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JOURNALISM

**Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper  
University of Oxford**

# **“No longer possible to hide the truth”**

*The Impact of social media on Afghanistan’s social taboos*

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**Trinity Term 2016**

**Sponsor: British Broadcasting Corporation**

## Executive Summary

In this globalised world, social media can act as an agent, changing mindsets and perceptions in societies, especially where there have been traditional restrictions.

This paper will discuss the struggle women in Afghanistan have faced throughout history to achieve their basic rights as individuals. The paper focuses on the impact of social media on Afghanistan's social taboos, and the changes it is bringing to the lives of a neglected section of Afghan society.



Figure 1

Women using the internet in Herat, Afghanistan December 2009

I have derived results about the impact of social media on women from interviews with women living in urban areas in various Afghan provinces. Many believe it is leading them towards a more broad-minded society. However, the study demonstrates that violence towards women continues. Despite the growing awareness among women of their rights and the increasing possibilities for women to communicate with each other and to participate in wider Afghan society, women are still threatened and attacked with impunity.

The study also highlights actions taken by social activists, through social media, to curb this repression. One hundred women were interviewed, via social media platforms, email, telephone and face-to-face.

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## **1. Introduction**

In Afghanistan, social media is allowing Afghans to access and share news, even in remote areas, for the first time. It has opened many aspects of Afghan society to external and internal scrutiny. It has broken the wall of silence that once existed around the country.

Afghanistan is a highly patriarchal, traditional society. In the past, violence against women, and punishments meted out by society against women, were rarely punished by law, disclosed or openly discussed. However, this is beginning to change: it is becoming harder to hide the truth.

New media has allowed women to leave behind traditional conservative behaviour. It is enabling them to speak out beyond the family circle.

The process is at its very beginning. Of a population of 36 million people - many living in rural areas - only around five million are believed to have access to the internet in 2017. It is not known what proportion of these are women, but it is certainly a minority. The numbers are slowly increasing, however, and this research demonstrates that new media is enabling women to understand and assert their human rights. It is allowing women to build networks and campaign for solidarity and social justice.

### **1.1 Definitions**

The term 'social' has various definitions. It always refers to the interaction of one sort of living beings with other sorts of living beings for their combined co-existence, irrespective of whether the interaction is intentional or unintentional<sup>1</sup>.

The definition of social media used in this research is: "Social media is roughly defined as a group of internet-based applications based on that built on the

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<sup>1</sup> Mathur P.K. (2012) Social Media and Networking: Concepts Trends and Dimensions

ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content.”<sup>2</sup>).

This paper accepts that the introduction and use of social media applications, such as internet blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp etc., has become the new catalyst tool in the formation of social movements<sup>3</sup>. The term social movement was first used in academic writing by Lorenz Von Stein, a German sociologist in the 1950s<sup>4</sup>. It referred to the idea of a continuous, unitary process, by which the whole working class gained self-consciousness and power.

For the purpose of this study, the Oxford Dictionary definition of the term ‘social taboo’ is used: ‘A social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing’. (See also chapter 2)

## **1.2 Research Questions**

This paper will seek to answer the following question:

*Are Afghan women using social media to help break social taboos?*

To address this question, the research tests the following hypotheses:

- a. Women are increasingly using online forums to express themselves (although often anonymously)
- b. by allowing them to express their own personal views online, social media is giving Afghan women a sense of identity
- c. Social media in Afghanistan, particularly Facebook, is allowing women to find out about what is happening outside their own families and enabling them to form wider social networks - formal and informal

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<sup>2</sup> Kaplan A.M & Haenlien M. (2010) Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media

<sup>3</sup> Amandha Rohr Lopes, "The Impact of Social Media on Social Movements: The New Opportunity and Mobilizing Structure" Journal of Creighton University, (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Tilly C. (2004) Social Movements, 1768-2004

In conclusion the paper suggests how the media and social media can continue to play a positive role in raising awareness of women's issues, particularly those around domestic violence. The findings can be presented to civil society organisations, women's rights groups and the media, in the hope that it can help to bring about change both within Afghanistan and also in external attitudes towards the country.

I hope it can provide enough evidence to enable the media, including my former employer, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), to take up, and highlight, women's issues.

### **1.3 Methodology**

The research employed five main methodologies:

- a) Content analysis of social media posts, including Facebook and Twitter, blogs, articles and other web based platforms belonging to Afghan users over a specific time period.
- b) Semi-structured interviews with 100 female social media users via digital networks - including Skype, Viber, WhatsApp, Facebook, and some face-to-face interviews, conducted in Afghanistan.

Although all were from Afghanistan and were living in Afghanistan when interviewed it is important to note that the sample is not representative of Afghanistan's female population. Interviewees already used social media to some extent and were based in urban areas.

The sample did not include women in rural areas, where social media use is still low due to lack of access to the internet. I believe there is scope for further research examining the impact of social media in these areas and among this sector of the Afghan population.

When selecting women to interview I tried to find a representative mix of students, professional women and women and girls who stay at home and do not work. All were educated to at least high school level. All of the women I spoke to had access to social media, either through smart phones, personal computers, or shared computers in universities or public internet centres.

The women came from Afghanistan's major urban areas cities: Kabul, Herat, Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif.

The majority of the interviews were conducted over three months, between April and June 2016.

c) Interviews with 20 men about their attitudes towards women using social media. The men were mostly educated, professionals mostly active on social media. They were based in Afghanistan and abroad.

d) A review of relevant academic literature.

e) Data collection: data was collected through contacts on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp etc.

In addition, Afghan Human Rights Commission documentation of thousands of cases of violence against women was used as a source for collecting and analysing data for the project<sup>5</sup>.

The research was exploratory as well as descriptive.

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<sup>5</sup> Human Right Watch. World Report 2012: Afghanistan

## **2. Social taboos in Afghanistan**

The study examines whether women in Afghanistan are using social media to challenge the country's social taboos. This chapter will detail three of the key social taboos that govern women's behaviour in public and in private: virginity; women's appearance in public; and relationships between men and women.

The chapter will examine how these social taboos are impacting women's lives and provides examples.

### **“Half the value of men”**

Afghan culture is deeply patriarchal, insular and traditional. Women are regarded as chattels, with “exactly half the value of men”<sup>6</sup>.

Dr Hafizullah Emadi, an Afghan sociologist, wrote “women are treated as a man's personal property, one that can be purchased and disposed of at any time. The concept of a woman as a chattel is strong among most tribal communities and some men even tattoo their women with the same mark they put on their animals.”<sup>7</sup>

In this patriarchal society, women are expected to abide by social taboos. If they do not they can be subject to violent recrimination with impunity. There are few laws to protect women's rights in Afghanistan and those that exist are rarely enforced.<sup>8</sup>

### **2.1. Virginity**

One of the deepest held and most damaging taboos for women surrounds virginity. There is a tradition in Afghan culture that women will remain virgins until they are married. If a woman is found not to be a virgin before marriage she is considered to be ‘dissolute’ or damaged and unworthy, and to have brought dishonour on her

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<sup>6</sup> Erika Knabe: Women in the Social Stratification of Afghanistan, 1977

<sup>7</sup> Culture and Customs of Afghanistan, Emadi, 2005

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2012/country-chapters/afghanistan>

family. This is used to justify harassment, beating and divorce - it is even used to justify murder, under the guise of so-called 'honour killings'<sup>9</sup>.

