

# The Role of Women in the Security Paradigm of Afghanistan

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Respect for women is the sign of a civilized society. Those societies where they work shoulder to shoulder with men without any harm and threat from the male counterparts, highlight the image of their country. Women in Afghanistan have passed through tormenting transitions partly during the Taliban regime and partly in the post-September 2001 scenario from the male members of the society. But the nature of their suppression is different in both the eras, in the former case they had to abide by certain strict Islamic orders relating to the *Purda* system while in the latter case they have to face the issues of sexual harassment, abuse, risks to life and property and obstacles in the way of their political participation. Objective of the study focusses on analyzing the role of women in the security paradigm of the country in the post-September 2001 scenario while research questions focus on the role played by women in maintaining peace and security, impact of the Security Act of 2017 on the status of women, the issues of sexual harassment and abuse faced by women and systemic mechanism of rules and laws for regulating the behavior of the civil and security servants so as to pave the way for the women to perform their duties efficiently. The study adopts qualitative approach mainly relying on the secondary sources of documents analysis to heighten the significance of women in protecting the country against internal and external aggression.

**Key words:** *Women, Security, Afghanistan, Harassment and Mechanism*



## Introduction

Women are very important to the security of Afghanistan. Their role has been very significant in the nation building and security of the country in the aftermath of the post-2001 scenario. Prior to it, they were mostly deprived of their due rights and political participation in the country particularly during the Taliban regime though they were in a position to enjoy high positions in jobs, social and political participation in all walks of life during the 1960s and 1970s. Theoretically women have played an important role in the peace efforts since 2010 but the most pathetic event was when they were not included directly in the US-Taliban agreement of March 2020, which created a sense of deprivation and insecurity among them (Belquis, 2019). Keeping in view the importance of women and role played by women in Afghanistan, ex-US President, Donald Trump signed the Women, Peace and Security Act in 2017, which shows the US to be global leader by promoting women's participation in preventing, managing and resolving conflict.

## Objective

To analyze the role of women in the security paradigm of Afghanistan in the post-9/11 scenario

## Research Questions

- i) What role do the women play in maintaining peace and security in the country?
- ii) How did the Peace and Security Act of 2017 affect the status of women in Afghanistan?
- iii) Do the women face the issues of sexual harassment and abuse?
- iv) Will the proper mechanism of code of conduct for civil servants and its implementation by the Afghan government help in redressing their issues?

## Problem Statement

Women in Afghanistan are tormented by many issues with regard to their service and future career in the war-stricken country. They are confronted with the issues of sexual harassment, abuse, risk to their life and property, social stigmatization of character on media and above all issues from their job-counterparts in the security agencies of the country. The reason is the absence of the proper mechanism of laws from the interior and defense ministries of Afghanistan. Proper code of conduct within the civil service, security service and political spheres of life will provide them with better opportunities of showing their potentialities and their motivation and courage coupled with devotion towards their service and safeguarding the country against the internal and external aggressors.



## **Methodology**

The study relies on the qualitative approach for which mainly secondary sources have been utilized. These include different books, reports by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, research articles, newspapers, and web pages. The researcher has analyzed the documents on the basis of the available data by getting the gap filled through the objective and the research questions.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for focusing on the very important subject pertaining to the issues faced by the women in Afghanistan. This paper highlights the significance of women since they have been subjected to issues that greatly impair their character and personality in the public and prevent them from performing their duties efficiently. The government of Afghanistan needs to focus on the core issues faced by the women and devise mechanism to get their issues redressed and resolved on priority basis.

## **The Security Act of 2017**

The Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017 was signed by the US President, Donald Trump on a bipartisan basis (Steigberg, 2020). The law very clearly reflects the need for the growing awareness stating that the wide-spread exclusion of women from the peace process and post-conflict governance, as well as the failure to protect assist the displaced women have been a key factor in so far as proliferation of wars and global refugee crises, that bear a direct impact on the security paradigm of the United States (Steigberg, 2020). Earlier, President George W. Bush and Barrack Obama had codified law being practiced through regulations or policies enhancing the role of women in peace process abroad giving protection to women violence and abuse from conflict and displacement. Moreover, it also enshrines women's rights activists and their movements abroad while making efforts for integrating gender into all aspects of its national security strategies.

