



## **Paper Title: Afghan Women in Music**

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**To cite this article (Chicago):** Qasimi, Nadia (2020) "Afghan Women in Music." *Women and Public Policy Journal*, Vol. 6 (2020): pp. 30 - 35. 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)



# Afghan Women in Music

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Prior to the Taliban rule, Afghanistan produced renowned musicians and singers. Women were free to pursue careers in music. However, during the Taliban rule which lasted from 1996 to 2001, the group decreed music as being un-Islamic and officially banned it across Afghanistan both for men and women.<sup>2</sup> No one was allowed to pursue careers in music or even to listen to music. Those caught doing so were severely punished by Taliban's Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.<sup>3</sup> Due to the hostile environment, most Afghan musicians either emigrated to other countries or completely stopped practicing music during those years.<sup>2</sup>

However, the post-2001 period in Afghanistan witnessed several changes. Laws were reformed, human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment have been considered the most important mandates of the Afghan government and the international community's intervention in Afghanistan. It was during this period that women regained their right to pursue a career of their choice.

This essay explores Afghan women's achievements in the field of music. To do so, this essay relies on the story of Zohra Orchestra, the only all-female orchestra in Afghanistan, as a case study. In so doing, this paper analyses the background of women's involvement and contribution to

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1. Nadia Qasimi is a Member of the Afghan Women Welfare and Development Association.

2. Najafizada, Eltaf. "We Won't Be Silenced! Afghan female musicians tell Taliban." Time, April 2019. Accessed on January 3, 2020. <https://time.com/5573842/afghanistan-female-women-musicians-music-taliban/>

3. 2 AFP. "Afghan Taliban burn musical instruments: radio", May 2, 2001. Sept. 29, 2020 <http://www.rawa.org/music2.htm>

the field music after 2001; their achievements in the last 18 years; and opportunities and challenges to their pursuits.

### **Zohra Orchestra**

The Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM) was established in 2010 by an Afghan–Australian musicologist, Ahmad Sarmat, with the help of various international institutions. The ANIM was established with the objective of transforming lives and societies, bring social changes, and promoting gender equality, open mindedness, and democracy through music. ANIM aims to revive the culture of music and to encourage investment in the arts.<sup>4</sup> Established in 2014, the Zohra Orchestra (ZO) is part of the ANIM. It is comprised of 35 female members, all of whom are the first in their families to study music professionally in over 30 years.<sup>5</sup> ZO members come from various parts of Afghanistan, including Nooristan, Bamyan, and Kabul provinces.

Since its establishment in 2014, ZO has made tremendous achievements. It has represented Afghanistan in various international platforms and has won prestigious international awards. ZO's conductor, Negin Kheplwak, has performed in Dubai, India, Germany, Switzerland, and the US. In 2007, ZO also performed for an audience of over 2000 political and business leaders from across the world, at the World Economic Forum, during which they performed a combination of western and traditional music. ZO members have also been awarded the Polar Music's Award in 2018 for international recognition of excellence in the world of music.<sup>6</sup>

ZO's journey is a story of female Afghan musicians. They have continued with their hard work and have pursued their calling with resilience, despite security risks, cultural barriers and familial restrictions. Some of the members are orphans and some, from economically disadvantaged families. By performing on various platforms, ZO expresses hope and embodies a message of peace, harmony and a new face of Afghanistan to the world. Through their work, ZO members have confronted and sought to

4. Forest, David. Interview with Ahmad Sarmast. The Afghanistan National Institute of Music. June 24, 2013

5. DAS, Ria. Meet Afghanistan's First all-female Orchestra-Zohra." Shethepeople, March 2019. Accessed on April 3, 2020. <https://www.shethepeople.tv/news/meet-afghanistan-female-orchestra-zohra/>

6. Dawod, Vincent. "Afghanistan's first all-female orchestra Zohra visits the UK." BBC, March 15, 2019.

transform the conservative norms prevalent in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> While ZO's journey is inspiring, pursuing a career in music is still not straightforward for most Afghan women. To understand why, it is necessary to understand the existing opportunities for women in music; the general public perception regarding women's participation in music; key challenges female Afghan women musicians (and aspiring musicians) face; and legal limitations to their pursuits.