In some parts of the country the bride's virginity is tested by the groom's family on the night after the marriage, by checking the sheets of the marital bed for blood. If they fail to find such 'evidence', the punishment can be barbaric.

"In some cases, a bride's ears and nose are cut off," one Afghan woman recently told a television journalist. "They are forced into dirty clothes and taken back to their parent's home. Their heads are shaved. The bride's family is told that she is not a virgin. Other times, a bride is simply killed and her body is returned to her parents."<sup>10</sup>

Evidence that an unmarried woman is not a virgin can lead to criminal prosecution. A recent report by Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission (March 2016), based on interviews with 53 female prisoners across 12 of the country's 34 provinces, found that 48 of them, including girls as young as 13, had been sent by the police or prison for virginity tests. This is usually to provide evidence that they have committed a 'crime', such as adultery. The international human rights group, Human Rights Watch has called for an end to this practice.<sup>11</sup>

The fear surrounding the taboo of virginity means few women dare to speak about it, even with female relatives or close friends.

This fear is viewed as a way of controlling women. One interviewee for this paper, Monira S, said that after losing her virginity, while still a single woman, she lost all hope for her future and for marriage. She said this diminished her confidence, even at home with her younger sisters and brothers. She said: "I always think I am wrong in everything and soon they will find out about me and they will kill me."<sup>12</sup>

Bahaar Sohail, an air stewardess, also interviewed for this study, is divorced from her husband and now lives alone. She has a boyfriend but he does not want to marry her, she said, "because I am not a virgin girl". "This makes me insecure about my

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<sup>9</sup> Saramad M.H. & Sultani L. Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission\_August 26, 2015. National Inquiry report on Factors and causes of Rape and Honor Killing in Afghanistan Retrieved from Afghanistan Independent Human Right Commission website:

<http://www.aihrc.org.af/home/research-reports>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-virgin-brides-punishment/27409971.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/25/afghanistan-end-moral-crimes-charges-virginity-tests>

<sup>12</sup> Sources is Interview of "Monira" by Bahaar Joya 01 August 2016

relationship with him. If you are not a virgin due to marriage, nobody wants to marry you as a divorced woman.”

Zohra M became a victim of violence after losing her virginity. Zohra - not her real name - now lives in Paris, but before leaving Afghanistan was a women’s activist. She had a six-year relationship with her boyfriend, who promised to marry her. She became pregnant three times and each time had an abortion in illegal clinics in Kabul. But the man eventually left her, with no protection from her family or society.

Zohra eventually obtained a scholarship and escaped Afghanistan in order to save her life - having a relationship outside marriage is a crime in Afghanistan’s Islamic law and culture. “When he left me, I found myself ruined and tried to kill myself by taking an overdose of pills. But one of my friends took me to the hospital and saved my life,” she said.

## **2.2 Women’s appearance in public - and online**

Another social taboo that has traditionally inhibited women’s lives surrounds their appearance in public, this now extends to their appearance online.

In Afghanistan’s patriarchal society men have traditionally been expected to carry on all interaction outside the house (school, work, shopping etc.) and women are supposed to remain at home occupying themselves with children, housework and cooking.

There is a culture prohibiting women from appearing in public at all. Many are confined to their houses, they cannot work and have little education. In some houses windows are painted so that women cannot see out and men cannot see in. When women do appear in public they are often veiled, covered from head-to-toe by a burqa.

Although this culture has long been challenged in some urban areas and among educated classes, women who break this fundamental taboo are generally judged harshly. Women who appear in public without a burqa are often subject to insults, threats, even violent attacks in the street from male strangers. Women who do the

same on social media, i.e. expose their identity by using their real name or photo, are also subject to similar harassment and recrimination from strangers.

“As long as patriarchy is perceived as the dominant culture and public value in Afghan society, violence and the tendency to commit violent acts will remain an integral part of culture and valued relationships,” Shabnam Nasimi, a law student working for the Afghanistan & Central Asian Association as Muslim women's engagement officer, wrote in openDemocracy.

“These discriminatory practices against women are pervasive, occurring across ethnic groups in both rural and urban areas...Many Afghans, including some religious leaders, reinforce harmful customs by invoking their interpretation of Islam. In most cases, however, these practices are inconsistent with sharia, as well as Afghan and international law” Nasimi wrote.<sup>13</sup>

Wida Saghari is a presenter in a local TV station in Kabul. By doing this work - appearing in public as an independent, working woman - she is breaking social taboos.

Saghari is also very active on Facebook and is a radical women's rights activist using social media to get her message across. In an interview with the author she explained why she has chosen to break the taboos around women in public. “I know the consequences of my activities, but we need to start breaking the wall of tradition and suppression of women. I am ready to be part of this big change in our history. I put my life in serious danger by fighting against traditionalism and Mullahs (religious scholars). Sometimes I am afraid for my children but not for my own life.”

Bahaar Sohail, the stewardess, also fights against religious taboos and inequality. She openly uses Facebook and displays her photograph on her profile page<sup>14</sup>. She said this “battle” has caused her to lose her job and she has had to move house often, because of threats. “I have received many threatening messages on my Facebook page or on my phone. They contacted the airline I was working for and

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<sup>13</sup> Shabnam Nasimi 'The Devastating Truth of Women's Rights in Afghanistan, 2014, Open Democracy <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/shabnam-nasimi/devastating-truth-of-women%E2%80%99s-rights-in-afghanistan>

<sup>14</sup> [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=10159224623605363&id=618740362](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10159224623605363&id=618740362)

threatened them, saying they had to expel me from my job. This is because I fight against traditionalism and injustice for women in our society.”

The threats received by Bahaar Sohail are visible on her Facebook wall. The comments are filled with accusations, describing her as a “whore who works for non-believers and Christians.” They also say that if they reach her they will kill her.<sup>15</sup>

### **2.3 Relationships between men and women**

The third taboo concerns relationships between men and women. Romantic relationships are an ‘alien concept’ in Afghanistan where ‘strict social and cultural norms are based on segregation of the sexes’<sup>7</sup>. Arranged marriages are still common and matches are often made for economic reasons. Women have few rights in choosing their own partners and refusing to marry the man who has been chosen for you is considered a ‘moral crime’ which can be punished by imprisonment or even death, if it is considered to have impugned the family honour.

“When women and girls decide to leave [a marriage] because of abusive relationships or unhappiness, enraged parents, brothers, fiancées, and husbands frequently track them down and accuse them of running away, or of zina (sex outside marriage). Male family members, comfortable in the knowledge that their own criminal behaviour will not be subject to scrutiny, can easily use such accusations as a weapon. Aided by authorities too willing to accept their allegations at face value, they can accuse a woman of zina, knowing that she is likely to be arrested.

