International Journal of Intercultural Relations 108 (2025) 102250

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel

Responses to the rapid reactionary social change: A social-psychological investigation of young Afghan women's experiences during the Second-Taliban era☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Resistance
Discrimination
Reactionary changes
Social identity
Nostalgia
Afghan women

ABSTRACT

How do members of disadvantaged groups respond to the rapid reactionary changes? To explore this question, the paper delves into the experiences of a highly discriminated group, young Afghan women, after the Taliban's return in 2021. We analysed the data derived from 35 interviews with women (aged 19–32) living in Afghanistan. Our findings indicate that anti-women regulations have severely undermined Afghan women's basic psychological needs for safety, security, autonomy, competence, and social bonding. Additionally, we show that acts of violence against women undermine women's human dignity, facilitated by dehumanising women. We also explore the restrictions imposed by the ruling powers and cultural hierarchies that aim to render women invisible and keep them in a domestic prison. While resistance is not ubiquitous among Afghan women, those who do resist often use less overt forms, due to the anticipated repression, such as establishing secret online schools for girls. Our findings also indicate that a shared social identity and nostalgia for past achievements contribute to resistance. Besides that, migration to other countries is widely perceived as an individual response to the feeling of threat, frustration and hopelessness.

Introduction

Afghanistan witnessed several brutal unrests in the recent century. Among all affected groups, Afghan women have consistently been the target of cultural, social, and political discrimination (Qazi Zada & Qazi Zada, 2024; Telesetsky, 1998), which led to Afghanistan being called one of the world's most dangerous and challenging places for women (Anderson, 2011; Shoib et al., 2022). Beyond ruling regimes, patriarchal tribal culture and fundamental religious teachings were influential in shaping women's status in Afghan society (Ahmed-ghosh, 2003, 2006). Before the regime change in 2001, the Taliban group, which dominated most of Afghanistan, restricted women's rights by banning employment and education for women as well as persecuting women's rights activists (Rostami-Povey, 2003). Following the US invasion that ended the Taliban's power, Afghan women experienced two decades of relative relief (2001–2021) because of the opportunities created in the political structures for women (Amin & Alizada, 2020). In this period, although Afghan women still faced substantial cultural challenges, they strived to expand their presence and impact in the

☆ The data from this study cannot be shared due to political risks associated with the participants.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2025.102250
Received 10 March 2025; Received in revised form 10 July 2025; Accepted 13 July 2025
Available online 17 July 2025

public sphere, particularly in education and employment.

With the return of the Taliban to power in 2021, Afghan women once more became the target of oppressive policies and practices ruled by the new regime (e.g., Human Rights Watch, 2024; UNHCR, 2024). Shortly, the few, but still available, and hardly achieved women's social and economic possibilities, such as access to education, occupation, and public presence, were swiftly outlawed. Despite differences in content and intensity, this recalls the historical and contemporary struggles faced by women in different political contexts (Jupîneanţ, et al., 2024; Rhoodie, 1989; Stromquist, 2014). For example, a World Bank study across 98 developing countries showed that women are significantly less likely than men to access financial services due to the legal restrictions and gender norms, e.g., early marriage and gender-based violence (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2013). Historically, Rhoodie (1989) described the exclusion of women, particularly Black women, from public life under apartheid in South Africa. In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Jupîneanţ et al. (2024) showed the intensified vulnerability of Roma women in Spain due to intersecting gender and ethnic inequalities.

Even in liberal democracies, despite constitutional promises of equality, systemic discrimination continues to affect women's daily lives (SteelFisher et al., 2019; Stopler, 2005). For instance, the study conducted by SteelFisher et al. (2019) documented widespread discrimination experienced by women in the U.S across multiple domains of their lives. Within EU countries, the other study finds that gender wage discrimination significantly contributes to household poverty, with its impact especially severe in households that rely heavily on women's earnings (Gradín et al., 2010). In line with these examples, the experience of Afghan women represents an acute instance of this broader pattern, where gender oppression becomes a central feature of reactionary governance.

