

IN FOCUS

by Barbara Schiavulli

Terror and dark power in Afghanistan

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban took power in Afghanistan after a devastating agreement which did not take into account the desires of the population. Since then, every right painstakingly gained by women and ethnic and religious minorities over the last 20 years has been erased, despite promises to the contrary. In addition to gender apartheid, the economy has collapsed, and the country has sunk into despair and poverty after 17 months.

I have been covering Afghanistan for 21 years, and since the Taliban arrived, I have returned every four or five months to prevent the spotlight on Afghanistan (and the West's guilt) from being turned off.

A few years ago, I founded [Radio Bullets](#) with other colleagues, an independent and reader-funded news organisation that covers foreign affairs, human rights, and inclusivity, because we believed that mainstream media did not adequately cover stories that deserved to be known.

It's not a country for women

By law, women in Afghanistan can no longer work or attend school beyond the age of 11. Only female doctors, elementary school teachers, and female prison police officers can continue their professions. Women cannot walk in parks, go to hammams, or go to the gym. They have no voice in the political process and must always be accompanied by a man to go out. In Afghanistan, there are tens of thousands of widows who do not know how to make ends meet. In one of the Taliban's recent decrees, even women employed by NGOs cannot work anymore.

And since only women can help women, millions of human beings no longer have access to aid. Fatima (not her real name), a widow with children, does not send her sons to school because they have to go and collect plastic to bring home some money. The rent for the two rooms she occupies is US\$25 a month. After five months of non-payment,



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the owner proposed that he should be given her youngest daughter in exchange. I intervened, paying off the debt and preventing her from selling her daughter, and getting her into the Dignity project of Noveon-lus. Now, she can survive. The sale of children to feed other children has increased in Afghanistan, the age of marriage for girls has lowered, and human trafficking has grown exponentially.

The protest girls

Protests in Afghanistan last five minutes. The girls are almost immediately stopped by

the Taliban who shoot in the air, beat them, arrest them, and then force them to sign a paper promising to behave. The few girls who protest have had to leave their families to avoid putting them in danger. They ask men not to join their battle because they know that if a man is imprisoned or killed, the rest of the family will not survive because without men working or accompanying them, they cannot do anything.

Ismail Mashal

On 26 December 2022, Ismail Mashal, a professor and found-

er of a university centre, during a debate on ToloTV, takes his degree and tears it up on live television, saying that if his Afghan sisters cannot study, he will no longer teach. The video goes viral, and he does not return home to avoid putting his family in danger. He says, "Even if they kill me, I did it for my daughters. When they asked me why they couldn't go to school, my heart broke. If they have to remember their father, I want it to be because I did the right thing." A few days after our interview, while distributing free books on the street to boys and girls, he was beaten by the Taliban and

arrested. More than a month has passed. Mashal is the only Afghan man who has openly come out against the restrictions to girls' right to education.

Abdul Rahman Chakari

Abdul Rahman Chakari is an Imam and university professor in Kabul. We asked him if it was religiously permissible for the Taliban to ban girls from attending school and women from working. Chakari explains that Islam does not forbid it. In fact, the Quran, which is the holy book, must be accessible



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to anyone and contains the essence of education. All Muslim countries, even other conservative countries, have pointed out to the Taliban that education is necessary and that an educated society is better. The Taliban have thus changed the narrative; education is not banned, it is only suspended until the necessary conditions are created for girls to return to school. Several Taliban leaders, steeped in their convictions, have told us that girls in university contract HIV/AIDS, but without providing any statistics or evidence.

The Minister of Education denied me an interview because I am a woman. If women do not continue to go to university, one of the short-term prob-

lems will be the lack of female doctors, with the resulting collapse of every aspect of women's health.

A young country

Afghanistan is a young country. The average family has six or seven children. The main maternity hospital in Kabul, also known as the "baby factory," delivers 11,000 babies per month. If there are no problems, new mothers are discharged within six hours of giving birth. Outside, men wait in desperation, especially if a girl is born, and super desperation because the unemployment rate is very high, and a child is another mouth to feed. Despite this, there is great love for children because

they represent the future and the possibility that if the children are boys, they can leave and find work anywhere. Today, most Afghans and women do not work. The Taliban have taken over all administrative positions, former military personnel are unemployed and for the most part hiding, as are those women who had a role in civil society and were unable to leave during the August 2021 evacuation, when 150,000 people were exfiltrated, including artists, politicians, magistrates, athletes, activists, and humanitarian workers.

