

The Guardian view on Afghanistan's suffering: the war against women

Families are in desperate straits, the security situation is worsening – but the Taliban's priority is punishing half the population

Based on an article published 2/01/2023 The Guardian Editorial

The Taliban's relentless campaign against women is not only a matter of rights, but of survival. It is not only cruel and oppressive, but deadly. In a country already on its knees, where 97% of the population live in poverty, two-thirds need humanitarian assistance, 20 million face acute hunger and parents sell kidneys to feed their families, it has made life still more desperate. By banning women from working for NGOs, they are denying essential, life-saving services to women and children. Almost all the large aid agencies have suspended operations and the United Nations has paused some "time-critical" programmes. Major world powers have urged the Taliban to immediately reverse their "reckless and dangerous" decision, while UN agency chiefs described female staff as key to every aspect of the humanitarian response.

In many cases, these staff – who number in the tens of thousands – are also the only breadwinners in their households. Denying them their salaries ensures that women, children (and, incidentally, men too) will starve. The Taliban's earlier decision to bar women from universities – and reportedly even primary education – means that no more female doctors or teachers will be trained. Teenage girls have already been kept out of school for almost a year and a half.

The Taliban strove to create the impression of a more moderate "Taliban 2.0" before their return to power, promising not to repeat the cruelties of the 1990s regime. But the new Taliban look more and more like the old one. If there are more moderate figures in the ranks, they are unable to prevail. Last month, there was the first public execution since their return to power. Women have been among those punished in public floggings. If the Taliban's priorities were not so horrific, they would be bizarre: this viciousness appears to be all they care about, despite the country's parlous state in every possible regard.

Relations with Islamabad are breaking down as cross-border attacks by the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) increase. In December, members of the TTP – separate to but allied with the Afghan Taliban – overpowered guards at a counter-terrorism facility in Pakistan and seized control. As the security situation deteriorates, Islamic State has claimed responsibility for attacks on the Pakistani and Russian embassies in Kabul. The Chinese ambassador ordered all nationals to leave the country after gunmen attacked a hotel used by Chinese businessmen. These developments are not merely a diplomatic problem for the Taliban; hopes of income to help replace the vanished foreign aid that shored up the country for so long have disappeared. Now the last props are being removed as aid operations halt, at terrible cost.

In these grim times, women have demonstrated extraordinary courage and resilience in challenging the Taliban's harsh rule. Men have taken a stand beside them. They deserve not only admiration, but support. The UK did extremely poorly at evacuating Afghans before Kabul fell last year. As of early December, not one person had been accepted and evacuated under the Home Office's Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, which was launched in January for those at risk because they had worked for or were affiliated with the British government. Afghans, and especially those brave enough to challenge this regime, need more than words from the British government.

*Text not included in Internazionale article 5/1/2023