

## **Today I am talking from a country where it's a crime to be a woman.**

Hardly a day goes by without more bad news and restrictions on women. The suffering that the women of Afghanistan have endured, women have not suffered in any other land throughout history.

Today I am presenting a report from a country in which women don't have access to their essential rights of education, work or free movement. But if women ask about those rights, the answer will be beating, arresting or killing.

Today I am raising my voice for women and girls from a country in which the Minister of Higher Education said, at the graduation ceremony of the students of a religious center that those who write/talk against, and/or resist the Taliban deserve to be murdered. This includes both online and offline criticism of their regime.

They actively search every single home, even searching the phone, laptop and all private things to see and find who is working against them. If yes, then they will arrest, beat or kill them. But no one has the right to complain.

But the Taliban don't know that today's women are not like women were during 1996–2001.

Today's women strongly believe that "an educated mother builds a strong nation". And they are stronger than their restrictions. These women are not afraid. Afghan women get stronger day by day, as they raise their voice against the Taliban to demand their own essential rights of education, work and free movement.

Today I am here to tell you that there are no HUMAN rights and there are no WOMEN'S rights in Afghanistan under the Taliban's control.

Afghanistan is not the only country where women's rights are being rolled back. But what is happening should ring alarm bells for all of us; of progress on sex equality and women's rights can be literally wiped out in months.

There are countless unsolved problems facing Afghan women, but because of restrictions, women can't share their stories with each other. And on the other side, there is no ear, no organization, and no group to hear the problems women face. Afghan women are entirely isolated.

## **Things I can no longer do**

I can't go outside alone without a male relative from my home.

I can't go to school over the age of 12.

I can't go to university or the gym or park.

I can't be an engineer or pilot or singer or athlete.

I can't go work, except as doctors or nurses in some hospitals

I can't go to male doctors for treatment.

I should wear a long burqas which covers me from head to toe.

I can't laugh loudly. (No stranger should hear a woman's voice).

I can't present or speak in radio, television or public gatherings. But if I did I would have to cover my face during any TV program.

I can't play sports or enter a sports center or club.

I can't ride bicycles or motorcycles, even with a mahram.

I am banned from listening to music – this applies not only to women, but men as well.

## **To make sense of this moment, it helps to discuss the Taliban's history.**

### **I'll start with the year I was born.**

I was a newborn baby during the Taliban's early ruling years, and I wasn't aware of how women were treated then. But last year, my grandmother, mother, and sisters heaved with grief as they reopened old boxes of burqas they had packed away 20 years ago. They told me unbelievable stories about the horrible ways women were treated.

My grandmother shared how the Taliban entered Afghanistan back then, at a time when fewer men and women were educated. The Taliban leveraged the name of Islam and the conditions of traditional society to manipulate uneducated people. They were particularly cruel to women. "People can't just forget or forgive all the killings," my grandmother said. "Almost every family in Afghanistan now knows of somebody or has a family member who was killed by the Taliban."

## **The golden years: 2001–2021**

Despite my country's many issues, 2001–2021 was a golden time for Afghan women. The Taliban was ousted, and women started to learn about their rights and gained autonomy in their lives. I was one of those girls whose life was changed for the better. Despite our relatives' objections, my parents enrolled me in school, and I was the first girl in our extended family to attend.

Our relatives said that I shouldn't go to school past the age of 12. But my parents didn't listen to them. "We had a hard time, but we don't want a hard time for our children," they said. "We want a bright future for you – especially our daughters." I continued to the university then job....

This life for Afghan girls is one of prisoners who do not know when they will be released. I hear the situation is more horrible in some areas and provinces, where women don't have access to the internet, mobile phones, or any education. There are reports the Taliban has taken cruel actions such as kidnapping, targeted killing, killing by stoning, and forced marriage.