**[Extreme misogyny](https://www.dawn.com/news/1772973/extreme-misogyny)**

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THE latest chapter in the Taliban’s crusade against women was unveiled this week, when at least 60 potential scholars expecting to be accommodated at a university in Dubai were turned away from Kabul airport. It followed a series of similar gestures that have stretched from stripping the right of girls to secondary or higher education, to bans on women working for aid agencies and a ban on hair and beauty parlours.

During the Doha conversations that preceded the cakewalk into Kabul two years ago this month, the interlocutors from Afghanistan indicated that Taliban 2.0 would be different from their Pakistani- and Saudi-backed incarnation in the mid-1990s.

It has not worked out that way. Just last week, the Band-i-Amir national park in Bamiyan was declared off-limits to women. “I’ve heard more than one Afghan woman talk about how next the Taliban won’t allow them to breathe,” Human Rights Watch’s Heather Barr was quoted as saying. “That sounds very hyperbolic until you see them doing things like actually trying to stop women from being outdoors and enjoying nature.”

The Taliban response? “Going sightseeing is not a must for women.” That comes from a spokesman called Mohammed Khalid Hanafi who, like many of his Taliban brethren, seems to be unaware that he wouldn’t exist without his mother’s nurturing instincts following the agony of childbirth. In other words, as the singer-songwriter Peggy Seeger queried: “How can a man of woman born/ Thereafter treat her sex with scorn?”

The Taliban are destroying Afghanistan’s future.

She wasn’t talking about Afghanistan. Prejudices against women have been entrenched to various degrees in all societies, and their recent resurgence in the US is deplorable but not surprising. Former first lady Laura Bush at one point pretended to be keen on women’s rights in Afghanistan, which served as one of the post-hoc excuses for the 2001 invasion, but appears to have had nothing to say about their depletion in the US.

Only a few American journalists have acknowledged that women in urban Afghanistan experienced the least limitations on their ambitions during the Soviet-backed PDPA phase. As schoolteacher Glenn Sacks noted in Counterpunch this month, “In 1985, women accounted for 65pc of the 7,000 students at Kabul University — unthinkable in previous times.”

Some US initiatives after the 2001 occupation may have echoed Soviet ones, but that could never officially be acknowledged — not least because back in the 1980s, the Afghan mujahideen were receiving instructions from America on slitting the throats of schoolteachers who dared to instruct girls.

An outcome of recent Taliban policies has been to turn Afghanistan into one of the few countries where more women than men commit suicide. The ruling clique seems not to care.

There is a perception that the Taliban leadership is divided between those who might be willing to make social concessions, and a hard-line faction keen to reverse even the tiniest nod to liberalisation. Small wonder, then, that no country has formally recognised the regime — not even Pakistan, the Saudis and UAE, the three sponsors of the Taliban’s first incarnation.

In a recent report, BBC’s Lyse Doucet quoted a Kabul beautician as saying that the mounting pressure on women is part of an effort to win international recognition. If that’s true, it’s a strange way of going about it. One would have thought that some movement in the opposite direction might be more effective.

It is unlikely that any harm can come from talking to the Taliban — and the regime’s emissaries are reputedly frequent flyers. So far, there is also no evidence that diplomatic dialogues will yield meaningful results. The conversations should nonetheless continue, if only because there is no obvious alternative. While resisting IS-K, the Taliban have also exercised control over opium production, and, more broadly, security for travellers is reported to have vastly improved since the US occupation — which is hardly surprisi­ng, given the Taliban and their affiliates were once the main purveyors of insecurity.

There has been talk of Afghanistan profiting by allowing exploitation of the rare earths buried underneath its soil — most likely by Chinese entities unbothered by violations of human rights. The country could obviously benefit from such engagements, given its most lucrative produce is the chief ingredient for heroin.

The nation’s future, however, will not be determined by royalties. It cannot possibly prosper without liberating women from their shackles. Afghanistan is not entirely an outlier in the Muslim world in the context of women’s rights, but it goes further in denying them than even its most retrogressive peers.

Plenty of nations have contributed to Afghanistan’s plight, but right now its destiny is in the hands of the (originally Pakistan-spawned) Taliban.

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