

Female Lecturers' challenges in Afghanistan's higher education under the Taliban rule

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Abstract

This research explores the systematic discrimination and gender apartheid faced by female lecturers in higher education institutions since the Taliban began imposing gender-based restrictions in 2021. Ten female lecturers from several public universities were interviewed using thematic analysis to elucidate their experiences. These findings were examined within the framework of critical feminist theory. The study identifies key areas of gender-based exclusion and marginalization, beginning with the enforcement of a strict dress code that unduly emphasizes appearance and restricts autonomy while serving as a tool of surveillance and control. Female lecturers are also restricted in their mobility within academic spaces or altogether prohibited from entering the campuses, thereby exacerbating their isolation and limiting their engagement with students and colleagues. The exclusion of women from administrative offices further entrenches patriarchal dominance within institutional hierarchies. These policies, along with salary reductions and limited opportunities for academic promotion, significantly impede female lecturers' professional development and participation in academic life. Furthermore, significant mental health issues resulting from the impact of the restrictions on their personal and professional lives were reported.

1. INTRODUCTION

The significance of higher education in today's world and workforce cannot be overstated. It is widely recognized that obtaining a higher education leads to better job opportunities, increased salaries, and improved social status (Johnson, 2023). Women make up approximately half of the world's population and should have equal access to and success in higher education. Promoting equity for women in higher education helps break down gender barriers and advance gender equality (De Welde & Stepnick, 2023).

The higher education sector in Afghanistan is directly and often negatively impacted by patriarchal and social turbulence (Ahmadi, 2022). It collapsed completely when the Taliban, an ethno-religious extremist group, seized power in 1996 (Ahmadi, 2022; Baiza, 2013). The era of the Taliban (1996-2001) is regarded as the worst period for human rights in Afghanistan. Their rejection of international norms of human rights was incommensurate with the interests and needs

of Afghan women. They barred women from all social roles and services except medical positions and required women to cover themselves from head to toe and to have a male chaperone when leaving home (Majeed, 2018; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Ansary (2012) noted, “Kabul University had never quite closed, but in Taliban times, the clerics had reduced it to little more than a stunted madrasa.” During this period, girls’ education was banned (Riley, 2009; Giustozzi, 2010), and female teachers were not allowed to go to work or tutor students.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, led to the fall of the Taliban regime. This shift from Taliban rule to a pro-Western government resulted in significant changes across various sectors, including education (Ahmadi, 2002). According to Engelbrecht & Hassan (2021), after 2001, the United States and its international allies contributed over a billion dollars to higher education institutions in Afghanistan to enhance access to quality education.

Research by Hayward and Karim (2019) shows the remarkable transformation in higher education that resulted. Female participation increased from virtually no female students, faculty, or staff in 2001 to 28% female students and 14% female faculty members by 2017. The environment for women improved significantly due to the Higher Education Gender Strategy and various policies aimed at fostering an open, comfortable, and equitable atmosphere for women (Hayward, 2019). Schools and universities employed nearly 80,000 female instructors, including over 2,000 university professors (UNWOMEN, 2024).

Since August 2021, the Taliban has generated widespread fear and concern in both the pre-university and higher education sectors in Afghanistan. Most academic staff and researchers report being deprived of their financial resources and academic freedoms, expressing that they do not feel valued by the new government (Mallapaty, 2021). The Taliban have imposed strict, questionably religious rules on Afghan women based on an interpretation of Islamic teachings that is heavily influenced by tribal culture and norms (Moghadam, 2002; Rahim, 2021). One of the most egregious actions taken by the Taliban after assuming control has been the imposition of such rules and restrictions on female lecturers.

The prolonged closure of universities to women and the enforcement of these strict policies have inflicted significant professional, economic, and psychological distress on female academics. This situation poses a critical problem as it restricts fundamental human rights and exacerbates gender inequality in Afghanistan. It is therefore essential to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by female professors in order to inform interventions and policy initiatives aimed at providing them with a safe environment and gender equality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Acker (2006), several factors can contribute to women's limited progress in the workplace, including sexual, ethnic, racial, and religious discrimination or harassment. Other factors may include differences in communication styles, exclusion from informal networks, limited management support for work-life balance programs, a lack of mentors and role models, occupational sex segregation, and various attitudinal and organizational biases (Bomбуwela & Alwis, 2013; Vinkenburg, 2011).

