

# The Status of women in Afghanistan before 2001: A Historical study

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**Abstract:** To understand women status in Afghanistan, one has to consider the country's multi-ethnic, multilingual and traditional society, which has historically been governed along tribal lines and by a weak central government. Today's Afghan women bear the huge and heavy burden of four decades war and conflicts. Early at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Afghan women, as a result of the first constitutional movement under the leadership of King Amanullah Khan succeeded in gaining some of their human rights and freedoms. King Amanullah Khan's democratic plans included the elimination of burqa, access to education and active participation of women in the social, economic, political and cultural process in the society. But unfortunately, after the fall of Soviet-backed government of Kabul and their subsequent regimes – Mujahideen and Taliban, all those values were buried soon.

**Keywords:** Afghan women, Gender discrimination, tribal leaders, tradition, queen Soraya.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has been in turmoil throughout its history. No other country has been through such conflicts and wars than Afghanistan, regrettably its history has been shaped by too many people that Afghans themselves find it difficult to remember. The irony is that history keeps in repeating itself because neither the Afghans nor the people of the world have drawn any lessons from it. History of Afghanistan has been represented by the gender discrimination at the forefront throughout the course of history. Although her voice and genuine grievances have been silenced by taking recourse to all methods at their command, a scan number of women managed to break the shackles of forced confinements imposed upon them.

The issue concerning women in Afghanistan have remained part of the agendas of the national constitution since 1920s. In the beginning of the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, King Amanullah took various innovative measure towards issues of empowerment, welfare and improvement in living condition of women. He discouraged polygamy, went against the imposition of veil system and strived for enhancements in personal freedom of women. King Amanullah's reforms were aimed at a complete restricting of the Afghan society and he wanted to revolutionize the traditional character of Afghan life and transform the country into an entirely new kind of entity. Amanullah faced several criticism and resistance from the non-radical groups against the initiatives he had taken. The powerful resistance from the tribal leaders made Nadir shah, the successor of king Amanullah.

King Nadir shah was more careful and he tried to uphold the ideals of Afghan society in his 1931 constitution. He tried to provide the religious leaders more freedom than they enjoyed under his predecessors. He did not provide for any special rights of women under his constitution, but in one of the articles (Article 9) of his constitution he mention that all persons having Afghan citizenship are equal.

During the period of Mohammad Zahir shah (1933-1973) a new era was initiated, where women could breathe new vernal breeze of freedom. This established stimulus initiated by M. Zahir shah was materialized partially when Mohammad Dawood allowed women to enter the civil services departments; education, healthcare and politics. During this golden age, women managed to teach, treat patients and join the political spheres of the country. Like Amanullah, Dawood khan

not only discouraged veil system, but was against the subjugation of women that lead to abuse, indiscrimination and exploitation. Such reformatory policies however, were confined to the capital of the country. The women exposed their faces for all to see and the social reforms and modernization programs challenged many key customs which wore a mantle of religious sanction until that time. In July 1968, when the 'Wolesi jirga' were discussing the Kabul university constitution; several conservative members proposed that Afghan girls should be prohibited from studying abroad. There was an immediate demonstration by hundreds of women students outside the shura (parliament) reminding the parliament that the new constitution guaranteed equal rights to men and women.

During the 1980s, after the communist government (1978-1992) came to power and the Soviets intervened military, a considerable number of women, especially in the urban centers continued to enjoy the benefits of the liberal era inaugurated in 1959. The educational policy of the Soviets saw the dispatched of children including hundreds of girls from urban areas to the Soviet Union. While these women were exposed to education and the communist culture, they were detached from their support network back home in the country. In reality, this period was the period of anarchy and destruction for the whole Afghan nation, because of the revolutionary pace of social change caused concern among the Mullahs and tribal chiefs in the interiors. The disintegration of Najibullah government in Kabul and the success of the Mujahedeen in taking over the capital opened a new chapter in the history of Afghan's women.

As mentioned before, the status of women was undermined during the Soviet era in Afghanistan. Afghan women's situation worsened in the 1990s, because of civil war. Women rights were further undermined after the Taliban came to power in 1996. Under the Taliban regime women were not allowed to work outside the home, were forced to wear the burqa and were not permitted to travel unless they were fully covered and accompanied by a male family member. In addition, girls' schools were closed down. Yet the plight of Afghan women was largely ignored until the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 drew strategic interest toward Afghanistan.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the present study, the women in all the periods of Afghanistan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have been closely observed. To indicate the real condition of women, gender inequality and progress, data on women's conditions and life, literacy level, participation in different sectors of jobs, violence against women and the legal system and women's access to justice have been used. Beside these resources, I also used historical books, journals and essays about the Afghan women.

