

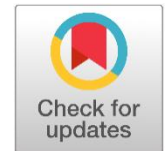


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# Afghan Women's Representation in News Discourse during the First 365 Days of Taliban Governance: A Corpus-Based Analysis



Fatima Tuz Zahra<sup>a</sup> & Tariq Amin<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Lecturer, Minhaj University Lahore – Pakistan

<sup>b</sup> Lecturer, University of Lakki Marwat, Lakki Marwat, KP – Pakistan

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## ABSTRACT

The study attempts to investigate the 365 days of Afghan women in the post-Taliban regime in Afghanistan in news discourse. The study particularly aims to analyze the lexical collocation of the keywords related to Afghan women in the news discourse. The study is qualitative as it analyses the data qualitatively. Corpus Linguistics has been used as a methodology in this study. Fifty online news articles have been selected from Pakistani newspaper The News International, and a corpus has been developed with the name Afghan Women News Corpus. The data have been analysed using LancsBox v.5.x (Brezina et al., 2020). The study draws on Baker's (2004) Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis framework. The corpus was uploaded to LancsBox and a list of collocations of the keyword Afghan Women was generated. Both the left and right collocates of the keywords were analyzed in detail and were used for thematic development and coding. The findings of this analysis revealed the basic patterns the data used to deal with the topic of Afghan women in particular and their social setup in general. It is found that in the majority of cases, the news discourse negatively represents the Taliban regime, occasionally shows it neutrally, and rarely shows it positively. The research concludes with a discussion of the main findings by highlighting the discourse surrounding community representation before and after the war.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The news representation is often criticized for misleading the public and convincing them of hidden intentions.

\* **Corresponding author:** Fatima Tuz Zahra, Department of English, Air University Islamabad

E-mail: [fatimazahra.eng@mul.edu.pk](mailto:fatimazahra.eng@mul.edu.pk)

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Therefore, such information does not constitute a “valueless consideration of ‘the facts’” (Fowler, 1991). Media-focused research (Cloud, 2004; Klaus and Kassel, 2005; Stabile and Kumar, 2005) found that Afghan women were portrayed in the media as helpless victims and that this media policy served to increase public sympathy, increase awareness, and provoke indignation against their oppressors. Twenty years of U.S. occupation have not changed the perspective, and there are similarities before and after the U.S. occupation as presented in the media. Media reports can change the public perspective that leads to the policy, and it becomes significant during war times when human lives are at stake. Soroka (2003) observed that scientific analysis of media reports links the American public and politicians as

both follow this reporting system to gauge public opinion. Media advocacy knows that feminist concerns are often underrepresented, and a sudden focus on such matters does not show an honest concern for their support but rather an effort of 'others' to gain public support for initiating war. It was observed when the American public was confronted with terrifying images of oppressed women under the Taliban government (Cloud, 2004). Furthermore, in recent years, Afghanistan has appeared as a country with complicated sociopolitical contexts. Most of the media reportage is hostile, and less is known about the realistic situation of Afghan women. Therefore, the study observed the sketching of Afghan women through corpus-assisted discourse analysis.

This article examines media representation of issues relating to Afghan women. The study attempts to examine how Afghan women are represented in one of Pakistan's most widely circulated newspapers, *The News International*, and to identify the main arguments used for issues related to Afghan Muslim women and how they are represented in these questions. The article draws on Baker's (2004) corpus-assisted discourse analysis framework, which has recently been widely incorporated into discourse studies of newspaper articles. The corpus tools used to conduct this research are concordance analysis and collocation analysis. The analysis focused on representation, as it has been one of the most prominent themes in recent news discourses on post-Taliban exile politics in the United States. The concordance analysis revealed the basic patterns used by the media to address the issue of Afghan women in particular and Muslim women in general. The study seeks answers to the following research questions:

- What textual themes can be discursively drawn from the news corpora, and what profound significance can be demonstrated within the social-cultural context?
- How is Afghan womanhood sketched under Taliban occupation in selected news discourse, and how does this sketching develop and maintain miserable conditions for Afghan women?
- What does the selected news discourse suggest about the role of Afghan women?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language as a form of social action is dynamically shaped and reshaped to construct or manipulate representations of social reality. Analyzing language use in news corpora helps understand the structure, discourse, and ideology represented in the news media. Wartime narratives sketch women differently than men; this tradition continues regardless of the genre it is covered in, news or fiction (Cloud, 2004; Hunt, 2002). Research investigations (Brenner, 1996) observed that the veil is a source of empowerment for the women who wear it, though every society and every period interprets the veil differently. In Brenner's (1996) analysis, the veil in modern Java often expresses the desire to distance oneself from Javanese customs and traditions and Western cultural imperialism. Macmaster and Lewis (1998) reviewed French colonization in Algeria and observed veiled women's representation in French media. This study has linked the increase of veiled images in Western media since the early 1980s to growing fears of an Islamic threat to the West (Macmaster and Lewis, 1998). Lorber (2002) observed that post-September 11 rhetoric about the rights of Afghan women and their oppression by the Taliban started a debate in American

political policies, though it had little to do with concern for their welfare.

On the other hand, such media representations provided a solid ground for the U.S. administration's political itinerary for providing a reason for war and gaining public support. Stabile and Kumar (2005) observed that these media advocacies represent this war as an enlightening cause for a "noble ideal": the safeguard of women, and thus, the rhetoric warranted the attack of civilized on the uncivilized. Huntington (2017) described the "clash of civilizations" as an unavoidable encounter between the United States and non-Western, particularly Islamic civilizations, hostile to capitalism. Stabile and Kumar uncovered the reflection of Western ideology when they stated that the American media took an unidentified position with the Taliban as the battleground, the root cause of uncivilized, evil doings, especially to women, but also pardoned the Americans of misconduct and war crimes. Further to this, it was examined that American policies had contributed to the terrible conditions of these women whom it now appealed to protect. If we do not hate what we do not have, we cannot love what we do have.

These are the old truths that we are painfully rediscovering after a century and more of sentimental singing. Those who reject them deny their family, their heritage, their culture, their birthright, and themselves! People seeking identity and reconstructing ethnicity require enemies, and the most dangerous entities occur across the fault lines between the world's greatest civilizations (Huntington, 2017). A binary position created by the U.S. media presented the U.S. as itself and the other as the enemy, portrayed a paternalistic attitude towards Afghan women, and associated the West with liberty, women's rights, and free will that underpin the U.S. war and Afghanistan policies (Cloud, 2004). Cloud claimed that images of Afghanistan in the news media do not represent the Afghan population. Klaus & Kassel (2005) did a textual analysis of German newspaper articles about Afghan women, and it showed a classification of women into three domains: refugees, political activists, and those hidden in their dwellings. The veil is associated with fundamental violations of human rights, cultural distance, and religious extremism, and Germans perceive veiled women and refugees as silent victims in the articles reviewed by Klaus and Kassel, even in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Previous investigations uncover that if the U.S. media depict an attack on Afghanistan as a civilian mission, it is considered a humanitarian duty in Germany (Sabile & Kumar, 2005).

Baker et al. (2013) argued in a recent, comprehensive investigation of Muslim representation in the British press that women were the fourth most common collocate of the word 'Muslim' (men came in ninth), highlighting the central role of women as a semantic macrostructure in the current media discourse about Muslims and Islam. The study also reported a trend to focus on Muslim women's clothing, with negative sermons about the hijab becoming widespread. Two opinion polls in Germany found that the themes most associated with Islam were 'women's oppression' (93%) and 'terror' (83%), cited in Al-Hein (2015). Barlas A (2005) discussed Muslim women in the global era and the new societal roles they recognize. A corpus-based analysis of refugee and asylum seeker discourse was conducted using data from a range of British newspapers and texts from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees website, both published in 2003. The term refugee coordinates examines and groups asylum seekers (s) according to

patterns that reveal linguistic discourse traces. Discourses portraying refugees as parcels, intruders, vermin, or water were found in newspaper texts, although cases of negative discourses were also found in UNHCR texts, demonstrating the difficulty of ignoring dominant discourses.

