



CONSCIENTIZATION AND RESISTANCE: AFGHAN WOMEN'S STRUGGLE FOR AGENCY UNDER TALIBAN HEGEMONY (1996–2025)

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Abstract

This article reconstructs the social history of Afghan women (1996–2025) as a non-deterministic process of consciousness transformation amid ideological repression and successive regime change. Countering global narratives that reduce Afghan women to passive victims of religious patriarchy, the study addresses a critical gap: the absence of a systematic, historically grounded model linking private spiritual motivation to public political resistance across generations. Employing a qualitative-historical, narrative-feminist, and hermeneutic approach, it analyzes corpus of documents including oral testimonies, institutional human rights reports, and international media archives subjected to rigorous external and internal source criticism, and interpreted through collective memory (Halbwachs), critical pedagogy (Freire), and social movement (Khan and Sharp). Findings show that systemic repression does not mechanically extinguish female agency; rather, under specific socio-spiritual conditions, it can serve as a trigger activating three chronological phases: survival consciousness (1996–2001), sustained through clandestine home-based schools framed as religious obligation; reflective consciousness (2001–2021), articulated through formal education and civic organization; and critical consciousness or *conscientização* (2021–2025), mobilized through encrypted digital networks and transnational diaspora solidarity against renewed educational bans. The study's novelty lies in specifying concrete mediating mechanisms, clandestine education, intergenerational memory transmission, grassroots social organization, and transnational digital networks through which collective trauma is progressively transformed into emancipatory social and spiritual agency.

Keywords: decolonial feminism; collective memory; critical consciousness (*conscientização*); feminist historiography; afghan women's agency

Abstrak

Artikel ini merekonstruksi sejarah sosial perempuan Afghanistan (1996–2025) sebagai proses transformasi kesadaran yang non-deterministik di tengah represi ideologis dan pergantian rezim yang berturut-turut. Berbeda dari narasi global yang mereduksi perempuan Afghanistan semata sebagai korban pasif patriarki religius, studi ini menjawab kesenjangan penting: ketiadaan model historis yang sistematis dan berbasis data yang menghubungkan motivasi spiritual privat dengan resistensi politik publik lintas generasi. Dengan pendekatan historis-kualitatif, naratif-feminis, dan hermenutis, penelitian ini menganalisis korpus dokumen; kesaksian lisan, laporan lembaga hak asasi manusia, dan arsip media internasional yang diuji melalui kritik sumber eksternal dan internal secara ketat, serta diinterpretasi melalui teori memori kolektif (Halbwachs), pedagogi kritis (Freire), dan gerakan sosial (Khan dan Sharp). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa represi sistemik tidak secara mekanis memadamkan agensi perempuan; sebaliknya, di bawah kondisi sosio-spiritual tertentu, represi dapat berfungsi sebagai pemicu yang mengaktifkan tiga fase kronologis: kesadaran bertahan hidup (1996–2001), yang ditopang oleh sekolah rahasia berbasis rumah yang dibingkai sebagai kewajiban agama; kesadaran reflektif (2001–2021), yang diartikulasikan melalui pendidikan formal dan organisasi sipil; serta kesadaran kritis atau *conscientização* (2021–2025), yang dimobilisasi melalui jaringan digital terenkripsi dan solidaritas diaspora transnasional untuk melawan pelarangan pendidikan yang kembali diberlakukan. Kebaruan (*novelty*) studi ini terletak pada penjabaran mekanisme mediasi yang konkret antara pendidikan klandestin, transmisi memori antargenerasi, organisasi sosial akar rumput, dan jaringan digital transnasional yang melaluinya trauma kolektif secara bertahap ditransformasikan menjadi agensi sosial dan spiritual yang emansipatoris.

Kata Kunci: feminisme dekolonial; memori kolektif; kesadaran kritis (*conscientização*); historiografi feminis; agensi perempuan Afghanistan

Background

Since the Taliban's rise to power in 1996, global discourse has tended to portray Afghan women through an imagery of suffering: women forced to leave school, deprived of the right to

work, and confined to conditions of social isolation. International media reports, such as those from BBC News and The Guardian, alongside early works in international feminist



scholarship,¹ have predominantly constructed Afghan women as symbols of Islamic oppression. While these narratives are important for exposing structural violence, they carry a significant limitation: they fail to capture the historical processes through which Afghan women have developed their consciousness and political identities amid conditions of repression.

The Taliban is implementing a rigid and literal interpretation of Islam, prohibited women's education and severely restricted their participation in public life.² However, field reports from organizations such as Human Rights Watch³ and testimonies from Afghan women activists documented in *Faces of Resilience: Portraits of Afghan Women Human Rights Defenders*⁴ reveal that many women, including teachers and activists, continued to organize clandestine educational activities within private homes. These activities were not merely forms of practical resistance, but also spiritual acts affirming women's right to seek knowledge as a religious obligation.

Following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghan women entered a new phase in their social history. With the reopening of schools and public institutions to women, they began to articulate new forms of consciousness through education and civic activism. The period 2001–2021 thus represents a crucial era of social and ideological reconstruction. In this phase, experiences of past repression were transformed into an ideological foundation for the women's

education movement. The emergence of figures such as Jamila Afghani and networks like Afghan Women's Network demonstrates that women increasingly reinterpreted Islamic values in progressive ways to advocate for social and educational rights.⁵ In line with the perspective of Chandra Talpade Mohanty,⁶ this movement can be understood as a form of decolonial feminism, one that rejects the universalism of Western feminism and affirms that the consciousness of women in the Global South is shaped by specific social, cultural, and spiritual contexts.

