Analysis Of Women's Rights And Freedom Of Expression In Taliban Political Thought Based On The Lived Experience Of Afghan Women

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Abstract

The current focus on Afghan women's political and social rights in relation to the Taliban's political ideology is a significant global issue in today's world. Therefore, in this research, human rights have been examined in the mirror of the Taliban's political thought, with emphasis on women's rights and freedom of expression. The research is both analytical and exploratory in nature, utilizing qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. The research findings revealed that most interview participants perceived the Taliban as restricting women's political and social rights by excluding them from such activities. They attributed this to the Taliban's radical interpretation of Islam, which dictates that women should focus solely on caring for their children.
This article explores the impact of the Taliban's political ideology on women's rights and freedom of expression in Afghanistan, highlighting the lack of quantitative research in this area. The Taliban's interpretation of women's rights restricts their involvement in political activities, with some suggesting that the Taliban's aim is to protect women. In future research, the assessment of the models proposed in the study can be conducted through an analysis of empirical findings and quantitative approaches.

Keywords: *Human rights, Taliban political thought, Women's rights, Freedom of expression, Lived experience of Afghan women*

Introduction

Generally speaking, the social-political participation of women is a central issue in developing countries. Women, as active forces, play a key role in the social and political system so that they can partially remedy existing deficiencies in social forces in the least developed countries. While in the traditional Afghan community, women are known to be the backbone of the family, in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule, they deal with numerous problems, especially concerning women's rights and freedom of expression (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 2). Founded in 1994 as a militant group, the Taliban's philosophy is that women are thought of as men honor, and therefore they must be protected

(Zahedi 2021: 131) but this view is in direct contradiction to social-political history of Afghanistan. As the social-political status of Afghan women has closely intertwined with the Taliban's political philosophy, the issue has received much international attention in recent years. Reviewing women's place in Afghanistan over time indicated that they have always complained of being marginalized and deprived of basic civil freedoms despite their great efforts to revive women's social-political rights and make decisions for their fate (Seran 2014).

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The Taliban's perception of women's political-social rights meant depriving them of any political-social activities. Building upon their reactionary attitude, that women only must take care of their children, Taliban leaders have deprived women of their social-political rights (Zahedi 2021: 134). In this context, the political participation of Afghan women is one central issue after the overthrow of this militant group and its return to power. In a broad sense, political participation in the development process seems important in nations that are in transition to democracy. The reason why social forces become highly influential in these countries is that the political system mobilizes all forces to support democracy (Azizi 2021: 12). Afghanistan, as a new country, needs active social forces to take major steps towards democracy. Although, under the new political system, the Afghanistan government had taken symbolic steps to practice democracy, it faced many challenges to establishment and stability . In this context, past evidence and experience have shown that women in Afghanistan have been influential forces in society, and the lack of attention to women's society and their issues has created important challenges for different political systems. Accordingly, the present research seeks to address and analyze women's rights and freedom of expression in the Taliban's political thought based on the lived experience of Afghan women.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section moves on to study literature review. Then, the methods used in this investigation are discussed. The final section is concerned with the results of data analysis and conclusion.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations
After taking part in militant activities from 1994 to 1996, the Taliban paramilitary-political group established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and ruled the Afghani people from 1996 to 2001 (nearly 5 years). Then, after the September 11 attack, the group was overthrown by a U.S. military raid. However, they did not surrender and returned to power in Afghanistan. The issue of calling the Taliban to account for the violation of human rights, especially women's rights and freedom of expression, forms the central focus of this research (Karimi Haji Khademi 2016: 14).

The Taliban's perception of women's political-social rights meant depriving them of any political-social activities. Relying on their reactionary philosophy that women are duty-bound to look after their children, Taliban leaders stripped Afghan women of social-political activities (Yousufi 2021: 3). They first ordered women to stay a home under the pretext of preserving their dignity and later prevented them from schooling and work, going to hospital, or even going to public baths. A little while later, women were permitted to go out only when accompanied by male relatives and they must wear head-to-toe clothing (Burqe) in public (Jami 2022: 608).

The Taliban misuses religion to justify its brutal totalitarian dictatorship lacking any religious or moral values. From the beginning of their rule, they have always been issuing prejudiced decrees and have justified their harsh policies with extreme perceptions of Islam. However, imposing strict restrictions on women and preventing them from social-political activities originate from a political approach and a type of ruling rather than following Islam or tribal traditions.