The question to answer is how individuals, here Afghan women, would respond to the rapid reactionary social changes threatening their fundamental rights. While the rare studies on Afghan women have predominantly relied on observers' accounts (Sahill, 2023), the current paper reflects the Afghan women's narratives. Our research initially focused on a broad and exploratory question of what Afghan women experienced after the Taliban came back as an emerging design. This approach allowed us to remain responsive to unexpected findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Throughout the research process, our focus shifted to the scientifically important and less addressed aspects of Afghan women's experience, e.g., the multifaceted aspect of discriminative processes as well as how and in which ways, if at all, the Afghan women reacted to such swift reactionary change.

Therefore, this article aims to explore the severe psychological challenges faced by a vulnerable group—young, educated Afghan women—whose aspirations and recently gained rights were abruptly undermined by a reactionary social change. Moreover, we delve into the Afghan women's responses to the highly discriminatory regulations that the new governments have placed upon them. By doing so, we portray the experience of living under highly discriminatory conditions and the coping strategies in a single narrative. This study intentionally emphasizes educated Afghan young women, given that it is speculated that they are confronted with the highest levels of oppression in Afghan society. First, we provide a brief history of Afghan women. Then, we review the relevant social psychology literature elaborating how reactionary regime changes can affect disadvantaged groups.

Women in Afghanistan: a short history

After the Taliban's overthrow in 2001 by the U.S. in response to the 9/11 attacks, Afghanistan ruled by a presidential system, witnessed a growth of women's rights reflected in the increased rate of girls enrolling in schools concurrently, and the rising number of women's employment rate. Shortly after the US departed Afghanistan in 2021, the government collapsed and the Taliban seized power. The Taliban started to restore the severe guidelines, prohibiting women's fundamental freedoms. The stringent rules were enforced in reality, even if the Taliban claimed they were not as rigorous as they were during their former reign (Bogaert, 2022). Women's rights to employment, education, public attendance, freedom of expression, and the right to cover up were all abandoned by the newly formed government (Bogaert, 2022). Shortly thereafter, women activists organized street demonstrations to challenge anti-women regulations but met brutal repression by the Taliban (BBC, 2024). According to the reports, these protestors faced beatings, abuse, imprisonment, and even threats of death by stoning (Aljazeera, 2024; BBC, 2024).

Afghanistan's population is shaped by various ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Sadat, among others. Pashtuns in comparison to the other ethnic groups have the most shared cultural elements with the Taliban group due to their common Sunni branch of Islam with the fundamental reading of religion and patriarchal social structure; noting that Pashtuns have the highest population among other ethnic groups estimated to be between 42 % (The World Factbook, 2022) to 52.4 % (World Data, 2024) of Afghanistan's population.

How do individuals respond to rapid reactionary social change?

Social changes are not always *progressive* and strive for greater equality; they can also be *reactionary* and aim to establish a hierarchical and unequal society (Becker, 2020). Accordingly, conservatives, particularly those with extreme views, may support social changes that seek to revert to a past that featured more inequality and hierarchy. In the case of Afghanistan, the re-emergence of the Taliban's power led to significant and reactionary changes aiming at re-establishing hierarchical restrictions on women (Sahill, 2023; Singh, 2023). But the question is: How do members of highly disadvantaged groups, here Afghan women, respond psychologically when everything they have accomplished so far is taken away overnight?

To answer this question, we draw on key psychological frameworks that help explain which basic needs are threatened under repressive regimes and how individuals may cope. To conceptualize Afghan women's experiences of disrupted security, we begin with foundational concepts from Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory of basic human motivations and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954). We then anchor our analytical approach in Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which respectively account for how individuals strive to meet core psychological needs and how group-based identities shape responses to social adversity.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) proposed three basic human motivations. 1) *Epistemic motivation is* the desire for certainty, structure, and control. 2) *existential motivation*—the desire for safety and security. 3) *relational motivation*—the desire to affiliate with similar others. These motivations underscore the complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social factors that shape human behaviours. Accordingly, individuals who benefited from epistemic, existential and relational guarantees are likely to justify the system in favour of experiencing stability (Jost et al., 2017). But, when these motivations are at stake/lost, a potential response from individuals grappling with loss is to engage in activities aiming at reclaiming them. For Afghan women, this may inspire some to attempt greater knowledge, assert their identities, and build supportive communities, which this paper explores. Maslow (1954) similarly suggests that fulfilling lower-level needs, such as safety and physiological well-being, is essential before higher-order needs like esteem and self-actualization can be pursued.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) expands on this by identifying three core psychological needs: autonomy (a sense of volition), competence (feeling effective), and relatedness (feeling socially connected) (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2006), crucial conditions that enable the expression of our natural inclinations towards psychological growth, internalization, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000: 229). When these needs are thwarted, psychological well-being suffers (Martela et al., 2023; Tay & Diener, 2011; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). The restrictions imposed following the Taliban's return to power can simultaneously undermine all three psychological needs: the ban on educational and professional opportunities strips women of autonomy and agency in shaping their lives; structural barriers to employment and skill development diminish their sense of competence; and limitations on public life and social participation curtail opportunities for relatedness and meaningful connection with others.