This historical context demonstrates that the consciousness of Afghan women has evolved in a gradual and layered manner. It begins with a form of spiritual consciousness grounded in survival under repression, develops into a reflective consciousness articulated through education and activism, and ultimately reaches a stage of critical consciousness that is collective and political in nature. This final stage becomes particularly evident following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Unlike the situation in 1996, women are no longer passive; they actively utilize digital networks, social media, and online platforms to continue their education and organize global solidarity.⁷ This form of consciousness not only resists oppression but also redefines the meanings of faith and freedom within a contextualized Islamic framework.

Within this context, this study seeks to position the history of Afghan women (1996–2025) as a history of the transformation of critical consciousness. This three-decade trajectory demonstrates that women's consciousness does not emerge solely from external intervention or global feminist influence, but rather develops through internal reflection on their own experiences of suffering and spirituality. The perspective is essential for shifting prevailing

¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783–90, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.783>; Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion* (London, New York: Zed Books, 2007).

² Stephen J McKinney and Jennifer Farrar, "Education and Human Rights in Afghanistan," *Open House Journal*, 2025; Susanne Schmeidl, Katja Mielke, and Conrad Schetter, "Bicc Policy Brief in Afghanistan: Where to Next?," *BICC – Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies* (Bonn, 2021), <https://doi.org/doi:https://doi.org/10.60638/yvc1-3p21>; Valentine M. Moghadam, "Patriarchy, the Taleban, and Politics of Public Space in Afghanistan," *Women's Studies International Forum* 25, no. 1 (2002): 19–31, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395\(02\)00224-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(02)00224-8).

³ "Afghanistan: Human Rights Developments," 1999.

⁴ MADRE, *Faces of Resilience: Portraits of Afghan Women Human Rights Defenders* (New York: Madre, 2023).

⁵ Basira Mujadidi & Faiza Mujadidi, "Reclaiming Sacred Knowledge: A Fghan Women's Agency and Islamic Education in Post-2021 Afghanistan," *At Tarbawi* 10, no. 2 (2025): 132–45.

⁶ "Feminism without Borders," *Feminism without Borders*, 2003, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smp7t>.

⁷ BBC, "In Their Own Words: Spend a Day with Afghan Women Living under Taliban Rule," 2025; Al Jazeera, *Afghanistan's Women: Life under Taliban Restrictions*, 2023.



academic frameworks that continue to position Afghan women as passive victims of conservative regimes, toward recognizing them as active subjects in the historical formation of consciousness.

The transformation of Afghan women from a subordinate position within patriarchal social structures into active agents in the struggle for their civil and political rights. As noted by Parwana Ibrahim khail,⁸ Afghan women are not victims of fate; they are survivors of tyranny. Their struggle is not merely their own, but a collective struggle of humanity to attain dignity, freedom, and equality. Alia Chebbab⁹ likewise argues that the steadfastness of Afghan women reflects a form of resilience forged through repression. On a global scale, their resistance has become a symbol of collective endurance against violations of women's rights and an inspiration for women's movements worldwide.¹⁰ These narratives demonstrate that the history of Afghan women is not solely a story of oppression, but also a narrative shaped by an enduring agenda of resistance.

The social history of Afghan women over the past nearly three decades reflects a complex trajectory of resilience, spiritual reflection, and agentic resistance. Standard global narratives, frequently operating under a liberal-savior paradigm, tend to depict Afghan women through a simplified imagery of passive victimization, forced to leave school, deprived of basic rights, and confined to social isolation under conservative religious regimes. While these reports are critical for exposing structural violence, they carry major analytical limits. They overlook the internal historical processes through which Afghan women have constructed their consciousness, negotiated faith, and maintained active agency under extreme repression. Indeed, a critical historical-qualitative inquiry reveals that

repression does not always lead to a total extinguishing of agency. Rather, under specific socio-spiritual conditions, repression can serve as a critical trigger that catalyzes collective solidarity and critical consciousness.

Repression is not a guaranteed catalyst for resistance; it simultaneously inflicts devastating social costs, including deep fear, alienation, physical and mental exhaustion, social fragmentation, and enforced silencing. Thus, the analytical task is to identify the specific 'mediating mechanisms' and 'analytical dimensions' that allow women to survive and transform their material trauma into emancipatory agency. The primary research gap in current literature lies in the lack of a systematic, non-deterministic, and historically grounded model that traces the intergenerational evolution of Afghan women's consciousness from 1996 to 2025, particularly one that links private spiritual motivations to public political resistance.

This study formulates the following testable qualitative-historical proposition: While systemic repression under Taliban hegemony inflicts severe social fragmentation, fear, and silencing, it does not completely eliminate female agency; rather, under the conditions of shared collective memory and progressive Islamic spiritual reinterpretation, repression operates as a trigger that activates informal domestic networks, which in turn mediates the transformation of Afghan women's consciousness from survival to critical resistance across three decades (1996–2025).

By integrating the theoretical frameworks of collective memory as developed by Maurice Halbwachs,¹¹ decolonial feminism as articulated by Chandra Talpade Mohanty,¹² and critical pedagogy as proposed by Paulo Freire,¹³ this article seeks to reinterpret the history of Afghanistan as a dialectical process between repression, reflection, and the transformation of consciousness. Through this lens, the struggle of

⁸ "Afghanistan's Women: The Struggle for Identity and Survival," Nobel womens Initiative, 2025.

⁹ "Breaking the Silence: Women's Resistance in Afghanistan," Nadja, 2024.

¹⁰ UNWomen, "Afghanistan's Women Are Still Fighting: Inside the Fight for Rights under Taliban," unwomen.org, 2025.