In other words, dictatorial regimes that face a variety of oppositions and dangers first try to restrict half of society members by discovering the public Achilles' heel. Then, by abusing the existing horror atmosphere as well as social, political, and cultural limitations, they would be able to take control of people's lives. A case in point is domestic tensions created in the light of world wars where many opponents were defeated (Naila et al. 2012: 14-15).

Unfortunately, most Islamic countries did not condemn the Taliban for their harsh rules and extreme measures and the issue has derived most Afghani people, especially women, to despair (Sumitra et al. 2023: 234-235). Although Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Arab states of the Persian Gulf did not even

state the importance of Afghan women's education or respecting fundamental human rights in Afghanistan, Iran heavily defended women's rights in Islam.

The results of studies showed that since returning to power, the Taliban have imposed several severe restrictions on women (Shahraki 2021). For example, one decree issued by the Taliban was that women should not appear in public without a male relative (mahram), which means Afghan women are not allowed to go out unless they are in the company of a male relative, and any woman who broke the law she would punished. Therefore, a lot of problems in making a living are faced by widows divorced women, or those who have no male guardian (Azizi 2021).

After the overthrow of the Taliban, Afghan women made brave efforts to attain their fundamental rights, but when the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, women were again deprived of the little achievements which have received after a long, tough struggle. In the next section, we will address each of the issues in the literature reviews.

Literature Review

Among research in line with the theme of the present paper, a study (Mohaghi et al. 2018) examined the rights of Shia minority women in the law of Afghanistan. The results indicated that Afghan women have always suffered the consequences of being the most underprivileged members of the society where lack of laws appropriate to the status of women along with many other cultural, political, and economic factors plays a central role in their backwardness. Although Afghanistan's new constitution has brought great achievements for Afghan women, there were still deep deficiencies in the laws associated with Shia women.

To fill this gap, the Afghan government set an agenda to formulate personal status law which was included in Afghanistan's legal literature in line with Article 131 of the Constitution of Afghanistan (2003).

Research undertaken by Kosha and Mahmoudi (2018) addressed violence against women and the violation of human rights (the basis of its negation in Islam). The results of the research revealed that religions contribute to the prevention of violence against women. Islam is a case in point. Unlike other religions, Islam treats women with respect and objects to any violence against them. Accordingly, there is a basis for human dignity in Islam to which Western universal human rights have turned its attention.

Fazlikia (2019) studied Afghan women's rights during Amanullah Afghan reign (1919-1929). The results revealed that religious reformists failed to bring alterations, especially in the field of women's education, into conformity with Islamic decrees.

Mohseni (2020) investigated the issue of equality between men and women in the enjoyment of human rights in Afghanistan's legal system. The results suggested that since the country is liable to observe international conventions and commitments, a lot of effort has been made to confer men and women equal rights in Afghanistan law because absolute legal equality between men and women is a matter of concern to international documents, including Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966).

By researching the social-political participation of women in Afghanistan in three phases including post-Taliban, Taliban year, and Pre-Taliban, Ahmadi (2020) concluded that the issue of social-political participation of Afghan women transformed due to the establishment of a new government in 2001 after NATO allies went into Afghanistan. Accordingly, women noticed their legal power to make social-political decisions in the country.

Moreover, Shahraki (2021) investigated the function of the Taliban in nation-building following the 2021 transformations in Afghanistan. Using a library method, the research examined the role of the Taliban in nation-building after the 2021 transformations in Afghanistan. Results revealed that Nation-building in Afghanistan has always been influenced by numerous factors including two decades of presence of the U.S and NATO allies in the region, long fights against the Taliban, al-Qaeda as well as traditional thoughts, fear of the Taliban's restrictions, ethnocentrism and Afghani

people distrust in the U.S. Altogether, the situation could drive the country towards the establishment of a new dictatorship Taliban government.

Methodology

The methodological approach taken in this study is studying human rights in the mirror of the Taliban's political thought by emphasizing women's rights and freedom of expression. This research seeks to address the following question: What is the theoretical framework for analyzing women's rights and freedom of expression in the political thought of the Taliban? This research is analytical and exploratory in terms of its purpose, and qualitative research in terms of the type and method of data collection and analysis. Grounded Theory was used to analyze the content of the interviews.

