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# Iranian woman, I travelled around Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. This is what I saw

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**As an Iranian woman, I understood the fear and oppression facing Afghan women. I had to tell their stories to the world**

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I crossed the border into Afghanistan from Iran one month after the Taliban seized Kabul. I could no longer handle reading, sharing posts or retweeting news about Afghanistan. I could no longer look at the agony without even touching it. I needed to witness the situation with my own eyes.

I managed to get the visa of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan at the border by pretending I was going to visit relatives in Herat, in the west of the country. It was my first trip abroad since the pandemic and it might be my last as an Iranian holding a passport stamped by the Taliban. But it did not matter, I had to be in Afghanistan at any price.

Perhaps no woman on Earth can relate to an Afghan woman more than an Iranian. With shared language and culture, we know what it means when a political power transfer happens and men in power decide on women’s issues. We know that when those men say that ‘proper systems are in place to ensure the safety of women’, it means that they are going to gradually ignore us.

We know the process : first, they announce their respect for women, emphasising women’s duty of childbearing, then they rule how women should cover themselves, before banning us from going to work or having higher education, ‘for our own good and security’. And then, some time later, after wars, bombs, suicide attacks or economic crises, women’s issues are forgotten altogether.

In Iran, the process went from ‘women are at liberty to choose their hijab’ before the 1979 revolution to ‘women without hijab are not allowed in governmental offices’ right after, then to ‘mandatory hijab for every woman’ some years later, to ‘in this critical condition protesting against mandatory hijab or demanding equal rights is not a sensitive action’, decades after.

## **‘I am afraid they could whip me’**

In 2019, the administration of then-US president Donald Trump withdrew from a planned nuclear deal with Iran and re-imposed economic sanctions that had been lifted as part of the agreement. As a

result, the Iranian currency plunged, making Iranians like me much poorer. But this was not the only reason I chose to take a shared-taxi with nine other passengers to reach Herat : I vowed on this trip to be in contact with people as much as I could.

Before reaching the border, my travel companion told me he would not take any 'responsibility' if I did not wear a chador (a full-body cloak) when we arrived in Afghanistan. Yet, even wearing a chador could not protect me from the staring eyes of men at the border. I was the only woman there.

When we arrived at the bus terminal in Herat, I bumped into Ziba who was staying with her mother in a filthy room at the inn of the terminal. Ziba lives in Kabul, but when the city fell, she was in Iran. Just like me, this was her first time in Afghanistan since the Taliban took over.

"Two months ago I went to Iran to visit my brother and sister. Since it was supposed to be a short trip, I left my two children with my husband," Ziba told me. "Then everything changed. My husband was encouraging me to stay in Iran but I came back because of my children," she said.

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### **The owner of the inn ranted : 'Put your chador on, the Taliban might inspect here'**

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She showed me the tattoos on her arm, which she had covered with a tight black sleeve. "I had this tattoo inked two years ago when I had no idea the Taliban might wrest control again. I am now afraid they would whip me for that," she said.

"Do you think my appearance is acceptable by the Taliban ?" I asked her. "I have no idea. I'm just like you. I was three years old when the Taliban fell," she answered.

She was right. She was not as acquainted with the chador as I was. When she went to the terminal's restroom wearing only her scarf and manteau, the owner of the inn ranted : "Put your chador on, the Taliban might inspect here."

"The Taliban would inspect here ?" I asked. "We don't know. They might," he answered.

### **The shadow of the past**

All along my trip through Afghanistan, I felt confusion and uncertainty. While the armed Taliban were patrolling the streets everywhere, no one was sure what the rules were. The future was unclear. Everybody was waiting for what might happen next.

Meanwhile, all the women I spoke to used past tense verbs in conversation. "I used to be a teacher", "she used to study at the university", "we used to go...", "we were able to...". The shadow of the past was everywhere, along with sorrow, disappointment and confusion.

The women I came across had no trust in the new government. The women wearing all-black niqabs who came out in support of the Taliban's gender policies [1] at Shaheed Rabbani Education University in Kabul on 11 September seemed to me as absent as colors and style in their veils.

