



**DROPS**

**Paper Title: Women’s Participation and Portrayal in Afghan Media**

**Author(s): Fatema Hussaini**

**To cite this article (Chicago):** Hussaini, Fatema (2020) “Women’s Participation and Portrayal in Afghan Media.” *Women and Public Policy Journal*, Vol. 6 (2020): pp. 66 - 71. Accessed Month Day, Year. Retrieved from *url*

**Women and Public Policy Journal (Vol. 6 – 2020)**

**Published by:**

**Organization for Policy Research and development Studies  
(DROPS)**

# **Women's Participation and Portrayal in Afghan Media**

**Fatema Hosseini<sup>1</sup>**

The rise of independent media is one of the greatest achievements in post-2001 Afghanistan. According to reports, at present, nearly 1,741 women work in various Afghan media outlets.<sup>2</sup> However, with rising threats against women in various parts of the country, many female journalists have felt compelled to quit their jobs. In the past four years alone, at least six Afghan women working in the media industry have been killed.<sup>3</sup> A large number of women are subjected to verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and discrimination. Yet, despite challenges, the presence of women in the mass media sector is a promising sign and is evidence of the fact that they would fight for their rights. Women's participation also demonstrates the representation of half the country's population, which helps unheard voices getting heard and increases the possibility of their conditions getting improved.<sup>4</sup>

This essay explores women's participation in Afghan media and the nature of their participation. To that end, this study relies on existing literature as well as in-depth interviews with six participants (four women and two men).

---

1. Fatema Hosseini is a News Reporter with Kabul Now Online.

2. "Some 1,741 women journalists working across Afghanistan." Center for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists, March 08, 2020. <https://www.cpawj.org/en/2020/03/08/some-1741-women-journalists-working-across-afghanistan/>

3. Ibid

4. Ibid

### **Afghan Women in Mass Media**

In a society affected by a combination of protracted conflict and conservative norms, lasting changes cannot occur overnight. One way to effect lasting positive change would be by harnessing the potential of mass media. Mass media plays a significant role in most Afghan women's lives.<sup>5</sup> Through mass media, whose operations resumed after the fall of the Taliban regime, positive changes towards gender equality have been engendered. However, bringing about these changes has not been an easy task because many media persons, particularly women, have lost their lives and have suffered various harms in the process. Unfortunately, Taliban members, many religious leaders, and other conservative sections of the population who have withheld women's freedoms for many years are also part of the broader Afghan society, and strongly oppose transforming cultural norms to ensure women's equal rights and freedoms.<sup>6</sup>

After the fall of the Taliban and establishment of democracy, mass media operations were allowed once again in Afghanistan. Today, nearly 1,000 media outlets are in active operation as compared to 15 media outlets in 2000.<sup>7</sup> Privately owned radio and TV stations comprise a bulk of these outlets. A broad range of issues from security to weather forecast, news, TV dramas, and other entertainment shows are broadcast by these outlets. Due to the media's persevering observations and critiques of most of the government's performance and activities, the Afghan government has become more responsive towards media and people in the society.

At present, approximately 12,000 people are employed with privately owned media outlets.<sup>8</sup> However, despite substantial achievements, the mass media sector in Afghanistan faces some challenges, particularly when it comes to women's overall inclusion and provision of key responsibilities to female employees. Despite protests by religious scholars, the Afghan government has supported provision of space for women in media.

5. Page, David, and Siddiqi, Shirazuddin. "The media of Afghanistan: The challenges of Transition." BBC Media Action, Mar. 2012, [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/policybriefing/bbc\\_media\\_action\\_afghanistan\\_is\\_in\\_transition.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/policybriefing/bbc_media_action_afghanistan_is_in_transition.pdf).

6. Mashal, Mujib. "Vibrant Lives of Afghan TV Crew, Erased in a Taliban Bombing." The New York Times, January 21, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/22/world/asia/afghanistan-tolo-tv-bombing.html>

7. Khalvatgar, Abdul Mujib. "Freedom of Expression Under Threat in Afghanistan." Stability International Journal of Security & Development, November 20, 2014. pp. 1-4. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/sta.e1>

8. Ibid

Unfortunately, however, women often continue to be tasked with non-serious roles and used as entertainment to increase viewership.<sup>9</sup> There is also a mindset issue and women are mostly considered to be incapable of conducting political analysis or developing serious analytical content.<sup>10</sup>

In an interview with this author, Fatima Amiri,<sup>11</sup> a human rights activist, compared the role of women in the foreign media with those in Afghan media. She argued that “we have very few influential women, who are leading the media. When we talk constantly about women in media, the first things that come to our mind are TV hosts, singers and actresses. When one discusses women in the media in other countries, one can see women working in a variety of roles such as producers, analysts, actors, singers, and other artists. However, this is not the case in Afghanistan.”

