

The Impact Of Taliban Rule On Afghan Women: Pakistan's Humanitarian Response And Regional Cooperation In Promoting Gender Equality (2021–Present)

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Abstract: *The reemergence of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 has resulted in a radical decline in women's rights and freedoms. The whole situation has plunged Afghan women into a harsh set of limits dictated by the Taliban regime, affecting those who had achieved enormous success in education, employment, and politics over the last 20 years. This paper probes how Taliban rule has had an effect on the women of Afghanistan in terms of all these issues they are exposed to, e.g., less access to education, healthcare, and the job market, and because of the general degrading of personal freedoms. To address this crisis, Pakistan has been at the center of giving humanitarian aid, especially to Afghan female refugees who have dared to cross the border. As part of the larger campaign to encourage gender equality, Pakistan has participated in providing essential services, including medical assistance, education to refugee children, and vocational training to women. Further, the paper explores regional cooperation efforts in light of overcoming these obstacles, with an emphasis on Pakistan and its relations with global bodies and regional neighbors. This paper has brought attention to gender equality in post-conflict settings by examining the humanitarian response and regional cooperation. also highlights the complexities of addressing women's rights during political instability and war and explains how neighboring nations like Pakistan can play a crucial role in rescuing suffering women in Afghanistan and advancing their rights in light of the current socio-political situation there.*

Keywords: Taliban rule, Afghan women, gender equality, humanitarian response, Pakistan, regional cooperation

Introduction

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 heralded a new chapter of repression for Afghan women, overturning two decades of incremental progress in gender equality. For Afghan women, the period after 2001—when the Taliban were ousted from power—was marked by significant strides in education, employment, and political participation. Women in Afghanistan saw an increase in the number of girls attending school, more women entering the workforce, and a greater role for women in the political and social spheres. However, the return of the Taliban, with their strict interpretation of Islamic law, reversed many of these gains. Women in Afghanistan have once again been forced to confront an environment where their rights are severely restricted, and they are largely excluded from public life. The Taliban’s resurgence has led to a near-total rollback of women’s rights, with women being subjected to restrictions on education, employment, mobility, and even their personal

autonomy (Malala Fund, 2022).

Under the Taliban's rule, women are no longer allowed to pursue higher education beyond grade six, nor are they permitted to work in most sectors, particularly in public offices. The Taliban's policies, reminiscent of their rule in the 1990s, mandate that women be escorted by a male relative if they wish to leave the home, and they are required to wear the full-body covering, such as the burqa, whenever they venture outside. These policies have not only deprived women of their basic human rights but have also denied them opportunities for economic independence, social participation, and personal growth (Guterres, 2022).

In response to these alarming developments, the international community has turned its focus toward providing humanitarian aid to Afghan women, particularly through regional cooperation and direct interventions in countries like Pakistan, which shares a border with Afghanistan and is home to millions of Afghan refugees. Pakistan's role has been pivotal in offering refuge to Afghan women fleeing the Taliban's harsh rule. The country's humanitarian response has included providing temporary shelter, healthcare, education, and psychosocial support for Afghan women who have sought asylum in Pakistan. However, the challenges remain enormous. These women, already displaced and traumatized, often face cultural barriers, economic difficulties, and legal obstacles that limit their access to resources and support.

The Impact of Taliban Rule on Afghan Women

The Taliban's policies have brought about a profound shift in the lives of Afghan women, pushing them back into traditional roles defined by gender restrictions and prohibiting their active participation in society. Education, which had been a symbol of empowerment for Afghan women in the two decades following the Taliban's ousting in 2001, became the first casualty of the new regime. With the Taliban's decree in 2021, all girls were banned from attending school beyond the sixth grade, severely limiting their access to education and, consequently, their potential to contribute to the workforce, economy, or political life in Afghanistan. As Malala Fund (2022) reports, this ban affects over a million girls in Afghanistan, depriving them of opportunities for personal development and future economic security. This educational setback is not just a short-term loss, but one that will have long-lasting consequences for generations of Afghan women.