Silence, resistance, and migration: coping strategies

When rapid reactionary social changes occur, as seen in Afghanistan, the individuals may respond in various ways. One response is silence, particularly when internalized oppression takes root. Studies show that individuals from disadvantaged groups may adopt dominant group narratives or internalize negative self-stereotypes, especially when they lack self-esteem or when resistance feels futile (Bell & Burkley, 2014; Bonnot & Croizet, 2007; Burkley et al., 2013; Crocker & Major, 1989). In this context, some Afghan women may have come to accept the restrictive conditions and remain silent in the face of discrimination or pervasive frustration.

Resistance is another response that individuals may exhibit when facing undesired changes. According to social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), when the group is devalued, members may respond by emphasising a shared "us" against "them," which can motivate resistance, particularly when change is perceived as possible (Keshavarzi et al., 2021; Van Zomeren, 2013; van Zomeren et al., 2008). so, members of a disadvantaged group may take (collective) actions to enhance the group's status or to hinder unwanted changes, which in turn can support their own conditions. If resistance seems unattainable, individuals may adopt other strategies. These include social creativity through emphasising positive in-group qualities (Becker, 2012; van Bezouw et al., 2021), or individual mobility, such as emigration, when continued membership in the group is perceived as threatening to one's self-concept (Ellemers, 1991)

Nostalgia can also function as a psychological coping mechanism. When negative social changes occur, members of a disadvantaged group may look back on the past with nostalgia to cope with their unfavourable condition. Research has shown that recalling the nostalgic alleviates feelings of loneliness, meaninglessness and negative mood (Garrido, 2018). Svetlana Boym's (2001) distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia is especially relevant here, while the former drives a desire to recreate a lost past, the latter allows for a contemplative processing of loss. In the absence of happiness, the nostalgia of the favoured past could make the present seem darker (Sedikides et al., 2010) and hence exert adverse effects on well-being (Newman et al., 2020; Newman & Sachs, 2023). Yet, it may inspire individuals to question the current social order by engaging in collective actions aimed at reclaiming an idealised version of the past (Smeekes et al., 2023; Versteegen, 2024; Wohl et al., 2020). Therefore, despite its ambivalent psychological effects, nostalgia can be both a source of emotional relief and a catalyst for social and political engagement. Among Afghan women, nostalgia for progress in pre-Taliban can provoke a sense of despair, yet simultaneously inspires resistance to reclaim the past.

Still, collective resistance is risky, especially in repressive settings. Authoritarian regimes often tend to deter dissent through coercion and fear (Loveman, 1998; McAdam, 1986; Zeineddine & Vollhardt, 2024). Even so, collective action is not impossible under repression; it may take covert forms (Ayanian et al., 2021; Ayanian & Tausch, 2016). During the Taliban's first regime, Afghan women organised secret networks to support one another (Rostami-Povey, 2003). Similar patterns that enable safer forms of engagement may appear to be re-emerging today, which we explore here.

The present study

This study explores how young educated Afghan women psychologically experience and respond to the abrupt reactionary social changes that followed the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Specifically, we ask: (1) How do Afghan women experience the loss of rights and its impact on their psychological needs under the new regime? (2) What psychological coping strategies do they adopt in the face of systemic discrimination and repression? By grounding these questions in social and political psychology theories, we aim to offer a nuanced understanding of how disadvantaged groups endure and resist oppressive conditions in contexts of rapid political change. Noting that while early reports and international statements (e.g., Human Rights Watch, 2024; UN Women, 2024) have documented widespread violations of women's rights in Afghanistan; this study addresses these concerns through the lived experiences and voices of those directly affected.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative inductive analysis to explore the lived experience of Afghan women following the resurgence of the Taliban. This approach makes it possible to obtain a thorough understanding of the phenomenon even with a small sample size (Patton, 2005). We obtained approval from the Central Research Ethics Committee of Yazd University (IR.YAZ.REC.1401.108) before conducting this study to ensure compliance with ethical standards. We conducted 35 interviews with young, educated Afghan women between August and December 2023. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 32 ($M_{age} = 24.74$, $SD = 3.29$) and were recruited through snowball sampling. Initial participants were identified through professional and educational networks and were then asked to suggest additional candidates. Among them, there were 11 Hazara, 6 Pashtun, 4 Sadat, 2 Tajik, 7 Uzbek, and 5 individuals of mixed ethnicity (including 3 Pashtun-Hazara and 2 Pashtun-Tajik). Additional information about our participants, including age, ethnicity, education status, and major, is available in the supplementary material. To achieve a diverse sample, our sampling technique was based on shifting from homogeneity to heterogeneity depending on the place of residence and ethnicity (Robinson, 2014).

Due to safety concerns and geographic limitations, all interviews were conducted remotely via online platforms, specifically Google Meet and Telegram. Interviews were conducted in Dari, the language all participants spoke fluently and by one of the authors, who is originally from Afghanistan and was residing in Iran at the time of the study. The majority of interviews were conducted synchronously. However, in four cases, due to participants' concerns, the interviews were conducted asynchronously. In these instances, the interviewer shared audio-recorded questions in advance, and participants responded by recording and sending their replies when they felt safe. Before every interview, the participants were contacted and given detailed information regarding the goal of the study, that the study is fully scientific, and the voluntary basis of their participation. We assured them that their identities would never be revealed. Thus, the subsequent names are pseudonyms.

After each interview, audio recordings were transcribed, and data were reviewed. The initial three interviews were entirely conducted in an open-ended and exploratory approach, while the subsequent interviews were structured around emergent themes identified from the previous interviews. Following the fourth interview, a set of predetermined questions was prepared, but room was still left for participants to provide additional data unrelated to the questions. For example, participants were asked questions such as, "How do you feel when you think about Afghanistan after the Taliban?", "How do you think this situation will affect the women of Afghanistan today and in the future?", and "How do women support and encourage each other?". The data collection ended with the 35th interview when data saturation was reached (Fassinger, 2005). A short profile of participants, including information about their age, ethnicity, educational status and major, is provided in supplementary material. The duration of the first interviews was approximately 60 min, gradually decreasing to 30 min in subsequent sessions.

To analyze the collected data, first we immersed ourselves in the data; that is, listening to the audio and reviewing the transcripts repeatedly. Our analyses were conducted through the three stages of coding, that is, open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Table 1 depicts information about the coding process conducted in this study. The line-by-line open coding was carried out to obtain a sense of the data. In this stage, we broke the data into small segments, reflecting the patterns of data without organizing them into predefined groups. In the next step of axial coding, the previous codes were assigned to a more abstract theme based on similarities and differences. In axial coding, we grouped the data segments extracted from the previous stage into broader categories according to conceptual similarity. This means that we investigated the relationships between the categories and related the main themes to the subcategories. Finally, in selective coding, the axial codes were grouped into more defined and

Table 1
Coding process.

Raw	Axial coding	Selective coding
1	Violent practices	Deprived human dignity: Experiences of dehumanization and violence
2	Normalization of violence	
3	Dehumanization	
4	Women as commodities	
5	Family and ethnic group as a repressive structure	
6	Restrictions on women's education, and occupations	The domestic prison: Being made invisible
7	Imposing a strict form of hijab	
8	Stay at home and out of the public eye	
9	Return of oppressive cultural elements	
10	Pre-Taliban period as a nostalgia	The dual edge of nostalgia: Loss, despair, and re-appropriation
12	Sense of loss	
13	Regret	
14	Phobia of the future	
15	Past as a basis for the comparisons	
16	challenge the status	
17	Denaturalising the status quo	Resilience in Adversity: Silence, subtle resistance, and exit
18	Shaped women identity	
19	Signals of brutal repression: Fear	
20	Unsupportive family	
21	Dissatisfaction and silence	
22	Secret education classes: covert resistance	
23	Migration	

abstract categories. This means that selective codes depict the contents of all subthemes.

The coding process was carried out independently by the three authors, and then the extracted themes were compared to identify distinctions. Only a few variances in codes were noted which prompted collaborative efforts to establish the most comprehensive coding that accurately represented the participants' experiences. Any remaining disagreements were revisited among the authors, and the final findings were then shared with two participants to ensure the accuracy of our reflections.

Regarding research positionality, we note that this study was conducted by a team with diverse backgrounds, one author from Afghanistan (who conducted the interviews), two from Iran, and one from Germany. The Afghan author conducted the interviews, and this fostered trust, especially given the sensitivity of the topic. We remained aware of potential power dynamics and addressed them by ensuring voluntary participation, maintaining anonymity, and inviting some of the participants to review our interpretations. The research team also engaged in ongoing reflexive discussions, and a team member from Germany with expertise on gender-related research reviewed the findings to examine the fit with current social psychological theories. The team also engaged in ongoing reflexive dialogue to critically assess how our perspectives might shape the analysis.

Results

Based on our analyses, we identified four psychological consequences that occurred in Afghan women after the Taliban re-established their power in 2021. The identified core themes include 1) Deprived human dignity: Experiences of dehumanization and violence; 2) The domestic prison: Being made invisible; 3) The dual edge of nostalgia: Loss, despair, and re-appropriation; 4) Resilience in Adversity: Silence, subtle resistance, and exit. We now elaborate on these core themes.

Deprived human dignity: experiences of dehumanization and violence

Here we elaborate on how Afghan women became targets of various acts of violence raised or intensified by the Taliban, and how this is facilitated by the dehumanizing mechanism. According to the interviewees, the violent practices experienced by Afghan women range from overt and public acts of violence to more subtle displays of oppression; set up to undermine their sense of humanity. "In Takhar province [one of Afghanistan's provinces], they beat girls in public who don't wear a chador [1] and say that they must wear a chador…" Sabzehgol asserted. This statement shows the use of public violence as a means of coercion to ensure compliance with cultural or religious expectations. "Unfortunately, women are sacrificed daily, getting beaten, forced into marriages, excluded from decision-making, and being treated as second-class people," Tala stated. This report signifies the normalization of violence and oppression against women within the Taliban rule. It also reflects that violence against women has become an ordinary part of life that in turn desensitises society to these acts and reduces the perceived severity of the issue.

In such circumstances, women became targets of daily violence, worsened by widespread dehumanization efforts within society – justifying the unequal treatment of women. As shown in previous studies (N. Haslam & Loughnan, 2016; N. Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016); hostile groups intentionally dehumanize the members of subordinate groups to justify the use of violence against them. Golnour stated in this regard:

> *"My ethnic [Pashtuns] see women through a sexist perspective. According to them, a woman is only a number, nothing more [women are not seen as a human being]. They think that a woman is not a human and so she does not have independent opinions, beliefs, or even actions. According to my people [Pashtuns], a good woman wears a good hijab, does not have any relationship (social relations) with the opposite sex, knows how to keep house, and is subordinate to the husband."*

These citations illustrate how the Taliban threatened women's existential needs to feel secure and respected (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). According to Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, safety and belonging are fundamental prerequisites for psychological well-being. In line with the assumptions of Maslow as well as Berger and Luckman (1966), Afghan women experienced a pervasive sense of insecurity which is extended to all women, particularly about attendance in public. They are widely marginalized by excluding from society and not regarded as fully human which is coupled with profound implications for their mental health and well-being. In turn, this creates an environment where fear and anxiety are constant companions. Moreover, this could cause negative appraisals of gender identity which are permanently the focus of oppressive regulations.