Inequalities detrimental to women are evident in all areas of life, including the education sector (Nezaami, 2022). Researchers argue that ongoing informal discrimination, obstacles, and restrictions hinder women from achieving prominent positions in academia (Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Taj, 2016). The possible causes and effects of gender inequality in different areas, including higher education, have been widely reported (Cooper, 2018). Although there is

an increased number of female employees in mid-management positions, executive roles and full professorships remain predominantly male-dominated (Mayuzumi, 2015; Liu, 2013; Oforiwa and Broni, 2013).

The percentage of female tenured faculty in the EU and US ranges from 20% to 33%, with even lower figures in fields such as engineering, where it can fall to as low as 5%. In many European countries, the situation is even more discouraging. For example, women hold only a small number of senior academic positions: 15.6% in Belgium, 17.3% in Germany, 17.5% in the United Kingdom, 19.3% in France, 19.3% in Switzerland, and 23.8% in Sweden. When women are hired, they are often placed in lower-paying, non-tenure-track positions. Obstacles for women in academia are evident at every stage, including hiring, letters of recommendation, student evaluations, peer reviews, grant opportunities, funding requests, service responsibilities, and promotion to tenure. Additionally, there is a significant pay gap; for instance, in Europe (United Kingdom), female academics earn 12% less than their male counterparts (Houser, 2019).

Traditional masculine beliefs create career barriers for Middle Eastern female managers, manifested in patriarchal power dynamics, negative attitudes from men, and in the stereotyping of women's capabilities (Abalkhail, 2019; Hodges, 2017; Omair, 2010). There is substantial evidence that Iranian higher education institutions foster gendered hierarchy and power distribution, and practice gender discrimination in filling positions. The hiring of female lecturers in Iran depends greatly on structural factors, political decisions, and the workplace culture within individual institutions. Overall, female candidates have not been equitably treated. However, despite all existing limitations and the stagnant number of female academics, there is evidence that women's share in individual research and publishing has expanded (Rahbari, 2016). In Pakistan, another neighboring country of Afghanistan, women in academia also face numerous challenges stemming from societal and institutional inequalities. These challenges include pressure based on family values, a lack of confidence, gender bias, and a reluctance among peers to provide support. Female academics in public universities often find themselves marginalized, with restricted access to leadership opportunities and professional growth (Amjad, 2024).

According to UNESCO 2012, men overwhelmingly dominate worldwide, occupying 71 percent of positions in academia, leaving women with less than 29 percent. In 54 of the 90 countries for which data is available, women account for 25 to 45 percent of researchers in only 21 nations. Afghanistan is 169th out of 187 countries on the United Nations gender inequality index. In the post-war period in Afghanistan, Islam remained the primary source of political and social legitimacy, and conservative traditionalist interpretation of Islam placed women in an inferior position to men (Riphenburg, 2004). Thus, tradition remained an impediment to some women's employment. Afghan society is deeply conservative, religious, and patriarchal, and it has been risky for women to pursue and advance careers (Nehan, 2022). The 20 years of international intervention in the country after 2001 provided an environment where girls and women could gradually pursue their dreams and goals. The Ministry of Higher Education was highlighted in 2009 in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan, 2010-2014 (MoHE, 2009) as part of the government's National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (MoWA, 2007) and the Higher Education Gender Strategy (MoHE, 2015). The issue of gender equity turned out to be more complicated than any of the other goals outlined in the NHESP. The Higher Education Gender Strategy, initiated by Deputy Minister Babury and team in 2011, faced a parliamentary backlash and was only finally inaugurated in 2016 (Welch & Wahidyar, 2019). It placed a major focus on

increased admission of female students, the hiring of more women faculty members, and promotion. Specific objectives included improving the atmosphere on campuses to ensure equal treatment and safety, increasing the proportion of female students to 25% and female faculty members to 20% by 2020, increasing the number of fellowships for women to study abroad for Master's and PhDs, constructing 4000 more dormitory places for women, and establishing a committee to review progress on these goals (MoHE, 2016).

