

What awaits Afghan women?

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

THEY have endured horrific floggings and beatings in public, they have endured violence at home, their access to education and healthcare have been restricted, and they have even been stoned to death—not too long ago. And now the women of Afghanistan fear more brutality and repression as the US starts pulling out its forces from the war-ravaged nation after two decades of intervention.

Not that in those two decades the lives of Afghan women had improved significantly. But with the Taliban taking a back foot, there had been some improvements for women in Afghanistan, especially in the more urban areas, easily accessible by the western powers and aid organisations.

In these past 20 years, girls and women had been allowed access to education, access to healthcare, access to income generating opportunities, among other facilities. For the suppressed women of Afghanistan these are privileges; things that we are lucky to be able to take for granted.

“Though progress has been uneven, girls and women now make up about 40 percent of students. They have joined the military and police, held political office, become internationally recognised singers, competed in the Olympics and on robotics teams, climbed mountains and more—all things that were nearly impossible at the turn of the century,” reported the *New York Times* recently.

However, there had also been multiple cases where women human rights activists like Fatima Khalil had been brutally killed. She was only 24. Brave journalists like Meena Mangal, Malala Maiwand, Mursal Wahidi, Sadia Sadat and Shahnaz Roafi, have been assassinated. Their fault: they dared to raise their voice for the truth, for what was right. And one cannot write about the suppression of female voices without remembering Zakia Herawi and Qadria Yasini—the two female Supreme Court judges, who had been assassinated by armed men in Kabul, earlier in the year.

A US government watchdog report,

titled, “Support for gender equality: Lessons from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan”, released in February, stated, “U.S. efforts to support women, girls and gender equality in Afghanistan yielded mixed results.”

And this is especially true for areas that are controlled by the tribes and are not easily accessible owing to their remoteness. “Often, women’s opinions are unclear in these parts, where roughly three-quarters of Afghanistan’s 34 million people live, and are often unreachable because of geographical, technological and cultural constraints,” wrote the *New York Times* in one of its reports in April this year, referring to the women living in rural areas.

However, the US has spent USD 780 million in the last two decades to support and facilitate women’s empowerment in Afghanistan, which has led to some improvements for women, especially in terms of high education enrolment, fall in maternal death rates, among other factors. According to World Health Organization data, maternal deaths per 100,000 births came down to 638 in 2017 from 1,300 in 2002.

However, with September 11, 2021

In these past 20 years, girls and women had been allowed access to education, access to healthcare, access to income generating opportunities, among other facilities. For the suppressed women of Afghanistan these are privileges; things that we are lucky to be able to take for granted.



An Afghan woman and girl approach American troops in Kandahar.

PHOTO: REUTERS

approaching—the day when the US will fully withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, on the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks—the Afghan women fear for the worst.

From female students to women workers to journalists, everyone is worried about how the new situation will unfold, post the US troop withdrawal. The Taliban for sure will try to establish its own grip over the country—be it through either corrective means or by striking some sort of an agreement with the government. But what happens to the girls and women after that? Would they have to go back to the old ways?

On July 9, 2021, the Taliban claimed that they control 85 percent of Afghanistan, as reported by *Reuters*. While the Afghan government has brushed off the Taliban claim, one cannot ignore the fact that the Taliban are actually gaining ground in Afghanistan.

But then who are the Taliban? They used to be a group of angry young men bound together by the hatred for a common enemy, and they adhered to a common set of beliefs to eliminate the enemy. The young men have now become battle-hardened hardliners, who cannot be expected to be flexible with

their ideologies and beliefs. The possibility of reprisals and bloodshed cannot be ignored. And many of the victims will be the vocal women, who would not want to adhere to the Taliban’s orthodox ideals.

However, in imagining an Afghanistan post US presence, one must also factor the existence of the fragmented, multi-ethnic tribe-oriented social system, in the bigger picture. There are many tribes in the country, who have their own social codes. Who would work to support the empowerment of the women living in those areas?

Moreover, Afghanistan is a country where in recent decades, the issue of women’s freedom has been determined by the men. According to a 2019 UN study, a mere 15 percent of the men think that women should work outside the house after marriage.

Domestic violence is another dimension to the sufferings of the Afghan women. A Human Rights Watch report suggest that around 87 percent of Afghani girls and women endure domestic violence in their lifetime. So, it is not only outside the house, but also within the confines of the home, that women are suppressed and tortured in Afghanistan. And it

is the overall social mind-set that encourages and aids this.