The law required the Trump administration within a time period of one-year by putting in place a strategy for government-wide action and submit detailed implementation plans for four key sectors: the State Department, the State Department of USAID, the Defense Department and the Homeland Security (Steigberg, 2020). But the process took more than one and a half year to complete the process and that too when many steps were taken diametrically in contravention to the objectives of the 2017 law. Some of these included the willingness to the extent of the expulsion of women and gender considerations from negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan. This act created further problems for women in the already achieved fields of social, economic and political aspects since 2001. Though the Act of 2017 comprised some key approaches that were very necessary for the women in Afghanistan but the steps taken by the Trump administration went in contravention to the true spirit of the act that created

embarrassment among the Afghani women and consequently they were totally ignored by the Taliban in the intra-Afghan talks. The government of Afghanistan included nine women members from side for negotiation with the Taliban but the Taliban did not include any women in their team showing their future plan and attitude when the US forces leave the country. This prognosticates another important thing that the Taliban are sure about their direct involvement in the political affairs of the country where they would be at liberty to impose their self-styled laws.

### **Need for Security**

The need for security has greatly increased in Afghanistan and the government of Afghanistan is interested in increasing more than double the number of women in her security forces by 2024 so as to meet the need and requirements of the security paradigm (Noorzai, 2021). Analysts are also of the vie that they may face hindrances in joining the security forces from the various quarters in the country. The government intends to increase the number of forces the current 4,000 to 10,000 in the coming three years. This shows the commitment of the Afghan government towards the enhanced needs towards the women security by giving an increase of 125% in the existing strength of the women security personnel. This announcement by the Afghan government at a very crucial time when an Afghan woman working police officer was put to death near Jalalabad and when responsibility was claimed by any group. Whether any group claims responsibility for such attacks or not the question is it has increased the sense of insecurity among the Afghan women police. In reply to a question, a 42-year police women in Kabul said, “We are concerned, women are targeted every day, no one knows what is going on to happen, and no one knows who the next target would be” (Noorzai, 2021).

Women and girls have now become the targets of killings and butcheries in Afghanistan as May 8, 2021 witnessed a series of explosions resulting in the death of at least 50 people and injuries of 151 in the attack the attack that was supposed to be targeted against the girls (Newsletter, 2021). The attack was carried out in Kabul’s Dasht-e-Barchi neighborhood and its minority Hazara community. The attack was the most horrific one in in the wake of US withdrawal scenario from Afghanistan. Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan calls for the investigation by the United Nations and the inquiry at the international level into the incident. This brutal act by the terrorists caused irreparable loss to the innocent children besides, other attacks on the varsities and other important sectors of the country. According to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, since January 2021 at least 14 women have lost their lives while 22 others have received injuries (Noorzai, 2021).

Despite all the risks and perils, the Afghan women are determined to work on different forums and are not in a position to leave their duty stations. It is also a bitter reality that the cultural barriers and illiteracy, Afghan women don’t hesitate to join the Afghan National and Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) in spite of the hidden risk associated with the job. Their mission is to provide security to the girls and women at all levels and safeguard the key installations,



educational institutes, health sector and other related areas against the aggressors and terrorists (SIGAR , Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 2020). There are cases where the Afghan women have been awarded for meritorious services for working with the security agencies of Afghanistan. In this regard seven Afghan women were given posthumous the US State Department award who lost their lives during the service for the sake of maintaining peace and security in the country.