Mursal Nabizada

On January 15, 2023, Mursal Nabizada was killed in her



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sleep at home. Her brother, with whom she shared the room, was wounded by three gunshot wounds. Nabizada, 29 years old, was a former parliamentarian who did not want to leave the country. She had started working with an NGO but continued to talk to people in her neighbourhood and try to solve their problems. No one has claimed responsibility for her murder, but several women former politicians, activists, and journalists have been killed, both before and after the Taliban's arrival. There is no longer freedom of expression and dissent in Afghanistan. At least 250 media outlets have been closed, 700 women journalists no longer work, and male journalists are controlled, threatened, and often end up in prison.

Dying of cold and starvation

There are 3.5 million internally displaced people in Afghanistan. They live in tents or mud and brick huts, without heat-

ing, electricity, or food. And now that women humanitarian workers cannot work, except in the health sector, the situation has become even more complicated. This winter has been the coldest in the last 50 years, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), with hundreds of children dying of cold with temperatures dropping below -33 degrees. The World Food Programme (WFP) delivers about 20 million food parcels per month to a total population of 36 million people; 6 million children suffer from acute malnutrition and 97 percent of Afghans live below the poverty line.

Dreaming about leaving the country

For the first time in the last 20 years, most Afghans says



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that if they could, they would leave. For the first time, many people do not see a future for themselves and their family. If security has improved because Americans, allies, and the Afghan army no longer fight against the Taliban, ISIS attacks continue (against the Taliban, foreign interests like China and Iran, and minorities like the Hazara), targeted killings have increased, and crime has increased due to poverty. At bus stops leading towards the border, there are hundreds of boys ready to take their chances to leave the country.

Whatever it takes to leave, find a job, and support the family back home. Trafficking to Europe costs about \$8,000, and sometimes it takes months without any guarantee to reach the destination. But the “maybe” represented by the journey cancels the risks, because at home, many have the certainty of not surviving.

Drugs and violence

The situation in Afghanistan regarding the production of opium and the spread of drug addiction is dire, even with the

recent takeover by the Taliban. The country remains the largest producer of opium in the world, and drug trafficking and international crime continue to thrive. The Taliban do not like drug abusers and conduct raids in the cities every 45 days, rounding up drug addicts and placing them in detoxification centres that are essentially concentration camps. The conditions in these centers are inhumane. These places are infested by lice and people receive just a handful of rice per day, no soap, and no medication during withdrawal.

Survivors often return to drug use and end up sleeping on the streets. The use of opium and heroin has increased due to the widespread depression in the country. Women are particularly vulnerable, as many are forced to use drugs by their husbands to keep them submissive. Children are also often given drugs by their mothers for the same reason. Additionally, 80 percent of women in Afghanistan experience violence in their homes, and the Taliban have shut down all anti-violence centres. When prisons were reopened,



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all husbands who had been arrested for abusing their wives were sent back home.

A new moral order

Mohammad Sadik Aqek, 34 years old, is the spokesperson for the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which replaced the Ministry for Women's Affairs that was dissolved. The morality police, present only in three countries (Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran), control the habits of Afghans: from how to wear the veil, to accusations of theft or the length of the beard, or the regularity

of prayer. The law of retribution has been reinstated as well as the death penalty. Cutting off the hand of thieves, and whipping women accused of betraying their spouse are among the forms of punishment.

The music is over

Every form of art that is not religious has been banned. From music to painting. Faiz taught in at a music school performed at embassies or during concerts. A few days after the arrival of the Taliban, he rushed with his children to his school to save traditional

instruments. Then the Taliban arrived to destroy them. During the scuffle, his 17-year-old son was stabbed. Today, musicians, as well as artists, have hidden instruments and musical scores. They live on the run, without work, dreaming of leaving. The same goes for actors and street artists. Afghanistan is the only country in the world where music is forbidden. Even weddings have become silent. Thanks to the internet, Afghans still listen to music, but in secret, and let's not forget that the country has little electricity, Kabul, the capital, has no more than two hours of electricity a day.



Ms. Barbara Schiavulli is a war correspondent and writer who has covered conflict zones for the past 26 years, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine, Pakistan, Yemen, Sudan, Chile, Haiti, and Venezuela. Her articles have been published by several newspapers, including Repubblica, l'Espresso, Il Fatto, and La Stampa. She has also collaborated with radio and TV stations and currently works with the BBC. She directs Radio Bullets, an online news outlet that focuses on international affairs, human rights, and inclusivity. Ms. Schiavulli reflects the world through the stories of the voiceless. She has received numerous national and international awards, including the Lucchetta Prize, Antonio Russo Prize, Maria Grazia Cutuli Prize, Enzo Baldoni Prize, and Koinè Prize. She has published several books, including "Butterflies do not die in the sky", "War and war", "The war within", "Bulletproof Diaries: Stories of a War Reporter", "When I'll die, I'll tell God: stories of ordinary extremism", and her latest book, "Burqa Queen," set to be released in May. She always travels with a pink trolley and a fountain pen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR