

## Veiled Oppression: The Taliban's Misogynistic Rule in Afghanistan

In 1996, the Taliban took over Kabul after years of civil war between various *mujahideen* groups. Shortly after, the Taliban established the First Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, despite no member of the Taliban having any practical experience in running a country. The Taliban instilled a theological government, draconian laws, and cruelty exhibitionism based on their interpretation of *Sharia* law. The effect: the most misogynistic policies seen until today. Women under the Taliban were prohibited from leaving the house without a male blood relative, attending school, carrying out their jobs, or receiving adequate medical care, and lived under gender apartheid. No other Islamic state which follows *Sharia* law is as extreme as Afghanistan under the Taliban about the role of women and their rights. The Taliban's views about women differ drastically from the views of moderate Muslims.<sup>1</sup> This conjures the question of how the Taliban justified its state-sanctioned misogyny. This essay argues that the Taliban of the 90s coopted *Sharia* law and justified their misogynistic legislature under the guise of protecting and honouring women. This essay will first provide a historiography and definition of misogyny. Second, this essay will explore the Taliban's background and Pashtun culture. Third, it will turn to the laws regulating women, followed by an examination of the Taliban's discrepancy in their interpretation of *Sharia* law and the Koran.

Many scholars have written extensively about the Taliban, their rule, and inevitably their attitudes and imposed austere rules on women. In her book, *The Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban*, Rosemarie Skaine asserts that the extreme beliefs of the Taliban oppose those of moderate Sunni Muslims. In the chapter "Women's Roles in Islam," she disavows the Taliban's claim of following and enacting *Sharia* law by highlighting the rights Women are granted in the Islamic faith. Skaine quotes the Koran to highlight women's equal rights to education. Further, she mentions that the Taliban conflates religion and culture.<sup>2</sup> While Skaine elucidates the

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemarie Skaine, *The Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 57.

<sup>2</sup> Skaine, *The Women of Afghanistan*, 63.

discrepancies within the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia and the Koran, she fails to delve deeper into the conflation of religion and culture and highlights in what ways Pashtun tribal codes have influenced the Taliban. Scholars John and Linda Schulz elucidate in harrowing detail the effects of Taliban rule on women. They decipher the effects of the burqa on mental and physical health and brilliantly demonstrate that the Taliban's rules harm instead of protect women. Furthermore, they highlight the Taliban's responses to women's suffering, such as a Taliban official's response to the question of how widows were supposed to survive: "Let them die."<sup>3</sup> Schulz and Schulz excellently prove the Taliban's misogyny by highlighting women's violent realities and the Taliban's cruel discourse. However brilliant their article *The Darkest of Ages: Afghan Women Under the Taliban* is, they fail to contextualise where the Taliban derive their misogyny from.

In chapter eight of his book *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Ahmed Rashid discusses the restrictions placed upon Afghan women by the *Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice* and illuminates the senselessness of its decrees, such as the prohibition of makeup given that women wore head to toe burqas.<sup>4</sup> Rashid contextualises the Ministry and its recruitment from madrassas as well as the weaponizing of Islam against women. Additionally, Rashid explores the connection between Pashtunwali and the Taliban's interpretation of Islam. He aptly coins this Pashtunwali-Sharia law.<sup>5</sup> Rashid's summary of the Taliban's laws is an insightful addition to the scholarship. Yet, he lacks a demonstrative rigour regarding the punishments against women and the effects that they have. Rashid moreover infuses his report on women under the Taliban with restrictive edicts against men and the general population, which weakens his argument that the Ministry of Vice and Virtue is banishing women from public life. This essay's analysis of the Taliban's state-sanctioned misogyny adopts

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<sup>3</sup> John J. Schulz and Linda Schulz, "The Darkest of Ages: Afghan Women under the Taliban," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 5, no. 3 (September 1999): 237–54, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327949pac0503\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327949pac0503_5), 243.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 105.