After the Taliban regained power in 2021, they proposed many restrictions and limitations on female lecturers and students. In December 2022, the doors of universities were closed to female students, and female lecturers were prohibited from teaching.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Virginia Woolf (1938, reprint 1992) shows us how academia honors masculinity and constitutes a man's world through language, concepts, and conventions. The present study employs Critical Feminist Theory to understand the experiences and challenges of female lecturers in Taliban-run universities within the patriarchal culture of Afghanistan. Feminist criticism views patriarchy as a social system in which men have a concentration of power and women are systematically excluded. The primary goal of the theory is to identify, challenge, and reform gender-based inequality, discrimination, marginalization, and devaluation (Braithwaite and Schrod, 2021). Critical Feminist Theory focuses on power dynamics and relations in societies and asserts that in patriarchal societies, men have more positions of power than women; they control women's behavior in actions and interactions both outside and inside the family; this is a key factor resulting in the devaluation of women's experiences, views, and knowledge. Given the power relations in patriarchal cultures in which women's positions are subordinated to those of men, proponents of Critical Feminist Theory work to raise awareness about women's knowledge, experiences, and points of view which have historically received less acknowledgment and value compared to those of men (Hearding & Norberg, 2005). Critical Feminist Theory emphasizes critical thinking and empowerment of oppressed groups in educational settings in order to dismantle oppressive structures within academic institutions in particular and within society in general (Steven & Maclaran, 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY

In the current study, which took place between April 2024 and January 2025, a series of interviews was conducted with female lecturers and professors. Thematic analysis was employed to examine the qualitative data and investigate the challenges the subjects faced. This approach allowed exploration of the details and complexities of the participants' experiences and addressed the following main questions:

- What has happened to female lecturers since August 15, 2021?
- What are the specific challenges experienced?
- What are the gender discrimination issues identified during the study period?
- What are the consequences of restrictions on female university lecturers?

3.1. Participants

Female university lecturers, living in Afghanistan and prohibited from teaching, were selected from different public universities and faculties governed by the Taliban regime. The participants

were between 35-45 years of age at the time of data collection, with over 15 years of teaching experience at public universities.

The authors used purposeful sampling to select participants. Through social networking sites and messaging applications such as WhatsApp, 15 female lecturers were invited to take part. Ten of them expressed interest in the study and were willing to be interviewed, and five declined, citing safety concerns. Of the ten who agreed to

be interviewed, five were willing to be recorded during the Zoom interview. Three sent their own recorded responses to written questions, and two sent written responses.

Oral consent was obtained from all subjects before the interview. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. They were also assured that their responses would be kept confidential. Once the authors reviewed the interviews, the participants were contacted with further questions and invited to elaborate on certain responses. The interviews were conducted in Farsi/Dari.

3.2. Analysis

The interview recordings, as well as the recorded responses, were transcribed. The authors listened to the transcript and the recording simultaneously to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. The transcript and written responses were translated from Farsi/Dari into English and then read concurrently for accuracy. Thematic analysis, more specifically *in vivo* coding, was used to analyze the data. This technique allows the researchers to derive codes from the participants' actual utterances rather than from a list or literature (Saldaña, 2016). This method captures the participants' views and life experiences about the issue under study (Manning, 2017). Six stages of thematic analysis were developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) and have been used to analyze the data. First, the authors familiarized themselves with the data, with a thorough reading of the transcripts while taking notes. In the second phase, the data were coded, employing an open coding approach in which codes were identified and adapted as the coding process evolved. In the third phase, a systematic review of these codes was carried out, looking for recurring issues and connections. The codes were grouped based on their relevance to the research objectives. Subsequently, the initial themes were refined to ensure that they accurately reflected the data patterns. In the fifth phase, they were then validated by revisiting the transcripts and cross-referencing themes against the data. Finally, the themes were named and presented with supporting evidence in the form of quotations from the participants' interviews.

3.3. Ethics and safety

The authors of this study are a former university lecturer and a manager of the gender department at a public university in Afghanistan. They left Afghanistan after the Taliban took control in August 2021. Since leaving the country, they have had no official ties to any academic institution and have faced significant challenges in obtaining institutional support for their research.

However, their extensive experience in university education and advocacy for women's rights provides them with the expertise needed to conduct a rigorous and credible investigation. By conducting this research independently, they have had the freedom to address sensitive topics that institutional constraints might otherwise restrict. Despite their lack of official endorsement, the authors' commitment to ethical research practices ensures that the identities and responses of participants are well-protected, especially in the challenging and dangerous environment of

Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

4. FINDINGS

The findings below elucidate how female lecturers are suffering in silence while struggling with the many constraints imposed by the Taliban.