Beyond education, women in Afghanistan face increasing restrictions on their ability to work. The Taliban government issued orders that women in both public and private sectors should stay at home, significantly decreasing their participation in the workforce. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2021), the exclusion of women from the workforce has exacerbated economic hardships not only for Afghan women but also for their families, as many women were the sole breadwinners in their households. This exclusion from employment also cuts off Afghan women from economic independence, thus reinforcing their dependence on male relatives, further entrenching traditional patriarchal norms.

In addition to educational and employment restrictions, the Taliban's gender policies have had a direct impact on women's freedom of movement. Under the new regime, women are required to be accompanied by a male guardian whenever they leave the house, even for basic necessities such as shopping or seeking medical treatment. This restriction severely limits their ability to participate in public life and denies them the autonomy to make decisions about their own bodies and futures (Guterres, 2022). Moreover, the mandate for women to wear a full-body covering when outside further reinforces their objectification and social invisibility. The return to these oppressive policies has stifled Afghan women's social mobility, leaving them confined to their homes and out of the public eye, effectively erasing their presence from society.

Pakistan's Humanitarian Response to Afghan Women

Given Afghanistan's proximity and the high number of Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan, the country has become an essential partner in responding to the humanitarian crisis facing Afghan women. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2021), there are over 3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, with many fleeing to the country to escape Taliban rule. Among these refugees, a significant proportion are women and children, who often face heightened vulnerabilities due to gender-based violence, displacement, and lack of access to education and healthcare.

Pakistan's humanitarian response to Afghan women has been multifaceted, involving collaboration with international organizations, including UNHCR, World Food Programme (WFP), and World Health Organization (WHO), to provide relief and protection. The Pakistani government, alongside these organizations, has established refugee camps, provided healthcare services, and offered educational opportunities to displaced Afghan women and girls. These initiatives aim to address the immediate needs of Afghan women, particularly in the areas of education, nutrition, and psychosocial support. For example, Pakistan's efforts in providing temporary shelters and basic health services to Afghan refugees have been critical in preventing further humanitarian disasters.

Despite these efforts, the situation remains dire. Afghan women refugees in Pakistan face numerous challenges, including legal barriers to accessing formal employment, social stigma, and limited educational opportunities. Afghan women refugees often live in informal settlements or refugee camps, where access to basic services is limited, and discriminatory practices are prevalent. In addition to physical challenges, they experience significant psychosocial trauma due to their displacement, the loss of family members, and the horrors of the war and Taliban repression. Pakistan's response, while commendable, is insufficient in addressing these ongoing challenges. More comprehensive solutions are required, particularly in empowering Afghan women to rebuild their lives and participate fully in society.

Regional Cooperation and Gender Equality

While Pakistan has provided vital support to Afghan women, the regional cooperation in promoting gender equality is equally important. Given the geopolitical context and the shared border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, regional cooperation is essential to addressing the underlying issues and ensuring that Afghan women have access to basic human rights. Regional platforms such as the Islamic Cooperation Organization (OIC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), in which both Afghanistan and Pakistan are members, have played a significant role in advocating for gender equality in Afghanistan.

However, regional efforts have been hampered by the lack of cooperation from the Taliban regime and the international community's reluctance to directly engage with the Taliban on women's rights issues. Despite these barriers, Pakistan has continued to press for regional dialogue and multilateral interventions aimed at improving the status of Afghan women. Through bilateral efforts with neighboring countries and international institutions, Pakistan has advocated for greater autonomy and gender equality for Afghan women, while also offering humanitarian support to address their immediate needs.

At the regional level, Pakistan has been involved in initiatives that aim to empower Afghan women, especially in the fields of education and healthcare. Regional cooperation on gender equality is critical for ensuring that Afghan women receive the support they need to overcome the social and economic setbacks imposed by the Taliban. Nevertheless, regional cooperation remains challenged by the complex political situation in Afghanistan and the Taliban's disregard for international norms regarding women's rights.

Literature Review

The Return of the Taliban: Gender Impacts

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has had a significant and direct impact on Afghan women's rights, reversing many of the gains made over the past two decades. Under the previous government, Afghan women made strides toward gender equality, especially in the fields of education, employment, and social participation (Malala Fund, 2022). According to Guterres (2022), the Taliban's strict interpretation of Sharia law has led to severe limitations on the rights of women. The policies enforced by the Taliban include a ban on girls' education beyond grade six, restrictions on women's mobility, and the imposition of dress codes, requiring women to wear the burqa when in public. These repressive policies represent a stark departure from the progress Afghan women had made in the years following the fall of the Taliban government in 2001.

