



## Taliban Ascendancy and Its Impacts on Women Empowerment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Mudasir Iqbal

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### ABSTRACT

*This research delve into the rise of the Taliban in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan, and the long-lasting impact it has had on women's lives in the region. What commenced as a geopolitical shift during the Soviet-Afghan war steadily turned into a movement that reshaped daily life in KPK most severely for women and girls. This study outlines how religious extremism, political instability, and a lack of state control allowed the Taliban to grow in power, eventually leading to severe limits on women's education, healthcare, and freedom of movement. Thousands of girls were pressed to leave school, female health workers were targeted, and women were forced out of public spaces and silenced. Depiction from a wide range of secondary sources, this paper not only scrutinizes the structural and ideological roots of Talibanization, but also flashes a light on the human stories like the killing of Shabana, a young dancer in Swat that expose the true cost of extremism.*

**Keywords:** Taliban, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Women Empowerment, Healthcare, Education.

### Introduction

Taliban ascendancy in the region of N.W.F.P remained under concern for years. During Taliban insurgency the region has faced multiple faceted challenges and destructions in social and economic means. The rising journey of Taliban forces in KPK is traced back in late 1970s and early 1980s. There happened certain events that contributed to a huge rise in Taliban and Talibanization.

Some of the major factors that drive the ascendancy of Taliban are Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, KPK served as a base for the Mujahideen and militant groups, rise of religious extremism, Madrasas and militancy and many more. This severe ascendancy left behind a very tragic remaining in the form of catastrophe in the region. The long history of KPK has become the victim of surrogacy and exploited by the Taliban to inaugurate their presence. Pashtun tribal areas were already marginalized with limited presence of government have provided safe havens for Taliban to gain influence. These harsh conditions hit KPK with lack of basic infrastructure, unemployment and poverty. Apart from these the most effected segment throughout the episode was women of the region. The whole duration left a negative impact on women empowerment in the region. Taliban have imposed restrictions regarding girls' education a number of girl schools were closed and females were only allowed to get education to a certain grade or age.

Hundreds of female students had quit education and stay at homes because of security concerns. Female health workers were always facing threats and tyranny of Taliban meanwhile providing essential health services to women and girls. In this research the researcher has figure out the impacts that the Taliban ascendancy has left on empowerment of women in KPK. Women were treated as objects and their self-identity was dissolved under Taliban rule. This study underscores different dimensions of the issue e.g social and economic factors discussed in this paper.

### Statement of the problem

There is a tendency of treatises available on the topic in the form of journals, articles and research papers. Various writers have discussed and debated the very topic in different perspectives. Most of the debate is on general basis the writers have discussed the multiple impacts

collectively and are not so detailed and the impact of Taliban ascendancy on women empowerment needs the focus of researchers to shed light on it. In this paper the researcher has shed light on the whole picture and extracted detailed stuff about the topic from different sources.

### Research Questions

- What were the major factors that escalated the rise of Taliban in KPK?
- To what extent Taliban ascendancy effected women in the region?

### Literature review

There is a pile of literature and scholarship is produced on this topic but every writer has portrayed and explained the topic generally. In this research paper the researcher has highlighted all the possible facets of the Talibanization. Including its emergence, role and after effects of the cause specially in the context of women empowerment. What kind of effects and impacts the emergence of militant group had bring in after its inception in the society.

Extremism grew in Pakistan because the country wanted to define itself as a moderate Muslim nation. There were dissimilarities between those who wanted a more modern approach and those who wanted a rigorous Islamic government. The Islamic groups got stronger, especially with the help of military leaders like Ziaul Haq. External episodes like the Soviet-Afghan war made things worse. Extremism has caused a lot of problems for Pakistan, like hurting its image and economy. Now, there's a realization that extremism needs to be dealt with seriously. Even though religious parties don't win many elections, they still have a lot of influence. The emergence of Taliban is traced back in 1970s and 1980s when the state had decided to commence jihad against Soviet Union in Afghanistan. (Dr.Nasreen Akhter, 2020)