The domestic prison: being made invisible

According to what our participants asserted, shortly after their resurgence, the Taliban started imposing restrictions on women's education, and occupations, and forcing them to obey their prescribed dressing [Borqe]. Sanam stated in this regard:

> *"The Taliban confiscated our university cards (student cards) and instructed us to wear black clothes, then we will give you your cards. Every day, charts, banners, statements, and announcements about hijab under the title of wearing an Islamic hijab were attached to the walls."*

It seems that the Hijab for the oppressive power serves as a clear sign of successful oppression. Notably many Afghan women wore

[1] A large piece of cloth that covers the woman's body and only the face exposed, worn especially by some Muslim women.

the hijab voluntarily before the Taliban's rule, however, the new regime enforced a singular, rigidly defined type of hijab. The Taliban-endorsed types of hijabs, known as the burqa and chador, render women invisible by keeping them out of the public eye. At first glance, it may appear that the new restrictions were charged only by the Taliban as a dominant group. At the same time, women's experiences uncovered the multifaceted features of oppression in the new time. First, some families and ethnicities mostly but not limited to Pashtuns were already dissatisfied with the granted rights to women, the resurgence of the Taliban to power allowed them to reassert their restrictive views on the women. Secondly, some families justified such restrictions by citing the changes in the political system. They argued that since women were prohibited from working, there was no need for women to be educated anymore. Reyhaneh stated in this regard:

> *"In Afghanistan, it is widely repeated that women are nothing … my relatives believe that women must only take care of the children of the husband, cook and prepare bread, the same for his brothers, they say that women are only for the home, not work and outside, no education needed…"*

Therefore, the daily lives of women were engulfed by an all-encompassing sense of insecurity due to the direct or indirect actions of the new regime. The newly imposed restrictions and the emergence of a new type of governance resulted in a significant rise in women's unemployment rate (Bogaert, 2022; Singh, 2023). The comparison between the current situation to what they experienced under the previous political regime contributed to the profound feeling of despair about the future among Afghan women. The descriptions suggest that the return of the Taliban threatened women's fundamental need for autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). They were pushed by external factors (Taliban and conservative family members) to stay at home, had to wear the Islamic hijab and were not able to act with a sense of ownership of their behaviour. Moreover, their relational needs were threatened as well by being jailed in their homes, restricting their contact with other women (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The dual edge of nostalgia: loss, despair, and re-appropriation

Previous studies show that nostalgia can assist individuals cope with the real world by preserving self-continuity, life meaningfulness, and social connectedness (Layous et al., 2022; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019; Wildschut & Sedikides, 2023). However, in terms of unfavourable changes, the sense of nostalgia can hurt their well-being by highlighting the losses (Newman et al., 2020; Newman & Sachs, 2023). Indeed, our participants continuously engaged in comparing their present situation with the past, expressing regret for the degree of autonomy, freedoms, and relatively open political atmosphere they experienced in the preceding time. In the case of Afghan women, the nostalgia of the past was accompanied by the feeling of great loss and discontinuity and hence not surprisingly that caused the adverse impact on wellbeing. Mahjan also described the situation as follows:

> *"…in two decades, women in this country have grown significantly. But in a short period, we returned to the dark times of the past years [the first Taliban period]"*.

On the other hand, for some participants, nostalgia—despite its accompanying feelings of regret— serves as a motivating factor that keeps them still hopeful about the future. For some Afghan women, nostalgia provides a basis for the comparisons resulting in the perceived relative deprivation and hence prompts them to challenge the status quo to reclaim the past (Versteegen, 2024). "We studied for twenty years, we had progress, we must not let our progress be lost, we must resist;" Bita stated. This expression signifies nostalgic past fosters hope and resistance mainly by reflecting on the efforts and achievements made over the previous twenty years. Nazanin also stated in this regard:

> *"Maybe it will be very difficult, maybe we will go through a difficult time, but I think that we will definitely succeed, we are not like the women of twenty years ago, we do now allow all things to get lost, we are educated people now."*

Resilience in adversity: silence, subtle resistance, and exit

Our interviewees highlighted the various strategies Afghan women adopted in response to the newly established circumstances caused by the Taliban. Some sympathized with the protesting women (although not demonstrating by themselves) but felt fear about the repercussions of overt protest, some initiated secret online schools for girls and others considered leaving Afghanistan to improve their personal situation.

All interviewees voiced their opposition to the Taliban's regulations. As mentioned earlier, the memory of progress made by women during the pre-Taliban era played a pivotal role in laying the groundwork for resistance against the new circumstances —something that must be preserved (David, 2013; Williams, 2012). The nostalgic period of the pre-Taliban denaturalises the newly established gender norms and patriarchal system for Afghan women. "The new generation of women is not like the women of 20 years ago, that is, they [Afghan women] do not allow the Taliban to dictate to us [women] that we must not leave the house or not to study". Mahtab stated in this regard.