4.1. Strict dress codes

Most participants reported that the Taliban places great focus on women's appearance and dress and dictates what female lecturers wear and how they look. Deans and heads of the faculties are forced to ensure that the female lecturers observe hijab when present to sign their attendance sheets. As participant 007 noted: *"We are required to cover not only our faces by wearing a mask, but they emphasized covering the whole of our face and wearing black eyeglasses and gloves. We are told not to wear jeans and tight or colorful dresses, only loose black coverings. It is painful and unacceptable not to have the right to wear what we want, not even the color we like"*. Another lecturer [003] said that she had a purple coat, and during the winter, the university office staff member admonished her not to wear any other color except black. Lecturer 002 from a public university mentioned that for the first time after it was announced that they could go to the university, *"I went while covering my face. There was a group of gunmen at the university gate, and they didn't allow me to go in. They asked me to go home and wear chadiri [a local hijab used in some parts of Afghanistan to cover a woman's entire body], so I went home and changed. It gave me the worst sense of my fate as an academic woman, which I will never forget. When I saw some of my female colleagues with the same hijab, we just looked at each other and cried"*. Participant 001 noted: *"After the Taliban took control, entering the university was like a nightmare and it was difficult to believe that this was the place where I had spent 16 years of my life and was like a second home to me. Everything was terrifying. Strangers were around and even the faces of male colleagues and students had changed, with long beards and a shaggy appearance. I was wondering and thinking that I would have to leave this place soon."*

4.1.1. Restricted access to campuses

Upon reclaiming power in February 2002, the government allowed female lecturers to teach, but only female students. However, in December 2022, the Taliban decreed that female students could no longer attend academic institutions (with limited exceptions, such as in the health sector), thus eliminating the need for female lecturers. These orders resulted in limitations on access ranging from severe restrictions on mobility within campus to outright prohibition from entering campuses. Study participant 004, a colleague of one of the authors, related how she suffered for the first time after the Taliban took control of the country. She said: *"After a while, I wanted to go to my office at the university to take my laptop, academic journals, and books to read at home. There was an armed guard with an unorganized appearance in front of the university who stopped me and asked me where I was going. I told him that I was a lecturer here and wanted to go to my office to take some of my belongings, and he told me to get out of there before I whip you. 'Who permits you to come here when you are not allowed to go inside the campus?' I was completely dizzy and could barely stand on my feet. I returned home and cried many times. I will never forget that scene in my entire life. For two months, I could not feel normal, could not eat or behave well with my family; when they were looking at me, I felt that I was sinful or guilty."* Although lecturers were told to stay home after the banning of female students, participant 009 noted: *"We are*

required to go to the university and sign the attendance sheet. Failure to do so would be considered an absence and result in termination.” Participant 010 from Kabul stated: “It is not easy if you are not respected as a university lecturer because you are a woman. After banning the female classes, they didn’t allow us to go inside the university to sign the attendance sheet. When we were going to enter the campus, they stopped us outside the gate and brought the attendance sheet for us to sign, and then we had to leave.”

4.1.2. Restricted access to administration offices

Faculty administration emphasizes that women should not enter any offices at the university or talk with male colleagues. They are forced to come with a male chaperone, sign their attendance sheet, and leave. Participant 008 said: *“You don’t think that you are in an academic environment; it is such a surreal, nightmarish place, and everywhere looks scary.”*

Another interviewee (002) explained that when she wanted to consult for a few minutes with a male professor regarding her research paper, he said, *“I am sorry, but I was told not to talk with female lecturers or even allow you inside the office to discuss an academic issue. If you want some guidance, please ask one of your male family members to ask me and then he can send you my message”*.

Participants related that rules about entering the campus vary from province to province. Some urban centers allow female lecturers to go directly to a small, specially designated office to sign the attendance form at the end of each month at 1:00 pm and then leave immediately because, at that time, all male faculty members depart the campus to pray at the mosque: no presence, no seat, and no office. However, entering actual administration offices is entirely prohibited at all universities. Female lecturers are also barred from departmental meetings with faculty, university academic meetings, and Ministry of Higher Education sessions, having lost their membership. With an absence of female representation in decision-making spaces, such as boards and hiring committees, there is no chance for hiring new female university members. In contrast, as pointed out by participants, the average number of male lecturers hired since 2021 was around three to five in each faculty.

4.2. Loss of academic freedom and support

A female lecturer and official at the Ministry of Higher Education observed that the curtailment of women’s rights by the Taliban has led to a profound loss of academic freedoms for women. Most female lecturers reported that the Taliban have restricted academic research and teaching freedom by censoring ideas, impeding access to academic resources, and denying opportunities for collaboration and colleagues’ support. Academics must teach and conduct research for professional development and promotion. However, as participant 005 observed: *“Female lecturers are entirely restricted. Even if we want to choose our research topic, it takes months to discuss it in academic sessions and review it, and then they might reject it. There is no academic reason for this except for gender or religious biases. In the current climate, research into some sensitive and critical topics in society is not allowed, so we don’t have the right to choose our research topics. That is why the motivation for academic research died in us, and there is no interest in promoting.”*

Most of the female lecturers interviewed reported that the Taliban have further limited their work by impeding access to academic resources. Participant 008 stated that they are not allowed to use the library and IT center, where they can easily find references. She said, *“I needed to use the*

library and asked the head of the faculty, and he told me to send a male family member to take what I needed. I asked my brother to help, and he tried three times to find the books I needed, but he couldn't". Female academics have also lost opportunities for essential academic collaboration and support because of the prohibition against speaking with male colleagues.