Extremist ideology led by Mullah Fazlullah in Pakistan's Swat region resulted in attacks on CD shops, mandatory beard shaving, and threats to girls' education, all apparently based on Sharia law. This extremism increased after Fazlullah's group joined Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), allying with broader Taliban movements. Fazlullah's stance unsentimental as he gained more control, finally becoming the central leader of TTP. This extremism targeted women's education, leading to the destruction of numerous girls' schools in Swat, depriving thousands of education opportunities. The Taliban's opposition to women's education mirrored their counterparts in Afghanistan, reflecting a deeply ingrained mindset against female empowerment. Despite initial denials, the Taliban later admitted to orchestrating attacks on women's institutions, including the infamous shooting of education activist Malala Yousafzai. By September 2008 105 schools including 71 girls' schools were destroyed in Swat district more than 30000 girls were deprived of education. (Zaidi, 2015).

The writer has portrayed the rise of Fazlullah, known as Ameer ul Mo'mineen, in Swat, Pakistan, and the subsequent Talibanization that grabbed the region. Fazlullah utilized his FM radio to broaden his radical ideology, primarily attracting followers out of curiosity but later implanting fear through threats and announcements. The Taliban, under Fazlullah's leadership, employed tactics of fear, including wearing masks, brandishing weapons, and imposing brutal punishments, disturbing daily life and instilling strict limitations, particularly on women's freedoms and education. Enrolment of young men, intimidation for donations, and dependency on fear tactics formed the backbone of the Taliban's influence and resources. Despite the challenges, there is hope among the

people for military intervention to uproot the Taliban, acknowledging that lasting peace will require community resistance, support from authorities, and efforts to rehabilitate those affected by Talibanization. (Gul, 2009). Education is considered as the backbone of any country. Development is based on education during their tenure Taliban had targeted the education institutes in KP. According to available figures in 2008 total 119 school attacks were reported of them 111 were girls' schools 2 boys' schools and 6 were co-educational institutes. In 2009 the number of attacks on schools escalated to 140 in which 54 were girls' and 86 boys' schools and colleges. (Jamal Ud Din, 2022).

### **Contribution**

Through this research project the researcher has collected the most reliable and authentic data about the topic. It will help the future researchers to further investigate the topic because, it will provide sufficient data and a complete road map. Further, it will be helpful for the students studying in schools and colleges who are interested to know and scrutinize the brutal history of Taliban in the context of KPK, and what they have done with a century's old culture and women agency in the region.

### **Research Method**

The method used to conduct this research project is descriptive in nature and is based on table work. In this study the researcher has described the very topic in qualitative way. To collect data the researcher, completely rely on secondary sources books, journals and articles. Furthermore, to make the information more reliable the investigator has consulted various trustworthy sources, probe and has squeeze out robust and relevant data on the topic.

### **Factors behind Taliban ascendancy in KPK**

There are a number of factors that derived and incepted the whole episode of Taliban and Talibanization in KPK. According the renowned historian Ayesha Jalal amongst all the factors the most prominent and bold factors are Iranian revolution and the invasion of Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Along with these two elements cold war was also following Pakistan, as first Afghan war (1979-1988) was the terrible drift in the history of Pakistan.

Religious extremism was also promoted in the region to which the introduction of Islamization by General Zia-ul-Haq had further fueled. Subsequently, strict suni form of Islam rise in the region. Reflection of Islamization drive introduced unprecedented number of madrasas where the teaching of Islam was offered free of cost. This was not the whole along with Islamic teachings mujahideen were also created inside these madrasas to fight against the infidel troops inside Afghanistan. Aftermath, intolerance regarding religious and sectarian issues was observed in the region and the teachings of Islam were interpreted in extremist nature. Studies shows that the number of madrasas increased with a high pace during Zia's regime. In 1971 there were only 900 madrasas and by the end of 1988 there were 8000 registered and 25000 unregistered madrasas educating over 500,000 students. According the statistics by 2001-2002 there was the existence of 20 militant groups and 60 religious parties having connections with different madrasas of the country. (ALI, 2016).