International organizations have highlighted the devastating consequences of these policies. According to UN Women (2021), the Taliban's restrictions on girls' education have left over a million girls without access to secondary education, directly undermining their opportunities for economic and social advancement. These educational restrictions not only affect girls' current lives but also hinder their potential to contribute to the national economy, thereby exacerbating poverty and perpetuating gender inequality. The World Bank (2021) further reports that the exclusion of women from the workforce—particularly in government offices—has stalled economic growth and reduced opportunities for women to secure livelihoods and contribute to the economy.

Women's healthcare also suffered under Taliban rule. Healthcare services, already fragile in Afghanistan, became even more inaccessible for women, particularly in rural areas. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2021) indicated that a lack of female healthcare workers and the restricted mobility of women due to the Taliban's policies have significantly diminished women's access to essential medical services, including maternal healthcare.

Pakistan's Humanitarian Response to Afghan Women

Pakistan, as Afghanistan's neighbor, has played a critical role in responding to the humanitarian needs of Afghan women. Pakistan hosts over 3 million Afghan refugees, many of whom are women and children, fleeing the oppressive Taliban regime (UNHCR, 2021). The situation for Afghan women in Pakistan is precarious; while they are safe from the Taliban's immediate threats, they often face discrimination, poverty, and limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and legal support.

Pakistan's government, in collaboration with international agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and World Food Programme (WFP), has provided emergency relief to Afghan women in the form of shelter, food aid, healthcare services, and psychosocial support. The Pakistani government has also made efforts to ensure Afghan girls and women have access to education and vocational training. However, cultural and societal barriers in Pakistan sometimes limit the effectiveness of these efforts, as many Afghan women, especially those from rural areas, face challenges in accessing formal education or employment opportunities (World Bank, 2021).

Several humanitarian organizations, including UNHCR and Save the Children, have focused on providing mental health services and educational support for Afghan refugee women. However, these interventions often fall short of addressing the deep-rooted gender-based violence and psychosocial trauma caused by both the Taliban's repression and the refugee experience (Malala Fund, 2022). According to UNHCR (2021), the mental health of many Afghan women has deteriorated due to the trauma of war, displacement, and the loss of autonomy under the Taliban's rule. This underscores the importance of holistic approaches that go beyond emergency relief and work towards empowering Afghan women to rebuild their lives and contribute to society.

Regional Cooperation and Gender Equality Advocacy

Regional cooperation plays a vital role in promoting gender equality for Afghan women, particularly in the context of Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and the broader international community. In response to the Taliban's restrictions on women's rights, Pakistan has become an advocate for Afghan women's rights on regional platforms such as the Islamic Cooperation Organization (OIC) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Pakistan's advocacy has focused on gender equality and ensuring that Afghan women's rights are not overlooked by the Taliban or the international community.

However, regional cooperation faces significant hurdles due to the Taliban's refusal to acknowledge international human rights norms. Despite Pakistan's efforts to press for women's rights in Afghanistan through diplomatic channels, the Taliban's government continues to maintain strict control over the country, stifling regional collaboration on this issue (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021). Regional actors have been limited in their ability to directly influence the Taliban's policies, as the Taliban's stance on gender equality remains rigid and resistant to external pressures.

Nonetheless, Pakistan's humanitarian support for Afghan women and girls continues, with significant contributions to education programs and vocational training for Afghan women in refugee camps and host communities. Regional cooperation has also focused on cross-border programs to help displaced Afghan women gain access to resources that are otherwise unavailable in Afghanistan. For example, the UNHCR has partnered with Pakistan to set up cross-border education initiatives, where Afghan refugee women can access education through Pakistani institutions that offer gender-sensitive curricula (UNHCR, 2021).

