**Taliban and women**

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The harsh reality is that Afghan women will be treated once again as second-class citizens with limited rights and unabated suppression in their own country. This holds true whether, after the withdrawal of foreign armies, we see a stable Afghanistan within the control of a unified and new-faced ‘moderate’ Taliban, or as usual the country becomes a civil war-ridden unstable state with internal and external pressures.

It is also very clear now that the international community and the US used Afghan women as pawns in a geopolitical conflict; unfortunately, the instrumentalisation of the gender equality agenda was cynically used for intervention and use of force only.

From the early signs of the post-US withdrawal, it seems women’s rights and freedom particularly would be sacrificed in the name of the Taliban’s monopolised version of Islam and their so-called process of emirate building. Afghan women will experience this violence not just in its physical form; it will also be structural, cultural and institutional.

According to verified accounts, the Taliban have already introduced an antiquated version of modesty for all women (including young girls), banned them from sports, and are not allowing them to work with men in workplaces. Those who did in the past were recently called prostitutes by a militant Talib leader on Afghan national TV.

This kind of gender apartheid cannot play any role in peacebuilding, hunger reduction, or poverty alleviation in Afghanistan. It will only end up exacerbating and aggravating the issues. Since the Taliban took over, poverty and hunger have spiralled and an estimated 14 million people – according to the WFP – are on the brink of starvation in Afghanistan. But it seems the Taliban are at war with women and this war is deep-rooted into their interpretation of religion and morality.

Imperialist and colonial powers, like textbook deals on all colonies of the past, left fundamental human and gender rights to the Taliban’s monopolised religious and cultural interpretations. All these imperialists presumably require is that the Taliban do not facilitate another harrowing Western disaster similar to 9/11 and continue to maintain the ‘negative peace’ required by Western powers.

The Doha deal made a mockery of the same marginalisation and harrowing lives of Afghan women which ironically made a partial moral case for US and the West’s intervention in 2001.

It seems Afghan women will only have token Western media coverage, interviews and academia debate since Western governments have made their stance and hypocrisy clear and gender security has been put aside in the Doha deal.

The Pakistani Taliban have congratulated the Afghan Taliban on their “blessed victory”. Women from the merged districts of the tribal belt in Pakistan, which was once the stronghold of the TTP, are now faced with the question of whether the same situation awaits them. The TTP and the Afghan Taliban are connected by the same past brutality, and their shared ideological ties are undeniable. The TTP wants to adopt a similar model of strict and repressive governance as seen under Taliban rule in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, and which will once again be imposed in 2021 looking at the way things are unfolding.

Gender disparities in Pakistan are the most pronounced in our merged districts. Tribal women’s mobility, access to food, security. education, healthcare is low and is now further threatened by the Taliban capturing power in Afghanistan. The Taliban on both sides do not believe in the mobility of women, freedom of expression or the right to proper education or health. One such instance was the killing of four women workers from the development sector in Mir Ali, North Waziristan in February 2021, and the circulation of pamphlets where women are warned against working.

The Pakistan government has recently talked about an amnesty deal for the TTP. If such a thing were to ever happen, would the already limited freedom of women living in the tribal belt be offered as a peace offering? Will such a ‘compromise’ be deemed necessary for peace and security – much like it has happened with Afghan women.

In 2014, Pakistan launched a military operation against the TTP in North Waziristan and was able to drive the leadership into eastern Afghanistan. With the Afghan Taliban now firmly entrenched into Afghanistan’s power structures, will it be possible to break the bond between them and the TTP?

Gender apartheid is at the core of their ideology. The question arises: what is the likely future for the women of this region? The answer: not much except regression and complete lack of empowerment, education, and access to healthcare facilities.

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