In a series of international conferences, including the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Beijing International Conference on Women, there was no Afghan government representation.[27] However, the mujahidin soon fell into civil war and became ethnotribal leaders with little interest in women's empowerment or rights. The lack of peace and security paved the way for the Taliban's rise to power, leading to brutal policies against women.

Revolutionary ideals and the erasure of women

After the Taliban's fall in 2001, the post-Taliban regime, backed by international aid and policies, aimed to protect women's rights in Afghanistan. The Bush administration emphasized the oppression of Afghan women within the broader context of the "war on terror." As Laura Bush stated, "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."[28] Once again, gender became entangled with the rhetoric of war, echoing the historical archetype of the poet-heroine. This ideology—promoted by the Western-backed Afghan government and sustained through international funding—often overlooked the lived realities, aspirations, and self-definitions of rural, displaced, widowed, and otherwise vulnerable Afghan women. Although the global community prioritized the education of Afghan girls as a key objective following the fall of the Taliban, a 2017 report by Human Rights Watch indicated that progress had been limited. Despite years of international involvement, the proportion of girls attending school remained below fifty percent, and estimates suggested that nearly two-thirds of Afghan girls were still out of school. Rather than advancing, efforts to expand girls' education appeared to be stagnating or even regressing.[29] The report focused

the trade convoy route through Afghanistan to Turkmenistan (Marsden, *Taliban*, 44). That said, my primary focus here is on their revivalist Islamist ideology (Marsden, *Taliban*, 57–86).

[27] Samar, "Feminism," 151.

[28] Kim Berry, "The Symbolic Use of Afghan Women in the War on Terror," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 27, no. 2 (2003): 137–38.

[29] "I Won't Be a Doctor, and One Day You'll Be Sick: Girls' Access to Education in Afghanistan," Human Rights Watch, October 17, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/10/17/i-wont-be-doctor-and-one-day-youll-be-sick/girls-access-education-afghanistan.

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specifically on enrollment figures and did not address other systemic issues in Afghanistan's education sector, such as poor instructional quality or the prevalence of "ghost schools"—institutions that existed on paper but lacked actual students or teachers.[30] Due to the disconnect between newly introduced educational systems and the Westernized—rather than locally grounded—approach to promoting women's rights, even many urban girls gravitated toward madrasas and Islamist ideologies. A striking example of this tension was the tragic case of Farkhunda Malikzada, a 27-year-old Afghan woman who was brutally killed in Kabul on March 19, 2015. Farkhunda, a Salafi adherent advocating for a puritanical interpretation of Islam, had challenged entrenched customs within a mosque, leading to a confrontation with a local cleric that ultimately resulted in her murder. At the time, I published an op-ed on BBC Persian to shed light on the deeper conflict between puritanical jihadi-Salafi movements and civil rights advocates in Afghanistan.[31] This divide has created two opposing camps that remain alienated from one another, with both sides often overlooking local cultural dynamics and the realities of domestic development. Unfortunately, this critical debate continues to be neglected by many intellectuals.

In addition to overlooking the vast majority of women who remain silent and are compelled to live traditional village lives, post-2001 social and political dynamics have given rise to two distinct categories of women in Afghan cities. On one hand, there are liberal-minded young women who aspire to modern lifestyles and development. On the other, a growing number of conservative young women are drawn to Islamist groups and their reactionary interpretations of Islamic traditions, aligning themselves with female Islamist ideals and gender norms. As the liberal group increasingly seeks to leave Afghanistan in response to the restrictions imposed by the Taliban—who regained power in 2021—the conservative group appears more receptive to the ideological framework of the Taliban 2.0.

Although more time and data are needed to fully understand the defining features of this newly emerging Afghan woman who simultaneously supports and challenges the Taliban, what is clear is the rise of a new generation of heroines and fervent advocates of the growing fundamentalist narrative, embracing its vision under the banner of religion and national identity. Numerous reports indicate a notable rise in female madrasas—an unprecedented phenomenon in Afghanistan's educational landscape.[32] According to experts on the Afghan education system, the Taliban actively promotes the expansion of madrasas, both as a means

[30] Sayed Hassan Akhlaq, "A Story of Failure: Ignoring the Local in Democratic Nation-Building in Afghanistan," Jadaliyya, September 11, 2023, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/45299.