Challenges in Promoting Gender Equality in Afghanistan

Promoting gender equality in Afghanistan under the Taliban's rule remains an extraordinarily complex challenge. According to Guterres (2022), global humanitarian interventions have made little headway in changing the Taliban's stance on women's rights. While Pakistan has provided essential support to Afghan women through humanitarian aid, the effectiveness of these efforts is limited by the Taliban's refusal to engage with international actors on women's rights. Furthermore, the lack of security, ongoing conflict, and distrust in international organizations make it difficult to effectively address the needs of Afghan women, particularly those in rural or remote areas.

In addition to external challenges, cultural barriers in Afghanistan itself have proven difficult to overcome. Patriarchal social norms often limit Afghan women's access to resources and opportunities, even in areas not directly controlled by the Taliban. The displacement of Afghan women into refugee camps and neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, further compounds these challenges, as they face xenophobia, limited opportunities for work, and lack of access to basic services. These factors contribute to the ongoing gender inequality that persists even in regions where Afghan women have fled the Taliban's reach (World Bank, 2021).

Pakistan's Role in Supporting Afghan Women: Moving Forward

Pakistan's role in promoting gender equality for Afghan women is crucial, given its geographic proximity to Afghanistan and its large Afghan refugee population. However, Pakistan faces significant challenges in addressing the needs of Afghan women. To move forward, it is essential that Pakistan and its regional partners expand their efforts to empower Afghan women through education, vocational training, and economic opportunities. Additionally, regional cooperation must be strengthened to ensure that Afghan women have access to healthcare, mental health services, and protection from gender-based violence. Finally, Pakistan's humanitarian response should prioritize long-term strategies that build resilience and empower Afghan women, ensuring that they can reclaim their rights and participate in shaping Afghanistan's future, despite the challenges imposed by the Taliban's regime.

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has resulted in a humanitarian crisis for Afghan women, reversing many of the gains made in the years following the fall of the previous Taliban regime. Afghan women now face severe restrictions on education, employment, and personal autonomy, which has had devastating consequences for their mental health, economic stability, and social participation. Pakistan's response, which includes providing humanitarian aid and advocacy for gender equality, plays a vital role in mitigating the crisis for Afghan women. However, the challenges faced by Afghan women require a more comprehensive approach that involves regional cooperation, gender-sensitive policies, and long-term strategies to ensure that Afghan women can rebuild their lives and achieve gender equality.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore the impact of Taliban rule on Afghan women and assess Pakistan's humanitarian response and regional cooperation in promoting gender equality. A qualitative approach is suited for this research because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of Afghan women under Taliban rule and the nuanced challenges they face in accessing basic human rights, such as education, employment, and freedom of movement. Furthermore, qualitative methods enable the researcher to explore the effectiveness of Pakistan's humanitarian response and regional cooperation efforts in providing support to Afghan women.

Research Design

The study adopts a case study approach, focusing on Afghan women who have sought refuge in Pakistan since the Taliban's return to power. A case study allows for a deep, context-rich understanding of the specific challenges these women face, the support they receive, and the broader regional dynamics involved. Through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the study collects personal narratives from Afghan women, as well as insights from humanitarian workers, regional policymakers, and gender equality advocates involved in responding to the crisis.

Sample Selection

The sample for this qualitative study consists of 30 Afghan women refugees who have fled Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power in 2021. These women were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the sample captures a variety of experiences, including women from urban and rural backgrounds, different age groups, and those living in various refugee settlements across Pakistan. In addition to Afghan women, the study also includes 10 key informants, including humanitarian workers, Pakistani government officials, and NGO representatives, who have been involved in gender-based humanitarian aid and regional cooperation efforts. This diverse range of participants allows for a broader understanding of the impact of Taliban policies on Afghan women and the effectiveness of external responses.

Data Collection Methods

The primary data collection methods used in this study are semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). These methods are ideal for exploring the personal experiences and insights of Afghan women and other key stakeholders.