“When this happens, women often suffer an invasive medical examination and severe damage to their credibility and reputation, even if charges are never proven. Even the threat of an accusation can be used to control women and cover up or justify crimes, including forced and underage marriage, rape, assault, and forced prostitution.”<sup>16</sup>

One interviewee for this study, Mahdis, one of Afghanistan’s few female lawyers, specialises in representing women accused of crimes of “depravity” - the legal name for “crimes” committed by women who have been arrested after being seen in a

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<sup>15</sup> Source is Interview of “Bahar Sohaili” by Bahaar Joya 01 Aug 2016

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/28/afghanistan-hundreds-women-girls-jailed-moral-crimes>

public place with a man who is not their relative, or who have been reported missing after running away from domestic abuse at home.

Mahdis related one story of meeting a young woman in jail in Herat, Western Afghanistan, in July 2015.

“The young woman had been arrested by police because they saw her walking in public with a boy who was her classmate. Even her family refused to protect her and said she had damaged their reputation and they did not want her back. That woman has now been in jail for three years, without trial.”

She told Mahdis she has been raped by police and jail officials. Even in “safe houses” women are rented out to provide sexual services, Mahdis said.

She added that other lawyers have refused to represent this girl and her family have also threatened Mahdis - as her lawyer - saying that if she defends her in court they will do everything they can to prevent her release, saying that when they see her “they will kill her”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Source is Interview of “Mahdis” by Bahaar Joya Dated 22 Oct 2016.

### **3. “Attacks against women have increased, laws are rarely enforced.” Brief history of women’s struggle in Afghanistan**

Women’s rights in Afghanistan have been caught up in a turbulent history of state–society relations, marked by two attempts at radical reform instigated from above. The first occurred during the reign of King Amanullah (1919 to 1929), the second under the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) (1963–1973). Both episodes were followed by bloody uprisings and a violent backlash, targeting women’s attire, mobility and public presence, albeit under very different circumstances.

Different dictatorships, such as during the time of the Mujahidin (Islamic guerrilla fighters) and of the Taliban, in the later part of the 20th century, forced women to struggle not only to reform the male-dominated society, but also to gain basic freedoms.

More recently, during the presidency of Hamid Karzai (2001 to 2014), some of those freedoms were written into Afghan law, to please foreign governments and organisations who often tied their aid to domestic social and political reforms. Yet the reality is that these laws are rarely enforced. On paper it appears that Afghan women have more equality, in practice little has changed.

Levels of violence against Afghan women remains high and human rights groups continue to express concerns. They have found that while there is evidence that women are fighting against the restrictions society has placed on them, it is also apparent that violent attacks against women are increasing. Women are prepared to take more risks to stand up for their rights, by appearing in public, and on social media, without veils and scarves, but there is evidence that they are being punished for their openness.

## **Violence against women has increased**

Violent attacks against women have increased in the last three years according to organisations such as Amnesty International, the United Nations and the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (RAWA), an NGO based in Kabul. RAWA reported a 7.32% increase in attacks against women in 2015 over the year before.<sup>18</sup> In its 2015/2016 report on Afghanistan Amnesty International said the country's Ministry for Women had counted 'thousands' of acts of violence against women in the previous 12 months. It concluded that continuing insecurity means many attacks go unreported, and are carried out with impunity.<sup>19</sup>

### **3.1 King Amanullah (1919-1929)**

To understand the situation facing Afghan women, it is necessary to examine the historical context.

In the early 20th century King Amanullah played an important role in promoting freedom for women in the public sphere, to lessen the control patriarchal families held over them. The king stressed the importance for young girls and women to receive an education. Along with encouraging families to send their daughters to school, he promoted the unveiling of women and persuaded them to adopt a more western style of dress. In 1921, he created a law that abolished forced marriage, child marriage, and the custom of bride price. He also put restrictions on polygamy, a common practice among households in Afghanistan. However, over time these restrictions became nearly impossible to enforce.

King Amanullah's reforms became increasingly unpopular. In 1927 he left Afghanistan to tour Europe with his wife and during his absence an uprising against his rule led to the desertion of most of his army. He was forced to abdicate and go into exile in Europe. His brother succeeded him - for a few days - before being ousted by a Tajik warlord, Habibullah Kalakani.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2015/11/25/cases-of-iolence-against-women-has-risen-considerably-from-last-year-aihrc.html>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/afghanistan/report-afghanistan/>

### 3.2 People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan:

In 1973 the Afghan state was declared a republic and in 1978 a communist group, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), took power and attempted, once again, to reform the marriage laws and women's health laws and also to encourage women's education. During this time Afghanistan made significant advances towards modernisation. Some educated women, from elite families, were able to hold jobs as scientists, teachers, doctors and civil servants, and had a considerable amount of freedom with significant educational opportunities. They could travel abroad and participate fully in Afghan society. Even ordinary citizens of Kabul dressed in a westernised way and were free to walk in the streets.



Figure 2

Western dress was common in the streets of Kabul in the late 1970s, and women moved freely in public.



Figure 3

20 years later, under the Taliban women had to be covered and were beaten if caught on the street uncovered.

The fall of the PDPA government, then led by Mohammad Najibullah, and the end of the communist regime, in 1992, swept the mainly non-Pashtun Mujahideen into power.

### **3.3 Mujahideen and the Taliban 1992 - 2001**

#### **Mujahideen 1992 - 1996**

Led by President Rabbani, the new government, which styled itself the Islamic State of Afghanistan<sup>20</sup>, failed to establish control of most of the country's territory beyond the capital and its non-Pashtun ethnic base in the northeast. This period of lawlessness was witness to some of the worst human rights abuses, including crimes against women. The Taliban<sup>21</sup> emerged in 1994, at the height of the country's civil war between groups of Mujahideen. The Taliban gradually took over the country until, by 1998, they controlled most of Afghanistan.

#### **The Taliban (1996 to 2001)**

In an interview with the author (June 2016), Mahjoba Seraj, historian and founder and director of Mashal Consulting, which works for women empowerment<sup>22</sup>, said the worst period for women in Afghanistan was during the period of Taliban, when women were removed from every single activity of society. The repression started before the Taliban arrived in Kabul, during the Mujahideen period. The situation worsened immediately after the Taliban took power.

Women virtually disappeared from public sight and public life between 1994 and 2000, Seraj added. During this time women were forbidden to gather, and there were no discussions of women's rights or campaigns against violence towards women.<sup>23</sup>

The Taliban declared that women were forbidden to go to work and they were not to leave their homes unless accompanied by a male family member.<sup>24</sup>

Taliban policy was simply 'the continuation of institutionalised structural and personal violence against women in Afghanistan'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.umsl.edu/services/govdocs/wofact2001/geos/af.html#Govt>

<sup>21</sup> The Taliban (Pashto: طالبان ṭālibān "students"), alternatively spelled Taleban, is an Islamic fundamentalist political movement in Afghanistan currently waging war (an insurgency, or jihad) within that country.