The lexical choice proved to be a key aspect in maintaining the discourse on asylum seekers – juxtaposing analyses of terms such as failed vs. rejected revealed the writers’ original attitude to the subject. Baker (2005) looked at the discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in U.N. texts and newspapers, and Warren (2018) highlights the experiences of Muslim women working in the media as they search for identity and new spaces of belonging for Muslim women who are building and renegotiating their own identities. These studies revealed the portrayal of Afghan women in Western media and the division created through these sketches. Clash of civilizations draws attention towards this misrepresentation, but this investigation and other previous studies remain silent on the current situation after U.S. exile. As Western war policies change, further investigation of these changing attitudes can shed light on world leaders’ future dimensions and policies.

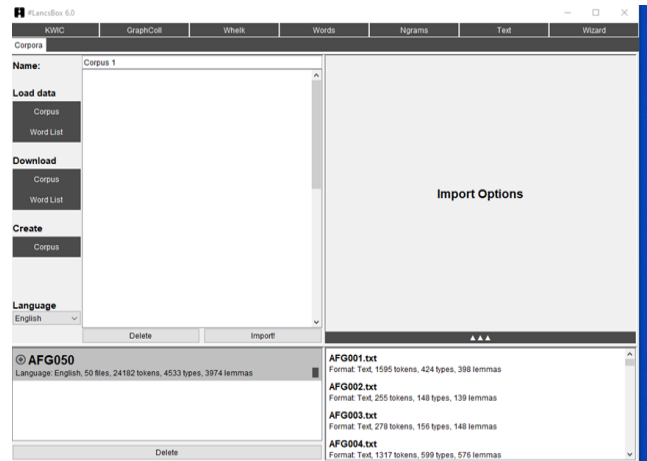
Previous investigations and extant literature show that the perspective of the actual population is yet to be explored, and there is a marked difference between those who are represented in the media and those who the community in news representation. The current investigation presents collocation analysis to provide a more rigorous procedure and, hence, a more solid result for discursive and social-cultural interpretations and to help specify the referential meaning of ‘Afghan Women.’

**3. METHODOLOGY**

The study used a qualitative approach as its primary aim was to study the representation of Afghan women in news discourse in the post-Taliban Afghanistan regime. The data was collected from the leading Pakistani English newspaper, The News International. The news stories on Afghan Women in the first 365 days (From August 2021 to August 2022) of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan were collected, and a corpus was developed with the name Afghan Women News Corpus. The corpus was then uploaded on PakLocCorpus. The corpus was then uploaded to the Corpus Linguistics tool LanCSBox, and a list of collocations of the keyword Afghan Women was generated. The collocation analysis of the keywords related to Afghan Women was conducted, and the different themes were identified based on the collocation analysis. Finally, the discourse analysis framework of Gee (2011) was used to reveal ‘social language’ hidden behind the surface denotations of linguistic expressions. It is intended to refine the understanding of the thematically categorized representation of ‘Afghan Women’ and its description through corpus tools.

**4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

This section presents the major results and their discussion based on the data analysis. The study analyzed 50 news stories on Afghan women in The News International. The corpus contained 24182 tokens, 4533 types, and 3974 lemmas.



**Fig. 1:** Details of the Corpus of the Study, “Afghan Women News Corpus”

Figure 1 shows the specifications of the corpus. The right panel of the tool shows tokens, types, and lemmas of each file separately, whereas the left panel provides complete details of the corpus. The study used Baker et al.’s (2008) Corpus Assisted Discourse Analysis framework. Corpus analysis tools provide results based on the statistical representation of the entire data, whereas qualitative analysis was made through the selected articles on Afghan women’s representation in the light of the theoretical model. Moreover, referring to women’s representation enables us to provide a differential perspective. This study has presented an integrated perspective and complete understanding of the issue in the newspaper text. Thus, the new construct will help support most of the population regarding the fundamental issues of representation.

The present study focused on the image of Afghan women created through English newspapers, for which specific collocation patterns of the selected word ‘Afghan women’ have been identified. Additionally, this study identifies the occurrence of the discussion and comparison of women’s representation in the U.S. and Taliban regimes. Results reveal that the occurrence of Afghan women is significantly higher than a singular Afghan woman; thus, the latter was discarded from the analysis. This concept and analysis of social language (Gee, 2011) provides an understanding by demonstrating how the linguistic patterns in the literary works of society are pretentious by their specific socioeconomic and political perspectives.