Asna, a 19-year-old woman who had been studying at Kabul University before the Taliban closed the country's public universities for women, told me that the group are trying to make Afghanistan as binary as their flag : women in black and men in white. She might be right, the traditional white dress for men is quickly spreading, although the Taliban have not yet announced an official dress code.

Tuba, a woman in her sixties I visited in Panjshir, in north-eastern Afghanistan, told me that a Talib caustically warned her to wear a chadari, an item of clothing similar to a burqa. She was so scared that it triggered her herpes all around her lips.

When we met, Tuba was with five other women from a village in Panjshir valley. They were all relatives of the mother of two locals who had been killed a few weeks earlier by the Taliban in a battle. They were reciting the Quran for the two brothers.

The women said that the people of Panjshir had sent all their young women to the other cities, fearing the Taliban. One old lady said that she had been forced to live in her brother's house because her house was occupied by Taliban troops after she had escaped to Kabul during the first days of the Taliban's invasion of Panjshir. She was not allowed to take her belongings back.

### **Women's declining visibility**

The Taliban might not have officially imposed the chadari but already women like Tuba are under pressure to change their image to one approved by the new political system. As with the Iranian regime, the dress code for women is the symbolic representation of the state ideology.

I tried wearing the burqa in the streets of Kabul. While I truly felt the ability to be invisible in a crowded street, it was a cumbersome outfit to move in as I could not see to my right or to my left and needed a hand to support me during the night.

Nevertheless, in a country replete with ethnic conflicts, wearing a burqa gives women from the oppressed Hazara minority, for instance, the protection of anonymity and of not being distinguished by their face. Hazara men are deprived of this and instead run into 'random checks' at Taliban checkpoints.

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### **I would rather be killed than wear a burqa**

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"I would rather be killed than wear a burqa," Nazanin, one of the members of the Women for Afghan Women (WAW) organization [2], told me. The organization has been the biggest safe-house for marginalized women affected by war, conflicts, and crimes.

WAW has now paused its activities - resulting in thousands of women being dismissed from the shelters. Some face the danger of violence from their abusive husbands or other family members, some of whom are among the prisoners that the Taliban released after they wrested control,

according to Nazanin.

Right now, the organization's office in Kabul is occupied by Taliban troops and all its equipment has been taken to an unknown place. Nazanin has rarely been out of her home in the past two months. She is not the only one. Women's visibility in public has declined since the Taliban took over the country due to the abrupt regressive policies preventing women from going to work or to schools and universities.

### **Oppression via 'nice requests'**

"We are also Muslims obeying Islamic hijab, so I wonder why the Taliban emphasizes Islamic rules in its decrees," said Masoude Hashemi, a former high school teacher who lost her job in Kabul due to the new policies.

When I asked Enamullah Samangani, a member of the Taliban's cultural commission, why his group has shut public higher education institutions, he answered : "Capturing the cities one by one in a short time was also a surprise for us, we had no policy in advance and we need time to figure the problems out." Most people believe that if and when the universities reopen, the classes will be segregated by gender, with women students allowed to be taught only by women. With few female teachers available, and most currently banned from working, Afghan women will be unable to attend most classes.

But the act of replacing the Women's Affairs Ministry with one for 'Preaching and Guidance' was swift [3]. And erasing women from public spaces is what Taliban spokesperson Zabidullah Mujahid proposed, when he asked women not to leave home [4] because he was not sure whether the Taliban soldiers would treat them respectfully.

Controlling the public space and pushing women into the private one is the way the Taliban maintains power. Twenty years ago, the group resorted to whipping and battering to oppress women, now they do so under the guise of 'nice requests'.

Segregation of the sexes in public is a popular idea in Afghanistan. I heard it from Ostad Nadim, the former manager of the Art Institute of Kabul who believes that when men and women are mixed in classes, they perform poorly compared with segregated education. I heard it again in a taxi from Bayman to Kabul, which I shared with three other passengers, a driver, a farmer and a butcher. All three concurred with the Taliban's policies of barring women and girls from university, citing the "immorality" that was taking place in the mixed universities of Kabul.

The next day I was in Farhat's home. She had received her bachelor's degree in Kabul and now is unable to continue her studies. I told her what I heard from those men in the taxi. "They have their imagination about what was going on inside the universities," she said. "Most people did not trust the system that was run by the US and had this idea that universities were not Islamic enough," she explained. "I, however, felt the most secure in the university since after four years, my male classmates were like brothers to me," she added.

