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**POLITICS**

# 'It's just rubbish': Experts doubt Taliban's promises on women and girls

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Published 4:11 p.m. ET Aug. 19, 2021 | Updated 9:31 a.m. ET Aug. 23, 2021

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## Story Highlights

The Taliban have made vague promises to protect women's rights within the norms of Islamic law.

Analysts are skeptical the Taliban's evolution on women's rights is real.

U.S. and other countries call on Taliban to guarantee protection of women.

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WASHINGTON – For the young Afghan woman, the first person in her family to attend a university, her college diploma was a point of family pride.

In the hands of the Taliban, it could be her death sentence.

Terrified that Taliban insurgents might come knocking on her door now that the regime is back in power, the young woman threw her hard-earned document in the trash. Later, she became alarmed the Taliban might dig through her garbage, so she yanked the diploma from the trash and burned it.

“That’s how scared (women) are,” said Marie Clarke of Women for Women International, the human rights group for whom the young Afghan woman worked. USA TODAY is not publishing her name due to the risk of violent retaliation.

Ever since the Taliban’s swift and stunning resurgence, the Islamic militant group has tried to convince the world that it is less hostile to women’s rights than when it

ruled the country more than two decades ago, when it barred women from leaving home without a male chaperone and prohibited them from working or going to school, enforcing a strict interpretation of sharia or Islamic law.

The Taliban's longtime spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, promised during a news conference that women's rights would be respected within the norms of Islamic law.

But human rights experts and activists view the Taliban's proclamations as merely distractions from the horrors happening on the ground – and as a public relations campaign to stave off any kind of international effort to sanction the new regime.

“It's just rubbish,” said Christine Fair, a Georgetown University professor and an expert on Afghanistan. “This is a very misogynistic organization.”

**‘No possible life’ under Taliban rule:** Afghan women fear murder, oppression after US withdrawal

## **'The truth is horrible'**

The Taliban's messaging flies in the face of the group's long history of oppression of women and girls, as well as recent reports of violence, Fair said.

“I don't find it credible. I'm amazed when others do,” she said. “People just want to believe the impossible because the truth is horrible.”

Samar Ali, a Muslim American international lawyer in Nashville, Tennessee, said the women she has spoken to in Afghanistan remain terrified and unconvinced by the Taliban.

“There is a lot of fear, there is a lot of concern for safety, and there's also shock in how fast things changed,” said Ali, a Vanderbilt University law professor who has been working with human rights groups to safely evacuate people from Afghanistan.

## **A harsh blow:** Taliban's Afghanistan takeover undercuts Biden's 'America is back' foreign policy promise

Besides unspecific promises, the Taliban have said their ideology hasn't changed, suggesting they haven't evolved as much as they want people to believe, said Madiha Afzal, a foreign policy fellow at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank.

"The big question right now is what the Taliban means when it says 'under Islamic law.' The group is being purposefully vague, and that may be partly because it hasn't decided exactly what the implementation will look like yet, and because it is saying things publicly with an eye to the world watching," Afzal said. "I think we should wait and see what the Taliban does, not what they say at this point."

## **Taliban 'keenly aware' of international aid, reputation**

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said the U.S. and other governments won't simply take the Taliban at their word when it comes to women's rights.

"This is not about trust. This is about verify," Sullivan said at a White House briefing. "And we'll see what the Taliban end up doing in the days and weeks ahead, and when I say we, I mean the entire international community."

On Wednesday, the U.S. State Department issued a joint statement with 20 other countries calling on those in positions in power and authority across Afghanistan to guarantee the protection of women.

"We are deeply worried about Afghan women and girls, their rights to education, work and freedom of movement," the statement said. "Afghan women and girls, as all Afghan people, deserve to live in safety, security and dignity. Any form of discrimination and abuse should be prevented."

**Taliban's promise:** Taliban vows to uphold rights for women and US allies. White House is skeptical.

Ashley Jackson, who has done extensive research on the Taliban and civilians living under their control, said the new regime's claims that it wants an inclusive government are aimed at a global audience as much as the people of Afghanistan.

The Taliban would like to become a member state of the United Nations, she said. But just three countries – Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia – officially recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government the last time the group ruled Afghanistan.

An even bigger concern for Taliban leadership is the potential loss of international aid. Roughly 80% of Afghanistan's budget comes from the United States and other foreign donors.