In the current study, the population under study embraced Afghan women and girls living in Shiraz, Iran who had previous experience of living under the rule of Taliban and had enough knowledge about human rights and freedom of expression. Participants were selected using purposeful snowball sampling. To do so, the researcher first recruited two Afghan women who lived in Shiraz and then they were asked to introduce more samples to the researcher. Interviews kept on until the theoretical saturation was reached. Finally, a total of 12 interviews were chosen for an analysis based on a grounded theory.

Results

As it was stated in previous chapters, interviews were used to collect data. Accordingly, 12 interviews with participants were carried out to reach theoretical saturation. Table 1 summarizes the main features of the samples.

Table 1. Features of interview participants (Source: Author)

No.	Occupation	Duration of interview	Age
1	University student	57 min.	23
2	Ceramic workshop	44 min.	26
3	Housewife	39 min.	48
4	Fashion designer	52 min.	32
5	Dressmaker	63 min.	39
6	Artist	68 min.	29
7	Doctor's office secretary	37 min.	28
8	Graphic designer	48 min.	34
9	Housewife	42 min.	47
10	Handicrafts	56 min.	38
11	Saleswoman	49 min.	26
12	Dress designer	49 min.	42

Focusing on the lived experience of interview participants who all had two-year experiences of living in Afghanistan under Taliban rule and their relatives are still living in such a setting can be referred to as the most precious and original data collecting tool, and that is why this population was chosen for the research.

As was noted in the previous section, the qualitative method of Grounded theory with Barney Glaser Approach developed by Strauss and Corbin was applied to analyze data collected from the interviews where the main coding process included the following stages: open, axial, and selective coding (theory crafting process for the studied phenomenon).

In the first step, both initial and secondary coding stages were used to cover the studied phenomenon correctly. In the secondary coding, initial extracted codes were compared, and then either similar or common cases fell into a single category. Thus, bulk data (codes-concepts) were reduced into several

limited categories. Then, the categories were gathered together and linked to each other for the analysis of the studied phenomenon.

In the second step, i.e. coding, one category belonging to the open coding stage was selected and put in the center of the studied phenomenon (as a central phenomenon), then other categories were classified as follows: "causal conditions", "strategies", "contextual conditions", "intervening conditions", and consequences". This stage includes drawing a model representing the "schematic diagram of the research methodology".

After being implemented, interviews were examined, conceptualized, and categorized line by line. Then, components of "causal conditions", "contextual conditions", "central phenomenon", "intervening conditions", "strategies" and consequences are presented based on their similarities, conceptual link, and common features between open codes. Causal conditions show reasons for the development of the central phenomenon. In the same vein, contextual and intervening conditions are conditions that have facilitated and intervened in the formation of the central phenomenon.

Table 2 summarizes the results of open coding for the category of causal conditions (main reasons for developing the central phenomenon) associated with women's rights and freedom of expression in the Taliban's political thought.

Table 2. Results of open coding about causal conditions

Proposition	Concept (initial code)	Reference
Taliban see women as a symbol of men's honor, so they must look after women.	The importance of preserving honor	Interview no. 1
They used religion as a pretext for justifying their worst measures	Using religion as an excuse	Interview no.2
Women must look after their children	Imposing parenting on women	Interview no.2
Taliban leaders believed that the social participation of women leads to immorality	A justification for the avoidance of immorality	Interview no.4
Their logic was to prevent the Afghani people and the Taliban militia from being corrupted.	Preventing people from corruption	Interview no.5
All Afghani people should follow Islamic orders and the Taliban put extreme interpretations on Islam	Giving extreme interpretations on Islam	Interview no. 5
Adherence to ethnic and tribal traditions rather than following orders of Islam	Adherence to Islam as well as tribal and ethnic traditions	Interview no.8
Restoration of law and order has priority over women's rights	establishing law and order	Interview no. 9
Taliban feared that literate women may no longer obey them	Fear of Afghan women's knowledge and awareness	Interview no. 11

Table 3 represents the results of open coding related to intervening conditions for women's rights and freedom of expression in the Taliban's political thought.