Women like Farhat have found new allies in some of the men they attended university with, who are using social media to voice their opposition to the Taliban.

I met a group of these men in a café in Kabul. Ali, who is in his twenties, said : "Our women had more courage and concern than we did as we are merely tweeting while they are going out to protest against the Taliban even at the price of getting assaulted and beaten."

Noorollah and his wife Arefeh both studied theater at Kabul university. They are now living in Bamyan, and hoping to immigrate to Iran or Europe, like so many others who consider immigration the last resort.

Arefeh told me that women in Bamyan have lost their small businesses, such as restaurants, gift shops and handicrafts, which were about to flourish thanks to tourism in the historical Bamyan. This makes them dependent on men.

## **Afghanistan's abandoned women**

A few years ago, I was invited to a wedding in a château in the south of France. The bride and groom were top-ranking old-timers of the UN in Kabul. Most of the guests were also working with the UN or other foreign organizations in Afghanistan. Not a single Afghan person had been invited to the wedding.

While the music was playing outside and people were dancing, I remember asking the cozy gathering in one of the rooms why they had not invited anyone from Afghanistan despite living there for ages. "Well, you know what? Afghans are not easy to befriend," someone replied.

Afghanistan is a very complicated society, in which deep patriarchy, traditions, religious attitudes, ethnic conflicts, decades of war, rough neighborhoods, and political geography play their parts.

With the future of women's rights and girls' education in doubt under Afghanistan's new Taliban regime, Zarlisht Wali is one of many who are fighting back

The female literacy rate almost doubled from 2011 to 2018 but remained low at 30% according to UNESCO [5]. But while people like the farmer in my taxi considered the education system non-Islamic and imported by the US, the highly paid employees of foreign organizations, such as those guests at the wedding, bear a colonial attitude. Many lived in compounds, without any connection to the people, while they decided which programmes they would allocate million-dollar budgets to in the country. Much of these budgets ended in the networks of corruption [6] under the former government, making many people rich.

This is why the former first lady, Laura Bush, sounded naive and superficial in her radio address to the nation in 2001 [7], when she said: "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes, they can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. [...] The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."

Twenty years on, not only did the US fail this "war for women's dignity", but it also abandoned them.

Perhaps the most vivid illustration of the irreversible destruction of the country are the destroyed Buddha statues in Bamiyan. When I reached the top of one of them, I sat down and cried.

I cried for the people I had visited on this trip, particularly the Afghan women. I was thinking about Maryam, an 11-year-old girl who was called "the genius of the family" by her siblings and who was so overwhelmed that she was unable to talk about her feelings of not being allowed to go to school. I could see the distressed face of a nine- or ten-year-old boy asking for money for his sick mother in a bus full of displaced people from Kunduz in the north of Afghanistan.

None of these people were on TV or on Twitter, and they were certainly not statistics. I could see

their faces and hear their voices, reminding me that the pain and uncertainty are real.

Perhaps Mahbooba Siraj, the founder of the Afghan's Women's Network, said it best, when interviewed on Turkish TRT World news channel [8] : "I'm going to say to the world's leaders, shame on you for what you did to Afghanistan. Why did you have to do what you did ? And why are you doing this to this part of the world ?"

As American author James Baldwin once said : "It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have."

**Mahzad Elyassi**

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## **P.-S.**

- Open Democracy. 24 November 2021, 12.00am :  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/i-travelled-around-taliban-controlled-afghanistan-this-is-what-i-saw/>
  - Photos by Mahzad Elyassi not reproduced here.
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## **Notes**

- [1] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58537081>
- [2] <https://womenforafghanwomen.org/>
- [3] <https://>
- [4] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58315413>
- [5] <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378911>
- [6] <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/13/americas-money-lost-the-afghan-war/>
- [7] [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext\\_11701.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext_11701.html)
- [8] <https://consent.youtube.com/m?continue=https://www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DKUJlQbKHD2o&gl=FR&m=0&pc=yt&uxe=23983171&hl=fr&src=1>