## III. AREA OF STUDY: AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan is a country with a myriad history inflicted with conflicts among different ethnic groups, wars and political turmoil so much so that the country cannot be termed as a nation in true sense rather a conglomerate of diverse ethnic groups striving together to retain their sovereignty. The ethnic identities are more visible than the common national identity of Afghan. So the values and norms followed by ethnic communities are considered far above the national laws and modern values of liberation, democracy and equality.

## IV. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Afghanistan is very rugged in its topography and various ethnic, religious, and tribal groups sparsely populate it. Both spatial and ethnic impenetrability has prevented Afghanistan from ever forming a consensual and coherent sense of nationalism. In addition, interference by western countries and countries bordering Afghanistan have contributed to the fragmentation of the Afghan polity. In many instances, tribal politics is still determined by ethnic loyalties to bordering states. Although there have been sporadic attempts to bring dissenting tribes together, at no point has the Afghan nation experienced at strong centralized state with a common legal system. Instead, rival ethnic groups have had political ambitions to capture Kabul and, through well-armed tribal leaders (supported by foreign funds), created their own sovereignties. Ethnically based rivalries, combined with open and varied interpretations of Islam, have created fractious cultures.

The impact on women has been especially harsh, since women's lives have often been used as the raw material with which to establish ethnic prominence. Tribal laws and sanctions have routinely taken precedence over Islamic and constitutional laws in deciding gender roles, especially through kinship hierarchies in the rural regions. Tribal power plays, institutions of honor, and inter-tribal shows of patriarchal control have put women's positions in jeopardy. Tribal

laws view marriages as alliances between groups; women are pawned into marriages and not allowed to divorce, total obedience to the husband and his family is expected, and women are prevented from getting any education. Women are perceived as the receptacles of “honor”, hence they stay in the domestic sphere, observe the veil and are voiceless. The honor of the family, the tribe, and ultimately the nation is invested in women (Moghadam, 1997: 76).

The issue of women’s rights in Afghanistan has been historically constrained by (a) the patriarchal nature of gender and social relations deeply embedded in traditional communities and (b) the existence of a weak central state that has been unable to implement modernizing programs and goals in the face of “tribal feudalism”. In addition, as I will argue, foreign interference by the British, Soviet Union, dating to the 1880s, critically impeded social development in Afghanistan. In the following section, I will try to show how tribal leaders blocked reform efforts that aimed to separate women’s identity from that of her family and tribal community, and ultimately any attempts at modernizing the state (Ghosh, 2003: 1).

## V. MONARCHY PERIOD

The birth of modern Afghanistan is attributed to Abdur Rahman Khan who ruled from 1880 to 1901. He was the first ruler to attempt consolidation of the nation into a centralized state. He tried to change some of the customary laws that were detrimental to women’s status. For instance, he 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. (Dupree, 1986) Nancy Hatch Dupree surmises that his liberal wife Bobo Jan may have influenced the Amir, pointing out that, “in fact, she was the first Afghan queen to appear in public in European dress without a veil. She rode horses and trained her maidservants in military exercises. She had a keen interest in politics and went on numerous delicate missions to discuss politics between contending parties” (1986: 12).

### Reign of Amir Habibullah (1901-1919)

Upon the death of Abdur Rahman, his son Amir Habibullah Khan took over and reigned for 18 years. Habibullah continued his father’s progressive agenda by putting a ceiling in extravagant marriage expenses that often caused poverty in many families. His wives were seen publicly unveiled and in western cloths. In 1903, Habibullah established the first college in Afghanistan, Habibiya College, employing foreign teachers from India, Turkey and Germany. His other achievements included the setting up of the first hospital, the first hydroelectric plant, factories and construction of roads in Afghanistan, and improved trade with Russian central Asia and India (Gregorian, 1969; Dupree, 1973).