Search Afghan Women	Occurrences 39 (16.1%)	Texts 14/50	Corpus	Afghan women representation	Context	Display Text
1	AF0012.txt	ICC regarding Afghan women's participation in sports	Afghan women	social science group for a photograph		to "assert their rights" to the face
2	AF0012.txt	Guardian reported Afghan girls and their mothers had to come from other Afghanistan's "borderlands"	Afghan women	the Afghan women will assert their rights		Alongside the current financial crunch, there are
3	AF0020.txt	contributions of girls' education and empowerment of	Afghan women	and girls. The fact that the		in parliament, in the courts, in the
4	AF0020.txt	well. Afghanistan has transformed. We could see	Afghan women	girls and adults, journalists, human rights activists,		and now, working in the streets of
5	AF0020.txt	and we will see a nightmare for	Afghan women	Since the Taliban took control of Kabul		have become extremely challenging, according to some
6	AF0020.txt	see this unprecedented and historic resurgence of	Afghan women			The Taliban "has no legitimacy beyond the
7	AF0020.txt	government on August 15, which is a sign of	Afghan women			There's a big question that gains much for
8	AF0020.txt	prominent US feminists with strong ties to	Afghan women			over the past 20 years, and it's clearly only
9	AF0020.txt	agencies. But since that position could help	Afghan women			was expiring, the Taliban went the other
10	AF0020.txt	There's a big question that gains much for	Afghan women			democratic society as "unfettered" The security
11	AF0020.txt	to fight to establish KANDJ, Citizens of	Afghan women			back to the streets on Sunday to
12	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			since the Islamic Emirate came to power,
13	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			since having power last year, ending them
14	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			plans to make football clubs in America. The
15	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			has a powerful, symbolic victory
16	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			see back in global conversation - especially so
17	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			as they were back rights to education
18	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			which football team making their way through
19	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			inhibits. The support comes from the
20	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			harmless. A world has been through their
21	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			bars are gone and behind the scenes
22	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			who can't hold the line against Taliban
23	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			have even more reason to worry if
24	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			The position of women in Afghanistan has
25	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			will not allow their rights to be
26	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			have fought and paid their own rights
27	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			and children under the emerging political regime
28	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			and children will be under the Taliban
29	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			and children under the initial American invasion
30	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			is a fundamental aspect of Afghanistan. The more complex
31	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			is a fundamental aspect of Afghanistan. The more complex
32	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			is a fundamental aspect of Afghanistan. The more complex
33	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			is a fundamental aspect of Afghanistan. The more complex
34	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			is a fundamental aspect of Afghanistan. The more complex
35	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			is a fundamental aspect of Afghanistan. The more complex
36	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			is a fundamental aspect of Afghanistan. The more complex
37	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			is a fundamental aspect of Afghanistan. The more complex
38	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			is a fundamental aspect of Afghanistan. The more complex
39	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			is a fundamental aspect of Afghanistan. The more complex
40	AF0020.txt	call to reverse these restrictions imposed on	Afghan women			is a fundamental aspect of Afghanistan. The more complex

**Figure 2:** Concordance lines of the selected word ‘Afghan Women’

Figure 2 shows 39 instances of the selected word. It shows 39 occurrences of the selected word in 14 corpus files.

**Table 1**  
Right Collocates and Major Themes in the Selected Word

Node word	Collocates	Themes
Afghan women	Football players	Participation in sports
	Youth football team	
	To assert their rights	Demand their rights
	In Parliament	
Protest for rights		
Afghan women	Took the streets	Women are scared
	Are back...global conversation	
	Will not allow their rights to be.....	
	Have fought for....rights	
	Fears and peace	
	Have...worry	