Semi-Structured Interviews:

In-depth interviews were conducted with Afghan women refugees and key informants to explore their experiences, challenges, and perceptions of the Taliban's impact on their lives and rights. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling the interviewer to ask open-ended questions while also allowing participants to speak freely about their experiences and provide detailed answers. Interview questions focused on topics such as:

Personal experiences under Taliban rule (before and after 2021)

Access to education, employment, healthcare, and legal protection

The role of Pakistan in supporting Afghan women and providing aid

Perceptions of regional cooperation efforts to advance gender equality in Afghanistan

Social stigma, cultural barriers, and psychosocial trauma resulting from displacement

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

FGDs were held with Afghan women refugees in different locations to explore shared experiences, challenges, and suggestions for improving support for Afghan women. These discussions were intended to capture a collective perspective on gender equality, humanitarian aid, and regional collaboration efforts. Each group consisted of 6-8 participants and was facilitated by a moderator with experience in gender and refugee studies. The discussions were structured around topics such as:

Access to education for girls and young women

Healthcare services and mental health support for women

Experiences of gender-based violence and discrimination

Challenges related to economic integration and empowerment

Documentary Analysis:

To complement the qualitative interviews and FGDs, the study also incorporates a documentary analysis of policy documents, humanitarian aid reports, and regional agreements related to the humanitarian response for Afghan refugees, especially women. These documents are analyzed to understand the broader political and legal contexts surrounding Pakistan's support for Afghan women and its role in regional gender equality efforts. Documents such as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports, Pakistan government policies, and regional cooperation frameworks were examined to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis are analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This approach involves identifying and analyzing patterns or themes within the data. The steps involved in the thematic analysis include:

Familiarization with the Data:

The first step in the analysis was to transcribe all interviews and FGDs. This was followed by a process of familiarizing myself with the data by reading through the transcripts and making initial notes on key observations.

Generating Initial Codes:

In the second step, I applied open coding techniques to the data. This involved breaking down the data into smaller segments and assigning labels (codes) to key ideas, experiences, and issues that emerged in the interviews and discussions. These codes helped to capture patterns in the data related to the impact of the Taliban's policies, humanitarian aid, and regional cooperation efforts.

Searching for Themes:

After coding the data, I organized the codes into potential themes by grouping similar codes together. Themes such as gender-based restrictions under Taliban rule, Pakistan's role in refugee support, barriers to education and employment, and mental health consequences emerged as significant themes.

Reviewing and Refining Themes:

The identified themes were then reviewed and refined by revisiting the data to ensure they accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Any overlapping or redundant themes

were consolidated, and new themes were added if necessary.

Defining and Naming Themes:

Once the final themes were established, I defined and named each theme to summarize the core findings. These themes were used to develop a comprehensive narrative that describes the impact of the Taliban's rule on Afghan women and evaluates Pakistan's humanitarian response.

Ethical Considerations

The study follows ethical guidelines to ensure the confidentiality and safety of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing interview data and focus group discussions. Given the sensitive nature of the research, especially regarding trauma and displacement, participants were assured that the findings would be used for academic purposes only. Additionally, the study adhered to ethical standards of cultural sensitivity, ensuring that all participants were treated with respect and dignity throughout the data collection process.

Limitations

While the qualitative approach provides rich, detailed insights into the experiences of Afghan women under the Taliban rule, the study has some limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small, consisting of 30 Afghan women and 10 key informants, which may not be fully representative of all Afghan women refugees in Pakistan. However, the purposive sampling method ensures that the sample captures a diverse range of experiences. Second, the study focuses on Afghan women refugees in Pakistan, which limits the findings to this specific group. Future research could expand to include Afghan women residing in Afghanistan or other neighboring countries to provide a more comprehensive view of the issue.

Results and Discussion

This study sought to understand the impact of Taliban rule on Afghan women and to assess Pakistan's humanitarian response and regional cooperation efforts aimed at promoting gender equality for Afghan women in the context of the post-2021 situation. The qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and documentary analysis provide insights into Afghan women's lived experiences, their challenges, and the effectiveness of humanitarian and regional interventions.

Impact of Taliban Rule on Afghan Women's Education

One of the most significant findings of this study revolves around the devastating impact of Taliban policies on education for Afghan women. Nearly all of the Afghan women refugees interviewed described the Taliban's ban on girls' education as the most significant blow to their future prospects. Prior to the Taliban's return to power, Afghan women had made substantial progress in education, with female literacy rates increasing and more girls attending secondary and even higher education (Malala Fund, 2022). However, the Taliban's restrictions have reversed this progress, depriving girls and young women of educational opportunities.