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. If there is a single person responsible for the modernization of Afghanistan in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was Mahmud Beg Tarzi. He returned from Syria to found and edit a modernist-nationalist newspaper, the *Siraj-ul-Akhbar-i Afghan* (the lamp of the news of Afghanistan). between 1911-1918 he advocated modern education and political views critical of western imperialism as well as, in subtle ways, the monarchy (Magnus and Naby, 1998). Educated in Syria and Turkey, Tarzi was strongly influenced by modern interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence and by the liberties afforded to women in these countries. 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. In his newspaper, Tarzi devoted a special section in women’s issues entitled “Celebrating Women of the World”, which was edited by his wife Asma Tarzi. As Schinasi (1979: 36) concludes, “no one before Tarzi had pronounced such words as ‘liberty’, ‘respect for the homeland and religion’, ‘union’, ‘progress’, or ‘school’.”

Habibullah, due to Tarzi’s liberal influence, opened a school for girls with English curriculum which tribal leaders and mullahs saw as going against the grain of tradition. Unfortunately, as Magnus and Naby (1998: 39) points out, “the liberalization of the nation through education and modernization of even the ‘tiny elite’ spawned an opposition movement”. Education for women, and state’s interference in marriage institutions challenged the power of the tribal leaders and their patrilineal and patrilocal kinship systems, resulting in Habibullah’s assassination in 1919. Schinasi (1979: 26-27) sums up Habibullah’s reign perfectly, “Habibullah is sometimes referred to as the forgotten king. But it was Habibullah who was keen to maintain Afghanistan’s position in the international as well as on the Muslim scene, but he was unable to control both with the same skills”.

### Reign of King Amanullah Khan

The assassination of Habibullah placed his son Amanullah on the throne marking the full-fledged modernization period of Afghanistan, as we will see later. Amanullah's first task was to completely liberate Afghanistan from the British. He succeeded by defeating the British in the third and final Anglo-Afghan war in 1919. Amanullah was relentless in his attempts to modernize Afghanistan. His modernizing agenda included the liberation of women from tribal cultural norms. His enthusiasm and persistence in enforcing these changes were heavily influenced by the modernization agenda operating in Turkey and his impressions from his travels in Europe.

Amanullah publicly campaigned against the veil, against polygamy, and encouraged education of girls not just in Kabul but also in the countryside. At a public function, Amanullah said that Islam did not require women to cover their bodies or wear any special kind of veil. At the conclusion of the speech, Queen Soraya tore off her veil in public and the wives of other officials present at the meeting followed this example. Throughout her husband's reign, Queen Soraya wore wide-brimmed hats with a diaphanous veil attached to them (Dupree, 1986). Many women from Amanullah's family publicly participated in organizations and went on to become government's officials later in life. An example is Amanullah's sister, Kobra, who formed the Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Niswan (Organization for Women's Protection), in the early 1920s. This organization encouraged women to bring their complaints and injustices to the organization and to unite to contest the oppressive institutions. Queen Soraya also founded the first magazine for women called Ershad-i-Niswan (Guidance for Women). Another sister of Amanullah founded a hospital for women. Women were encouraged to get an education and in that attempt 15 young women were sent to Turkey for higher education in 1928 (Gush, 2003: 4).

Queen Soraya was very instrumental in enforcing change for women and publicly exhorted them to be active participants in nation building. In 1926 at the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence, Queen Soraya in a public speech delivered said: independence belongs to all of us and that why we celebrate it. Do you think, however, that our nation from the outset needs only men to serve it? Women should also take their part as women did in the early years of our nation and Islam. From their examples we must learn that we must all contribute toward the development of our nation and that this cannot be done without being equipped with knowledge. So we should all attempt to acquire as much knowledge as possible, in order that we may render our services to society in the manner of the women of early Islam (Dupree, 1986: 46).

Amanullah tried to consolidate Islam and state policies, but faltered when he tried to impose rapid changes pertaining to women's status. Many conservative Afghans in the rural areas felt that the reforms were too "western" for their society and the forced changes were against the doctrines of Islam. People in the countryside were unable to comprehend the changes being imposed in them in haste, especially since men saw these changes as challenging their familial and tribal authority. Resistance was strongest to the abolition of bride price and polygamy, and to the introduction of education for girls. The 1920s were thus the time that conflicts between the elite modernists and traditionalist tribes began to surface. The main bone of contention was the changing status of women. What broke the proverbial camel's back for the traditionalists and rural population was the institution in 1924 of the freedom of women to choose their own partners and attempts to abolish bride price. Fathers of young women saw such progressive laws as a loss of social status, familial control and financial security (Gush, 2003: 5).