<sup>5</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 112.

a framework borrowing from Skaine, Schulz and Schulz, and Rashid since, individually, neither scholar's answer is complete, yet collectively, they complement one another. It will scrutinise the Taliban's background and the Pashtunwali, as well as highlight the devastating effects of the Taliban's Pashtunwali-Sharia on women and thereby prove the laws are misogynist and disprove that the Taliban's misogynistic laws are derived from Sharia. Misogyny, the oldest prejudice in the world, describes a deep-seated hatred, contempt, or prejudice against women that contributes to the marginalisation, discrimination, and oppression of women based on their gender. Misogyny can manifest in numerous ways, such as unequal treatment of and violence against women. Misogynistic laws, for instance, are family laws which enforce traditional gender roles and disadvantage women, laws that limit educational opportunities or restrict work opportunities.

The roots of the Taliban go back to 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, a deeply divided country with many different tribal groups. The Taliban's roots come from the Pashtun ethnic group, and Taliban translates to student in the Pashtun language. During the Soviet invasion, rural Afghans revolted and formed armed militias, called *mujahideen*. The conflict against the Soviets was supported by countries such as Pakistan, and the US. The conflict drove many Pashtuns into refugee camps in Pakistan across the Durand line. Almost all of the Taliban leaders grew up in those camps with women who were deeply disturbed by the trauma of war.<sup>6</sup> These refugee camps were often run by Deobandi organisations.<sup>7</sup> Many of the illiterate tribal members were then educated in Deobandi madrassas in refugee camps. The Deobandi movement arose in British India, seeking to reform and unite Muslim society, which was struggling under a colonial non-Muslim state. The Deobandis viewed education as crucial for the modern Muslim whilst maintaining a restrictive view on the role of women.<sup>8</sup> By 1988 there were over 30000 madrassas in Pakistan, many of them unregistered, teaching over half a million students. With Pakistan's failing education system these madrassas were the only chance for boys of poor families to receive education. These madrassas were primarily in rural areas and

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<sup>6</sup> Schulz and Schulz, "The Darkest of Ages," 239.

<sup>7</sup> Vern Liebl, "Pashtuns, Tribalism, Leadership, Islam and Taliban: A Short View," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 18, no. 3 (September 2007): 492–510, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310701674481>, 503.

<sup>8</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 88.

Afghan refugee camps and “were run by semi-educated mullahs who were far removed from the original reformist agenda of the Deobandi school.”<sup>9</sup> Rashid writes that the interpretation of Sharia by these mullahs was heavily influenced by the Pashtunwali tribal code. That, along with the funds from Saudi Arabia, which was following the Wahhabi creed, enabled these madrassas to produce young militants.<sup>10</sup> During their years in the madrassas, young boys and men were physically isolated from any women and were indoctrinated by a religiously orthodox male ideology.<sup>11</sup>

The Pashtunwali, a tribal code practised by the Pashtuns, has three primary tenets, which are all connected to honour. The first is *malmastia*, which is the provision of hospitality. The second is *nanawati*, which offers refuge from war and prosecution or forgiving wrongs. The final tenet is *badal*, which is vengeance and can be used to avenge any insult. However, *badal* can also be used to reciprocate of any good deed. Liebl writes that “Pashtuns will never forgive or forget a wrong, however slight, and will defend their honour, even unto death, as an obligation.”<sup>12</sup> In Pashtunwali, the honour of women and the honour of society are intricately linked. Therefore, the protection of women is the safeguarding of society and men’s honour. Women can thus be restricted to maintain society's honour. One of these restrictions is *pardah*, the seclusion of women. Traditionally, some Pashtun women consequently only had contact with family members.<sup>13</sup>

After the Soviet Union left Afghanistan in 1989, a civil war broke out between the various mujahideen groups from which the Taliban, guided by Mullah Omar, emerged victorious. Subsequently, they took over Kabul and established a government based on their interpretation of Sharia law. After their conquest of Kabul, the Taliban enforced draconian laws, which repressed

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<sup>9</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 89.