4.3. Decrease in salary

After the banning of women from campuses and months of increasingly difficult work conditions, in May 2024, the Taliban decreased female lecturers' salaries from approximately 40,000 AFN (600 USD) to 5,000 AFN (75 USD) monthly. Participant 006 said it will have devastating consequences for her. *"My husband was a military member of the previous government, and he escaped to Iran and could not find work there to support us financially. I am responsible for five children, and it has been six months since I received any salary. I don't know how to pay life expenses. I am the only supporter of my family, and reflecting on how to survive, there is no mechanism for complaint or objection. Even if we say one word against them, the Taliban will punish us or one of our family members, so we must keep quiet."* Some other participants noted that they had been unpaid for months without knowing the reasons. Almost all the interviewees expressed frustration and discouragement with the negative impacts of salary reductions, not only the significant economic uncertainty and challenges they face, but also the loss of their hard-earned financial independence.

4.4. Mental health issues

The restrictions imposed by the Taliban on female university lecturers have led to significant mental health and psychological challenges, as reported by all interviewees. The bans on campus access, enforced dress codes, exclusion from administrative roles, insults, contempt, and lack of professional opportunities have created feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, and depression. These oppressive measures not only disrupt their academic careers but also take a toll on their emotional well-being, leaving them struggling to cope with the loss of identity, purpose, and autonomy in their professional and personal lives. The pervasive sense of isolation and frustration has deeply affected their mental health, as expressed uniformly by those interviewed. Participant 001 noted: *"Some of my female colleagues are psychologically affected by this restricted situation and gender inequality, and they are still under treatment and taking medication to relax. As lecturers, we never accept such bad behavior in an academic environment but tolerate it because of economic issues."* Another (003) echoed similar views, relating that two months prior, one of her female colleagues had attempted suicide. She said: *"All female lecturers suffer from mental problems. We have attained our professional positions after many difficulties and challenges, fighting the traditional norms in our society, and working hard to receive the support of our fathers, brothers, and husbands, and yet we are not only devalued as academics but even as human beings. This is painful and disappointing for educated people like us. We are suffering a slow death over these three years"*. In addition, the majority of the interviewees personally experienced domestic violence and also reported a general increase in domestic violence among female colleagues, likely contributing to the mental health issues described.

5. CONCLUSION

Since the Taliban seized power in August 2021, Afghanistan has seen the systematic implementation and enforcement of discriminatory policies and gender apartheid. Women are

facing increasingly restrictive laws, regulations, and orders, which have eliminated many of the rights they had gained over the previous two decades.

This research has revealed the profound and far-reaching impact of systematic discrimination and gender apartheid on female lecturers in higher education institutions in Afghanistan. The imposition of strict dress codes and the hyper-focus on female lecturers' appearance highlight how patriarchal norms are weaponized to control women's bodies and self-expression. The prohibition of female lecturers from entering campuses and holding administrative roles not only silences their voices but also reinforces their exclusion from intellectual and decision-making spaces. These discriminatory policies, combined with restrictions on mobility and diminished opportunities for promotion, have institutionalized gender inequality within the academic system. The deliberate marginalization of female lecturers through lower salaries and blocked career advancement reflects a broader strategy to erode their professional standing and contributions to academia. As a result, the academic environment is becoming increasingly hostile for women, depriving them of both financial stability and opportunities to shape academic discourse. These oppressive measures not only undermine their academic careers, but they erode their sense of identity and purpose in life. The resulting feelings of isolation, anxiety, and professional loss have severely impacted their mental health and well-being. These women will need mental health support to cope with and overcome the many losses. Persistent and strong advocacy for their rights is crucial to restoring their sense of self, professional dignity, and rightful place in academia.

Addressing these issues requires concerted action from both local and international communities. Efforts must be made to dismantle discriminatory structures and promote inclusive policies for female academics. Only by ensuring equal access to academic spaces and opportunities can we begin to rectify the deep-rooted gender apartheid that continues to undermine women's contributions to education and society in Afghanistan.

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