### **Victimization of Women**

According to the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in February 2020 more than 3,000 civilians were murdered while 5,800 got injuries in Afghanistan despite the fact that the ongoing talks for peace were in vogue between the US and the Taliban (SIGAR, 2020). Threats, violence, terrorism and insurgency don't prohibit the women from performing their duties and other activities of life. The Deputy Minister of National Defense for Education, Munira Yusufzada, is of the opinion that, "My family and relatives did not want me to work with police," she told VOA. "When I was appointed in the Defense Ministry, people harassed me on Facebook. They used offensive language. Even some officers (in) the military, those in remote areas, would tell me that 'we do not accept a woman'" She said that she had it as a challenge and is determined to work for the betterment of the status of women and the country to promote education, peace and security and active participation of women in the political sphere of the country. She further states that they "we want to bring more women to the leadership and management team to break the taboo" (Belquis, 2019). This would really enhance the status of women in the war-stricken country and would enable them to work in a challenging environment. Moreover, this will automatically increase the number of women at the decision making level in the security agencies of the country.

Things are going towards improvement as the government seems to be very committed towards the empowerment of women in almost all sectors of life. Honsa Jalil, Deputy Minister for Women Affairs in Afghanistan pines that "reforms have been made to improve the recruitment process and work environment in the Ministry." These include the shortening of the long and bureaucratic process that used to delay the cases of women and their affairs while new procedures are being established by not only increasing the number of women but also improving the quality of the recruitment and their work environment. Jalil has also served the country in the capacity of Deputy Minister at the interior ministry and is well aware of the status and issues faced by women in the country. She is of the view that the country needs at least 10, 000 female police officers for the purpose of peace and security though their induction into the security agencies and particularly the police department is a critical task. In this way, the cases of violence, terrorism, and torture against women, girls and children would be reduced to a great extent. Increasing the number of women in the security agencies of the country, women would have easy access towards the resolution of their issues and easy access to justice. It is also a fact that they were denied right to education and jobs during the Taliban regime of



1996 to 2001 and were forced by the militant group to cover themselves from head to toe besides ordering them to not to leave their houses without the company of the male companion.

### **Significance of Security**

Security has been one of the greatest concerns of the entire world particularly in the post-September 2001 scenario, whereby the countries were compelled to evolve strategies for improving the security paradigm of their respective countries. Pakistan, being a neighboring country of Afghanistan had also to evolve a strategy by incorporating various measures for strengthening the security paradigm of the country, particularly in the Tribal belt bordering Afghanistan (Tariq M. , 2018). In 2009 Pakistan had to incorporate the National Counter Terrorism Act for strengthening the security of the country and it was in 2014 that the National Action Plan was put into vogue with a twenty-point agenda to give practical manifestation to the counter terrorism strategy (Tariq M. , 2018). Many military operations were conducted in the tribal areas of Pakistan prior to 2009 and 2014 when the counter terrorism strategies were implemented in the country to curb terrorism, target-killing, suicide bombing and the use of improvised explosive devices. Since the incorporation of the National Action Plan, there has been much improvement in the security of the country. In Afghanistan the Act of 2017 was brought in to deal with cases pertaining to women and their related issues by improving the quality of the existing security paradigm of the country.