Table 1 shows the right collocates of 'Afghan women.' Here, the first theme indicates liberation and freedom through sports participation in the U.S. regime. The second theme then indicates fighting for their fundamental rights as the collocates directly indicate protests, global involvement, and parliamentary debates on 'Afghan Women's rights. Analysis of the word choice shows that Afghan women suffered a great deal during the Taliban regime and were denied their rights to education, entertainment, and sports, and this presentation is also compared with the women in the U.S. regime. Socio-cultural analysis of Afghanistan shows the strong roots of the traditional Madrassa system and how these systems provide primary education, food, and entertainment. Previous investigations, such as Malik (2008), tried to provide a different perspective and correct misconceptions about madrasas' role by uncovering and sharing a more balanced discussion that denies neither the shortcomings of religious educational institutions in South Asia nor their significant role in mass education. Afghan representation is incomplete without discussing these systems. Western representations are not only an allegation to the Taliban government but also to the majority of Afghan women who prefer the alternative madrassa education system for themselves or their children.

Analysis of the rights collocates provided a clear picture of the women's representation and themes, how women are socially represented in the Taliban-led government, and their demand for rights. In the subsequent analysis phase, left collocates of the concordance lines were analyzed. Tuhiwai (2013) argued that non-Western feminism, tradition, and legacy cannot be silenced at the cost of promoting Western feminism. It uncovered the distinct tone of the Muslim lifestyle and revealed their stance on women's empowerment in the articulations of gendered and faith identification. Though it has distanced itself from Western liberal societies, it has its value, support, and significance.

Gee's (2011) framework offers an insight into the social language of a community. Here, language carries a way of life in itself. Gee's (2011) definition of Discourse is a theory that explains how language works in society. His theory of Discourse is grounded in social and cultural views defining language in use (saying, doing, and being), both written and spoken, and considering context and grammar. For this investigation, Gee's (2011) concept of social language seems

the most suitable as it covers both contextual and syntactic aspects of language as it is relatable in this investigation. Also, it allows flexibility and variation at the same time.

**Table 2**  
Left Collocates and Themes of the Selected Word

Collocates	Node word	Themes	
Eventually	Afghan women	Women in the Taliban regime	
Empowerment of			
Shocking for			
Nightmare for			
Resistance of			
Supporting			
Efforts to support			
Help			
Deterioration of rights that			
Imposed on			
Gatherings by			
Harshest restrictions on			
Struggle... The right			
Rights waged by		Women under U.S. feminist influence	
The rights of			
Fate of			
The challenges			
Liberation of			
Concern for			
Freedom for			
Freedom of			
The golden era for Afghan women			Women under U.S. regime
U.S. feminists...ties to			
Gains made by			
Leaving the country to the			
Feminists....abandon			
Vanguard of			

Table 2 shows three major themes in the collocation analysis, and these themes are naturally contrasting each other. Left collocates of the target word not only indicate the suffering of 'Afghan Women' in the Taliban government but also stress a great deal about saving women and all the efforts done by U.S. feminists. Global politics continues to provoke resistance towards a feminist movement seen to privilege white, middle-class, and secular interests. Such attempts hardly address inequalities within and outside of feminism and disciplinary geography.

As articulated or reformulated in 'white women saving brown women from brown men' and here, the articulation of 'challenges' 'demand of rights' or 'the memory of US Golden Era' seem to be a case of Western feminists igniting resistance to oppressed Muslim women (Warren,2018). The world needs to focus on differentiating traditions and values practiced in South Asia from ancient times. It is the same for communities of different religions or educational backgrounds, whether ethnic education, madrassa system, institutional training, or Westernized, European-influenced educational system. (Ahmed, 1992) argued that cultural imperialism and the legacy of colonialism not only reside in the 'rescue paradigm' of Western feminism but also mobilized around the liberation of Muslim women's bodies and the politics of veiling. Legacies of colonialism and cultural imperialism reside in what is termed the 'rescue paradigm' of Western (white) feminism mobilized around the liberation of Muslim women's bodies and the politics of veiling, amongst other concerns (Ahmed, 1992).

Individuals from the entertainment industry, politicians, sports personnel, or business tycoons are trolled if found going against these norms. Though the media struggles to normalize these incidents, traditional head coverings, modesty in clothing, respect for seniors, and joint family systems are deeply rooted in this region. The Westernized education system and educated youth cannot guarantee peace and prosperity for a country, and graduates from Pakistan's universities can be considered an excellent example of a country under heavy financial debt and at the mercy of the IMF.