Focus group discussions with Afghan women refugees revealed that many participants had been in the final years of their education when the Taliban took over, which led to deep feelings of frustration and hopelessness. A participant from an urban refugee camp stated:

"I was studying in the 10th grade when the Taliban took over. My dreams of becoming a doctor were crushed. How can they just take away our future like that?" (FGD with Afghan women refugees, 2022).

In contrast, many women expressed desperation about their children's futures. They feared their daughters would never get the education they deserved. The educational setbacks faced by Afghan girls

not only cripple their personal growth but also relegate Afghanistan to a future where women have little opportunity to contribute to the country's recovery and development.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2021), more than 1 million girls were denied access to education immediately after the Taliban's return to power. The implications of this educational ban are long-lasting, perpetuating gender inequality and economic disparities across generations.

Impact on Employment and Economic Independence

Another core issue identified in this study is the Taliban's policies that have excluded Afghan women from the workforce. Before the Taliban's return, Afghan women had gained a significant presence in the workforce, particularly in education, healthcare, and NGOs. Women's economic participation had contributed to Afghanistan's socio-economic development, but with the Taliban's resurgence, women were prohibited from working in most sectors, especially in the public sector.

During interviews and focus group discussions, Afghan women refugees shared their personal experiences of losing their jobs under Taliban rule. One interviewee, a former teacher, explained:

"I was working as a teacher in Kabul before the Taliban came. I was the sole breadwinner for my family. After the Taliban returned, I was fired, and I have not been able to find any work since" (Interview with Afghan refugee, 2022).

The loss of economic independence for many Afghan women is not just a personal hardship but also a social and economic setback. Women's economic roles were crucial to their families, especially in urban settings where women were contributing to household incomes. The exclusion of women from the workforce has led to economic instability, which in turn has made it harder for families to access basic necessities, such as food, healthcare, and education for their children (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021).

While Pakistan's humanitarian response has provided some avenues for vocational training and job placement for Afghan women refugees, many women remain trapped in informal labor markets or dependent on relatives for economic support. Despite the vocational programs, these efforts are insufficient to fully mitigate the long-term economic exclusion Afghan women face, especially when social stigma, legal restrictions, and limited job opportunities persist.

Impact on Healthcare and Mental Health

The healthcare challenges faced by Afghan women are another critical issue highlighted in this research. In Afghanistan, healthcare systems are fragile, and the Taliban's policies further exacerbated the gender-based inequities in healthcare access. According to WHO (2021), the Taliban's exclusion of female healthcare workers and the general restriction of women's movement significantly hindered Afghan women's ability to access healthcare services, especially maternal health services.

The interviews revealed that many women who fled Afghanistan to seek refuge in Pakistan had suffered from chronic health issues related to violence, displacement, and poor living conditions. A participant described:

"We lost everything when we fled. We couldn't get medical treatment for our illnesses, and some of us are still struggling with mental health problems due to everything we've been through. It's hard to find help here, too" (Interview with Afghan refugee, 2022).

The mental health crisis among Afghan women is a major concern, as many women have experienced trauma from both Taliban repression and displacement. The prolonged exposure to gender-based violence and the loss of autonomy under the Taliban has contributed to widespread feelings of hopelessness, depression, and anxiety. The psychosocial impact of these experiences is compounded by the stress of displacement in refugee camps, where living conditions are often harsh and access to mental

health services is limited.

Pakistan's humanitarian response has included psychosocial support services and healthcare initiatives, but these efforts are inadequate given the scale of need. Refugee women often lack the resources to access mental health services due to cultural barriers, language differences, and financial constraints (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021).

Pakistan's Humanitarian Response and Regional Cooperation

Pakistan has been at the forefront of humanitarian response for Afghan refugees, particularly Afghan women, since the Taliban's return to power. The Pakistani government, in collaboration with international agencies such as UNHCR and WFP, has provided temporary shelter, food aid, medical services, and vocational training. Pakistan has also worked to ensure that Afghan women and girls in refugee camps have access to education through refugee schooling systems (UNHCR, 2021).

While these interventions have provided some relief, Pakistan's response faces serious challenges. Refugee women often face legal barriers to accessing formal employment and education due to their uncertain legal status in Pakistan. Social stigma and discrimination against Afghan refugees have further marginalized these women, preventing them from fully integrating into Pakistani society and gaining access to the opportunities needed to rebuild their lives (World Bank, 2021).