<sup>10</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 90.

<sup>11</sup> Hayat Alvi, “Islamists’ Fear of Females the Roots of Gynophobic Misogyny among the Taliban and Islamic State,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, January 2022, 81–87, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Liebl, “Pashtuns, Tribalism, Leadership, Islam and Taliban,” 507.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War, Religion, and the New Order in Afghanistan* (London: Zed Books, 2002), 92.

women, instead of having actual policy.<sup>14</sup> These draconian laws were regulated by the *Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice* (Ministry of Vice and Virtue.) The Ministry of Vice and Virtue was also responsible for policing the laws they enacted. The ministry confined women to their homes. To illustrate, a woman is only allowed to leave the house, if she is accompanied by a male blood relative, such as a father, brother, or husband. When leaving the house, a woman must wear a burqa, veiling her completely and rendering her invisible. She is prohibited from wearing white socks, squeaky shoes or showing her ankles.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, women and girls were banned from schools and universities and prohibited from doing any work outside the home. Thereby completely alienating women from the public sphere, making the economic and political community exclusively male.<sup>16</sup> Even within the house, women were extremely restricted, as any house with a woman living in it must have darkened windows, which left women without access to direct sunlight. A strict curfew for women was imposed and did not make exceptions for women in labour, resulting in an increase of birth and gynaecological complications, such as uterine infections.<sup>17</sup> Women lost access to public bath houses and with it access to wash themselves and practice adequate hygiene. The strict restrictions imposed on women included the segregation of hospitals. Schulz and Schulz report that in 1997, there was only one hospital available for half a million women in Kabul. While this restriction had been lifted, health care was still inaccessible because most female doctors were not allowed to practice and male physicians were forbidden from examining women, unless they were wearing a burqa. Therefore, most afflictions could not be accurately diagnosed and treated, and women died needlessly because of it.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Liebl, "Pushtuns, Tribalism, Leadership, Islam and Taliban," 504.

<sup>15</sup> Anastasia Telesetsky, "In the Shadows and Behind the Veil: Women in Afghanistan Under Taliban Rule," *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice* 13 (September 1998): 293–305, <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z382Z12P1T>, 293.

<sup>16</sup> Telesetsky, "In the Shadows and Behind the Veil," 296.

<sup>17</sup> Schulz and Schulz, "The Darkest of Ages," 242.

<sup>18</sup> Schulz and Schulz, "The Darkest of Ages," 245.

Theoretically, women are allowed to leave the house if accompanied by a male blood relative and completely veiled underneath a burqa. However, burqas cost at least three months' worth of average wages or more.<sup>19</sup> Considering that most households lost women's income, the burqa is a financial burden that either completely confines women at home or means that women must share the same *burqa*. The burqa considerably compromises a person's field of vision. Changes in one's surrounding are not recognised in time and leaves women vulnerable to falling and any attacks. Moreover, the imposition of the burqa added to women's declining health since the burqa can cause eye, ear, and skin problems, increased cardiac problems, hair loss and depression.<sup>20</sup> The punishments enacted by the Taliban for breaking any rules were beyond cruel. For instance, women are flogged with car antennas and beaten close to death for wearing white socks or showing their ankles. Women who leave their house with a non-related male are sentenced to death by stoning.<sup>21</sup> Digits get amputated for wearing nail polish. A woman rushing her sick child to the hospital got shot for not being accompanied by a male blood relative.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the Taliban's cruel and misogynistic legislature brought upon a society of gender apartheid in which women lived under constant fear.