¹¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), <https://doi.org/10.52200/53.a.c4gwdaq3>.

¹² Mohanty, "Fem. without Borders."

¹³ *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

Afghan women is not merely about rights that have been denied, but about their efforts to construct a new language of freedom rooted in faith, memory, and education elements that constitute the foundational basis for the future of women's movements in Afghanistan.

Studies on Afghan women have often been confined within a dichotomy between repression and liberation. Global literature, particularly that rooted in liberal feminism, tends to focus on patriarchal structures and state power while overlooking the processes of consciousness that emerge from women's own spiritual and social experiences.¹⁴ To overcome this reductionism, this study integrates three theoretical traditions: collective memory, critical pedagogy and social movement, as developed respectively by Maurice Halbwachs, Paulo Freire, Khan and Sharp. These frameworks are employed to interpret the trajectory of Afghan women from repression to critical consciousness as a process of historical transformation.

In on Collective Memory, Maurice Halbwachs¹⁵ argues that memory is not individual but social in nature. The shared memories of a group shape their frameworks of thought, values, and collective actions. In the Afghan context, women's collective memory has been formed through shared experiences of structural violence, the prohibition of education, and social exclusion during the first Taliban regime (1996–2001). However, this memory does not remain as trauma alone; it evolves into a source of identity.

Furthermore, Paulo Freire,¹⁶ in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, emphasizes that critical consciousness (*conscientização*) does not emerge spontaneously but is cultivated through reflective engagement with oppression. Education becomes the primary arena in which individuals come to understand structures of power and seek to transform them. In the context of Afghan women, underground education during the

Taliban era represents a concrete manifestation of critical pedagogy. It is not merely an act of learning, but a dialogical practice in which teachers and students collectively interpret their social reality. According to Freire, the consciousness that emerges from such learning experiences develops through three stages: first, magical consciousness (magical perception), in which women accept repression as a social destiny; second, reflective consciousness, in which they begin to question structures of injustice; and third, critical consciousness, in which they act to transform social conditions through knowledge and solidarity.

To address the lack of operational definition for key analytical concepts, established clear operational parameters and textual indicators used to assign testimonies to each category. This prevents arbitrary categorization and ensures analytical rigor.

The development of Afghan women's agency is operationalized across four interconnected dimensions of consciousness, beginning with survival consciousness. This dimension is defined as a form of awareness focused on preserving individual and group dignity, identity, and values under conditions of extreme physical restriction, without overt political confrontation. Textually, survival consciousness is identified in subject testimonies through specific linguistic markers and keywords such as 'survive', 'preserve', or 'keep learning in secret'. The narrative posture reflects an active quiet defiance, focusing on maintaining everyday social practices in closed domestic spaces as a silent, defensive assertion.

This survival consciousness deepens and transforms into spiritual consciousness, defined as an inner awareness that frames actions of survival and knowledge-seeking as direct theological obligations (*fard*) that transcend and mendelegitimize the regime's political authority. The primary linguistic indicators of this consciousness include the articulation of religious terms such as 'religious duty', 'fard', 'God's command', 'sacred obligation'. The narrative posture exhibits a profound moral certainty,

¹⁴ Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others"; Mohanty, "Fem. without Borders."

¹⁵ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.

¹⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

wherein women reclaim their epistemic authority over sacred texts, reject the patriarchal monopoly on religious interpretation, and position progressive Islamic theology as a moral shield and a safe language to negotiate their existence.

As social spaces opened following the fall of the first Taliban regime, this awareness evolved into reflective consciousness. This phase is operationally defined as an awareness that begins to systematically evaluate, question, and challenge localized patriarchal and social structures, seeking social reconstruction through formal civic pathways. Its textual indicators are characterized by emancipatory vocabulary such as 'reconstruct', 'advocate', 'reform', and 'our right'. The narrative posture in this phase reflects structured chemical and social mobilization, the establishment of formal institutions, and the progressive reinterpretation of religious values to demand gender equality in public spheres.

At its peak, this intergenerational reflection culminated in critical consciousness (conscientização). Critical consciousness is defined as an advanced, highly politicized, and transnationally connected collective awareness that acts deliberately to dismantle structures of gender apartheid using digital domains. Its textual indicators are marked by sharp conceptual terminology such as 'gender apartheid', 'systemic oppression', and 'transnational resistance'. The narrative posture is no longer localized or defensive, but manifests as global digital activism, organizing diaspora-based networks and cross-border solidarity to demand epistemic justice and absolute liberation.¹⁷

Within the sphere of social movements, Khan and Sharp¹⁸ demonstrate that women's

movements in Muslim-majority contexts such as Afghanistan have played a central role in advocating democratization and confronting the politicization of religion that restricts women's participation. Furthermore, Aslam, Yousaf, and Raza¹⁹ highlight that through public actions such as the Women's March and transnational social organizations, women have succeeded in redefining gender norms and expanding the discourse of progressive Islamic feminism. Mateko²⁰ adds that Afghan women's engagement in development initiatives and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflects the emergence of a form of social consciousness oriented toward structural transformation. Meanwhile, Halima-Khalil²¹, in her dissertation, finds that younger generations of Afghan women have developed new identities shaped by hope, education, and social resilience, making critical reflection an integral part of how they navigate trauma and post-war social change. Thus, this phase demonstrates how education and social organization became the foundation for the emergence of reflective consciousness, which would later evolve into collective critical consciousness.