<sup>22</sup> [http://awn-af.net/editor/uploads/files/Short\\_Biographies\\_AWN\\_media.pdf](http://awn-af.net/editor/uploads/files/Short_Biographies_AWN_media.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/womens-rights-afghanistan-history>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.rawa.org/rules.htm>

When women did go out they were required to wear an all-covering burqa (a long, loose garment covering the whole body from head to feet, worn in public by many Muslim women). Under these restrictions, women were denied formal education. Some women were unable to leave their households at all because they could not afford a burqa or they no longer had any male relatives.

Women were usually forced to stay at home and even had to paint the windows of their houses, so that no one could see in or out. During the Taliban's five-year rule, women in Afghanistan were essentially put under house arrest. Some women, who once held respectable positions, were forced to wander the streets in their burqas selling everything they owned or begging in order to survive.

### **3.4 Karzai Administration, 2001 to 2014**

After the removal of the Taliban regime from Afghanistan in 2001, a new government was formed, led by Hamid Karzai. The Karzai administration aimed to relax policies around women's rights, and in Kabul women could be seen driving cars and engaging in other activities that they would have previously been banned from participating in. Access to education, jobs and politics also appeared to become easier for women.

Yet, despite these apparently relaxed policies, in 2013 the United Nations published statistics showing a 28% increase over the previous year in reported incidents against women, such as forced marriage, domestic violence and rape.

The same United Nations report, 'A Way to Go',<sup>26</sup> also revealed that a new law, intended to make violence against women illegal: The Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW), introduced by the Karzai government, was not being enforced.

'A Way to Go' reported that EVAW "criminalised for the first time in Afghanistan 22 acts of violence against women and harmful practices including child marriage, forcing or prohibiting marriage, forced self-immolation, rape and beating. The law also specified punishments for perpetrators."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup><https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/drl/rls/6185.htm>

<sup>26</sup>[https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama\\_evaw\\_law\\_report\\_2013\\_revised\\_on\\_16\\_dec\\_2013.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_evaw_law_report_2013_revised_on_16_dec_2013.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> 'ibid'

Yet the report found that although the number of reported incidents of violence against women had increased by 28% since EVAW, the number of indictments under the law had gone up by only 2%.<sup>28</sup>

“UNAMA highlights that most incidents of violence against women still remain largely underreported, especially in rural areas, due to social norms and cultural restraints, discrimination against women (leading to wider acceptance of violence against them), fear of social stigma or exclusion and, at times, fear of reprisals and threat to life. Those incidents that reach law enforcement and judicial authorities or receive public attention represent only a small percentage of thousands of incidents of violence against women throughout the country,” the report concluded.<sup>29</sup>

In February 2014 the Afghan government passed a new law that threatened to dilute the impact of EVAW even further. It added a provision that allowed relatives and family members that witnessed family violence the choice of whether to give evidence or not in any prosecution, effectively making it even harder to bring charges.

Human Rights Watch<sup>30</sup> describes the implementation of the 2009 Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women as "poor," noting that some cases still go ignored.

In one high-profile case during the Karzai period, in July 2013, a top female police officer, who was the symbol of improving women’s rights in the face of Taliban hostility, was shot dead by an unknown assailant. Lieutenant Islam Bibi, who survived death threats from her own brother to rise through the ranks, was shot as she was being driven to work by her son to Helmand’s capital Lashkar Gah.<sup>31</sup>

In a 2015 case that gained international attention, a young woman, Farkhunda, was beaten to death by a mob on the streets of central Kabul, after she was falsely accused of burning a Qur’an.<sup>32</sup> On 19 March 2015, she was on her way to her Qur’an class when she became involved in an altercation with a street vendor. On refusing to purchase a taweez (a religious trinket with inscriptions from the Qur’an),

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<sup>28</sup> ‘ibid’

<sup>29</sup> ‘ibid’

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/afghanistan>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/10159122/Helmands-top-female-police-officer-shot-dead.html>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33810338>

the street vendor accused her of blasphemy, an accusation which provoked the mob. She was repeatedly stamped on, beaten and stoned, dragged, clothes torn, thrown off a wall and finally her battered body was set alight. Many people, including police officials, witnessed this horrific attack but no one made any attempt to intervene or question the original allegation of blasphemy.

### **3.5 Current Period - Government of Ashraf Ghani (2014 - 2017)**

Afghanistan is still one of the most challenging places in the world to be a woman. Although the current government, under Ashraf Ghani, pledged it would improve the rights of women, at the time this report was completed, in 2017, little has changed. According to Human Rights Watch's World Report, 2016<sup>33</sup>, the government has "failed to take steps to improve enforcement of the Elimination of Violence against Women Law (EVAW) and to stop prosecutions of so-called moral crimes, which lead to imprisonment of women fleeing domestic violence and forced marriages.

A follow-up study, published in February 2016 by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), concluded that only 5% of cases filed under EVAW led to criminal prosecution.<sup>34</sup>

The 2016 HRW report<sup>35</sup> also reported that on June 30: "Ashraf Ghani launched Afghanistan's National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security, which outlines how Afghanistan will implement Security Council Resolution 1325 and ensure women's "equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security." However, the NAP was not accompanied by an implementation plan.

However, in one week in February 2017 the Afghan Women's Network reported seven cases of violence against women. Most involved violence by male relatives. For example, the husband of Zarina, 23, chopped off both of her ears after an argument in the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif. In the northern province of Badghis, Nasima was shot dead by her father for an alleged illicit relationship with her cousin. Masooma, a resident of a remote village in northeastern Badakhshan Province,

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/poc\\_annual\\_report\\_2015\\_final\\_14\\_feb\\_2016.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/poc_annual_report_2015_final_14_feb_2016.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> 'ibid'

died on her way to the hospital after being beaten by her husband. He was later arrested by local police.

The Afghan Women's Network, which campaigns for women's rights, highlighted those cases in a report released early in 2017, recording an increase in the number of attacks on women, usually carried out with impunity. A spokeswoman called for the government to enforce the laws to protect women. "We want the government to implement the existing laws and end the culture of impunity for offenders," she said. "We want the security institutions to arrest the offenders. We want the office of the attorney general and the special courts for addressing the violence against women to vigorously pursue cases to fully implement the law on violence against women."<sup>36</sup>

### **Life for women in modern Afghanistan**

Meanwhile other statistics concerning women in Afghanistan remain shocking. For example:

- Child marriage: More than 50% of Afghan girls are married or engaged by 12.
- Almost 60% of girls are married by 16. Women activists say up to 80 percent of marriages in poor rural areas are either forced or arranged.
- Most girls marry far older men — some in their 60s — whom they meet for the first time at their wedding.<sup>37</sup>

A lack of security after three decades of war, and the risk of kidnapping and rape, has also prompted many families to force their young daughters into marriage.