“The Taliban are keenly aware that if there's a sudden, sharp aid cut, it will be extremely problematic for them,” said Jackson of the Centre for the Study of Armed Groups. “They won't have the money to rebuild or reconstitute the government.”

## **A different Afghanistan**

The Taliban are inheriting a much different country than the one they ruled 20 years ago, a country where women's rights are not in line with the group's harsh interpretation of the Quran, said Daisy Khan, founder and executive director of the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality.

“There's greater equality for women and opportunities for women in the last 20 years ... Women have contributed significantly to society,” Khan said. “They are highly educated and very dynamic. There are 5,000 women on the police force. They're parliamentarians. They go to universities in greater number than before. They're entrepreneurs.”

As many as 3.5 million girls out of about 9 million Afghan students are enrolled in school, according to a February report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, an independent agency created by Congress. Literacy rates among girls was at 39% in 2017 – up from 20% in 2005.

**The 'forever war':** What went wrong in Afghanistan? Perspectives on the war from those who saw it up close

Thousands of women work in public service, from the village to the national level, according to the report. Some 27% of all parliament seats and 25% of provincial and district council seats are reserved for women. Women also make up about 28% of jobs at civil society organizations, including ministers, deputy ministers and ambassadors.

Women's participation in the labor market also has risen, making up 42% of urban jobs in 2017 – up from 27% just 10 years ago. Women comprised 25% of civil service jobs in 2019 – up from 18% in 2007.

All of those gains, and more, are under threat, Khan said.

Recent reports of Taliban commanders rarely allowing girls over 12 to attend school and not allowing women to leave their home without a male guardian contradict the group's promise to uphold women's rights within the framework of Islamic law.

The Quran allows women to have several rights, including the right to education, to pursue a career and to have control over whom they marry, Khan said.

“If the Taliban is going to respect women's rights within the framework of Islamic law, then they must allow women the rights that are enshrined in the Quran,” she said. “This is really the main question that needs to be part of the discourse right now.”

## Moderate vs. extreme

Leaders of the new Taliban regime are part of a faction that is more moderate than the extreme, ultra-conservatives that reside in many parts of the country, said Jeff Bardin, a former military intelligence analyst and expert on the Middle East.

The new Taliban leadership's goal is to secure international recognition and legitimacy and avoid the mistakes of the last regime, said Bardin, chief intelligence officer of Treadstone 71, a consulting firm that specializes in cyber intelligence and security threats.

"I think that will lead to some intense negotiations over power-sharing and who's going to do what and how they're going to treat women and minorities and what they're going to allow," Bardin said.

But, "getting people to fall in line is going to be difficult," he said.

Clarke, of Women for Women International, said the Taliban's attitudes about women vary widely from one part of Afghanistan to another.

The nonprofit organization provides business training and other resources for Afghan women. In some districts, especially those where the agency's training centers are located near Taliban offices or headquarters, the Taliban have assured them that their female trainers can continue to work without a male escort, she said.

**What we know:** How did the Taliban retake Afghanistan so quickly? What's happening now?

"At other districts, on Taliban letterhead, they will literally write a new list of rules, and one of those rules is a woman can't leave the home without her male escort," Clarke said.

“We are quite afraid that, since we’ve seen such a range, what will ultimately settle in could be that more restrictive Taliban that we know from 20 years ago,” she said.

An Afghan woman who heads one of the nonprofit’s programs recently expressed to her co-workers her deep distrust of the new Taliban regime. “For six months, they will be good people, and they will let women wear the hijab and they will let us go to work,” Clarke recalled her saying. “But I think after six months, they will go back to how they were before.”

**'They already looking for me':** An Afghan interpreter on the last 24 hours

## **'You can't uneducate a girl'**

Still, some are hopeful that more than two decades of educating women and allowing them to join the workforce cannot be so easily undone.

“We won’t be going backwards,” said Michelle Nunn, president and chief executive of CARE, a humanitarian organization with a big presence in Afghanistan. “We will be moving forward, and I think we have to stand with those women and girls.”

Taliban officials have asked nongovernmental organizations to maintain their operations in provinces throughout the country, Nunn said. CARE, which has more than 400 people on the ground in Afghanistan, intends to see that the Taliban live up to their commitments and promises, Nunn added.

**Defense secretaries in their own words:** US 'invented reasons' to stay in Afghanistan

The women of Afghanistan will help lead that fight.

“Women and girls that have been educated and have seen their rights in Afghanistan have been and will be powerful advocates and allies,” Nunn said. “As one of our colleagues said, you can’t uneducate a girl.”

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