The world community condemned the Taliban's treatment of women, including many Muslim communities, yet the Taliban claimed that they are respecting, protecting, and honouring women. They asserted that they were simply rejecting the cultural norms of the West and following Sharia law, as prescribed by the Koran, instead. Firstly, women are protected in the Koran by provisions that ensure property rights, inheritance rights or the right to refuse a marriage, among others. However, protection is not equality.<sup>23</sup> The Taliban movement "has announced their respect for all members of society, including women and men. These decisions and restrictions by the Islamic government are not only in agreement with Islamic instructions

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<sup>19</sup> Schulz and Schulz, "The Darkest of Ages," 243.

<sup>20</sup> Schulz and Schulz, "The Darkest of Ages," 246.

<sup>21</sup> Schulz and Schulz, "The Darkest of Ages," 247.

<sup>22</sup> Schulz and Schulz, "The Darkest of Ages," 248.

<sup>23</sup> Skaine, *The Women of Afghanistan*, 58.

but also indicate respect for the rights of women and human rights. In the context of human rights, education of women is not considered as important as the protection of honour and the integrity of women.”<sup>24</sup> The Taliban declared that the acquiring of knowledge is not as important for women as their honour or dignity. However, the Koran heavily emphasises the obtaining of knowledge and does not differentiate between men and women regarding knowledge. “Recite in the name of thy Lord who created everything. He created man from a clot of blood. Recite, for thy Lord is Most Beneficent, who has taught by the pen, taught man that which he knew not. (96: 1-5)”<sup>25</sup> While this revelation uses a masculine pronoun and refers to man, it encompasses women. If one rejects that this commandment does not include women, then other commandments, such as fasting or the pilgrimage, would also exclude women, since they use masculine pronouns as well. The Taliban emphasise that they will educate girls and women but that, momentarily, the country does not have the resources to do so in a way that is aligned with Sharia law. However, if half the population cannot work, the country will never have the resources to educate its female population.

The Taliban restrict women by continuously saying it is protecting their dignity and honour, claiming that they are adhering to the Islamic faith. In 1995, Mullah Rafiullah Nomani Tolo-ye Afghan explained why the Taliban outlawed public baths:

They call us narrow-minded because we have shut down some places where evil practices took place. Public baths for women are among such places. We have done this in order to protect the honour and dignity of the women. It is against our culture and tradition and against the teachings of the Islamic faith that women go to public baths. We have given women all the rights which are given to them by the Islamic faith. So we are not narrow-minded because we are acting in accordance with the teachings of the Islamic faith.<sup>26</sup>

It is noteworthy that the Taliban consider public baths a place of evil. It suggests that there are nefarious deeds being committed in women’s bathhouses, even though it is traditionally a

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<sup>24</sup> Strick van Linshoten, Alex Kuehn, and Felix Kuehn, eds., *The Taliban Reader: War, Islam and Politics in Their Own Words* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 133.

<sup>25</sup> Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, trans., *The Quran: The Eternal Revelation Vouchsafed to Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets: Arabic Text with a New Translation by Muhammad Zafrulla Khan*, 3rd ed. (London: Curzon Press, 1981), 624.

<sup>26</sup> van Linshoten et al, *The Taliban Reader*, 105.

woman-only space. Furthermore, the Koran states that “Allah loves those who turn to Him often, and Allah loves those who are clean and pure (2:222).”<sup>27</sup> In this verse, cleanliness is linked to purity, therefore those who are not clean are not pure. The Taliban’s claim that bathhouses are not in accordance with the Islamic faith is utterly false and misinformed and not only denies women basic human rights such as access to clean water but also hinders them from following the Koran’s teachings. This is not the only instance in which women’s ability to practice Islam has been thwarted. Women are banned from entering mosques and, thus, during the call of prayer, must kneel in the streets.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the Taliban calls Westerners infidels: “The infidels, above all the West, who are sworn enemies of Islam and Muslims [...] plot to destroy Islam and defame Islamic movements [...] and attempted to give a false impression of Islam to the world.”<sup>29</sup> The response to outside non-Islamic countries and agencies displays that they are trying to convince the world that the West simply does not understand Islamic teachings and the rights granted by the Koran. It further infers that the Taliban are protecting Afghan society and women from Western influences, which would erode Islamic values and teachings.

