

The Women of Afghanistan

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FROM THE COVER OF *TIME* magazine to the top stories on CNN and other networks, Afghan women have caused a stir in the U.S. media. The White House, too, has declared them a “top priority,” signaled by Laura Bush’s mid-November radio address in which she told of their adversity. We read about their plight, long-suffering victims of the most appalling forms of human rights abuses. We marvel at their tenacity, their ability to organize themselves and to look to the future with courage and hope. We learn with pleasure that the new government has two women in its cabinet: Suhaila Siddiq as health minister and Sima Samar as women’s affairs minister. As the U.S. public learns more about these women’s lives—what they were like under the Taliban rule and what they might become—the role of the social studies educator becomes, once again, crucial.

That students need to know about the women of Afghanistan is clear. The challenge for educators comes less from teaching the facts than answering and engendering difficult questions. How do we address such clear and abhorrent abuses of rights while maintaining respect for cultural differences? How can classroom discussions move beyond the sensationalized details of violence to a deeper understanding of social, political, and historical factors? Can Afghan women inform our students, not only about the need for human rights in their country, but also about the role of democracy and citizenship in our own?



Social Education continues to present special articles focusing on events stemming from September 11, 2001.

As a companion to these special focus articles, our website features lists of classroom tips and other resources at www.socialstudies.org/resources.



AP PHOTO/MARCO DI LAURO

Women walk in the old town of Kabul, Afghanistan, on Monday, November 26, 2001. After the United Front took over Kabul, some women decided to leave their homes without a burqa, but most continue to wear them.

Becoming “Invisible”

Nasrine Gross, an Afghan American and a leading activist in the Afghan women’s cause (see interview, page 13), remembers being a student at Kabul University in 1965:

Many of us went there with a chadari or scarf, with full backing of our families and official authorities; we studied with boys in the same class and had many male teachers; we wore short skirts, pale nylons, high-heeled shoes, with make up on our faces and polish on our nails; we moved about freely and without

an escort, and we chose our physicians ourselves.¹

When Gross returned to Afghanistan in August 2001, everything had changed. Women were forbidden to participate in all these activities: forbidden to go out without their full-length burqa, to study with males (or to study at all after age eight), to wear make up or high-heeled shoes, to go outside without a male escort. How did conditions change so drastically?

Women’s rights in Afghanistan have been eroded during more than twenty years of war, from the time that

the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. With the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, civil war erupted, during which time law was almost nonexistent and women experienced much violence and discrimination. Between 1992 and 1996, under the rule of President Burhanuddin Rabbani, the country continued in a full-scale civil war. When the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996, under the leadership of Mullah Mohammed Omar, they established the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.” The Taliban regime ended most factional fighting, but women’s rights were restricted in ways that were severe, steadfast, and systematic.

The Taliban, which began as a religious movement of students educated in Pakistan and Afghanistan and emerged as a military force in 1994, justified all their actions as fundamental to the Islamic faith; their treatment of women, they said, adhered to the teachings of the Koran. But Ahmed Rashid, author of *Taliban*, argues that their edicts had no validity in the Koran; indeed, the Prophet Mohammed’s first task was to emancipate women.² Rashid looks to other factors as the real causes behind their misogynistic policies.

The Taliban leaders were all from the poorest, most conservative and least literate southern Pash-tun provinces of Afghanistan. In Mullah Omar’s village, women had always gone around fully veiled and no girl had ever gone to school because there were none. Omar and his colleagues transposed their own milieu, and their own experience, or lack of it, with women to the entire country and justified their policies through the Koran. ...The Taliban’s uncompromising attitude was also shaped by their own internal political dynamics and the nature of their recruiting base. Their recruits—the orphans, the rootless, the lumpen proletariat from the war and the refugee camps—had been brought up in a totally male society. In the *madrasa* [an Islamic school] milieu, control over women and their

virtual exclusion was a powerful symbol of manhood and a reaffirmation of the students’ commitment to *jihad* [religious struggle]. Denying a role for women gave the Taliban a kind of false legitimacy amongst these elements.³

Of course, women were not the only victims of oppression under Taliban rule. Men were also restricted and brutally punished for disobeying the Taliban’s edicts, which included a ban on listening to music and watching movies and television, forced haircuts for Afghan youth, and an order for men to grow full beards and to pray five times daily. Homosexuality was also a crime, punishable by death. Non-Muslims were under constant threat as well, forced to wear badges to differentiate themselves from the majority Muslim population. In addition, seemingly harmless recreational activities, such as kite-flying, were banned in certain regions because the activities were considered un-Islamic.