By 1928, the ethnic tribal leaders in the rural regions grew restless and developed coalitions to protest the freedoms women were experiencing in Kabul. It should be pointed out here that in this period women in tribal and rural areas did not receive the benefits of modernization. Tribal leaders controlled not only their regions, but through inter-tribal unity, held sway over most of the nation in resisting attempts at modernization. The Loya Jirga<sup>1</sup> finally put their foot down when marriage age of girls was raised to 18 years and for men to 21 years, and polygamy was abolished. They also opposed the education of girls and by the late 1920s forced Amanullah to reverse some of his policies and conform to a more traditional agenda of social change.

Amanullah, determined to improve the status of women and maintaining that his support of the feminist cause was been in the tenets of Islam, took more steps in this directions in his short rule than were taken by all his predecessors together. Amanullah was ahead of his time; his liberalism in an era when Afghanistan was barely united in a sense of nationhood was traumatic for the state (Gregorian, 1969: 243).

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<sup>1</sup> A group of tribal leaders and elected officials coming together to democratically arrive at decisions.

### Reign of King Nadir Shah

As mentioned before, King Amanullah took various innovative measure towards issues of empowerment, welfare and improvement in living condition of women. He discouraged polygamy, went against the imposition of veil system and strived for enhancements in personal freedom of women. Amanulla's reforms were aimed at a complete restricting of the Afghan society and he wanted to revolutionize the traditional character of Afghan life and transform the country into an entirely new kind of entity. King Amanullah faced several criticism and resistance from the non-radical groups against the initiatives he had taken. The powerful resistance from the tribal leaders made Nadir shah, the successor of king Amanullah. Amanullah succumb to the pressure perpetrated by the tribal leaders, resulting in revocation of reformatory measures. King Nadir shah was more careful and he tried to uphold the ideals of Afghan society in his 1931 constitution. He tried to provide the religious leaders of his country more freedom than they enjoyed under his predecessors. He did not provide for any special rights of women under his constitution but in one of the articles. In articles of nine of his constitution he mentioned that all persons having having Afghan citizenship are equal. Women were not specially mentioned and so presumably they shared the rights mentioned in section 3 of constitution which included the right to primary education, appeal of court decisions up to the king and the right to freedom of expression and legal matters (Yassen, 2014: 12). King Nadir shah opened some schools for girls and tried to bring about some gender-based reforms but was careful to avoid conflicts with the mullahs and tribal leaders (Gush, 2003: 6).

### Reign of King Zahir Shah

During the period of Mohammad Zahir shah (1933-1973) a new era was initiated, where women could breathe new vernal breeze of freedom. This established stimulus initiated by M. Zahir shah was materialized partially when his Prime Minister, Mohammad Dawood allowed women to enter the civil services departments; education, healthcare and politics. During this golden age, women managed to teach, treat patients and join the political spheres of the country. Like Amanullah, Dawood khan not only discouraged veil system, but was against the subjugation of women that lead to abuse, indiscrimination and exploitation. Such reformatory policies however, were confined to the capital of the country. The women exposed their faces for all to see and the social reforms and modernization programs challenged many key customs which wore a mantle of religious sanction until that time. Some events however prepared the groundwork for such bold action. These were abandonment of the veil by Afghan women who accompanied their husbands to oversee posts, the testing of female singers and announcers by Radio Afghanistan, a delegation of Afghan women attending a conference of Asian women in Ceylon in 1957 and the Afghan government sending a woman delegate to the United Nations in 1958. Four months before receptionists and hostesses for Ariana Afghan Airlines and two months before a class of girls finishing the sixth grade were asked to work in the Kabul China factory. Although the unveiling of the leading ladies in public drew criticism from the religious Mullahs they could not arouse tribal rebellion because Sardar Daoud's secret police arrested and jailed most of the ring leaders (Yassen, 2014: 12).

One of the most improvement achievements of king Mohammad Zahir shah was the liberal constitution of 1964. His constitution declared Afghanistan as a 'constitutional monarchy'. It provided for a fully representative bicameral parliament, a fully elective lower house or the Wolesi Jirga and a partly elective and partly representative Meshrano Jirga. The Afghans elected their representatives to both the houses and the election results were released in October 1, 1965. A distinctive feature of the elections was the election of four women, two from Kabul, one from Herat and one from Kandahar. Women were enfranchised by the constitution and they voted in the larger urban centers. Women's empowerment took place during this period, especially in the urban centers. In July 1968, when the 'Wolesi jirga' were discussing the Kabul university constitution; several conservative members proposed that Afghan girls should be prohibited from studying abroad. There was an immediate demonstration by hundreds of women students outside the shura (parliament) reminding the parliament that the new constitution guaranteed equal rights to men and women.