By synthesizing these three theoretical traditions, the analytical framework of this study conceptualizes the history of Afghan women as a spiral process of consciousness, continuously moving from trauma toward transformation. This trajectory demonstrates that critical consciousness is not a sudden phenomenon, but the cumulative result of memory and reflection developed over nearly three decades. Accordingly, the transformation of Afghan women reflects a journey from survival consciousness to critical

¹⁷ MADRE, *Faces of Resilience: Portraits of Afghan Women Human Rights Defenders*; Fardin Ayar, "How Afghan Women Amplify Their Voices through Digital Activism: A Study of Global Engagement and Local Cultural Resistance," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 2025, 1–24., <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2025.2557546>; Hoda Azizi, "Fleeing Gender Apartheid: A Feminist Analysis of Forced Migration Among Diverse Women in Afghanistan Under the Taliban Regime Since 2021" (University of Oxford, 2025).

¹⁸ "How Women's Movements Lead Demands for Democracy in the Face of Backlash and Politicised Religion" (London, 2025).

¹⁹ "Reconfiguring Patriarchal Paradigms: The Women March and Its Role in Reshaping Gender Norms and Feminist Activism," *Asian Women* 41, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2025.6.41.2.227>

²⁰ "Breaking Barriers: Afghan Women's Struggle and Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals," in *Gendering Macroeconomics: 23-25 October 2025, Berlin* (Berlin: University of Johannesburg, 2025).

²¹ "Afghan Youth: A Study of Identity, Hope, and Resilience" (The Fletcher School, 2025).



consciousness, and from personal faith to social solidarity.

This study employs a qualitative-historical approach²² with a narrative-feminist perspective to trace the transformation of Afghan women's consciousness from 1996 to 2025. The historical approach is selected because the research focuses on changes in the structure of social consciousness, while the narrative method interprets women's experiences as epistemic evidence forms of knowledge that represent how women understand and interpret their own history, as emphasized by Joan Wallach Scott.²³ Accordingly, this study does not merely describe events but seeks to uncover how Afghan women construct consciousness through spiritual reflection and social action. In this sense, women's experiences and narratives constitute a higher form of historiography: history that lives within consciousness, rather than merely within archives.

To ensure transparency, replicability, and historical rigor, this study details its qualitative-historical, narrative-feminist, and hermeneutic design. Rather than treating archival documents as passive records, treat them as active site of struggle that reflect subjective agency. The documentary corpus for this study was systematically compiled through digital database searches and archival selection, totaling 69 documents. The breakdown of the corpus is as follows:

Subjective Oral Testimonies (17 documents): Consisting of 12 detailed testimonies of Afghan women human rights defenders compiled in MADRE's 'Faces of Resilience' (2023), and 5 personal narratives published in the BBC's 'In Their Own Words' project (2025). Institutional and Human Rights Reports (12 documents): Including key reports from Human Rights Watch

(1999, 2001, 2004, 2023), Amnesty International (1999), Physicians for Human Rights (1998), UN Women (2019, 2025), UNAMA & OHCHR (2013, 2020), UNESCO (2004, 2023), and UNICEF (2002). Media Archives (18 documents): Compiling news transcripts, video reports, and investigative articles from international media outlets, including BBC News, Al Jazeera (2023), CNN (2024), and Reuters (2003) documenting grassroots female initiatives.

Historical Source Criticism, applied rigorous historical source criticism. External criticism verified the authenticity, authorship, and publishing context of each report. Internal criticism evaluated the credibility and potential ideological biases of the sources. For instance, reports from international human rights organizations and Western media were critically analyzed to identify and adjust for the 'liberal-savior' bias, which tends to render local religious agencies invisible. Competing narratives such as official Taliban decrees asserting women's protection under Sharia versus the empirical realities of public beatings and closures documented by local activists were evaluated by cross-referencing official edicts against physical field data and direct subjective testimonies.

Robust Hermeneutic Framework, rather than relying on limited local theological interpretations of history,²⁴ our data analysis is grounded in the established philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Paul Ricoeur. Dilthey's concept of 'lived experience' (Erlebnis) and historical understanding (Verstehen) guides our analysis of how individual suffering is structured into shared social meaning. Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons' (Horizontverschmelzung) was employed to interpret the dialogue between the researcher's modern academic context and the historical socio-spiritual context of the Afghan women. Ricoeur's 'hermeneutics of suspicion' was used to decode the subtextual resistance in documents

²² Helius Samsuddin, *Metodologi Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2014); Sartono Kartodirjo, *Pendekatan Ilmu Sosial Dalam Metodologi Sejarah* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1992); Dudung Abdurrahman, *Metode Penelitian Sejarah* (Ciputat: PT Logos Wacana Ilmu, 1999).

²³ "Gender: Still a Useful Category of Analysis?," *Diogenes*, no. 225 (2010): 7–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110369316>.

²⁴ Johan Septian Putra, "MEMAHAMI SEJARAH MELALUI AYAT-AYAT AL-QUR'AN," *Khazanah* 11, no. 1 (2021): 61–70, <https://doi.org/10.15548/khazanah.v1i1.470>.



that appear to show complete female subordination, while his 'hermeneutics of faith' allowed us to take the women's spiritual and religious claims seriously as authentic sources of agency and truth, rather than mere coping mechanisms.