Yet the Taliban decrees, broadcast regularly on Radio Shariat, limited all aspects of women’s lives. The list of rules was long and, by contemporary standards, cruel: Women could be beaten, or worse, for having non-covered ankles, for laughing loudly, or for wearing nail polish. The law even forbade women from making noise with their shoes when they walked; in an interview, the head of the ministry explained, “Women are duty-bound to behave with dignity, to walk calmly and refrain from hitting their shoes on the ground, which makes noises.”⁴

Offenses were monitored and punished by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice—the “Religious Police”—whose forms of discipline became notorious. The police wielded leather batons, steel cables, and whips, and used them against men, women, and children who made any number of infractions. Women were beaten publicly for such offenses as showing too much skin (wrists or ankles), wearing the wrong colored socks, lacking a male escort, educating girls, working, and begging. Many

Glossary of Terms

Burqa (or burka): Veil. The head-to-toe covering with a mesh grid over the eyes. Required garb for all women during the Taliban regime.

Hajj: Annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca.

Mahram: A close male relative, such as a brother, father, or husband.

Mujahidin: “Those who struggle.” In Afghanistan, the term refers to the forces that fought the Soviet-backed regimes.

Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (“the Religious Police”): Enforced Taliban restrictions against women and others through means that included arbitrary and humiliating beatings.

Sharia (or shariat): Islamic law.

Websites

Negar—Support of Women in Afghanistan

www.users.erols.com/kabultec

Afghan Women’s Mission

www.afghanwomensmission.org

Beneath the Veil

www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/presents/index.veil.html

Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)

rawa.fancymarketing.net

Women’s Alliance for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan (WAPHA)

www.wapha.org

Women on the Road for Afghanistan

www.worfa.org



AP PHOTO/KEVIN FRAYER

A young woman smiles as she shows her face during a pro-government rally in the Afghan capital Kabul, Afghanistan, Saturday, Dec. 22, 2001, the day that Afghanistan's new government was sworn in.

women adjusted their behavior so they wouldn't get beaten. One woman said, I stayed home. I only went to the bazaar with a chadari and came back fast. We were scared to look around. We heard that women were beaten for having their hand out or for having nail polish. People live in fear. If one is punished, everybody fears being the next.⁵

Enforced brutally during Taliban rule, the main restrictions against women in Afghanistan fell into the following general categories.

The Burqa

The most visible, though not the most debilitating, aspect of control was the requirement that women wear the burqa (sometimes referred to as the *chadari*), a head-to-toe covering with a mesh opening for the eyes. Although the long-standing place of the burqa in Afghan culture is complicated—many women wore the burqa before the Taliban edict—

at the time when Nasrine Gross was in college, for example, wearing the garment was voluntary. Journalist Richard Lacayo described the health risks:

The heavy cloth covering can induce panic, claustrophobia and headaches. It's a psychological hobbling for women that is akin to Chinese foot binding. It's also life threatening. Try negotiating a busy Kabul street—around donkey carts, careening buses and the Taliban roaring by in Datsun pickups—when your hearing is muffled and your vision is reduced to a narrow mesh grid.⁶

Under Taliban law, women could be beaten—and often were—if they even lifted up the veil in public.

General Suhaila Siddiq, Afghanistan's only woman general and now the new health minister, criticizes Westerners, however, for focusing on the burqa when denouncing the Taliban's abuse of women. The burqa should not be the

core concern. "The first priority should be given to education, school facilities, the economy and reconstruction of the country," said Siddiq.⁷ Soraya Parluka, an Afghan female activist, agreed: "The burqa is not the main problem of women . . . First women should find work and improve their economic situation."⁸

Male (or *Mahram*) Accompaniment

In addition to wearing the burqa in public at all times, women had to be escorted by a male relative—usually a brother, husband, or father. This restriction often created problems for widows who had no mahram living with them or for women whose mahram were not often at home. Even if a woman was ill and needed to go to hospital, for example, she was not allowed to leave the home without a male escort. One woman described,