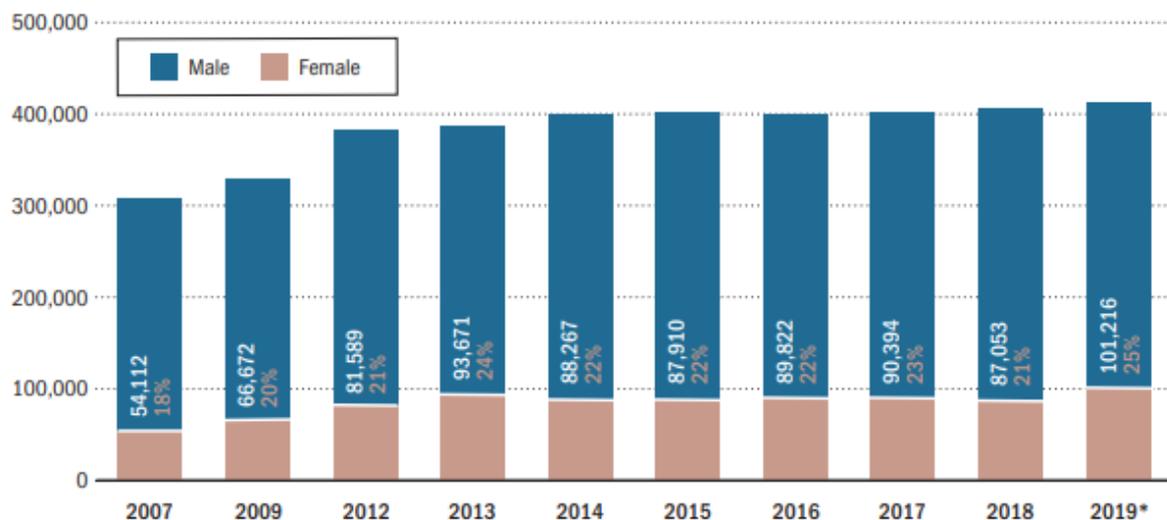
It was in 2008 that the Afghan National government's National Action Plan for the women noted that the number of women in the interior and defense ministries are too few and their number in these two ministries need to be increased so as to influence decision making process in the country (Sopko, 2021 ). In May 2010, the interior and defense ministries showed their commitment to fill the 10% of all the uniformed Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police posts with women by 2020, while the Afghan National Army initiated its first training classes for the female officers (Report, 2015). The recruitment of women to the ANDSF became the priority of the government of the United States in 2010 while prior to the 2010, the US priority remained concerned with the building of the Afghan security forces on the basis of achieving an ethnic, regional and political balance among male recruits to the Afghan National and Defense Security Forces (Sopko, 2021 ). This support by the United States towards women recruitment, retention, and progress within the ANDSF was facilitated by the objectives set out in the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (House, 2011 & Forces, 2011). It was the need of the country to maintain security and peace and for that purpose between 2014 and 2021 the US Congress had to authorize up to \$240.6 million from the Security Forces Fund of Afghanistan for the purpose of recruitment, retention, training and treatment of female security personnel. Resultantly, \$110 million was appropriated for the stipulated period for the purpose of women's recruitment, retention, training and treatment of women for the security of the country (Sopko, 2021 ).

## Women Representation in Jobs

Women have not only representation in the Afghan security forces but also have representation in the Civil Service of the country which are considered to be the most secure jobs for women. It is a fact that their ratio in the Civil Service of the country (to the utter exclusion of the Afghan Army and Police) increased from 18% in 2007 to 25% in 2019 (Sopko, 2021 ). The strength of women in this sector was 18% in 2007, 20% in 2009, 21% in 2012, 24% in 2013, 22% in the years 2014, 2015 and 2017, 21% in 2018 and 25% in 2019 (Sopko, 2021 ). It is significant to note that the women have great role to play in the overall structure of the country. The period from 2007 to 2017 witnessed an increase of 7% in the overall body of the civil service of the country. The legal system of the country presents the same picture where 12% of the judges and 5% of lawyers in Afghanistan are women (Sopko, 2021 ). But gender disparity is still more pronounced in Afghanistan in the decision making process of the civil service of the country, where 85% of such posts are held by men. But now things are changing, with women having 15% of government decision-making position in 2018 which stood at 10% in 2013. (Sopko, 2021 ).

The graph below shows the representation of women in the civil jobs year-wise.

WOMEN EMPLOYEES VS TOTAL EMPLOYEES IN CIVIL SERVICE, 2007-2019



## Women and Security Jobs

In order to train and assist the women in the security measures, the US and the allied forces provided them with a good number of gender advisors to the ministries of defense and interior of the Afghan with the sole purpose of their training and preparing them for the combat operations. Moreover, the US funds were directed towards the recruitment and salary of women coupled with different incentives, uniforms for women, building and security improvements,



women specific training and courses against women violence and self-defense, *inter alia* other things (Sopko, 2021 ). Though this fund was meant to be used on women yet it left some issues unaddressed such as the limitations on the mobility of women for the purpose of recruitment and training, and the social obstacles that stood in the way of women's interaction with the men (Sopko, 2021 ). The cultural restraints on the Afghani women are mostly to remain confined to the household activities and not to leave house for the jobs and other activities. Serving in the police department is neither considered as a dominant social norm nor an honorable activity for them.