Survival Consciousness in Enclosed Spaces under Taliban Regime (1996–2001)

Afghanistan entered a new period under the rule of the Taliban after following the collapse of the Mujahidin government in 1996.²⁵ In September of that year, the group seized Kabul and declared the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.²⁶ The Taliban government was grounded in a strict interpretation of Islamic law, with a political structure centered on the authority of religious scholars and clerical councils.²⁷ During the first five years of its rule (1996–2001), the Taliban implemented a range of social regulations that significantly restricted public participation, particularly for women.²⁸

Women were prohibited from working in the public sector, attending schools or universities, and were required to wear the burqa in public spaces. These regulations were enforced by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, a moral authority tasked with monitoring compliance with religious norms and supervising public behavior through street

patrols.²⁹ Violations of these rules were frequently met with physical punishment, including public beatings of women who failed to wear the burqa or who traveled without a mahram.³⁰ Women's access to healthcare was also severely restricted. Strict gender segregation meant that many hospitals were designated exclusively for male patients, while female medical professionals were barred from working in most healthcare facilities. As a result, women often lacked access to adequate medical services.³¹

Despite the severe restrictions on women's public activities, various field reports indicate that certain women's social networks remained active in concealed forms. In Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif, a number of women who had previously worked as teachers established home-based learning classes.³² These activities were often disguised as sewing workshops³³ or religious study circles.³⁴ Under such constrained conditions, private homes functioned as informal educational spaces operating discreetly.³⁵

The situation shifted at the end of 2001 when an international coalition led by the United States launched a military intervention following the events of September 11. The Taliban government collapsed, and in December 2001 the Afghan Interim Authority was established under the

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Systematic Violations of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," vol. 13, 2001.

³⁰ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2001 - Afghanistan," 2002.

³¹ United Nations, "Women's Access to Education, Health, Employment and Public Life Was Severely Curtailed," in *Commission on the Status of Women Forty-Fifth Session 6-16 March 2001*, vol. E/CN.6/200 (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2001), 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199560103.003.0007>.

³² Peter Popham, "Inside Kabul's Secret School for Girls," Independent.co.uk, 2021; Watch, "Afghanistan: Systematic Violations of Women's Rights in Afghanistan."

³³ Ron Synovitz, "Afghanistan: Author Awaits Happy Ending To 'Sewing Circles Of Herat,'" *Radio Free Europe*, 2004.

³⁴ Physicians for Human Rights, "The Taliban's War on Women. A Health and Human Rights Crisis in Afghanistan" (Boston, 1998); Watch, "Afghanistan: Systematic Violations of Women's Rights in Afghanistan"; Popham, "Inside Kabul's Secret School for Girls."

³⁵ Popham, "Inside Kabul's Secret School for Girls"; Watch, "Afghanistan: Systematic Violations of Women's Rights in Afghanistan."

²⁵ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (Yale University Press, 2000).

²⁶ Thomas J. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton University Press, 2010); Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

²⁷ Waheedullah Hamoon, Bohdan Krawchenko, and Tamara Krawchenko, "Governance and Public Administration Under the Taliban," *Asian Affairs* 56, no. 1 (2025): 87–111, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2024.2446960>.

²⁸ UNAMA & OHCHR, "In Search of Justice for Crimes of Violence Against Women and Girls," 2020; UNAMA, "Implementation of the Elimination of Violence against Women Law in Afghanistan Has a Long Way to Go," *UNAMA & OHCHR* (Kabul, 2013); Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Human Rights Developments"; Moghadam, "Patriarchy, the Taliban, and Politics of Public Space in Afghanistan"; Deniz Kandiyoti, "Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Islam and Women's Rights," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2007): 503–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590701192603>.



mandate of the United Nations.³⁶ This period was marked by the reopening of schools, universities, and government institutions to women. Data from UNICEF³⁷ that inform more Over three million Afghan girls and boys returned to school in March 2002 within two years after the fall of the Taliban.³⁸

The period 1996–2001 marks the initial phase in the formation of Afghan women's social consciousness under the ideological repression of the Taliban. During this time, women faced comprehensive restrictions on education, employment, and mobility. Strict regulations were imposed to control both private and public life, including prohibitions on traveling without a mahram and the mandatory wearing of the burqa in public spaces.³⁹ Within these confined conditions, a new form of consciousness emerged survival consciousness. This form of awareness did not arise from overt political activism, but from the everyday experiences of women striving to preserve the values of education, faith, and social solidarity.

Clandestine schools organized by women in Kabul, Herat, and Jalalabad functioned as alternative social spaces where learning, reading, and discussion were conducted in secrecy. In these spaces, education served a dual function: as a means of preserving social identity and as a silent assertion against state authority. From the perspective of collective memory theory as articulated by Maurice Halbwachs,⁴⁰ these activities within enclosed spaces constitute forms of cultural remembrance social practices that sustain the continuity of values amid historical rupture. In other words, the period of repression

became the foundation for the development of moral and spiritual consciousness, which would later serve as the ideological basis for women's movements in the post-2001 era.

New Social Consciousness of Afghan Women under Regime Power

The period 2001–2021 marked a phase of social opening and institutional restructuring following the collapse of the Taliban regime. The new government, established with international support, promoted increased participation of women in education, politics, and the economy⁴¹. By the mid-2000s, major universities such as Kabul University resumed admitting female students, signaling the restoration of women's access to higher education after nearly a decade of prohibition.⁴² UNESCO reports indicate a significant increase in the number of female teachers and students across Afghanistan between 2001 and 2018, reflecting the active role of international institutions in rebuilding the national education system.⁴³

Women also began to work in government institutions, non-governmental organizations, and media sectors, thereby expanding their presence in public spheres that had previously been closed during the Taliban era. Female representation in parliament increased gradually, with a quota of 25 percent of legislative seats allocated to women candidates as stipulated in the 2004 Constitution.⁴⁴ In addition, women activists and academics established various organizations, including Afghan Women's Network and Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), which became key

³⁶ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (Yale University Press, 2002); United Nations, "Women's Access to Education, Health, Employment and Public Life Was Severely Curtailed."