## VI. POST-MONARCHY PERIOD

By mid-century, with massive foreign aid and technical assistance from the Soviet Union, Afghanistan embarked on a modernizing journey. By the late 1950s, a need was perceived for women to be economically active to help Afghanistan achieve its targeted development goals. Women's issues were once again given some consideration. President Mohammad Daoud did not want to repeat the haste and mistake of his predecessor Amanullah Khan and declared veiling a "voluntary option". By the now women were expected once again to abandon the veil, marriage expenses were curtailed, and women were encouraged to contribute to the economy. 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. In 1965 Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a Soviet-backed socialist organization was formed. The same year also saw the formation of the first women's group, the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW). The main objectives this women's group was to eliminate illiteracy among women, ban forced marriages, and do away with bride price (Ghosh, 2003: 5-6).

### **PDPA Government**

The 1970s saw a rise in women's education, faculty in the universities, and representatives in the parliament (Dupree, 1986). The year 1978 saw the rise to power of the controversial PDPA. It is during the PDPA rule that rapid social and economic change, echoing some of the 1920s themes, was implemented and mass literacy for women and men of all ages was introduced (Moghadam, 1997). Massive land reform programs, along with abolition of bride price and raising of marriage age were also part of the PDPA agenda. In October 1978 a decree was issued with the explicit intension of ensuring equal rights for women. Minimum age of marriage was set at 16 for girls and 18 years for boys. The content of decree number 7 and the coercion of women into education were perceived by some as "unbearable interference in domestic life" (Hanne, 1990). Again, the revolutionary pace of social change caused concern among the mullahs and tribal chiefs in the interiors. They viewed compulsory education, especially for women, as going against the grain of tradition, anti-religious and a challenge to male authority. The PDPA's use of force in bringing the changes to fruition, combined with a brutal disregard for societal and religious sensitivities, resulted in massive backlash from the rural population (Marsden, 2002: 24).

A central feature of this regime was emphasize on education, education continued to be largely unhindered in the cities because the security was good there. The educational policy of the Soviets saw the dispatch of children including hundreds of girls from urban areas to the Soviet Union. By the end of this regime, women were found in all major government departments, in addition to the police force, the army, business and industry. Women taught, studied and acted as judges in the family court, dealing with issues related to divorce, custody of children and other family matters. While these women were exposed to education and the communist culture, they were detached from their support network back home in their country. In reality this period was a period of anarchy and destruction for the whole Afghan nation, because the revolutionary pace of social change caused concern among the Mullahs and tribal leaders in the interiors. The disintegration of Najibullah government in Kabul and success of the Mujahideen in taking over the capital opened a new chapter in the history of Afghan's women in 20<sup>th</sup> century (Yaseen, 2004: 21-13).

### **Mujahideen Government**

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. 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 services. 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". This was only to be the start of the apartheid against women. While many in the West and Islamic countries favored the Mujahideen, the situation of Afghan women was forgotten during this period. In the first stages of the war during the confrontation between the Mujahideen and the Soviet forces, many women were denied access to education, classrooms were closed, and women's organizations were shut down. Afghan women became targets of the political agendas in the Afghanistan. The Mujahideen treatment of women was unorganized, unplanned and unconnected to a state-driven agenda, except in so far as a single group tried to defeat and control other groups (Yaseen, 2015: 13).

The Mujahideen entered Kabul and burnt down the university, library, and schools. Women were forced to wear the burqa and fewer women were visible on television and in professional jobs. The period from 1992-1996 saw unprecedented barbarism by the Mujahideen where stories of killings, rapes, amputations and other forms of violence were told daily. To avoid rape and forced marriages, young women were resorting to suicide (Zoya, 2002: 63-64).

### **Taliban Government**

The Mujahideen were having an unplanned measures for the women subjugation. During the violent four year civil war many women were kidnapped or raped. By the time one of the factions became victorious many people welcomed this new leading force known as the Taliban. The chaotic situation in Afghanistan, opened the way for Taliban to gain power.

