

## Afghan women's rights are at risk

### Why in news?

- Recently, Afghanistan's Interior Minister promised soon return of girls to secondary schools that have remained shut since March 2022.
- However, any euphoria about this could be misplaced given the number of regressive steps taken by the Taliban to curb women and girls' freedom since they took power in August 2021.



### Taliban rule:

- The initial shock following the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan is waning. The Taliban, who during the initial period of the takeover had demonstrated a bit of moderation to gain international acceptability, funding and recognition, have now started showing their true colours.
- Notwithstanding the U.S.-mediated 2020 peace deal, which seemed to erroneously pin hopes on a "reformed" Taliban to govern the country, many observers had issued warnings that the takeover of power by the Taliban would result in the loss of the fragile gains made in Afghanistan over the last two decades.

### Opportunities for girls and women in Afghanistan:

- While there can be a debate over the gains made by the international community in Afghanistan in the last 20 years, it was unmistakable that opportunities for girls and women in education and employment had expanded vastly.
- Female participation in Afghanistan's labour force had climbed from around 15% in 2009 to nearly 22% in 2019. Women started playing important roles in the government, parliament, the media, the health and education sectors, and in civil society.
- They had carved space for themselves in conflict-ridden patriarchal structures and systems. Though the various interventions by the international community on women's issues did not transform the structures, they did provide opportunities for women to be enablers of change.
- In parliament, and in the provincial councils of Kandahar, Nangarhar, Badakhshan, Herat, Balkh and others, young women took grave risks in political participation and mobilisation.

### Position of women after takeover by Taliban:

- Today, those voices are lost. A report from the International Labour Organization in January 2022 found that Afghan women's employment levels fell by an estimated 16% in the third quarter of 2021, compared with 6% for men.
- By mid-2022, women's employment is expected to be 21% lower than before the Taliban takeover, if current conditions continue. In a rush to reach out to the Taliban during the peace processes, protection of the rights of women were hardly emphasised as a red line.
- As fatigue towards the war developed within and outside the country, there were barely any concerted efforts in making women rights and human rights a non-negotiable part of the negotiations.
- The participation of a few Afghan women representatives in the intra-Afghan dialogue in Doha had raised expectations in the international community that the insurgents had reformed and would be willing to accept women's role in Afghan society and government. These hopes were, however, shattered.

#### **A regressive mindset:**

- Since the capture of power in Kabul, the Taliban have made a series of contradicting moves on the issue of return of women to public life. Initially they referred to the prevalence of chaos and insecurity and asked women to stay indoors.
- The Taliban's acting Prime Minister, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, claimed that women would be allowed to continue working under Sharia law, but female government employees in Kabul were then told to stay at home. Only women whose jobs cannot be performed by men were allowed to work.
- Subsequently, the regime brought in rules which forbade women from venturing out if they were not accompanied by a male relative. They issued a decree making an **all-covering burqa mandatory for women**.

#### **Taliban 2.0:**

- It is clear that Taliban 2.0 is in no way different from the Taliban that ruled the country between 1996 and 2001. The stories of a "reformed" and "moderate" Taliban, which were narrated by sections of the media, were naïve.
- The greatest impact of denial of rights for women in the workforce would be a sharp contraction in the economy. In addition to the loss of rights, many households run by women could be staring at a bleak future.
- As per the World Bank, in 2019, 36% of teachers in the country were women, the highest number for 20 years. But most female educators have been forced out of work by the Taliban's ban on education for girls in March 2022. By the end of 2021, fewer than 100 of Kabul's 700 female journalists were still working.

#### **Way Forward:**

- As the war in Ukraine has grabbed and retained international attention, Afghanistan seems to have been forgotten yet again. Occasionally, the plight of Afghan women and the Taliban's atrocities find mention in the media. The Taliban do not shy from leveraging the issue to gain international attention.
- The international community, therefore, needs to make a concerted and coordinated attempt to protect the rights of Afghan women and girls and ensure that Afghanistan's de facto rulers are held accountable for their actions.