The Institute for War and Peace Reporting recently (December 2016) found that child marriages are increasing in some parts of Afghanistan, and that economic and security reasons were most often cited.<sup>38</sup>

Afghanistan has 1.5 million widows, one of the highest proportions in the world. Many men were killed in the armed conflicts, and older husbands are likely to die

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<sup>36</sup> <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-violence-against-women/28284751.html>

<sup>37</sup> Data taken from "Trust in education" which provides educational, economic and health care assistance to Afghan families and data sources for trust in education are from UN, CIA world fact book & Afghanistan Relief organization. <http://www.trustededucation.org/resources/life-as-an-afghan-woman/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/child-marriages-rise-afghan-province>

sooner than their younger - sometimes child - brides. The average age of an Afghan widow is 35, and 94% of them are illiterate. Most of them have more than four children to support. While many widows with children will continue to be cared for by their husband's family (marriage to surviving brothers is common), it is not always possible. Widows without male protection have few options and many are forced to beg or engage in prostitution.

Many women die in pregnancy and childbirth: 460 deaths/100,000 live births (2010)

85% of women have no formal education and are illiterate.

Total live births per woman – average of 6

One in ten children die before their fifth birthday. Life expectancy for women is 51.

## **4. Communications and Development of Social Media in Afghanistan**

In the last decade the mode of communication has changed significantly, particularly for women.

Before 2001, few households had access to any form of communication. Telephone land lines were mainly concentrated in the cities, such as Herat and Kabul, and belonged to the wealthiest families or government offices. Even so, the telephone infrastructure, damaged by 20 years of war, rarely worked.

By 2016 the Ministry of Communications estimated there were more than 18 million mobile phone users - over 50% of the 32 million population. Internet access is not as widespread. In 2016 there were an estimated five million internet users, mainly in urban areas.

### **Television and radio**

Before the Soviet period, Afghanistan, like most of its neighbours, had a monopoly state broadcaster, Radio and Television Afghanistan (RTA), and no commercial sector at all. Though RTA had a long history, dating back to 1925, it was generally perceived to be the voice of the government. In times of crisis, Afghans turned to the BBC and Voice of America for news on events in their own country. Foreign radio stations attracted huge audiences during the war years of the 1980s and 90s.

By 2016, after Hamid Karzai's government made efforts to open up Afghanistan's communications networks to private operators, there were 106 television operators in Afghanistan and 320 television transmitters. Selected foreign channels are also shown to the public in Afghanistan through official networks, but through the use of the internet at least 3,500 international TV channels can also be accessed.

There are also over 300 radio stations, broadcasting in all of the country's main languages: Dari, Pashtu, Uzbeki. A number of stations broadcast in English.

### **4.1 Mode of Communication for Women in the 1990s**

During the 1990s and especially after 1996, under the Taliban, many women were imprisoned within the four walls of their own houses. Women were expected to stay

at home producing children, satisfying male sexual needs or attending to the drudgery of daily housework. There was complete ban on women's activity outside the home unless accompanied by a *mahram* (close male relative such as a father, brother or husband).

The only mode of communication for women was at rare social gatherings, with other women, at occasions like weddings or Eid etc.

#### **4.2 Mode of Communication for Women after 2001**

Just over ten years ago Afghanistan had a barely functional post-war infrastructure and literally no telecom services. Since then, the re-emergence of the telecom sector in April 2002, when the first private telecom company – Afghan Wireless Communications Company (AWCC) – was authorised to provide mobile (GSM) services, the telecom sector has witnessed unprecedented and phenomenal growth. Due to these rapid developments in infrastructure, services, policy, and the legal and regulatory framework, the Afghan telephone market has doubled in size every year since 2002 and the telecom sector has become one of the largest revenue-generating sectors in Afghanistan with annual average income of \$139.6 million. Index-linked fees and taxes, paid by AWCC to the government, account for more than 12% of total Afghan government revenues.<sup>39</sup>

In 2002, the total number of telephones across Afghanistan numbered 50,000,<sup>40</sup> with most of them in Kabul. Citizens who wanted to make international calls had to cross the border into say, Iran or Pakistan, to reach the rest of the world.

With the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2002, however, the situation changed quickly. By the end of 2009, the number of mobile phone subscriptions across the country had reached 11 million, with almost 99 percent of these provided by the four private mobile telephone networks. The fifth network, run by state-owned Afghan Telecom, is focusing on wireline and regional connectivity.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> USAID, "The State of Telecommunications and Internet in Afghanistan - Six Years Later (2006-2012)"

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-19975113>

<sup>41</sup> Data sourced from "The World Bank" under Impact of Mobile phone on Afghanistan.

The four private mobile telephone networks include important international companies (South Africa's MTN and UAE's Etisalat) and networks with well-respected backers (Roshan, whose backers include the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development, Monaco Telecom International, and Nordic TeliaSonera; and AWCC, founded by the well-known Afghan philanthropist Ehsan Bayat).<sup>42</sup>

Together, these firms have invested well over US\$1 billion in their networks and services.

During this era, despite the increasingly sophisticated communications network, the condition of women changed little. Male family members still controlled the use of mobile phones by women and most only had access to mobile phones without internet access.

At this time only a few women, particularly those who were able to leave their houses for work or education, owned smartphones with internet access.

Yet, this was the beginning of a turning point in interaction between men and women, although not yet openly, due to the still very narrow-minded society.

#### **4.3 Mode of Communication for Women after 2006**

The Internet in Afghanistan began in 2002, after Hamid Karzai took office in Kabul. It was banned prior to 2002 because the Taliban government believed it broadcast obscene, immoral, and anti-Islamic material, and because the few internet users at the time could not be easily monitored because they obtained their telephone lines from neighbouring Pakistan.

Since 2006 more women and girls have been allowed to go to school and university. This enabled them to learn about computers and the internet - even though very few families had the internet in their homes. From this small beginning a few women, usually living in cities, were able to connect with the outside world. However most did so discreetly. Most invented secret identities on social media forums like Facebook, by using false name and pictures.

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<sup>42</sup> <http://operatorwatch.3g4g.co.uk/2014/07/afghanistan-mobile-operator-overview.html>

According to Afghanistan's Ministry of Communications, over five million people (approximately 15%) now (in 2017) have access to the internet in Afghanistan.

Social media use is still low, but a 2016 survey by Hootsuite and We are social<sup>43</sup> revealed it had increased by 43% between 2015 to 2016 and that nearly 10% of the population (2.7 million people) use at least one social media platform.

Because most women do not use their own names on social media pages it is impossible to know the exact number of female users. However, a Ministry of Communications spokesperson said that, according to their data, 20 percent of those with access to the internet are women. The Ministry estimates this could mean the same proportion also have access to social media platforms, such as Facebook and Viber.

Based on my research and also on my own experience, I have found that Afghan women use the internet to contact friends, watch videos, entertainment news or music videos.

#### **4.4 Future development of internet in Afghanistan**

Although the numbers of internet users in Afghanistan is still relatively low, it is likely to change as technology develops, allowing cheaper and more accessible online access.