³⁷ "Back to School' for 1.5 Million Afghan Children," reliefweb.int, 2002. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/fs/16729.htm>

³⁸ UNICEF; United Nations, "Women's Access to Education, Health, Employment and Public Life Was Severely Curtailed."

³⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Human Rights Developments."

⁴⁰ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.

⁴¹ UN Women, "Report Of The Islamic Republic Of Afghanistan On The Application Of The Beijing Declaration And Platform For Action," no. September (2019); Friederike Böge and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Kabul, "Women and Politics in Afghanistan: How to Use the Chance of the 25 % Quota for Women?," 2004.

⁴² UNESCO, "Let Girls and Women in Afghanistan Learn!," 2004; Reuter, "Afghan Women Usher in IT Age," 2003.

⁴³ UNESCO, "Let Girls and Women in Afghanistan Learn!," 2023.

⁴⁴ Böge and Kabul, "Women and Politics in Afghanistan: How to Use the Chance of the 25 % Quota for Women?"; UNWomen, "Afghanistan's Women Are Still Fighting: Inside the Fight for Rights under Taliban."



platforms for advancing gender equality and advocating women's rights within the post-conflict socio-political context.⁴⁵

In 2004, a new Constitution of Afghanistan was adopted, containing explicit provisions on gender equality and women's rights to participate in political life.⁴⁶ In 2005, for the first time in modern Afghan history, women were elected as members of parliament through national elections.⁴⁷ This period marked the re-entry of women into public and governmental spheres after nearly a decade of social isolation under the previous regime.

However, in 2021, Afghanistan's political landscape shifted dramatically once again following the Taliban's return to power in Kabul. The new government, once again identifying itself as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, imposed restrictions on women's access to secondary and higher education. In 2022, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice was re-established and prohibited women from working in certain international organizations as well as parts of the private sector. Reports by Al Jazeera⁴⁸ documented the closure of more than one hundred girls' schools across several major provinces.

Nevertheless, recent reports indicate that women have continued their educational activities informally through online networks and self-organized study groups.⁴⁹ Digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Zoom are widely utilized for distance learning. Reports from BBC

News⁵⁰ note that women in Kabul, Herat, and Bamiyan have organized online classes with support from educational institutions abroad.⁵¹ The period 2021–2025 thus reveals the emergence of a new pattern in Afghan women's social life, in which educational and social activities shift from public spaces to private and digital domains. These activities persist under conditions of strict surveillance yet continue as forms of social continuity driven by necessity and community solidarity.

The above discussion demonstrates that, over nearly three decades, Afghan women have lived through profound political transformations: from a theocratic system to a semi-liberal democracy, and then back to a religion based. However, in each period, their participation and social roles have persisted in various forms whether concealed, formal, or digital. Thus, the span from 1996 to 2025 reflects a continuity of women's social activity amid recurring cycles of regime change and shifting state ideologies.

The historical phases outlined above demonstrate that the consciousness of Afghan women has developed through three interconnected stages: first, a survival consciousness (1996–2001), shaped by experiences of repression and domestic solidarity; second, a reflective consciousness (2001–2021), cultivated through education and the reinterpretation of religious values; and third, a critical consciousness (2021–2025), manifested in forms of collective, digital, and global resistance.

This process indicates that the social history of Afghan women is fundamentally a history of consciousness emerging from lived historical experience, rather than the product of external intervention. Repression did not extinguish their consciousness; instead, it became the foundation for the formation of new identities and solidarities. Accordingly, the trajectory of Afghan women over nearly three decades is not merely a

⁴⁵ UNESCO, "Let Girls and Women in Afghanistan Learn!," 2023.

⁴⁶ Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan Constitution," 2004; Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Between Hope and Fear: II. Background – Women's Rights in the Constitution," 2004.

⁴⁷ M. Ashraf Haidari, "Afghanistan's Parliamentary Election Results Confirm Stunning Gains for Women," 2005; UNHCR, "Afghan Women Make History by Being Elected to National Assembly," 2005.

⁴⁸ "Afghanistan School Year Starts without Millions of Teenage Girls," 2023.

⁴⁹ Hassina Sherjan, "From Lockouts to Logins: Afghan Girls Continue Their Education Online," *girlsglobe.org*, 2025; Rick Noack, "As Taliban Limits Options for Afghan Women, Many Lead Secret Lives Online," 2024.

⁵⁰ BBC, "In Their Own Words: Spend a Day with Afghan Women Living under Taliban Rule."

⁵¹ Sherjan, "From Lockouts to Logins: Afghan Girls Continue Their Education Online"; Noack, "As Taliban Limits Options for Afghan Women, Many Lead Secret Lives Online."



story of struggle against political power, but a narrative of the evolution of human consciousness in relation to freedom, education, and dignity.

The collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001 opened new spaces for Afghan women to re-enter public life. The transitional government and the 2004 Constitution⁵² provided a legal foundation for women's participation in education, employment, and politics.⁵³ Over the following two decades, Afghan society underwent significant social transformation: thousands of schools were reopened, universities admitted female students, and women's civil society organizations expanded across multiple provinces.⁵⁴ These developments fostered the emergence of reflective consciousness among women. They began to reassess past experiences as part of a broader process of social learning. Many women who had previously taught in clandestine schools went on to become school principals, university lecturers, and education activists. Their consciousness evolved from mere survival toward the capacity to interpret social structures and actively participate in processes of change.

This phase also witnessed the rise of a strong educational ideology. Women's movements did not simply demand rights; they positioned education as a pathway to social emancipation. Activists such as Jamila Afghani and Sima Samar developed models of education grounded in spirituality, interpreting Islamic values as sources of legitimacy for the struggle for equality. This principle resonates with the theory of critical pedagogy advanced by Paulo Freire,⁵⁵ which emphasizes education as a process of cultivating critical consciousness through reflection and dialogue.

