



Written by Fateh Sami

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The Whitewashing of Tyranny: Western Narratives and the Reality of Afghan Women under Taliban Rule

Abstract

This article critically examines the controversial visit of Sheril Bernard, wife of U.S. diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad, to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and the global backlash that followed. It contextualizes Bernard's statements praising the Taliban within the broader narrative of Western attempts to rehabilitate authoritarian regimes for political convenience. Drawing on reports from international human rights organizations, firsthand statements by Afghan women activists, and credible media sources, the article highlights the disconnect between foreign diplomatic rhetoric and the lived experiences of Afghan women under Taliban rule. It argues that Bernard's remarks serve to whitewash systematic gender apartheid and weaken international accountability mechanisms. The piece calls for renewed global solidarity with Afghan civil society and rejects the normalization of a regime that continues to violate fundamental human rights. This analysis aims to amplify the voices of Afghan women and scrutinize the damaging influence of foreign political narratives on local struggles for justice and freedom.

Introduction

The takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021 marked a profound regression in the country's progress toward gender equality and human rights. Despite international warnings and decades of effort to empower Afghan women,

the Taliban swiftly imposed draconian restrictions that erased hard-fought gains. Yet, a troubling trend has emerged: some Western figures and narratives have begun to portray the Taliban regime as a “changed” entity, emphasizing supposed improvements in security and governance while downplaying or ignoring ongoing abuses. One of the most glaring examples is Sheril Bernard’s public comments during her 2023 visit to Afghanistan, where she asserted that Afghan women “feel safer” and that the country was “on a path to development.” This article investigates the implications of such statements, their dissonance with documented realities, and the broader geopolitical and ethical consequences of normalizing a regime characterized by systematic oppression of women.

The Whitewashing of Tyranny

Sheril Bernard’s televised interview on Afghanistan International in 2025 provoked immediate outrage within Afghan civil society and the global human rights community. Bernard, who is married to Zalmay Khalilzad—a former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan—asserted that the Taliban had fundamentally “changed” and highlighted security improvements as evidence. She claimed that Afghan women were “feeling safer” and heralded a “path to development” for the country.

Such remarks, however, stand in stark contrast to the documented realities faced by Afghan women. Multiple credible sources, including the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International, and independent journalists, provide extensive

evidence of a deliberate and ongoing campaign to exclude women from education, employment, and public life.

Since the Taliban’s return to power:

- **Education:** Girls above grade six are banned from attending school, and universities remain largely closed to female students. This ban affects millions of girls, condemning them to illiteracy and lost opportunities.
- **Employment:** Female government employees have been systematically dismissed or forced to stay home, undermining their livelihoods and eroding women’s participation in governance and civil society. The ban on women working in national and international NGOs since December 2022 has crippled essential humanitarian and development programs.
- **Public life and mobility:** The Taliban’s Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice enforces a rigid dress code (full-body coverings), restricts

women's movement without a male guardian (mahram), and uses intimidation, corporal punishment, and public shaming to control behaviour. Women face frequent harassment and arrests under vague charges such as "improper behaviour."

These realities illustrate a systematic gender apartheid that criminalizes female autonomy and attempts to erase women from public spaces. Bernard's rosy depiction of the situation thus not only distorts the truth but provides propaganda fodder for the Taliban, aiding their efforts to gain international legitimacy without meaningful reform.

The Response from Afghan Women

The reaction among Afghan women activists and civil society organizations was swift and scathing. Over sixty women-led groups united to condemn Bernard's statements, issuing an open letter accusing her of complicity in whitewashing the Taliban's brutal gender policies. Some activists called for investigations into Bernard's role in enabling the regime's propaganda machine, with suggestions that such complicity undermines international legal mechanisms designed to hold war criminals accountable.

For many Afghan women living under Taliban rule, Bernard's visit was perceived as a betrayal. Their daily struggles—from secret literacy classes to underground protests—are rendered invisible when Western figures depict a misleading narrative of progress. As one prominent activist lamented, "Her words are weapons in the hands of our oppressors."

The Afghan Powerful Women's Movement described Bernard's visit as an "insult to the suffering of Afghan women," warning that such endorsements risk normalizing a regime that should face sanctions and global isolation. They emphasized that the Taliban's actions are not isolated abuses but part of a systemic attempt to eradicate women's rights, punish dissent, and entrench authoritarian control.

The voices of Afghan women resisting Taliban repression are diverse and courageous. Despite risks of arrest, violence, and social ostracism, women continue to organize protests, operate clandestine schools, and amplify their plight internationally. Their lived experiences contradict the sanitized narratives propagated by some Western diplomats and commentators.

The Role of Western Narratives in Taliban Legitimacy

Sheril Bernard's statements must be understood within a broader geopolitical context. Since the chaotic U.S. withdrawal in 2021, Western policymakers face difficult choices regarding engagement with the Taliban. Some seek stability in the region, fearing renewed conflict or the resurgence of terrorist groups. Others are fatigued by prolonged military involvement and wish to pivot to diplomatic or pragmatic approaches.

Within this context, there has been a surge of efforts to rebrand the Taliban as a "viable governing partner." High-profile visits, diplomatic overtures, and media portrayals emphasizing stability and security create a narrative that the Taliban have moderated their behaviour and deserve international acceptance.

However, these narrative risks sacrificing human rights and democratic principles on the altar of realpolitik. It ignores the Taliban's ongoing atrocities, including extrajudicial killings, suppression of ethnic minorities, bans on female education and employment, and violent enforcement of misogynistic edicts.

Legitimizing such a regime weakens international norms and emboldens authoritarian actors worldwide. It sends a dangerous message that human rights abuses can be overlooked for the sake of strategic interests. Moreover, it marginalizes the voices of those suffering under oppression and delegitimizes their calls for justice.

This disconnect between diplomatic rhetoric and lived realities also creates confusion among international actors and the public, undermining efforts to coordinate effective humanitarian responses and targeted sanctions. When Western figures publicly praise or downplay the Taliban's actions, it undercuts the moral authority and leverage necessary to pressure the regime toward reform.

Conclusion and Calls to Action

The plight of Afghan women under Taliban rule is a litmus test for the international community's commitment to human rights and justice. Sheril Bernard's comments, whether intended or not, contribute to a dangerous trend of whitewashing tyranny and enabling impunity.

This article has highlighted the stark contrast between foreign political narratives and the lived realities of Afghan women, drawing on credible reports and activist testimonies. It underscores the importance of centring local voices and resisting narratives that serve geopolitical convenience over truth and justice.

To uphold international human rights standards, the global community must:

- Reject attempts to normalize the Taliban regime without tangible improvements in women's rights and freedoms.
- Support Afghan civil society, especially women-led organizations risking their lives for justice.
- Maintain and enforce targeted sanctions on individuals and entities responsible for human rights violations.
- Ensure humanitarian aid reaches those in need without legitimizing oppressive authorities.
- Promote accurate, nuanced reporting that amplifies Afghan women's voices and counters propaganda.

Afghanistan's future depends on the solidarity and accountability of the international community. Only by standing firmly against gender apartheid and authoritarian repression can the promise of freedom, dignity, and equality be realized for Afghan women.

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