### **Women’s Portrayal in the Afghan Media**

Although most national TV programs provide information about gender roles and ideal life, women’s roles are still misrepresented and women are often objectified.<sup>12</sup> Indian and Turkish soap operas that are mostly broadcast on national TV channels in Afghanistan are an example here. In most of these series, women are considered as decorative objects and play passive characters of housewives reliant on men’s financial, emotional, and physical support.<sup>13</sup> One of the factors influencing this is the fact that the media industry is mostly run and created by men, in men’s tastes and for men.<sup>14</sup>

Media is one of the powerful tools that can facilitate change. Therefore, instead of investing money on foreign and Afghan soap operas in which women are portrayed as passive, different national TV channels could arrange more TV shows on empowerment, education, economics, politics, and art which would be led by women. This would indeed challenge the

9. Nijat, Aarya and Murtazashvili, Jennifer. “Women’s Leadership Roles in Afghanistan.” USIP, 2015, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR380-Women-s-Leadership-Roles-in-Afghanistan.pdf>

10. Ibid

11. Amiri, Fatima, Women and Human Right Activist. Interviewed by author February 02, 2020. Kabul, Afghanistan.

12. Ceulemans, Mieke, and Fauconnier, Cuido. “Mass Media: The Image, Role, and Social conditions of Women.” UNESCO, 1979, <http://dergipark.ulakbim.gov.tr/intwojde/article/viewFile/5000149378/5000135817>

13. Gevorgyan, Anna Davtyan. “Women and Mass Media.” Heinrich Boll Stiftung South Caucasus: Feminism and Gender Democracy, April 08, 2016. <http://www.feminism-boell.org/en/2016/04/08/women-and-mass-media>

14. Ibid

pervasiveness of domestic violence, gender discrimination and draw attention to issues related to gender equality, culture, education and health.<sup>15</sup> Although, there have been many positive changes since fall of the Taliban, a large number of women working in the media industry in Afghanistan still face a constant threat to life and limb.

One of the main reasons for this is the enforcement of strict traditional norms, particular on women. In an interview with this author, Zahra Yegana, Hela Mahmood,<sup>16</sup> and Asad Ahmadi<sup>17</sup> said that “it is about men, their roles, and their rights; very little is mentioned about women. If the media industry is largely and only filled with men, the messaging will naturally also be primarily from their perspective and perhaps mostly related to them.”

The Taliban interpreted Sharia Law to their preference and forbade women from being seen in public ‘unnecessarily’, and from getting educated.<sup>18</sup> Psychologically, this may assure the conservative segments of the Afghan society who do not want to see any interaction between ‘their’ women and other men either directly or indirectly. Moreover, the concept of ‘code of honor’ has continued to exist among men even in the post-Taliban period. For instance, there is still a common notion that men should protect and take care of ‘their’ women, especially their wife. In general, the conservative interpretation of Sharia Law places Afghan women in a position lower than those of men. This is one of the main factors holding women back from raising their voices or defending their basic rights.

## Conclusion

This essay explored two issues: women’s participation as well as portrayal in Afghan media. A majority of the people in Afghanistan continue to be heavily impacted by the rules and policies that were enforced during the Taliban regime.<sup>19</sup> Most of those rules and norms enforced on women,

15. Frogh, Wazhma. “The Emerging Afghan Media: Beyond the Stereotyping of Women?” Middle East Institute, April 23, 2012. <http://www.mei.edu/content/emerging-afghan-media-beyond-stereotyping-women>

16. Mahmood, Hela, University student. Interviewed by author on February 02, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

17. Ahmadi, Asad, University student. Interviewed by author on February 03, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

18. Barakat, Sultan, and Wardell, Gareth. “Exploited by Whom? An Alternative Perspective on Humanitarian Assistance to Afghan Women.” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2002. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993395>

19. Abirafeh, Lina. “Lessons from Gender-focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan...Learned?” FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG, n.v, n.i, 2005, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/02978.pdf>

including those on how to act, walk, and talk as a woman continue to be practiced in some of the provinces where majority of the Taliban, conservative religious leaders, and other similar-minded people live. More efforts and studies are needed to improve the situation of women in Afghanistan. Moreover, changing conservative norms takes time and effort to deliver tangible, lasting results. However, the prospects of achieving lasting change also depends on approaches taken to do so. In other words, change can occur as a result of individuals using traditional ways recognized and accepted by people as well.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- Culturally responsive gender rights education should be arranged for entire families and not for women alone. Efforts aimed at reducing the gender gap often tend to be limited to focusing only on women and their roles, which is an inadequate approach. In Afghanistan, much like in other patriarchal societies, gender roles are mostly shaped by socio-cultural factors based on considering women as men's 'honor keepers'.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, men cannot be excluded from the programs intended to empower women. As an Afghan man once claimed, "women don't exist in isolation."<sup>21</sup>
- In order to promote a culture of respect and togetherness, different events and school programs must be carried out, including science olympiads among different boys and girls' schools, or story writing competitions among boys and girls schools, etc.
- Another way to increase public awareness would be by harnessing the power of mass media. This could include inviting female activists and women leaders on shows etc. Employing more women in leadership roles in the media sector and in positions of responsibility such as TV anchors, producers etc. would pave the way for more women to work in this sector, and contribute to breaking glass ceilings.

20. Manganaro, L. Lynne, and Alozie, O. Nicholas. "Gender Role Attitudes: Who Supports Expanded Rights for Women in Afghanistan?" Springer Science+Business Media, January 15, 2011. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-011-9931-6>

21. Abirafeh, Lina. "Lessons from Gender-focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan...Learned?." FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG, n.v, n.i, 2005, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/02978.pdf>

- Informative programs—be it entertainment, ‘info-tainment’ or news related—must broadcast on different TV and radio channels that focus on women in Afghanistan rather than merely broadcasting foreign TV series in which women are mostly portrayed in passive roles.
- Women must be treated equally as men when it comes to responsibilities, salaries, and authorities.
- While there are laws prohibiting discrimination and violence against women, their enforcement has been inadequate. This is one of the reasons why large numbers of women do not report violence and/or discrimination they face. In the absence of implementation, laws end up being mere rhetoric.