The Afghani society is normally custom and tradition stricken where the nature of the jobs of police and military impairs familial relations about the safety of women in such jobs coupled with the process of recruitment and retention in the department (SIGAR, SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 30, 2013, ; DOD, Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, July 2013, p. 117. , 2013). Many barrier including barriers in the way of getting education precludes women from fulfilling the requirements of the ANDSF (DOD, 2020). Those who are serving in the security department are confronted with a number of issues; such as social stigma, discrimination from male colleagues, hindrances from the areas where they work, besides facing cases of harassment and abuse from their male colleagues (Sopko, 2021 ). It is a great reality that women working in both the Afghan army and police department are facing the issues of victimization, discrimination, sexual offensiveness and assault from the various quarters (Sopko, 2021 ). According to a video shared in November 2017 on the Afghan media showed the Afghan Colonel, Ghulam Rasoul Leghmani, demands the sex from a female to get her promoted to the next rank (Sopko, 2021 ). Instances of such cases are not rare but very common among the security forces of the Afghan society where women are subjected to various tormenting temptations and abuses for getting their deeds and promotions done.

Due to the lack or absence of proper policies against the sexual harassment and assault within the interior and defense ministries as of 2018, women have no proper mechanism to report on such cases against the perpetrators (Jones, 2018). This absence of proper mechanism has resulted in delimiting the career development of women by facing them with more challenges and intimidations. As a consequence of this many educated women prefer to earn bread for their family through menial tasks such as tea-making, or cleaning, irrespective of their potentialities and job description (Jones, 2018). For the motivation of women to serve the Army and police department of the country, there is a greater need of offering more incentives, building of more trust, and giving assurance to their families of providing with the safety and security to their lives and property. Keeping in view the gravity of the situation, women members made up just 3.25 % of the uniformed positions in the Afghan Army and less than 1 % of the uniformed positions in the Afghan Police, showing their lack of interest for the problems faced by them though the target was expected to reach 10% in both cases yet this could not be achieved (Sopko, 2021 ).

Looking from close quarters and critical point of view the target of 10 % is really an ambitious one in a country struck by war and terrorism and where warlords and non-state actors try to impose their self-styled laws for the sake of getting their designs realized. In a liberal country like the United States, women only make up the 16% of the US Military forces while in Afghanistan they make up 25% of the security forces as of 2019. Even in so far as their representation in the Afghan Parliament is concerned, it stands at 27% while in the United States, their number stands at 23.6% in the Congress, in Pakistan it stands at 20% while in India and Tajikistan it stands at 14% and 24% respectively (Tariq, 2021). In this regards, it has greater number of women seats in the parliament than most of the liberal countries and upholders of the women rights. The real test for the Afghan government will come after the US forces completely withdraw their from the country and when different stakeholders will try their level best to establish their hegemony in the country by gaining more and more seats in the parliament (Tariq, 2021). So, it is significant to mention that Afghanistan is still far ahead in the number of women representation in the security forces and the political affairs of the country than most of the developed and liberal countries of the world. It would not also be out of place to mention that Afghanistan has made great progress in this regard despite the fact that women in Afghanistan are confronted with high risks and threats coupled with challenges that pose direct threat to their lives.

It is un-denying fact that the target of 10% seemed highly ambitious as this was also realized by the Resolute Support Gender Office that based their assumption keeping in view the existing recruitment, retention and training capacity of the women in the security agencies of the country. The Resolute Support Gender after realizing the target ambitious, had to change their targets for the uniformed women in the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police from the percentage of the total force to 5,000 and 10, 000 respectively by 2025 (DOD., 2015). Based on the reported targets of the total force strength numbers, this change witnessed a drop of about 11,700 in the Resolute Support recruitment targets for women in the Afghan Army and 5,500 for women in the Afghan police as of February 2015. But after a period of three years in 2018, the Afghan Army had to downshift their goals to fill 3% of their posts with the women by 2021 (showing a slow goal of 10%) and the Afghan National Police retained their goal of 10% but had to shift the target from 2020 to 2021 (Sopko, 2021 ).