### **War on terror and rise of Taliban**

Like the jihad movement in 1980s the continuous unrest in Afghanistan left negative impacts on Pakistan. US started project of war on terror in Afghanistan post 9/11 has pressed Taliban to a high extent and their government was overthrown in 2001. This was a swift drift in the dynamics of the whole region. After fall of their government Taliban had used their contacts in the tribal areas which they had created during Afghan jihad in 1980s. They used the desolate terrains of FATA as their sanctuaries. Many Al Qaeda jihadis escaped from Afghanistan and used the tribal areas as safe havens for

them. After reorganizing Taliban started to attack US and her allies in Afghanistan.

There was a security dilemma for US inside Afghanistan by keeping the then condition in consideration US president Bush had pressurize President Pervez Musharraf to destroy Taliban sanctuaries in the territory of Pakistan. In response to that Musharraf had deployed 100,000 military men in 2,500 km long border to control the insurgency. On 14<sup>th</sup> December, 2007 forty militant leaders commanding forty thousand fighters gathered in Waziristan and decided to form a unified front under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud as (TTP) Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan. The wave of Talibanization was proliferated from FATA to Swat. Hundreds of pro-government leaders were pointed and killed in the region. The whole journey which later came to know as Talibanization was the reflection of Zia's Islamization drive and Afghan war of 1980s. All these dynamics were paving roads for the extremists and eventually TTP was constructed against the Pakistani state. Furthermore, Taliban in Swat, under the leadership of Maulvi Fazlullah, known as 'Mullah Radio' for his illegal FM station broadcasts, continued to strengthen their position during the government of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)—a association of religious parties in power from 2002 to 2007 in KP—considered supportive towards them. Meanwhile their strong position in the region they had oppressed their rivals and also the local population. Terrorize them and fear was socialized inside the whole KPK.

### **The rise of Taliban and its impacts on women in KPK**

According to the writer Shabana Shamaas Gul Khattak war on terror is war on women in KPK. During the emergence of militant groups and later the counter-terrorism activities suffered women of the region in various ways including deprivation from education, health and their public visibility was also restricted under the security conditions and laws such as chadar and char deewari by general Zia-ul-Haq. Here are the major spaces where women suffered the most.

### **Effects on Education Sector**

The event of Talibanization in KPK leave a negative and harsh impact on women. Mostly, the introduced rules and reforms were circulating around and focused on women. A strict gender rules were introduced in KP in order to segregate females. Their public visibility and movement were restricted. Under such circumstances female students were restricted and were unable to go schools and colleges. If any girl or women disobey these rules, she was harassed and intimidated by Taliban. Secondly, Taliban have focused girls' schools because they were in favor of strict interpretation and imposition of Islamic laws. They view education for girls as opposing to their ideology and have started violence, including bombings and attacks on school buildings and teachers, to enforce their beliefs. This has led to the closure or devastation of numerous schools, depriving girls of access to education. The exact data about schools' attacks and damages is not available but according to the figures released by Global Terrorism Database, the total number of attacks on educational institutes were 867 from 2007 to 2015 that resulted 392 deaths and 724 injuries. Aftermath, the radical campaign of Taliban in Swat valley in 2007 girl's schools were radically targeted and by the result of which over 900 schools were forcefully closed and approximately 120,000 girls quit to attend school education. Apart from these 8,000 female teachers were over thrown. For most of the students the loss was forever and they haven't attended school again. (Watch, 2017). Taliban claim that population of the region was getting westernized through these education institutions. A note was found in a girl's high school Dara Ademkhel that they have decided to bomb the school during the attack if any student lost her life then she will be responsible for her death. The conditions were this how worsened in KP. The MMA provincial government requested female teachers and



students to wear white burqa instead of the fashionable black one it might change the militants' minds but that step was not enough and the brutality remained undisturbed.