My husband hailed a taxi to take my child and me to the hospital. Five minutes later, a Religious Police car stopped the taxi. He

made me get out of the taxi. . . . There were three Taliban. One of them beat the driver with a yellow cable that was pretty wide. I was scared. He asked me why the holes in my chadari were so big? . . . I put my child away in the car and told them, "Beat me, but do not hurt the child." He beat me. I hid my face. He hit me several times—on the back and arms. I had bruises.⁹

Employment

With the exception of health care workers, women were not allowed to be employed outside the home. This restriction contrasted with life in Afghanistan before the Taliban, in which 70 percent of all teachers, 60 percent of all civil servants, and 40 percent of all medical doctors were women. Unable to make a living, many women and families became impoverished and destitute.

Education

Girls over eight years old were not permitted to go to school. In addition, many boys had to stop their education because so many of their teachers were women and therefore no longer allowed to work. Those boys who did continue their schooling found the curriculum changed; Islamic teachings dominated, with only one class a week devoted to such subjects as math and science.¹⁰ Girls from well-off families often were sent to Pakistan, Iran, or Tajikistan to be educated.

Interestingly, Afghan women seemed most resistant to the education ban, often risking punishment to send their daughters to secret schools. Many educated women, frequently former teachers, set up these home schools for girls, often with the help of international aid. If the Religious Police became aware of the schools, they were shut down; often, the husbands were pressured to make their wives stop teaching.

One woman principal in Kabul described her experience teaching underground for five years. Her home school, set up in her father's house, began with only two boys and two girls in attendance but grew to as many as

180 students, ages 4-17. Classes were staggered, ongoing from morning until night. Girls who attended the school remember hiding their books underneath their burqas.¹¹ The *Christian Science Monitor* reported similar initiatives in Taloqan, in the North, in which an aid group called the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan helped as many as 16,000 girls gain access to education.¹²

The importance of education, both for themselves and for their children, is often expressed by Afghan women:

I wish I had gone to school so that I could read and write. I cannot even read the letters my brother sends from Iran, where he lives with his family. I want my daughters to study so that they can learn something that could be of use to them, for example, to become doctors.¹³

Health Care

Women's health was greatly affected by the Taliban's rule, both through their specific edicts restricting women's access to medical facilities and doctors, and through their general policies restricting women's opportunity for healthy standards of living. First, there was the challenge for women not only to get to the hospital (a mahram was necessary), but also to receive sufficient medical attention once there. Only female doctors, few in number, were allowed to fully examine and treat female patients. Male doctors were not allowed to give a thorough physical exam to female patients, who had to wear the full burqa at all times; male doctors could be imprisoned for talking to a female patient who was not fully covered. Women doctors were segregated from their male colleagues as well, which meant that they could not seek help or advice when needed.

Apart from these specific medical restrictions, women's health in Afghanistan has not been good: The life expectancy for an Afghan woman is 44 years old. In 1998, *The Journal of the American Medical Association* published a study assessing the health conditions of women living in Kabul under the Taliban.¹⁴ One hundred sixty women par-

ticipated, eighty of whom were still living in Kabul (the others had recently migrated to Pakistan). The women completed a survey of 101 questions, most of which focused on physical and mental health.

The majority of women reported a decline in physical and mental health (71 percent) and a decline in access to health care (62 percent). Many women experienced symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (42 percent), depression (97 percent) and anxiety (86 percent). They reported harassment, physical abuse, and restricted activity, all of which added to their decline in health. Many reported having been beaten by the Religious Police for such offenses as not wearing the burqa, not covering enough of their bodies, wearing stylish clothing, making noise when they walked, not being accompanied by a chaperone, and entering a public building through a designated male entrance. Even those who hadn't been physically abused feared the possibility. Sixty-two percent responded that they were worried about being detained and abused by the Taliban when they left their homes.

A Promising Future?

With a new interim government in place, many Afghan women, living in Afghanistan and abroad, are hopeful for the future. Certainly, the appointment of two women to the thirty-member governing council is a sign that women will have a political voice in the new Afghanistan. In Kabul, reopened stores selling books, videos, and kites signify a return to a more open society. And for the first time since the fall of the Taliban, a small acting troupe in Kabul performed a play for an audience of about one hundred, including Minister for Women's Issues Sima Samar.