There is currently fibre optic cable in 26 of 34 provinces across the country. Recently the World Bank contributed \$USD5m to the Ministry of Communications, to study the use of fibre optic and how it works in the provinces. "We have plans for the next five years to connect districts to fibre optic also," a government spokesman said in an interview with the author<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> <http://1tvnews.af/en/news/afghanistan/27738-social-media-use-in-afghanistan-jumped-43-percent-in-2016>

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Ministry of Communications, Afghanistan. 15 June 2016

## **5. Research Results: “Threatened and attacked”**

This section of the paper details the research results and findings, based on interviews with 100 women, living in urban areas in the north, west and east of Afghanistan (Mazar e Sharif, Kabul and Herat). All of those interviewed use social media at least occasionally. They were asked about their attitudes towards social media in semi-structured interviews. Questions included whether they were willing to use their own identities on social media and whether they deliberately use social media to challenge social taboos.

### **5.1 Revealing identities on social media**

One in ten of the women (10%) interviewed said that they are willing to use their own pictures on their Facebook, Viber and WhatsApp profiles. However, all of these women said they had suffered abuse as a result of their openness and some have been forced to change their behaviour online.

Mahdis, the lawyer based in Herat province, said she used to use her personal photograph and details on Facebook, but removed them after abuse: “I used Facebook for eight years with both my name and my picture. I put my picture on my Facebook page to fight against the taboo of hiding women’s faces. I believed that when I use social media I need to prove my existence with my own identity and to show this conservative society that I am equal to men. Sharing a photo on a profile is a very normal thing in a broad-minded society”.

However, Mahdis recently closed down her Facebook page following threats. Now she only uses Instagram with a fake photo, to minimise the hostility she was experiencing. Instagram is considered ‘safer’ as it is not yet widely used in Afghan society.

### **5.2 Threatened and attacked**

Of the 10 women in the study who reveal their identity (real names and photographs) on social media, all reported some level of violence and recrimination, both online and also in public, because of their social media use.

Mina Rezai, a 28-year-old civil activist from Kabul, described the harassment she has experienced. She still reveals her identity on social media, despite these threats. In an interview with the author she said: “because I am breaking taboos by putting my picture on my Facebook page, I receive many bad messages. They (men) ask me to become their girlfriend and when I don’t agree sometimes they send me pornographic pictures. Some of them were threatening me to stop posting pictures. If I don’t stop or listen to them they told me they will hack my account and reveal that I am a prostitute. But still I continue. I will not stop the way I live.”

Mina said she had made many friends through Facebook and also met her boyfriend, who is based abroad. She said they shared a good relationship and he has visited Kabul to meet her.

There are many difficulties in society and social media for women, like Mina, who are active and use their own name and real identity. For this reason, respondents said they are very careful about who they choose to ‘friend’ on Facebook, about who to add and whom to avoid.

Mina has also been subject to cyber-bullying. Her pictures have been copied from her Facebook account and used to make fake identity cards, or passed around as a picture of a prostitute.

Mina said other women on social media also face these threats and some women have succumbed to the pressure. They have withdrawn from socialising online, closing their accounts.

### **5.3 Real name, but no photograph**

One in five (20%) of 100 female Facebook users who participated in the study said they used their real names, but not real pictures, on social media.

Shabana Sidiqian is a teacher of commerce in the private Ghaleb University, she said her husband’s family, as well as her own family, don’t like her picture to be made public. “To avoid problems and tension at home I avoid putting my own pictures. I use my beautiful baby daughter’s photograph instead of mine.”

Shahira Shahir, a dean at Ghaleb university, said she chose not to use her own photograph on social media to protect her family: “my father is a known person in

society. If I use my real picture society will judge him in a bad way. On the other hand, if I don't respect my family's will they can limit my freedom on social media. Why I should fight against something I can't win?"

Another respondent, Khatera Baq, is a programme manager with the NGO Hager, based in Kabul. She said Afghan society is not ready to deal with the modern face of women. "My husband is a good man and he believes in equal rights for women, but he cannot fight the traditional society. If someone see his wife's picture in social media it would be very disturbing for him. To avoid this kind of chaos in my life I use my child's picture in my social media."

Kabul-based lawyer and human rights activist, Golsum Sidiquie, said that her marriage has limited her freedom. "Now my husband's pride and his family's wish is my responsibility. I used to have my own photos on my Facebook account but my husband received abuse from his friends and family. He was asked why his wife shares her pictures on Facebook. It created a lot of tension between me and my husband. I know if we were not living in Afghanistan my husband's behaviour would have been much better."

#### **5.4 Anonymous**

Nearly three quarters (70%) of female respondents choose to remain totally anonymous by using a fake name and fake picture.

Most (80%) of the 70% who remain anonymous said they choose not to reveal their identity on social media because of the risk of recrimination. One woman, Laila, 28, will not show her face. Instead she posts a picture of nature, or a similar scene. She said her family - especially her brothers - will not allow her to use her real name or photograph. She has male and female friends on her Facebook page and she said they mostly share cultural information and news with each other.

She does not use social media to discuss issues such as the breaking of cultural taboos, for her own safety. She says she will only share her own photo and her own identity when she "runs away" to a safe and democratic place, "like Europe or USA".

Laila said she does not have a boyfriend through Facebook because society will not accept this. She also believes that if her family discovered that she had a boyfriend they could kill her very easily.

However, she said social media has very strong impact on her life and that she believes it is empowering Afghan women, especially in Kabul. It allows women to communicate with each other and to fight social taboos, she said.

### 5.5 Challenging taboos - a minority

Only 10% of women interviewed for this study said they used Facebook or any other social media to challenge the country's social taboos (see Figure 4). The rest either were silent or just avoided any type of conflict with the male dominated society.

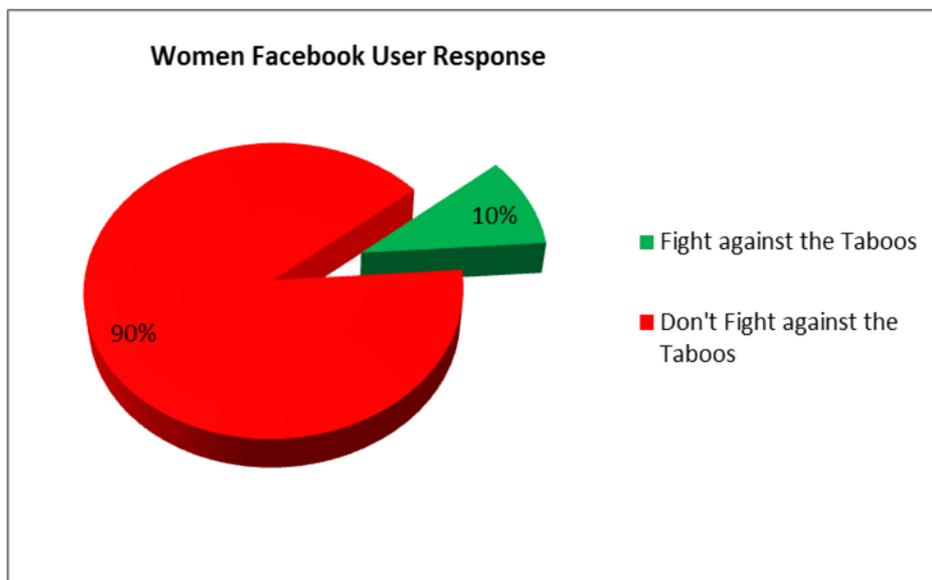


Figure 4

One respondent said she chose to use social media to challenge social taboos because: "I feel safe on social media as I am sitting at home on my own computer and nobody can hurt me or stop me."