While the situation is not expected to be better for the women and girls of Afghanistan once the US presence ends there, the international community cannot just silently watch them go back to the state of subjugation they had been under during the Taliban rule.

In a rare show of defiance, in the north and central regions of Afghanistan, hundreds of brave women recently took to the streets with assault rifles, to protest against the growing influence of the Taliban. The social media were flooded with photos of women flaunting their rifles, during the demonstration. But without support for how long can the Afghan women continue to hold on to their zeal for freedom, for their rights, especially in the face of surmounting challenges?

The US, and the other world powers have a responsibility to insist on ensuring a free and equitable society for the women and girls of Afghanistan, while there is still time. According to Ned Price, spokesperson for the US Department of State, the US has already “made clear that any country that seeks international legitimacy, that wishes not to be a pariah, needs to respect women and girls, and that includes any future government in Afghanistan.”

However, words alone would not be sufficient to change the lot of the subjugated women of Afghanistan. These girls and women need actual support—moral, emotional, economic and political—to overcome the decades old patriarchal mind-set that aims to pin them down to the ground. The Afghan government needs to demonstrate a strong political will to protect and promote the rights of their women. The US along with the rest of the international community should proactively support the Afghan government in this.

The mess that Afghanistan has become today has been the result of the various invasions over the years, including by the Soviets and the US. While they can wash their hands off the country, they cannot wash their hands off this responsibility. It is their moral duty and obligation to make things right rather than leaving the country and its people exposed to subjugation and fear.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is: @tasneem_tayeb

Do we care about digital privacy?

MAN AND MACHINE



MOINUL ZABER

RECENTLY the Chinese government ordered online platforms not to offer ride-hailing giant DiDi’s applications. The allegation against them is that “they are illegally collecting users’ personal data”. With more users

than Uber, DiDi is one of the leaders in the ride-hailing service business. This same allegation has been voiced around the world against most social network services, or those smart services that let us rest at home while the products (or sometimes humans) are delivered to their destination. According to DiDi this will severely impact their revenue stream. Already, the listed shares of DiDi fell nearly by 4 percent in pre-market trading. But will this act stop or at the least reduce data privacy violations of users? Or do we need a systematic design shift? The answer lies in the understanding of what the users think about their data and how the services communicate with the users regarding the data use.

So, what is personal data? It is any information that relates to an identified or identifiable living individual. Even different pieces of information that may lead to the identification of a particular person are personal data. These include my name, address, my personal email address, identification card number, location data that can be obtained from my cell phone, the Internet protocol address of the computer I am using now, my cell phone’s identifier, my hospital record, and many other things. We give away all this information in our everyday interactions with digital services through the use of mobile applications or accessing the web using browsers.

People often confuse privacy with secrecy. We all know what we do when we answer the call of nature. Still, we shut the



door of the “petit coin”. This is because we want privacy, not secrecy. Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of human rights states: “No one must be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation”. Privacy is a right, not a privilege!

We work, shop, get entertainment, look for information and catch up with friends and family online. When we do these online we expect that it would be a quick and easy experience. But that’s rarely the case. If you are reading this column online, chances are that before you could start reading it, you had to navigate through a jungle of advertisements. Most websites we visit nowadays are cluttered with advertisements. They also have trackers that are snippets of code that send information about you to other companies. These trackers use your information to target you with advertisements, analyse your behaviour regarding certain news or issue and connect

you to specific platforms without your knowledge. If you had the means to check who’s lurking behind, you’d see names of companies that you probably have never heard of.

It is like the 1954 movie “Rear Window” by Alfred Hitchcock. A professional photographer with a broken leg staring at his neighbourhood, eventually solving a murder mystery! However, in this modern digital world, we are the neighbours going about with our everyday lives while millions of companies are monitoring us as we have kept our windows open.

Digital applications gather a vast amount of real-time data every day that they use to analyse our choices and movements. It means that that they know where we live, which places we frequently visit and when, how long we work, what food we like and when is the best time to remind us about that product! There is both legitimate and illegitimate use of these data. These applications do not only

focus on us but sometimes sell our data to their buddy applications and advertisers. In the darknet that is not indexed by popular search engines, there are data brokerage companies that sell data of ordinary folks. Companies are now into targeted marketing. Now when I walk past a supermarket and get an SMS, “new deal on Hilsha fish”, I do not get surprised. The supermarket where I frequently visit probably has shared my customer loyalty information with advertisers! Now they know I love Hilsha fish, especially when it is raining. But did I permit them to share this information? I am sure I did not.