Yet Afghanistan's reconstruction will be slow and expensive, requiring the assistance of the international community. As post-Taliban Afghanistan faces enormous political, social, and economic challenges, women's rights remain a fragile, if fundamental, prospect. Many Afghan women bear deep psychological as well as physical

scars. But with the commitment of a new government, the help of women's organizations and international agencies, and the fortitude of many extraordinary female leaders, the women of Afghanistan—along with the rest of the country—can begin to heal.

Teaching Ideas

The following activities provide ways of bringing Afghan women's experiences into the classroom.

- ▶ The idea of *moral relativism*, that moral standards are grounded in social customs, has been debated for centuries and still as controversial today. Some argue that there is an ideal standard of absolute morality (against killing, for example), whereas others believe that the “right way to act” depends on the context, tradition, and handed-down values of a particular culture; therefore, we should not judge another society according to our own cultural bias.

Ask the class to debate the issue of moral relativism, using the experience of women in Afghanistan as one example. Have students come up with and research other examples. What are the dangers of making quick judgments about another culture because it is different from ours? What are the dangers of having an “anything goes” attitude? A useful website to help students understand the term can be found in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy (www.utm.edu/research/iep/m/m-relati.htm).

- ▶ Some critics argue that we should focus more on education, employment, and health care than on the burqa when addressing the conditions of Afghan women. But the rela-

tionship between women's freedom and women's clothing is an interesting one. Ask students to research a historical period in the United States and determine the status of women during that time. Have them report on how women's clothing adapted to or reflected the political or social climate. How did the corset, for example, restrict women in ways that were not only immediate and physical, but also symbolic? What happened to women's dress during the 1920s, and how did the change correspond to changing attitudes toward women? What about today?

- ▶ Have students write letters to local, state, or national politicians, explaining what they think should be done to help the women of Afghanistan. Make sure that students research not just the issues but also the politicians and assess how they might respond to their requests. Keep a log of responses. Students may also be given the option to write a letter to the editor for a local newspaper or a magazine, or a brief essay.

- ▶ Before the war and the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, Afghan women had received much less U.S. media attention. After the war has ended, the media may again move on to reporting on other “hotter” topics.

Have your students research another group of people that has been “dropped” from the media's radar screen. Ask students, either independently or in groups, to present their research to the class. Along with learning the facts about the group, students may want to consider how U.S. foreign policy initiatives influence what the media reports and how they

choose to report it. Encourage students to continue updating their research throughout the year. Topics could range from AIDS victims to war refugees to victims of child labor or domestic abuse. 📝

Notes

1. See www.erols.com/kabultec.
2. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 107.
3. *Ibid.*, 110-111.
4. *Ibid.*, 106.
5. Available on the Human Rights Watch website: hrw.org/reports/2001/afghan3/afgwr1001-05.htm.
6. Richard Lacayo, “About Face for Afghan Women,” *Time* (November 25, 2001). Available at www.time.com.
7. Stephen Farrell, “West's Feminists Under Fire from Female General,” *The Times* (November 28, 2001). Available at www.thetimes.co.uk/article/0,,2001540008-2001551489,00.html.
8. Terry McCarthy, “Stirrings of a Women's Movement,” *Time* 158, no. 24 (December 3, 2001). Available at www.time.com.
9. Available on the Human Rights Watch website: hrw.org/reports/2001/afghan3/afgwr1001-05.htm.
10. Keith B. Richburg, “Textbooks with a Subtext: ‘Ahmed Has a Sword,’” *The Washington Post* (November 19, 2001): A14.
11. Lucian Perkins, “For Girls, Education without Fear,” *The Washington Post* (November 18, 2001): A20.
12. Lucian Kim, “Tenacity under Afghan Burqas,” *Christian Science Monitor* (July 19, 2000). Available at www.csmonitor.com.
13. Available on the Human Rights Watch website: hrw.org/reports/2001/afghan3/afgwr1001-05.htm.
14. Zohra Rasekh, Heidi Bauer, M. Michele Manos, and Vincent Iacopino, “Women's Health and Human Rights in Afghanistan,” *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 280 (August 5, 1998): 449-455.

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