### Opportunities

Several opportunities for Afghan women emerged in the field of music after the fall of the Taliban regime. At the beginning of the post-2001 period, with the advent of a democratic form of governance and the promulgation of the new constitution, media platforms such as TV channels began hosting singing programs. Afghan women were able to participate in programs like *Afghan Star* which was broadcast by *Tolo TV*. This show had its first female winner in 14 years when Zahra Elham won in 2019.<sup>7</sup> The Afghan rapper duo, 'Paradise' and 'Diverse', (who comprise 143Band) won the best rap artist award in 2015 from Ariana Television Network (ATN), and headlined at the International FeminEast Fest in Sweden in 2016. Paradise was conferred with the Best Rap World Music Rumi Award in 2014.

In terms of legal frameworks, Article 22 of the current constitution of Afghanistan states that "Any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law."<sup>8</sup> Legally, Afghan women have an equal right to participate in music and there are no legal barriers and restrictions. Article 34 of the Afghan constitution upholds freedom of expression for all and states that "freedom of expression shall be inviolable..."<sup>10</sup> Over the years, the Afghan public's perception also seems to have transformed to some extent with regard to women's participation in music. In relative terms, there is greater acceptance of Afghan women musicians.

In terms of institutional support, in 2010, Dr. Ahmad Sarmast established

7. "Art of Now." BBC, May 11, 2019. July 4, 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0004sf7>

8. "The Constitution of The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan." Diplomatie, June 20, 2020. [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/The\\_Constitution\\_of\\_the\\_Islamic\\_Republic\\_of\\_Afghanistan.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/The_Constitution_of_the_Islamic_Republic_of_Afghanistan.pdf)

the ANIM with the assistance of the World Bank, the National Association of Music Merchants, and other donors.<sup>9</sup> The ANIM operates under the authority of the Ministry of Education and receives financial support from the Afghanistan Second Skills Development Project.<sup>10</sup> The Project is funded by the World Bank. The Afghan government played a facilitating role in setting up the ANIM. The then Minister of Education, Farooq Wardak, provided space for the institution and Dr. Sarmast, to actualize the plan.<sup>10</sup> Later, the British Council funded the ANIM for three years (until 2015) to enable increasing capacity-building, accessing material and as well as updating syllabus for the ANIM students who are mostly orphans, street children, and young girls.<sup>11</sup>

### Challenges

Although acceptance has gradually increased, female Afghan musicians continue to face severe cultural barriers to their pursuit of a career in music. Culturally, female musicians are not looked upon favorably, and some even encounter threats to life and limb due to their choice of careers. For instance, Afghanistan's first female music conductor, ZO's 22-year-old Kheplwak, frequently receives threats and faces resistance from relatives. Those opposing her prefer that she pursue a career other than one in music. Expressing her resolve in an interview with *Time*, Kheplwak stated that the Taliban can outlaw music and break instruments but they cannot take music out of Afghan people's hearts, and that Afghan women will not return to the dark days of the past.<sup>1</sup>

ZO members too have received threats from the Taliban. The Taliban has repeatedly threatened Marzia Anwari's parents, demanding that they stop her from learning music by arguing that music is haram (forbidden) in Islam.<sup>12</sup> Bashir Mobashir, a lecturer in the department of law at the

9. "Afghanistan National Institute of Music." The Kennedy Center, Sept 15, 2020. <https://www.kennedy-center.org/artists/a/aa-an/-afghanistan-national-institute-of-music/>

10. "Girls Find their Place in Afghan's Music Institute." The World Bank, Sept 2, 2015. Aug. 5, 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/09/01/girls-find-place-afghanistan-music-institute>