Bahaar Sohail lost her job as an air stewardess at Safi Airways after using social media to fight taboos. "They simply fired me because of my women's right activities on my Facebook page," Bahaar said.

Sohail believes many of Afghanistan's social problems are due to religious fundamentalism. "Our society is not only suffering from lack of education and from cultural issues, religious fundamentalism is one of the biggest issue in our society.

The male dominated society relates everything to religion and with the help of religion they are able to avoid women's freedom in everything, such as freedom of education, marriage, work, appearance and social activities", Sohaili said.

Sohail showed me some of the many threatening messages she has received from different accounts. She believes her fight and other women's right activist's fight will help draw international attention to the plight of Afghan women.

In 2015, Sohail became the first woman in Afghan social media who openly talked about menstruation as a normal physical condition for women, rather than something to be ashamed of. In Afghan society, mostly conservative people consider menstruation to be shameful and dirty. Women are not allowed to pray, touch the Quran or go inside Mosques or temples whilst menstruating. "It is important to raise awareness about the natural process of our bodies. It is something people need to know," Sohaili said.

Lale Osmani is another women activist. She lives in Herat, the most conservative city for women, where women are still expected to wear a burqa in public. In early 2017, Osmani started a campaign, #Whereismyname, aimed at challenging the taboo that makes it shameful to use a woman's own real name<sup>45</sup>. "A woman is called someone's daughter, wife or mother. A mother's name is not written on a birth certificate, the bride's name is not written on a marriage certificate. Instead the bride is called by her father's name," Osmani said.

"I wanted to raise this question. What is wrong with a woman's name?" Osmani said the only way to get more attention for her campaign was through Facebook and other social media pages. "Through social media my campaign became very large, even outside Afghanistan. This the slow revolution which is happening to our society through social media. Hundreds of men and women joined this campaign and we want to put pressure on the government and parliament to amend the law in favour of women's rights," Osmani said.

Another woman using social media to fight taboos is Parwin Pooran. Pooran was formerly a policy manager at a private women's right organisation. She used to write

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<sup>45</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/afghanistan-women-social-media-campaign-names-sexism-first-names-birth-surname-a7864861.html>

on Facebook about the discrimination against women in the work place, even within women's rights organisations such as her own. "My boss - who received funding from the International community to help women in Afghanistan - fired me. He never wanted me to share publicly my experience about discrimination in the work place and society. But it did not break my spirit. I took this issue to the social media and I keep raising my voice," Pooran said.

### **5.6 Social media is enabling change - post by post**

All of the women interviewed for the study agreed that change is happening, but slowly. It is too early to measure the impact of social media, except anecdotally.

For example, Diana Saqib, women's right activist and filmmaker recalled:

"I mostly make films related to women's stories. I remember six years ago only a very small circle of women were using social media and they were only using only Facebook. Nearly all of them without their real picture or name. Now I can see, especially among my own friends, many more women who are actively writing about most things on their social media pages, although the numbers are not yet comparable to our neighbours, for instance, Iran. but it is increasing slowly."

Kobra Rezai, now a spokesperson for Afghanistan's Ministry for Women, was completing her masters' degree at a university in India when she was interviewed for this paper.

She said social media is an important way to empower women in the male-dominated society. "We can now open an argument on different issues and let people know about our expertise and opinion," she said. "But we have to be careful as there is no protection and social media is still very new in our society. Many girls have been abused - and this could eventually destroy our confidence on these platforms," Rezai said.

### **5.7 Witnessing the murder of Farkhunda on the streets of Kabul, then taking action**

One recent example of how social media has impacted Afghan society was after the killing of Farkhunda.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/features/how-social-media-is-empowering-young-afghan-women-the-facebook-effect-10375022.html>

I was one of the witnesses, I arrived on the scene of her murder just after the event. It was my day off and I was travelling in a taxi through Kabul.

I saw a crowd of people shouting, there were police everywhere. At first I thought it was a suicide attack, but I saw something rolling in the street. It was Farkhunda. I stepped out of the car and ran towards her but I was stopped by police and asked to leave the place.

One policeman said Farkhunda had burned the Quran and people were making her pay the price. I talked to him and asked him to help her, that this was his duty but no one listened to me.

At that point Farkhunda was half alive, unconscious. People were pouncing on her as if there is a competition to beat her, everyone was trying to assault her. Her body was rolling and being thrown in all directions. The crowd was angry and rioting. As though they were proud to be killing her for her 'blasphemy'.

I cried and tried to reach her, but my friends and policemen stopped me and kept me away, until I became unconscious.

I was taken away from the scene and did not see the moment the crowd set her body alight.

I went directly to the BBC office, where I was working at the time, and wrote the news of her killing and sent it to London. From the moment I sent the news copy to the BBC, I started writing on social media about the brutality I had witnessed. I raised questions about whether even if she had burned the holy Quran, was it the right way to respond? To kill a woman with such barbarity?

We organised a demonstration to call for justice for Farkhunda, through Facebook. More than five thousand people joined the march in front of Kabul's High Court. The following day Afghanistan's government announced that she was innocent. I turned to social media to ask my friends to join me at her funeral and not let any man touch her coffin. The next day when I reached Farkhunda's house at eight o'clock in the morning I saw many women there, most of them were there because of our social media campaign for her.

We carried the coffin and we buried her, despite criticism by Muslim scholars that women are not "allowed" to conduct burials.

When I interviewed Sahrah Karimi, a female film maker in Kabul, for this study, she referred to the killing of Farkhunda. “When Farkhunda was killed, I wrote on my social media pages about protest. I called women to come with me in the street to call for justice for Farkhunda and all Afghan women. I found dozens of women around me when I reached to the place we wanted to start the protest. Not only women but men also,” Karimi recalled.

That was the greatest taboo that we broke. Social media had proved to be the strongest method of communication between me and other women, to plan the funeral and further protests and eventually to break one of Afghanistan’s oldest taboos against women.

I reported the story of the march for the BBC as well as of her funeral.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33810338>

## **6. What do Afghan men think of women using social media?**

20 men were interviewed as part of the research for this paper, including Daud Rawish, professor at Kabul University (Sociology Department). Rawish said that although women were starting to use social media for purposes such as asserting their rights, the activity is limited to a minority of educated women in urban areas of the country and, as this research shows, many of these women are still too frightened to reveal their identities on social networks.

Rawish, who is one of minority of Afghan men who believe in education of women, added that Afghan men generally regard women who are active on social media as being of bad character, although he acknowledged that some educated men are slowly accepting the change.

In a male dominated society, Rawish said, women are not free to use social media to express themselves. Many who try to do so will be targeted by men who will threaten to attack or kill them. "Afghan society is very traditional and conservative and the only way the extremists know how to stop a voice of women or kill the voice is to attack her in social media. [When they do this] she will be immediately made silent by her family or social pressures." Rawish said this reaction, and the threat of violence against women who assert their rights, is what has made many women aggressive and angry on social media.