But there has been less progress towards this direction partly from the Afghan ministries of interior and defense and partly from the women on account of the high risks and challenges faced by them from the various quarters. This lack of progress may further affect the entry of the Afghan women in the educational institutes, security agencies and the political affairs of the country. The Afghan government needs to focus on this sector with special attention and have to take measures to motivate the women to take active participation in all the sectors of life. This would help in increasing the number of women in the educational institutes, security sectors, and political participation of the country.

Both the US and the Afghan government have been trying to improve the status of women in the civil jobs as well as the security paradigm of the country. Some of the key indicators taken for the uplift of the women include:

- Appropriating of \$110 million by the US Congress by funding the women towards increasing the strength of women in the ANDSF
- There has been minimal increase in the strength of women in the ANDSF while a modest increase in the ratio of Afghan police.
- Keeping in view the issues faced by the women during their services, they must overcome a range of significant barriers while serving the security forces.
- Facing of cultural resistance, threats, to personal security, and pervasive harassment and discrimination.
- Focus on increase the strength of women in the law enforcement agencies of the country and then focus on improving the quality of service provided by them while maintaining peace and security in the country.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Women play the most significant role in the various sectors of the country. They have been playing their role in various sectors of the country so as to show their potentialities to the world that they are second to none. Nobody can gainsay their importance in the sectors of education, health, political involvement, peace and security and active participation in the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police to protect their country against both internal and external threats and challenges. Despite the high risk factors to their lives and properties, they do show their potentialities in the security agencies of the country though they are faced with the most serious cases of sexual harassment, abuse, honor killing and insulting remarks on the social media yet they stand like a strong rock in the face of these odds. Not only this, they do face threats and challenges from their job-mates and colleagues leading towards their defamation on the social media.

They not face issues concerning their honor and respect from their colleagues and job-mates with regard to their promotion and other opportunities in life but they are greatly faced with the issues of sexual harassment and abuse in the areas where they work and earn their bread. This directly results in stigmatizing their character by impairing their future career which bears a direct imprint on the overall behavior of women in the country. They show their reluctance to get either employment in civil service or the security agencies of the country. They do show their hesitation to go for jobs and prefer to do some indoor jobs that do not expose their identity in public. For example, most of the educated women try to do some domestic handicrafts, cleaning of utensils and working only in the environment dominated by women and where there is no male in such environment.



One of the main reasons for the sexual harassment of women and abuse is the absence of a proper mechanism and lack of proper implementation of law by the interior and defense ministries of the Afghan government. There are no special courts that can try such cases and award speedy justice to the victims. This would help in mitigating the issues mainly faced by them from them form their own colleagues as well as from the society at large. There is also greater need to implement certain codes of conduct among the security and political spheres so as to avoid such cases as were shared on social media in 2017 when a senior official of the Afghan Army tempts a junior women for promotion in lieu of sexual satisfaction. Implementing such mechanisms would mitigate most of the issues of the working class of women and they would get encouragement from the society as well as the government and other social organizations for their safety and security enabling them to perform their duties more efficiently.

A comparative analysis of the women of Afghanistan with most of the advanced and liberal countries show that their representation is still more than them in the security dynamics and political participation of the country. It is an admitted fact that there has been gradual increase of women in the security sector of the country in the post-September 2001 scenario. As compared to 2007 when their strength stood at 18% in the security forces, gained the ratio of 25% in 2019 showing 7% increase during the stipulated period. But this percentage is greater than that of the security forces of the United States. Even in terms of political participation the representation of women in Afghanistan stands at 27% which is again greater than that of the United States, India, Tajikistan and Pakistan.



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