In 1996, U.S.A, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and ... supported the Taliban to counter the “mismanaged” politics and “unexpected” brutalities of the Mujahideen. Initially a sense of relief was palpable, but it was extremely short lived, and very soon the Taliban set up Amar Bil Maroof Wa Nahi An al-Munkar (Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) to monitor and control women’ behavior. The Taliban made sweeping changes in the social order and daily, Radio Sharia reminded the citizens of their duty to the country and Islam, and listed the changes men and women needed to make to conform to the new fundamentalism regime. For women, this meant no longer being able to go outside except to buy food. If women did leave home they had to be accompanied by a mahram (male relative), (Ghosh, 2003: 7).

The women and girls were not allowed to appear outside their homes without wearing a head to toe covering known as the burqa. Their access to medical services was severely affected as they were even prohibited to visit a male physician and the access to female physicians had reduced. The Taliban religious police meted out punishment immediately for violation of these rules. Reports of lashing on the streets and public humiliation became common. Women were lashed in public for revealing their ankle or part of their hair. The psychological effect of such humiliation had a devastating effect. The Taliban restrictions denied women some of their most basic and fundamental human rights and, therefore, drew massive criticism from international community. Women had been virtually eliminated from public space by being forbidden to work outside the home and to appear in public without being covered from head to toe and girls had been forbidden to attend schools. Female patients were to go to female doctors, male doctors are not allowed to see any other part of the female patients other than the affected part, nor were they allowed to enter female wards unless they had been specially requested to do so. Taliban had laid strict restrictions on women education, announced that all women were working outside their home will continue to receive their salary, thus they claimed that there is no need for women to work any longer (Yaseen, 2015: 14).

## VII. CONCLUSION

A brief assessment of women’s situation in Afghan society indicates that the girl child is discriminated from their early childhood in comparison to the boys. Whether, it is for education, healthcare or being subjected to early forced marriages. Though rights to equality and freedom have been guaranteed to women under the new constitution, these remain largely on paper, as the tribal hegemony of the male dominant society has yet to change.

The two progressive eras of the 1920s and 1970s, while attempting to improve women’s status were not only unsuccessful but also led to violent, fundamentalist backlashes by subsequent governments. In both periods, tribal leaders who objected to the redefining of women by the state and the diminution of their general authority initiated the disruption of modernization process. These patterns of resistance to change focused on conditions for women suggest that future efforts to “modernize” in Afghanistan will only succeed with full recognition of the multiple conflicts, fissures and resistances to change. Though the first era saw a despot implement change (undeniably favorable to women), the second era saw a socialist-democratic but equally authoritarian regime forcibly impose change. As desirable as many of these changes may have been for Afghanistan, in neither situation were rural communities of Afghanistan involved. These issues remain important today when once again a limited national government and international pressure demand radical changes in women’s status.

The internationalization of democracy based on western individualism rather than traditional Afghan Islamic communalism, gender-blind social interaction, and the elevation of the individual above society, does not appear to be part of the emerging regional or Afghan worldview. In Afghanistan, democracy and an assertion of women’s rights can occur when the state is in an economically and politically stable condition, assisted by men and women of Afghanistan. Democracy will occur as a process of social change that the whole nation needs to undergo. When this happens, a society built on democratic-oriented ideology will regard women as equal partners in the social, political, and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Today Afghanistan is in such a desperate state that without external help and financial aid its future will be further jeopardized. It is against this political backdrop that one has to understand women’s situation in Afghanistan. Major dilemmas will always exist as to the most appropriate path to follow. There will always be debates about a so-called western model, urban elite model, Islamic model, and fundamentalist model. The basic need is to ensure that women, like men, have access to resources for survival like education, jobs, mobility and public visibility.

## VIII. RECOMMENDATION

The current situation may sound grave when compared to other developing nations, yet seeing the multi-ethnic society, multi-cultural history and traditions that govern the Afghan society, it is unfair to judge gender issues here as in other countries. The needs of Afghan women are to a large extent different in various socioeconomic realities that exist for women in nomadic tribes, rural areas and urban agglomerations. Thus, empowering them by providing access to education, health facilities, justice against physical violence, safe environment and equal job opportunities and creating awareness of their fundamental rights as well as human rights is more important than making global comparisons. The women of Afghanistan recognize their rights gradually with efforts of the international community and government actions. Yet traditions, past experiences and future insecurities tend to hold them back and this is why despite of rigorous efforts of modernization and democratization, traditions and religious laws still continue to be the supreme power in Afghan society.

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