11. "Afghanistan National Institute of Music" British Council, Aug. 10, 2020. <https://www.britishcouncil.af/programmes/arts/leadership-skills/afghan-national-institute-music>

12. Sahel, Baber Khan. "All-female Orchestra braves threats to revive Afghan Musical Heritage." Agencia EFE, June 2019. Accessed on Oct 19, 2019. <https://www.efe.com/efe/english/life/all-female-orchestra-braves-threats-to-revive-afghanistans-musical-heritage/50000263-3992973>

American University of Afghanistan, highlighted that Article 3 of the Afghan constitution states that “[n]o law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam in Afghanistan.”<sup>8</sup> Mobashir added that as long as the legal system and civil law is concerned, there is no provision setting limitations on Afghan women participating in music or banning their freedom of speech.<sup>13</sup> Some Islamic scholars would perhaps interpret Afghan women’s rights on freedom of speech with several restrictions and would not grant many right to Afghan women. However, some may support and encourage their participation in freedom of speech and music.

Afghan women often end their music career or hide from families when attending music school due to threats from neighbors, relatives, and conservative critics. For example, a female student who learnt to play guitar at Nazir Khara music school and often performed in public eventually quit after receiving threats of acid attacks from neighbors.<sup>14</sup> Another female musician (who preferred to remain anonymous) successfully learned to play the guitar but had to hide it from her parents and relatives because her family did not view music favorably. According to this musician, carrying her guitar was problematic, especially in public places, as people unknowingly suspected her of doing something dangerous.

It must be noted here that novice and aspiring musicians are not the only ones who face obstacles. Well-known musicians too encounter cultural barriers. For example, Aryana Sayeed, a famous Afghan pop musician has received several death threats. Yet she persisted and followed her passion.<sup>15</sup> Sayeed has broken several stereotypes and records vis-a-vis women in Afghanistan’s conservative social structures. Her performance during the national football tournament and the Afghan Premier League was well received by her fans. Afghanistan’s first female rapper, ‘Paradise’ (of Paradise and Diverse), is another well-known female Afghan musician who has faced major obstacles. In one instance, she was brutally beaten

13. Mobashir, Bashir. Interview by author. Kabul, Afghanistan. Sept. 2020.

14. Nawa, Fariba. “Afghanistan: Female Musician put their lives in danger.” FREEMUSE, January 2008. Accessed on Feb 1, 2020. <https://freemuse.org/news/afghanistan-female-musicians-put-their-lives-in-danger/>

15. Kumar, Ruchi, “Afghan Pop Star Challenges Cultural Norms.” The Lily, August 11, 2017. <http://www.ruchikumar.com/2017/08/11/afghan-pop-star-challenges-cultural-norms/>

up by strangers. When her fiancé, 'Diverse', took her to the police to file a complaint, the police personnel recommended that she stop singing, instead of enforcing the law.<sup>16</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Overall, due to death threats, some female musicians were compelled to relocate abroad to pursue their career and studies in music. Essentially, female Afghan musicians are persisting despite barriers but often at great risk to their lives. There are no legal barriers to Afghan women pursuing a career (or even simply indulging) in music. However, various other obstacles such as security risks (including death threats, threats of rape, acid attacks etc.) and cultural limitations are widespread. The Afghan society has been evolving over the past few years and this has played a facilitating role in encouraging Afghan women to pursue careers in music and other arts. At present, people in even the most remote villages of the country listen to music. This demand could be harnessed to further encourage and facilitate Afghan women's pursuit of careers in music.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- The Afghan government should establish more institutions for music, especially for women.
- The Afghan government should provide space for musicians to conduct concerts and to showcase their art.

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16. Stein, Eliot. "Afghanistan's First Female Rapper: If, I stay silent, nothing will change." *The Guardian*, Dec 1, 2016.