Table 3. Open coding results for intervening conditions

Proposition	Concept (initial code)	Reference
International entities failed to defend Afghan women's rights and only issued a statement	Lack of international support for human rights	Interview no. 1
failure of Afghan celebrities to support women's social-political status	Lack of celebrities support	Interview no. 3
Those who broke the rules were punished	Punishment for disobeying the rules	Interview no. 4

Even when schools were opened and girls were supposed to attend schools, the Taliban prohibited girls from schooling by banning teachers.	Preventing women from education	Interview no. 10
Afghani leaders and political figures lacked political maturity	Political immaturity of Afghan politicians	Interview no. 10
Arab states and such Muslim countries as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan supported the Taliban and their political thought	Failure of some Muslim countries to support women's rights	Interview no. 10
Even if they have not restricted women, we were poor enough to leave education	Poverty	Interview no. 12

Table 4 shows the results of open coding for contextual conditions related to women's rights and freedom of expression in the Taliban political thought.

Table 4. The results of open coding for contextual conditions

Proposition	Concept (initial coding)	Reference
As far as I recall, there has been so much war in Afghanistan that the issue of women's rights has been completely forgotten.	War	Interview no.1
A lot of people were illiterate like me. If we were literate, we would have much incentive to participate in the society. I did not even go out because I was uneducated.	Illiteracy	Interview no.3
Women had to get permission from their husbands if they wanted to leave the house, otherwise, they were beaten by their husbands.	Violence against women	Interview no.4
If a woman applied for a job nobody dared to employ them.	Fear of employing women	Interview no. 5
The issue of culture-building was always resisted. No attempts were made to recognize women's identity.	Lack of culture-building	Interview no. 6
Apart from all, Afghan women like my mother were so busy with housekeeping that had no time to address these issues.	Women's involvement in house works	Interview no. 8
Being financially secure, women were able to do some things. But most of us were poor.	Afghanistan economic condition	Interview no. 10
Even if there was no poverty, women did not dare to participate in social activities	Women's lack of courage	Interview no. 10
Most of us were completely unaware of women's rights and freedom of expression. These issue did not even discussed in women's gatherings.	Being unaware of women's rights and freedom of expression	Interview no. 11

In the next step, interview participants were asked to put forward practical solutions to retain women's rights and freedom of expression in Afghanistan, and then their consequences were examined. Finally, the results of axial coding and categorization of codes were summarized. Table 5 presents the results of axial coding and content category.
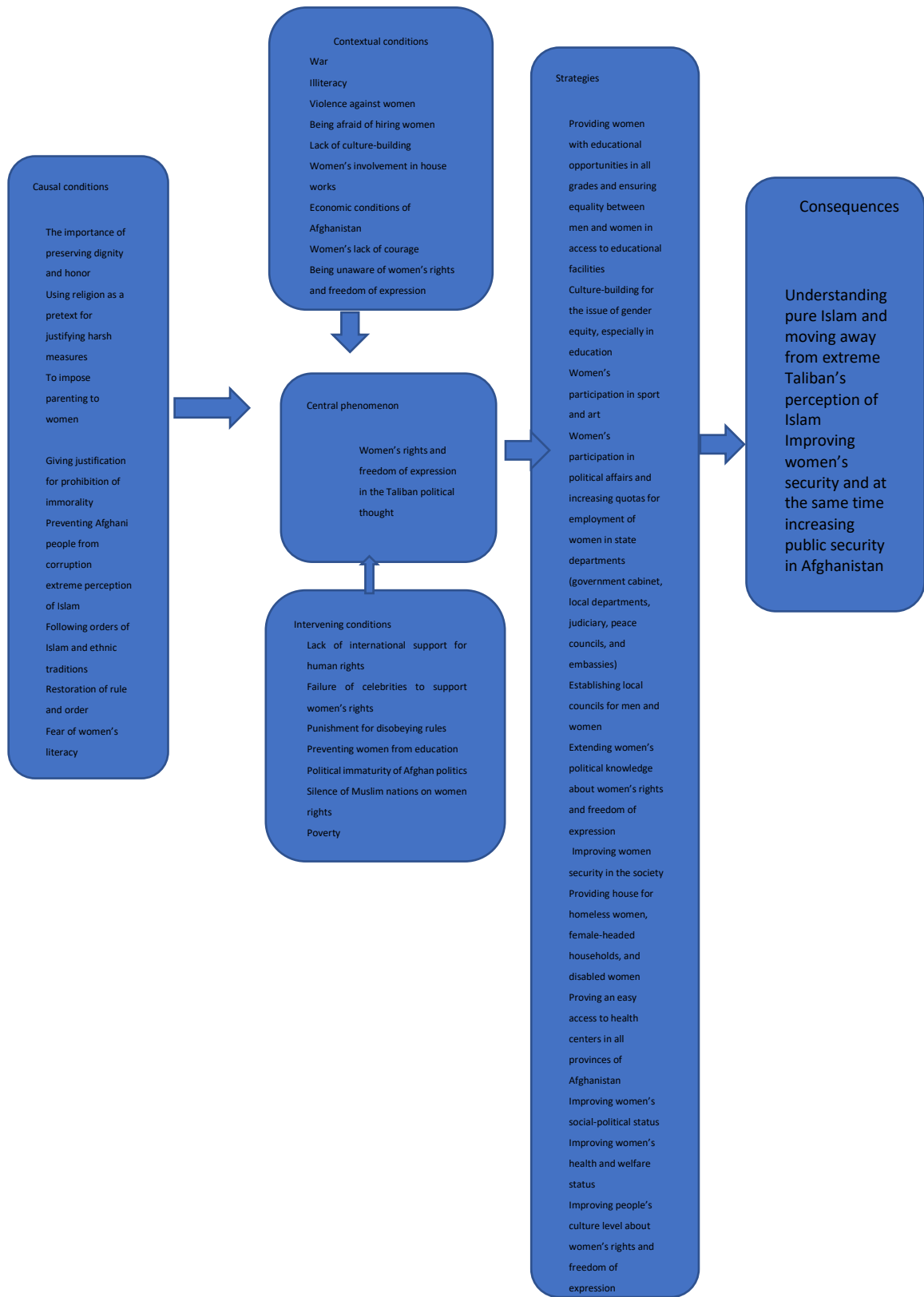
Table 5. Results of axial coding and code category