The Taliban blatantly put their own spin on Islamic teachings, all of which are misogynistic and driven by the desire to keep women confined at home. The rules and punishments that the Ministry of Vice and Virtue enact are a perverse reimagination of the Islamic faith. The Taliban declared that “Allah has clearly defined the responsibilities of men and women in this book. A woman has been given the important and crucial responsibility of making a family and looking after it. She is responsible for bringing up the children because she can do it better.”<sup>30</sup> This alludes to women’s place being in the household and men’s responsibility being outside the household. However, the Koran does not require women to be confined to the household in a

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<sup>27</sup> Khan, *The Quran*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> Schulz and Schulz, “The Darkest of Ages,” 243.

<sup>29</sup> van Linshoten et al, *The Taliban Reader*, 132.

<sup>30</sup> van Linshoten et al, *The Taliban Reader*, 108.



way that resembles *purdah*,<sup>31</sup> as enacted by the Taliban. Additionally, women are unable to care for their children if they cannot take them to the doctor or afford to feed them if families lose a woman's income.

The Ministry of Vice and Virtue is loosely modelled after the concept of enjoining good and forbidding wrong. It resembles a religious police force and is not beholden to either the Justice Ministry or the Supreme Court but only to the orders of Amir Mullah Mohammed Omar.<sup>32</sup> In addition to imposing draconian laws on women, the Taliban have outlawed vices such as smoking or drugs, yet Taliban officials still smoke, and Afghanistan in 1997 produced more heroin than any other country.<sup>33</sup> Instead of punishing smoking or drug production, the Ministry concentrates its resources on ensuring that women cannot cause any sexual temptation.<sup>34</sup> Female temptations, and, consequently, women are the first target of social control, and by controlling women, the Taliban believe that they are keeping women, and by extension, the public sphere safe.<sup>35</sup> Blaming women for sexual temptation absolves men of any sin, especially regarding sexual assault. It does not protect women; it targets them, especially considering that women are not allowed to petition a court directly, and their testimony is worth half of a man's testimony.<sup>36</sup> Legislature such as this subsequently state-sanctions sexual assault on women, who are consequently accused of adultery. The Taliban insists that they are following Islamic law; however, upon closer inspection, their subjugating of women is not derived from scripture and does not protect women from harm or protects their honour.

To summarise, the Taliban primarily trace their heritage to the Pashtun ethnic group. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, many Pashtuns fled to Pakistan, where they lived in

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<sup>31</sup> Skaine, *The Women of Afghanistan*, 58.

<sup>32</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 106.

<sup>33</sup> Schulz and Schulz, "The Darkest of Ages," 252.

<sup>34</sup> Alvi, "Islamists' Fear of Females," 81.

<sup>35</sup> Alvi, "Islamists' Fear of Females," 84.

<sup>36</sup> Telesetsky, "In the Shadows and Behind the Veil," 298.

refugee camps, and many boys and young men went to Deobandi madrassas. There, young Pashtuns, and Afghans were taught by ill-informed mullahs and grew up in isolation from females. Influenced by the Pashtunwali, they adopted Pashtunwali-Sharia law. The Taliban consciously claimed that they are protecting women and their honour yet, they imposed draconian rules that severely impacted women's physical and mental health. In addition, some of the Taliban's restrictions prevented women from practising their faith. Their extreme crack-down on women facilitated through the Ministry of Vice and Virtue is clearly derived from elements of the Pashtunwali, such as *pardah* and the concept that a woman's honour is linked to society's honour. By protecting women's honour and traditional roles in the household, the Taliban claim that they are protecting Afghans' honour from non-Islamic influences. However, women under the Taliban are not protected, nor are they honoured members of society; they are fully banned from the social and economic spheres, thereby being dependent on men and under complete social control.

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