[31] Hassan Akhlaq, "Qatl-i Farkhunda, Jidal-i Sunnat wa Mudirnita," BBC Persian, April 3, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/persian/blogs/2015/04/150331_mar_farkhunda_nazeran_tradition_modernity.

[32] For example, see: Elena Becatoros, "With No Access to Education beyond the 6th Grade, Girls in Afghanistan Turn to Religious Schools," AP News, July 24, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-education-girls-madrassa-7cdaf68896e8ccfda2abd71a07a02b99; and Isobel Yeung and Mick Krever, "'They Do Not Teach Us What We Need': Inside the Expansion of Religious Schools for Girls across Afghanistan," August 4, 2025, https://www.cnn.com/2025/08/04/asia/afghanistan-religious-schools-for-girls-expansion-intl-cmd#:~:text=Secret%20schools,studied%20diligently%20throughout%20her%20life.

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of ideological survival and as a tool for legitimizing their rule.[33] An intriguing case involves a Shiʿi ayatollah who, despite facing marginalization due to his ethnic and sectarian minority status, sought to assert his influence in Taliban-controlled Kabul. To demonstrate his presence and authority, in 2022 he organized female madrasa students to publicly welcome him upon his return from preaching missions or during visits to various cities.[34] In a particularly striking moment, his daughter delivered a public speech in front of the local head of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. She advocated for women's rights within an Islamic framework, citing Qurʾanic verses and firmly emphasizing the importance of preserving hijab.[35] This moment marks the emergence of a new kind of heroine—a growing phenomenon in which even marginalized women courageously navigate religious tradition, asserting their agency and voice within deeply conservative structures.

Conclusions

For nearly 150 years Afghanistan has grappled with the question of gender—caught between revolutionary ideologies and war-driven policies in its pursuit of a stronger nation–state. These competing ideologies, including monarchism, communism, Islamism, Talibanism, and a Westernized democratic nation–state, have each shaped Afghanistan's political landscape in distinct ways. Among them, two dominant models have played a central role in reimagining the image of women as poet-heroines. They inspired the masses with visions of an ideal society, rejecting Afghanistan's history, culture, and traditions entirely—branding them as capitalist by the communists and as ignorant by the Islamists. Although the revolutionary imaginary evolved over time, its elitist, monolithic, and normative nature remained intact. This continuity paved the way for new challenges and perpetuated a recurring cycle of symbolic female representation, often sidelining the lived realities and voices of ordinary women. Amid this turbulent history, ordinary Afghan women have rarely had the opportunity to define themselves on their own terms. Even in the post-2001 era, when affirmative action ushered many women into parliament, few legislative efforts truly addressed their empowerment. In Afghanistan approximately seventy-three percent of the population lives in rural areas.[36] The emergence of a female urban elite often served more as a symbolic gesture than a genuine representation of rural women—their aspirations, challenges, and lived realities. These few progressive women were frequently shaped by idealized visions of womanhood, largely crafted by male-dominated political discourse, rather than grounded in

[33] Mirwais Balkhi, "Factors Driving Taliban Madrasafication in Afghanistan and Their Implications," Wilson Center, March 31, 2025, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/factors-driving-taliban-madrasafication-afghanistan-their-implications.

[34] This was the grand ayatollah Waiz-zada Behsoodi; behsoodi_af, Instagram, accessed November 10, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/behsoodi_af.

[35] Cheshmak, "Sukhanrani Dukhtar-i Ayatollah Waʿiz-zada Behsoodi," YouTube, April 6, 2024, https://youtu.be/vrQSkJGMYco?si=fskMKSHuSlnyTlDZ.

[36] "Rural Population (% of Total Population): Afghanistan," World Bank Group, September 29, 2025, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=AF.

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everyday life. As a result, abstract ideologies—not authentic experiences—have continued to dictate what it means to be a woman in Afghanistan and how she should fit into the imagined political order. A particularly troubling aspect of this history is the silencing of women's voices, but the broader issue is the neglect of the voices of the people as a whole—women and men alike, especially the masses, the vulnerable, the disadvantaged, and the subaltern. Even in the Western world, these voices have received insufficient attention. True and effective feminism in Afghanistan must be inclusive, examining the entire system and established institutions through the lens of injustice and imposed ideologies, with a deep concern for humanity, particularly the subaltern and ignored communities, regardless of the gender roles imposed upon them.

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