A lot of us are unaware that digital platforms know more about us than we do about ourselves. But those who are aware are not doing much to stop it. GSMA—the industry organisation that represents the interest of the mobile network operators, surveyed to know how concerned we are about our privacy in the digital world. They found 70 percent of consumers are concerned about the privacy of their data and 48 percent pointed out that their concerns are growing. The same survey points out that nearly 50 percent of the consumers fail to take basic precautions such as changing a password. People appear to be doing very little about their privacy concerns!

Why is this happening? Firstly, we do not have enough information regarding how we can keep our digital life secured. This ignorance arises because these issues are not talked about much in our public or private forums. In our recent journal submission with colleagues at the University of Dhaka, we conducted a perception survey on password awareness among 881 Bangladeshi users. We found that most of the digital service users are unaware of the malpractices of password use. They are prone to use weaker passwords, mostly reuse their old passwords and most of their passwords have their personal information—making their digital lives vulnerable. One way to reduce this vulnerability is by educating people about this risk. Hacking and breach of passwords is

a known risk. People who are unaware of this vulnerability will never fathom the severity of the unknown risk of giving away bits and pieces of personal information. Nobody taught us that information in the wrong hands is dangerous, and we cannot predict the future! Whatever we do on the internet stays!

Secondly, organisations are reluctant to give away details about their privacy policy regarding personal data. In very recent research at United Nations University, we found that the majority of the applications that came out during the Covid-19 pandemic, collect various sensitive personal data even if they do not have any apparent use. Most applications do not explain the reasons behind the collection of data, why we should trust them, and rampantly use location data!

The fact is, the devil resides in the design. Even if we care about our privacy, we simply do not have the means to “close the window to the on-lookers”. It means that acting against one company or two will not solve the issue. We need to get control over these digital windows—we should know how to open and close them. We should also be able to choose when to open, how much to open and when not to open. We must educate people about privacy in the digital world. Governments need to make it mandatory for the digital platforms to clearly state their data use and privacy policies. The idea is simple, when we subscribe to a platform, we will know what this platform will do with our data and how we can choose to say “yes” or “no” to this use—they should not get away with some legal words that we never read! Industries need to make sure that they give “usable and adequate information” about their data use in a way that we can comprehend. For Bangladesh, it means these should be written in Bangla, so that we all can understand.

Moinul Zaber, Ph.D. is a Senior Academic Fellow at Operating Unit on Policy-Driven Electronic Governance (UNU-EGOV), United Nations University, Guimarães, Portugal. His Twitter handle is: @zabermi
The views expressed in this article are personal.

QUOTABLE Quote



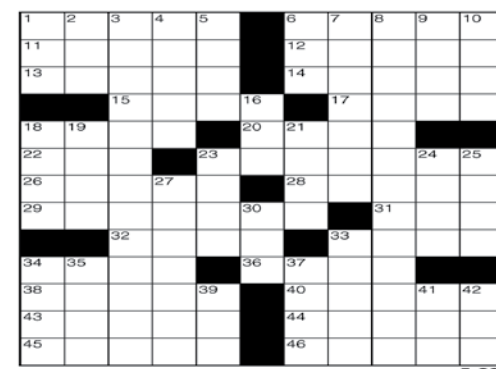
ALICE WALKER (1944)

American novelist and social activist

The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Shade
 - 6 Oven feature
 - 11 Game place
 - 12 Quite impressed
 - 13 Unkempt
 - 14 Longed
 - 15 Interlace
 - 17 Fling
 - 18 Clip
 - 20 “Like that’ll happen!”
 - 22 Braying beast
 - 23 Spy’s asset
 - 26 Exorbitant
 - 28 Nurse Barton
 - 29 Inlaid flooring
 - 31 Yoga need
 - 32 Surrounding glow
 - 33 Stare in disbelief
- DOWN**
- 1 Motor part
 - 2 Galena, for one
 - 3 Musical set in France
 - 4 Beginning
 - 5 Tampa Bay team
 - 6 Waiter’s reward
 - 7 Monogram unit
 - 8 Musical set in Spain
 - 9 Rams’ mates
 - 10 Cincinnati team
 - 16 Topper
 - 18 Shocked sound
 - 19 Nick and Nora’s dog
 - 21 Church group
 - 23 Goad on
 - 24 Golf bunker
 - 25 Loathe
 - 27 Draws a parallel between
 - 30 Have a bite
 - 33 Drain cover
 - 34 Band boosters
 - 35 Film’s Theda
 - 37 Troubling sign
 - 39 One or more
 - 41 Informant
 - 42 Singer Yoko



YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS



BETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.