"But I see a bright future for social media activities in Afghanistan for men and women and with this they will be connected to the world and different cultures and it will increase the tolerance between men and women and it can educate them too."

Of the 20 men interviewed for this paper, nearly all (75%) said they did not agree that women should have total freedom on social media (Figure 5), for example, to share personal information, reveal their personal lives, or discuss their views. Only 30% of interviewees (who were mostly educated, professional men based either in Afghanistan or abroad) said they would allow female family members to reveal their identities on social media.

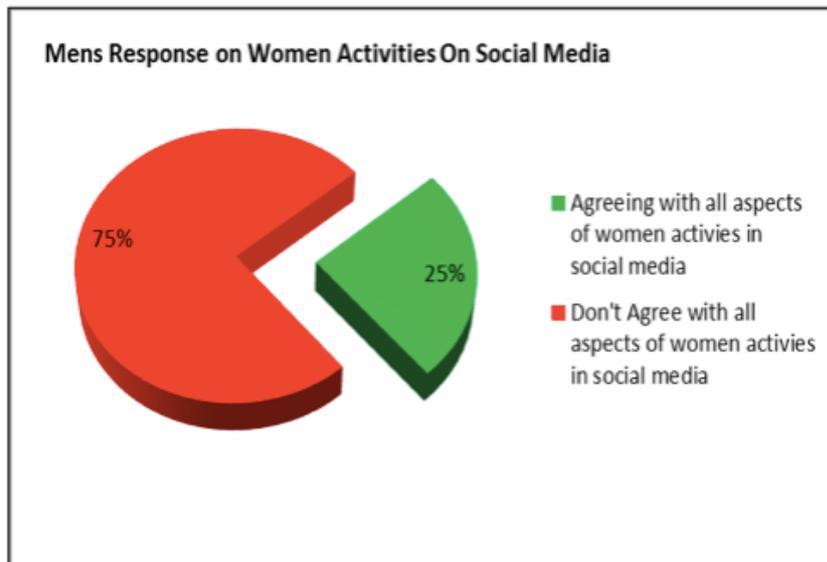


Figure 5

One interviewee, Mujibe Mehrdad, a poet and social activist said: “I think negative opinions regarding women are rooted in our culture. A traditional society reacts against women’s open-minded appearance in public, they think women’s social participation is an act against their moral values, and sometimes it is based on being unable to have access to women.”

Mehrdad, who himself started using social media since 2010 because he wanted to participate in a globalised world, said many of the problems between men and women in Afghanistan were based on misunderstandings. Men often do not understand women, he said, arguing that social media could break down cultural barriers and misinformation between the sexes in Afghanistan. He said if Afghan men learnt more about women they might find that women are “much better than men on many fronts”.

Another interviewee Haseeb Motaref, a doctor and social media activist, agreed that Afghan women should have the same rights to use social media as men. Motaref has been using social media since 2007 when he started university. “I have used Facebook just for fun and sharing images and Twitter for news bulletin.”

Like Mehrdad, Motaref believes that the behaviour of Afghan men towards women is due to patriarchal attitudes deeply-rooted in community culture as well as war, violence and sexual poverty.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper posed the question: *Are Afghan women using social media to help break social taboos?*

To address this question, the research examined whether women are using online forums to express themselves more freely - either anonymously or openly.

It questioned whether the use of social media was enabling Afghan women to gain a sense of identity previously denied to them by the conservative patriarchal society. It also asked whether social media was enabling women to form wider social networks, both formal and informal, away from their traditional family structures.

All of the women interviewed, living in urban areas, use social media and internet forums, at least occasionally and these women still form a minority of the Afghan female population, although the exact figures are still unknown.

While many said social media allowed them to express their views more freely, the study found few believe they can do so openly. Most (70%) of interviewees said they choose to remain totally anonymous online. These women expressed a fear that if they reveal their identities they could be harmed or harassed, either by strangers, or even by family members.

These views are well-founded. The study found that all of the women who reveal their identities online have been harassed or threatened.

However, whether they chose to hide their identities or not, almost all of the women interviewed said that social media had allowed them to build networks of like-minded women and to discuss subjects more publicly than they had been able to before they had access to the internet.

Many mentioned they were able to raise issues with wider audiences and some said they hoped to use social media to raise awareness of the problems facing Afghan women in the international arena. Some provided anecdotes about how they believed social media had helped raise public awareness within the country, by encouraging people (men and women) to campaign, such as in the case of Farkhunda.

A minority (one in ten) said they deliberately used social media to challenge social taboos, and many of those were already activists off-line, working in the media or for NGOs.

In conclusion the paper suggests that social media is starting to play a positive role in raising awareness of women's issues, in enabling women to communicate more freely with each other and to participate in broader society. However, the study found that change is very slow and that many women are still afraid to use social media openly.

Their fear is well-founded as women who do use it openly are often abused. There is also significant evidence that there is little legal protection for Afghan women as laws designed to protect the rights and safety of women are not enforced.

But despite these adverse issues the efficacy of social media and its impact may be gauged by the case of Farkhunda. It demonstrated the strength and effectiveness of social media. Women gathered, protested and took action to bar men from participating in Farkhunda's burial. All of these events occurred because of the power of social media. It has provided women with a potent weapon, to allow the exchange of ideas, and we all are aware, ideas alone can fuel revolutions.

At the moment the internet - and hence access to social media - is only possible for a minority of Afghan women, usually educated and living in urban areas. Although social media has only reached a minority of women, the number is growing

## **Recommendations**

The findings should be widely disseminated to civil society organisations, women's rights groups and the media in the hope that it can help to bring about change both within Afghanistan and also in external attitudes towards the country.

I hope it can provide enough evidence to enable the media, including my own former employer, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), to take up, and highlight, women's issues.

## 8. Picture credits

Figure 1: Women using the internet in Herat, Afghanistan December 2009

Source: U.S Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan Author: Daniel Wilkinson (U.S. Department of State)

Permission: This image is a work of a United States Department of State employee, taken or made as part of that person's official duties. As a work of the U.S. Federal Government, the image is in the public domain per 17 U.S.C. § 101 and § 105 and the Department Copyright Information.

Figure 2: Western dress was common in the streets of Kabul in the late 1970s, and women moved freely in public.

Originally published in a photobook about Afghanistan produced by the country's planning ministry; republished in "Once Upon a Time in Afghanistan... Record stores, Mad Men furniture, and pencil skirts -- when Kabul had rock 'n' roll, not rockets" by Mohammad Qayoumi, Foreign Policy, 27 May 2010.

Original caption: "Kabul is served by an up-to-date transportation system."

Figure 3: 20 years later, under the Taliban women had to be covered and were beaten if caught on the street uncovered.

This photo is caught from video that was recorded by RAWA in Kabul using a hidden camera. It shows two Taliban from department of Amr bil Ma-roof (Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, Taliban religious police) beating a woman in public because she has dared to remove her burqa in public.

Taken on: 26 August 2001

Source:<http://rawa.org/beating.htm> (Archived at the Wayback Machine)