At the same time, Afghan women's movements began to articulate forms of local feminism distinct from Western liberal frameworks. Within the perspective of decolonial feminism as articulated by Chandra Mohanty,⁵⁶ the consciousness of Afghan women emerges from their own historical and cultural contexts rather than from external ideologies. This consciousness integrates faith with liberation rather than separating the two. Accordingly, the two decades following 2001 can be understood as a phase of ideological reconstruction for Afghan women a period in which past experiences of repression were transformed into sources of reflection, and that reflection was enacted through education and social solidarity.

Critical Consciousness and Collective Resistance in 2021–2025

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 reinstated restrictive policies toward women, including the closure of secondary schools and universities for women in December 2022. However, unlike the earlier period, these measures did not entirely silence women's social activities. Within a short time, informal educational networks emerged, operating through online and transnational platforms. Reports from CNN⁵⁷ document the existence of virtual learning groups in Kabul, Herat, and Bamiyan connected to international educational institutions. This phase reveals the emergence of a new form of consciousness that is both collective and reflective. Women are no longer merely surviving or adapting; they are actively organizing through digital media and cross-border solidarity. Their awareness has reached what Paulo Freire terms critical consciousness a stage at which individuals understand structures of oppression and act deliberately to transform them.

Online education initiatives, social media campaigns, and solidarity networks among Afghan women in the diaspora demonstrate continuity between the generation that lived

⁵² Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan Constitution"; Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Between Hope and Fear: II. Background – Women's Rights in the Constitution."

⁵³ Böge and Kabul, "Women and Politics in Afghanistan: How to Use the Chance of the 25 % Quota for Women?"

⁵⁴ MADRE, *Faces of Resilience: Portraits of Afghan Women Human Rights Defenders*.

⁵⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

⁵⁶ Mohanty, "Fem. without Borders."

⁵⁷ "Shut out of School by the Taliban, Afghan Girls and Women Are Finding New Ways to Learn," 2024.



under the first Taliban regime and the digital generation after 2021. This consciousness is no longer confined to physical territory; it has expanded into a global awareness that integrates local experience with international support. Through these networks, Afghan women rearticulate their right to education and faith as forms of moral resistance against restrictive power structures.

The period 2021–2025 thus marks the culmination of the trajectory of Afghan women's consciousness. From experiences of repression emerged a spirituality of survival; from that spirituality developed an educational ideology; and from education arose a critical consciousness rooted in intergenerational collective memory. This consciousness reflects the historical continuity of Afghan women in defending their right to knowledge amid recurring cycles of shifting political power.

The third phase (2021–2025) marks the emergence of a collective critical consciousness among Afghan women who refuse silence under the second Taliban regime. In this period, women not only endure but actively construct new spaces of struggle through digital activism, transnational solidarity, and the reinterpretation of progressive Islamic values. Ayar⁵⁸ demonstrates that social media has become a primary arena for Afghan women to express their voices, disseminate global awareness, and challenge state narratives that seek to silence them through censorship and symbolic violence. Meanwhile, Shahir, Ren, and Noor⁵⁹ explain that Afghan women academics have adopted Islamic feminism as an epistemological strategy to resist intellectual repression, fostering a form of critical consciousness grounded in spirituality and transnational academic solidarity.

Hoda Azizi⁶⁰ adds a transnational dimension to this consciousness, showing how experiences of forced displacement under conditions of gender apartheid have generated diaspora-based activist networks demanding global recognition of gender-based crimes. From the perspective of everyday domestic experience, Mayasari and Muslim,⁶¹ along with Lestari,⁶² emphasize that women within Afghanistan continue to engage in daily acts of resistance, redefining education not merely as an individual right but as a political act against structural subordination.

Finally, Stavrevska, Ishoq, and Rouhshahbaz⁶³ illustrate how Afghan women in the diaspora transform collective trauma into an energy for peace, utilizing digital diplomacy and international networks to advance agendas of reconciliation and liberation from abroad. From the perspective of Mohanty,⁶⁴ particularly in *Feminism Without Borders*, the universalism of Western feminism is critiqued for its tendency to overlook the social, economic, and spiritual complexities of women in the Global South. Within a decolonial framework, women's consciousness cannot be separated from the contexts of colonialism, religion, and cultural locality. By employing a decolonial approach, the critical consciousness of Afghan women can be understood as an effort to reclaim their epistemic authority. Figures such as Jamila Afghani and activist networks like Afghan Women's Network⁶⁵ exemplify a form of progressive Islamic feminism in which equality is pursued through the reinterpretation of religious texts and social practices grounded in faith rather than

⁶⁰ "Fleeing Gender Apartheid: A Feminist Analysis of Forced Migration Among Diverse Women in Afghanistan Under the Taliban Regime Since 2021."

⁶¹ "Perempuan Dalam Pusaran Konflik Afghanistan Pasca Penguasaan Taliban 2021," *Jurnal Studi Gender Dan Anak* 7, no. 1 (2025): 78–98.

⁶² "Upaya Perlawanan Perempuan Afghanistan Dalam Menghadapi Ancaman Operasi/Kebijakan Operasi Taliban," *Indonesian Journal of Peace and Security Studies (IJPSS)* 3, no. 2 (2021): 68–78, <https://doi.org/10.29303/ijpss.v3i2.88>.

⁶³ "Building Peace from Afar: Women-Led Peacebuilding from the Diaspora," 2025.

⁶⁴ Mohanty, "Fem. without Borders."

⁶⁵ MADRE, *Faces of Resilience: Portraits of Afghan Women Human Rights Defenders*.