Moreover, regional cooperation has played a critical role in addressing Afghan women's needs, but the Taliban's reluctance to acknowledge international human rights norms complicates efforts to improve the situation. Pakistan's role in regional platforms, such as SAARC and the OIC, has been to advocate for Afghan women's rights. Yet, the Taliban's rejection of these efforts and their refusal to allow external influence on their policies have hindered meaningful change. Regional cooperation, despite its importance, remains limited in its ability to exert pressure on the Taliban to respect gender equality.

Barriers to Effective Humanitarian and Regional Efforts

The barriers to effective humanitarian response and regional cooperation are numerous. Legal challenges related to the status of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, combined with gender-based discrimination, limit Afghan women's ability to access education, healthcare, and employment. In addition, cultural barriers in both Afghanistan and Pakistan exacerbate the difficulties Afghan women face in securing basic rights. Women from rural areas, who are particularly vulnerable to displacement, often find it difficult to access humanitarian aid due to language barriers, social isolation, and a lack of resources.

Despite these challenges, Pakistan's humanitarian efforts and regional cooperation initiatives have had a positive but limited impact. To achieve sustainable solutions, it is crucial that Pakistan and its regional partners focus on empowering Afghan women through education, vocational training, legal reforms, and gender-sensitive policies that address the needs of refugee women and displaced populations.

Conclusion

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 has led to a severe regression in the rights of Afghan women, reversing the substantial progress made in the past two decades in terms of education, employment, and social participation. Afghan women, once hopeful for a future of increased gender equality and opportunities, now face a bleak reality marked by systematic restrictions on their fundamental rights. The Taliban's oppressive policies, including bans on girls' education beyond grade six, the exclusion of women from the workforce, and the requirement for women to be accompanied by a male relative for even the most basic tasks, have severely limited their autonomy and opportunities for social and economic development (Malala Fund, 2022). These measures have significantly curtailed Afghan women's access to education, economic independence, and healthcare, and have rendered them invisible in public and social spaces.

Pakistan's humanitarian response to the crisis has been crucial in alleviating some of the immediate needs of Afghan women, particularly those who have sought refuge in Pakistan. Through a variety of programs, including temporary shelter, vocational training, and mental health services, Pakistan has played a vital role in offering support to Afghan women and girls who have fled the repressive environment of Afghanistan. Organizations like the UNHCR, World Food Programme (WFP), and local NGOs have worked in collaboration with Pakistan's government to provide basic services and create a safe space for Afghan women and children. However, the scale of the crisis remains enormous, and while humanitarian aid is essential, it is not enough to address the deeper, systemic issues that Afghan women face, both in Afghanistan and as refugees in neighboring countries.

The impact of the Taliban's return on Afghan women cannot be overstated. Women who were once active participants in the workforce and the education system have been pushed back into traditional gender roles, deprived of opportunities for personal growth and economic independence. The mental health consequences of this oppression are also significant, with many Afghan women reporting increased levels of depression, anxiety, and trauma as a result of their displacement and the continuous repression under Taliban rule. The limitations on freedom of movement and the imposition of strict dress codes further exacerbate the challenges that Afghan women face in trying to lead independent, fulfilling lives.

However, Pakistan's regional cooperation efforts in promoting gender equality have been essential, despite the Taliban's refusal to engage with international norms. Through platforms such as the Islamic Cooperation Organization (OIC) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Pakistan has raised its voice in advocating for the rights of Afghan women, pushing for gender-sensitive policies and international pressures on the Taliban to respect women's rights. Still, regional cooperation has been hindered by the Taliban's lack of willingness to cooperate and the distrust among international stakeholders.

While Pakistan's humanitarian initiatives provide short-term relief, the long-term empowerment of Afghan women requires more than just emergency aid. The focus must shift toward sustainable solutions that provide Afghan women with the tools and resources to rebuild their lives, reclaim their rights, and fully participate in Afghan society once the political climate allows for it. Programs that focus on educational opportunities, vocational training, legal reforms, and economic integration must be prioritized to ensure that Afghan women have the support they need to regain autonomy and economic independence.

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