Categories	Axial codes

Causal conditions	The importance of preserving dignity and honor
	Using religion as a pretext for justifying harsh measures
	To impose parenting on women
	Giving justification for prohibition of immorality
	Preventing Afghani people from corruption
	extreme perception of Islam
	Following orders of Islam and ethnic traditions
	Restoration of rule and order
	Fear of women's literacy
Intervening conditions	Lack of international support for human rights
	Failure of celebrities to support women's rights
	Punishment for disobeying rules
	Preventing women from education
	Political immaturity of Afghan politics
	Silence of Muslim nations on women rights
	Poverty
Contextual conditions	War
	Illiteracy
	Violence against women
	Being afraid of hiring women
	Lack of culture-building
	Women's involvement in house works
	Economic conditions of Afghanistan
	Women's lack of courage
	Being unaware of women's rights and freedom of expression
Central phenomenon	Women's rights and freedom of expression in the Taliban political thought
strategies	Providing women with educational opportunities in all grades and ensuring equality between men and women in access to educational facilities
	Culture-building for the issue of gender equity, especially in education
	Women's participation in sport and art
	Women's participation in political affairs and increasing quotas for employment of women in state departments (government cabinet, local departments, judiciary, peace councils, and embassies)
	Establishing local councils for men and women
	Extending women's political knowledge about women's rights and freedom of expression
	Improving women's security in the society
	Providing houses for homeless women, female-headed households, and disabled women
	Proving easy access to health centers in all provinces of Afghanistan
	Improving women's social-political status
	Improving women's health and welfare status
	Improving people's cultural level about women's rights and freedom of expression

Consequences	Understanding pure Islam and moving away from extreme Taliban's perception of Islam
	Improving women's security and at the same time increasing public security in Afghanistan

Finally, using the data from table 5, the theory and a qualitative model for investigating women's rights and freedom of expression in the political thought of the Taliban obtained from the Grounded Theory was presented in fig. 1.

Contextual conditions

War
Illiteracy
Violence against women
Being afraid of hiring women
Lack of culture-building
Women's involvement in house works
Economic conditions of Afghanistan
Women's lack of courage
Being unaware of women's rights and freedom of expression

Causal conditions

The importance of preserving dignity and honor
Using religion as a pretext for justifying harsh measures
To impose parenting to women

Giving justification for prohibition of immorality
Preventing Afghani people from corruption
extreme perception of Islam
Following orders of Islam and ethnic traditions
Restoration of rule and order
Fear of women's literacy

Central phenomenon

Women's rights and freedom of expression in the Taliban political thought

Intervening conditions

Lack of international support for human rights
Failure of celebrities to support women's rights
Punishment for disobeying rules
Preventing women from education
Political immaturity of Afghan politics
Silence of Muslim nations on women rights
Poverty