The world needs to focus on differentiating traditions and values practiced in South Asia from ancient times. It is the same for communities of different religions or educational backgrounds, whether ethnic education, madrassa system, institutional training, or Westernized, European-influenced educational system. Individuals from the entertainment industry, politicians, sports personnel, or business tycoons are trolled if found going against these norms. Though the media struggles to normalize these incidents, traditional head coverings, modesty in clothing, respect for seniors, and joint family systems are deeply rooted in this region. Afghan socio-cultural and religious norms revolve around war as the generations have witnessed a never-ending dispute between opponents and alleys within and outside the country. Afghan women are considered very prestigious and secure in the boundaries of the home, and the concept of women's empowerment is more Eastern, away from Western liberation, where life outside the home is considered freedom. The Eastern perspective of women's empowerment allows freedom of choice and power within the boundaries of home and family, allowing female members to exercise power, even upon the men of the family.

Failing the European educational system, especially the English-enforced English curriculum, is likely to be rejected in the new setup. We need to design a curriculum that could empower women, children, youth, and professionals in all walks of life. U.S. model of professional training to prepare the Afghan army and police can be used along with popular traditional madrassa systems. Appreciating their social values, respecting family systems, and providing essential training for available work opportunities and resources can encourage them to join the mainstream workforce, participate in the international job market, and contribute to the peace and prosperity of the country. This study provides a new perspective to the world as Afghan women and their families need a new representation that is entirely different from the one created in the media. The world is divided into U.S. and U.K. allies, Russia, and China block. Countries that remain neutral or choose not to interfere in proxy wars find a problematic situation where they are dragged into political dialogues. Understanding the clash of civilizations, respecting their traditional values, and trying not to change their language, family systems, and norms can be helpful for world peace and prosperity. Westernized ideologies of women in Islam, as represented in specific media, represent only a fraction of the Western population. ...see the cover story of Afghan women in the Times

## 5. CONCLUSION

Sketching women's representation and social identity are linked with faith and is a motivational force for News agencies as it attracts readers' attention from almost all walks of life. Essential insights are thereby advanced that add meaning to existing frameworks of understanding the

dynamics of social difference in Afghan women's contexts that have focused more singularly on misery regarding equal rights, education, and empowerment. A more sophisticated understanding of this sketching issues clear insights into Afghan culture after U.S. exile. U.S. policies spanning over 20 years of women's education, offering opportunities in sports, public office, and the health sector have not affected their way of life, social realities, and tribal values. Though thousands of families were directly involved with U.S. personnel on Afghan missions, masses were absent from media coverage. They continued their traditional, tribal, and nomadic traditions for education, marriage, or justice. A more sophisticated understanding of tribal traditions and Afghan social life issues offers a window to the lives of females and how their men respect dominance and empowerment of motherhood and other relations.

Afghan women's empowerment can best be understood through their family policies where grandmothers and mothers hold a firm position after their husbands and take full charge of certain matters such as household decision-making and extending or limiting permissions to the family's young ones. Cloud (2004) observed differences in media representation and compared how Afghan social life is sketched in English News, and readers are persuaded to believe what is sketched for them. A small fraction of Westernized Afghan women confirm those representations as they find no place for them in their homelands and land through so-called rescue missions on unknown foreign lands, hoping to find peace and happiness for their families. However, these women do not represent the culture, traditions, food, clothing, and local education of entire womanhood in Afghanistan. They are supporting the new Taliban government through food, welcome, etc. Taliban won support from ordinary Afghans, US-trained personnel, and tribal chiefs who found themselves crippled in a corrupt, US-supported Afghan government. The current socio-political context draws attention to South Asian values, traditions, and practices in this region from ancient times, regardless of their religion or Westernized education backgrounds.

### Future Implications

The study is delimited to Afghan women's representation, and selected collocates are analyzed. However, out-of-school Afghan children are also represented differently through Western media, and this area is worth investigating. Here, the socio-cultural significance of the Islamic Madrassa system is ignored as it is not considered education from a Western perspective. Though this madrassa schooling is popular, children are not only provided with food, shelter, cultural training, religious education, and language learning.

### Conflict interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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