### Effects On Health Sector

During the whole duration KP remained under horrific conditions specially women were the most tortured segments in the society. As discussed above hundreds of girl schools were set on fire to keep them away from education. After education now they moved toward health sector where the Taliban militants have started to impose restrictions and expanded fear through violence and intimidation. Girls and women were kept deprived of a good health service. The region was short of professionals in medical field because, girls' education was restricted which led to the absence of medical professionals particularly specialists like gynecologists. Along with the pre existing severe environment the militants have portrayed a radical stance by declaring medicines as "haram" the perfect example of which is the announcement of Fazlullah on radio broadcast where he declared polio vaccine as the urine of US president George Bush. Labelled LHWs as prostitutes and servants of America. During their tenure Taliban opened three major fatwas against lady LHWs. Firstly, stated that the appearance of LHWs in public places is completely immoral, which compelled them to find males to accompany them during their routine visits. Further declared that it was the duty of Muslim males to abduct them during their visits marry them forcefully or use them as sexual slaves. According to Fazlullah LHWs were wajib Ul qatl. Second fatwa was that, it was against the teachings of Islam to do paid work for a woman. Third fatwa declared LHWs "men" for travelling in the streets unaccompanied, making them ineligible to enter women's homes.

Under these conditions many innocent women were dragged to death by promoting these stances and keeping them away from medical treatment. The social mobility of women was restricted and this was a barrier for females specially in the backward areas. They had to travel a long distances and cross militant check posts on the way which results delay in receiving proper medical treatment. Talibanization often results in restrictions on women's reproductive rights and access to reproductive health services. Extremist interpretations of Islamic law may limit access to family planning resources, maternal healthcare services, and contraceptives, leading to higher rates of unplanned pregnancies, maternal mortality, and unsafe abortions. Restrictions on women's mobility and education may also hinder their ability to make informed decisions about their reproductive health and family planning options.

### Broader Social Sufferings

The wave of Talibanization was not only extended to the educational and health sector rather it was affecting the whole lifestyle of women. Women were treated as objects. Many embarrassing conceptions were done by the militants with the women e.g., there was a punishment for women if they failed to wear full burqa. Their hairs were completely removed in public space to make them ashamed. After the introduction of burqa, the traditional chadar was vanished from the region. Certain women were raped and abducting of females from their homes was also carried out during their reign. If any girl was traced unmarried at the age of puberty, then she was forcefully married to a militant without her consent. Women were bound to accompany a *mahram* male when they leave home. They were restricted to visit certain places such as offices, bazaar, restaurants, agricultural fields, river corners to wash clothes and forests to collect wood.

### Case of Shabana (A Dancing Girl)

Shabana was shot dead by Taliban for her illicit profession of dancing and her dead body was left at khuni chowk as a

lesson for all those who were associated to the profession of music and entertainment. Subsequently, Shabana's sister confessed that when Taliban arrived in the city, they had decided to flee away but, they did not leave house in time. At night Taliban appeared in the house to search Shabana. They took gold and cash with them when they leave the house by promising to leave her if she quit the illicit profession of dancing. Therefore, in the next sunrise when his brother walked to the city her dead body was left on the street. The aggrieved family even not dared to file police report because of fear.

### Conclusion

The rise of Taliban had a very negative impacts specially on the women agency in KP. The consequences include restrictions on women to access education, health care, and their appearance in the public spaces. Very strict gender segregation policies were imposed in region. The education sector was jolted by bombing and terror attacks. Intimidation was common if anyone did not obey the strict rules. The extremist ideologies further intensified the odds of society. Like Fazlullah labeled medicines "haram" and females were kept away from proper healthcare services.

Further than education and healthcare, women in KPK tolerated broader social sufferings, including strict dress codes, limitations on public visibility, and instances of violence and oppression. The case of Shabana, a dancing girl brutally murdered by the Taliban, exemplifies the extreme measures taken to enforce robust interpretations of Islamic law and suppress women's rights. In a nutshell the whole episode of Talibanization was scary and devastating for KP. Their culture was excommunicated through the extremist policies of Taliban and self-identity of the inhabitants was controlled through rigid interpretations of Islamic teachings. There was rule by fear circumstances in the region.

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