⁵⁸ "How Afghan Women Amplify Their Voices through Digital Activism: A Study of Global Engagement and Local Cultural Resistance."

⁵⁹ "Silenced Voices, Enduring Struggles: An Islamic Feminist Analysis of Afghan Female Academics under Taliban Rule," *Women's Studies International Forum* 113, no. August (2025): 103193, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2025.103193>.



secularization. This decolonial framework also serves to distinguish the Afghan context from broader narratives about women in Pakistan or Iran, where struggles are often associated with formal legal reform.

From the historical trajectory of Afghan women between 1996 and 2025, it is evident that social change has not been driven solely by political factors or external interventions, but also by internal forces in the form of collective memory and social consciousness emerging from shared experience. These dimensions function as sources of historical energy a latent force enabling women to endure, adapt, and reinterpret their position within a repressive social order.

In the theory of collective memory developed by Maurice Halbwachs⁶⁶, social memory sustains the continuity of group identity amid shifting power structures. For Afghan women, memory is not merely a record of suffering, but a moral and spiritual foundation connecting generations. Through remembrance of repression, women maintain an awareness that their lives hold value beyond ideological constraints. This memory is transmitted through oral narratives, spiritual practices, and clandestine educational activities in homes and small mosques during the late 1990s.

The third phase (2021–2025) represents the most advanced relationship between memory and consciousness. With the Taliban's return, past experiences resurfaced as both warning and strength. Unlike earlier periods, memory became proactive, driving engagement through digital solidarity, global advocacy, and online education. The consciousness developed over two decades enabled collective organization even under prohibition. This process reflects an effort to reclaim epistemic authority beyond colonial and patriarchal narratives. Afghan women create new epistemic spaces where memory and faith serve as sources of legitimacy, transforming collective memory into collective critical consciousness that extends toward intergenerational solidarity.

⁶⁶ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.

Viewed historically, the relationship between memory and consciousness forms a spiral: from remembrance to reflection, from reflection to action, and from action to the reproduction of meaning. This explains how Afghan women sustain identity amid recurring repression. Each cycle produces new layers of consciousness, strengthening social networks that preserve memory. Thus, their history is not only a record of events, but also an account of inner and spiritual evolution in confronting power. Collective memory and consciousness therefore constitute two dimensions of the historical energy driving Afghan women. Memory provides direction, while consciousness generates momentum. When physical spaces close, they create mental and spiritual spaces beyond control. From these emerge actions, solidarities, and ideologies that enable Afghan women to write their own history not merely as victims, but as agents in the evolution of human consciousness in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the social history of Afghan women during the 1996–2025 period is not merely a chronicle of oppression under the Taliban regime, but rather a history of the formation and evolution of women's agency through a process of consciousness transformation. While repression, educational restrictions, and erasure from the public sphere engendered trauma, fear, and social fragmentation, they did not entirely eradicate women's capacity for resilience and action. On the contrary, under specific conditions, these lived experiences acted as catalysts for fostering solidarity, collective memory, and a heightened consciousness that enabled women to preserve their identity, education, religious values, and human dignity.

This transformation of consciousness unfolded progressively across three primary phases. The first phase, *survival consciousness* (1996–2001), was characterized by women preserving education and identity through home-based secret



schools and domestic solidarity networks. The second phase, *reflective consciousness* (2001–2021), emerged as the reopening of access to education and the public sphere prompted women to develop social reflection through formal education, civil society organizations, and the reinterpretation of Islamic values. The third phase, *critical consciousness* or *conscientização* (2021–2025), occurred when the Taliban's return catalyzed new modes of resistance leveraging digital networks, online education, social organizations, and transnational diaspora solidarity. Consequently, education, collective memory, spirituality, social organizations, and digital technology served as pivotal mechanisms in transforming the experience of oppression into collective agency.

Ultimately, this study underscores that Afghan women are active historical subjects rather than mere objects of repressive state policies or passive victims of conflict and patriarchy. The trajectory from 1996 to 2025 demonstrates a continuity of consciousness that evolved from survival to reflection, and ultimately to critical resistance. This agency is deeply rooted in women's own historical experiences, particularly at the intersection of faith, memory, education, and solidarity. These findings offer a nuanced understanding that the struggle of Afghan women should not be framed solely through externally imposed paradigms of liberation, but rather understood as an emancipatory process arising organically from their unique social, cultural, spiritual, and historical contexts.

This study's rigorous, non-deterministic social history nonetheless carries notable limitations. Findings predominantly reflect urban, educated women and diaspora experiences, limiting generalizability to rural women facing distinct tribal patriarchies. Finally, the three-phase chronological model is not strictly linear; survival, reflective, and critical consciousness frequently overlap, particularly where insecure rural conditions persist. To address these limitations and advance Islamic feminism and decolonial

theory, future research should pursue three directions. First, field-based ethnographic studies in rural Afghan provinces are needed to document underrepresented, non-urban, and traditional modes of female agency, security permitting. Second, philological analysis of primary sources diaries, oral testimonies, and poetry such as landays in their original Dari and Pashto should be prioritized to capture local epistemologies without translation bias. Third, longitudinal tracking of transnational virtual academies' educational, social, and psychological impacts is essential to evaluate the sustainability of digital-generation critical consciousness under prolonged exclusion.

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Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

Muhammad Nasir contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study, coordinated the research process, conducted data analysis and interpretation, and led the drafting of the manuscript. Johan Septian Putra was responsible for data collection, assisted in data analysis, literature review, supported data interpretation, performed critical revisions for important intellectual content, and approved the final version of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or non-financial interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper interests.



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