Strategies

Providing women with educational opportunities in all grades and ensuring equality between men and women in access to educational facilities
Culture-building for the issue of gender equity, especially in education
Women's participation in sport and art
Women's participation in political affairs and increasing quotas for employment of women in state departments (government cabinet, local departments, judiciary, peace councils, and embassies)
Establishing local councils for men and women
Extending women's political knowledge about women's rights and freedom of expression
Improving women security in the society
Providing house for homeless women, female-headed households, and disabled women
Proving an easy access to health centers in all provinces of Afghanistan
Improving women's social-political status
Improving women's health and welfare status
Improving people's culture level about women's rights and freedom of expression

Consequences

Understanding pure Islam and moving away from extreme Taliban's perception of Islam
Improving women's security and at the same time increasing public security in Afghanistan

Figure 1. Theoretical model for investigating women's rights and freedom of expression in the Taliban political thought.

Therefore, the above model was presented based on six components (categories) including "central phenomenon", "causal conditions", "contextual conditions", "intervening conditions", "strategies" and Consequences".

Discussion and Conclusion

As noted above, the paper aims to analyze women's rights and freedom of expression in the Taliban political thought based on the lived experience of Afghan women. After obtaining the results of the research, it can be acknowledged that the results summarized in the next section could contribute to understanding the Taliban ruling aspects and their political thought. The reason why the results are important is that the first Taliban took control of Afghanistan in a short period, so there is very little scientific knowledge of their political thought and their approach, especially because publication of existing documents is not legally permitted (Zahedi 2021: 133).

Therefore, the research gap in this context was obvious. Second, existing knowledge of this political group is mainly based on their records of militant measures, and thus there is little knowledge of their ruling philosophy and political thought. Therefore, the results of the research obtained from the lived experience of Afghan women can be classified as groundbreaking studies in this field.

What stood out most in the interviews with the interview participants was that the majority of them believed the Taliban's perception of women's political-social rights meant depriving them of any political-social activities. They believed that the main reason for their harsh actions was their extreme perception of Islam. The Taliban had clearly explained that women only must take care of their children. According to interview participants, some previous Taliban leaders believed that the sole purpose of this group was to protect their sisters against corrupt people.

Moreover, most interview participants believed that Muslim nations did not condemn radical measures of the Taliban as much as expected, and such countries as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Arab states of the Persian Gulf did not express their support for the Afghani people. While Iran has always strenuously defended women's rights in Islam. The above issue has grown in importance because, in the words of one participant, the failure of Pakistan or Muslim Arab states to show their support for human rights in Afghanistan set the stage for the predominance of the Taliban's political beliefs.

According to some interview participants, the September 11 attack could prove to be a turning point in the establishment of the new government in Afghanistan and after NATTO forces invasion and overthrow of the Taliban, a new plan was proposed during the Bonn Conference for state-building in Afghanistan.

At this conference, most attention was paid to human rights, freedom of expression, free press, and women's rights. Although time and planning were key elements in carrying out the plan, it was overshadowed by the return of the Taliban. According to participants, when the Taliban gained power again, women were completely removed from Afghanistan's social-political system to the extent that they were banned from attending academic settings, and they were not allowed to work, travel, or even choose their clothing.

Another important point is that interview participants believed that the Taliban sees women as a tool to satisfy men's lust and use them as a political instrument for dealing with the community of nations to force them to recognize the Taliban government. In other words, despite all ethnical, language, and religious differences, times were hard for women under Taliban rule, and female-headed households who had lost their husbands or guardians in the war had trouble making a decent living. From this we deduce that the instrumental view of the Taliban toward women has its roots in the fact that the issue of women is a matter of great sensitivity to the community of nations and the United Nations, therefore the Taliban tries to exert much pressure on the community of nations to not only recognize their government but also release their frozen assets in foreign banks.

A limitation of this study is that the researcher did not have any direct communication with the case study (Afghanistan). It is suggested that future research on this topic be undertaken by researches

having the experience of living under the Taliban rule. Moreover, after consulting experts about the current topic and analyzing earlier studies a variety of codes, concepts, and factors were identified and selected to present the research qualitative model.

In further research, models suggested in the research could analyzed based on practical results and quantitative methods.

The final point is that the data reported here appear to provide the underlying assumptions for further research. Therefore, it is recommended that further research be undertaken using this data for a varying population through different analyzing methods.

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