The Afghan women's responses to the newly established political and social environments align well with the predictions of social identity theory. The interviewees frequently used the term "we" instead of "I" to describe the situation, which signifies the shared group membership among Afghan women. According to SIT, members of disadvantaged groups have different options for how to improve their situation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). One strategy that has been studied in repressive contexts is collective protest against the advantaged group (e.g., Ayanian et al., 2021; Ayanian & Tausch, 2016). While none of our participants explicitly declared that they participated in the women's rights protests, they revealed how they understood the uprising of street demonstrations shaped by Afghan

women shortly after the resurgence of the Taliban. "The brave and civil activists of Afghanistan raised their voices in protest and demanded their and other women's rights. I also received much support from these women.", Rana asserted.

Nevertheless, the repressive environment created by the Taliban appeared as an obstacle that demobilised other women from joining the protesters, as reflected in their words. For instance, Bibigol stated, "The same women who protested for women's rights, you saw how they were beaten and tortured [by Taliban]". The severe brutality in repressing activists alarms activists about the repercussions of any further protests and hence serves as a tool of intimidation to silence dissents (Pierskalla, 2010; Young, 2019). Some of our participants, meantime, expressed frustration and despair as they witnessed other women who bravely tried to question the status quo failing in their endeavours. "Many Afghan women protested in Kabul and said that schools should be opened and schools should not be closed, but no one listened to them" Roya asserted. This signifies that despite the overwhelming fear of persecution by the Taliban, still some women opted to directly challenge the status quo. However, despite their valiant endeavors, they encountered significant obstacles in achieving tangible outcomes which in turn affected other women's orientation about the feasibility of change via participating in such collective attempts. This highlights the notion that social movements that fail to achieve their goals can engender feelings of frustration not only for those directly involved but also for others observing the outcomes, impeding future efforts (Pekrun & Stephens, 2010; Tausch & Becker, 2013).

Besides the Taliban's direct repression, the women's associates and relatives were the other authorities that prevented women from participating in any collective action to challenge the discriminatory status quo. This can unpack the complex nature of repression, directly by the restrictive system and indirectly via the families and associates (Lai, 2024). Tala asserted in this regard:

> *"If there was a guarantee, everyone would have stood up and fought and resisted. Families will not allow their daughters to go and face the threat of the Taliban. Personally, my family will never allow me to participate in the demonstration…"*

The obstacles to directly questioning the status quo moved women to adopt a less overt and more secure approach of resistance than in street protests: educating one another. The online training classes were mostly organized voluntarily by Afghan women or non-Afghan teachers who lived outside Afghanistan and hence appeared less risky. According to our interviews, there were groups based on online platforms where Afghan women shared educational documents, such as books and audio. The online platform seemed more practical and secure than the in-person groups and communities. "Women support each other, and a good example of this is providing education to girls (setting up online schools) who do not go to school," Shirin stated. During the first period of Taliban rule, secret women's classes and educational groups were held in private homes (Rostami-Povey, 2003). However, in the subsequent period, there was a shift towards online classes, which appeared to be a more secure option. "Women support each other, which is good in this situation by providing education to girls (setting up online schools); Girls who cannot go to school and this is a place of happiness", Taban stated.

Finally, migration to other countries was considered a prevalent solution to cope with the status quo for those participants who viewed the discriminative circumstances as temporarily unchangeable. According to SIT, individuals with a negative social identity may opt to leave the group to seek upward mobility (Ellemers, 1991, 2001) which for Afghan women could be translated to migration. The migratory intentions were extensively apparent among our participants. For instance, Parigol stated: "As a girl who grew up in Afghanistan, all the hard work and work I had and my education were all multiplied by zero and made me want to continue my education in other countries and immigrate". Thus, the profound feelings of frustration and powerlessness in changing the status quo interacted with a strong inclination to migrate.

Discussion

This paper answered what occurs from a social psychology lens when a disadvantaged yet progressively advancing group, Afghan young women, swiftly loses its achievements due to a rise of reactionary change, namely the Taliban's return. As expected, and referred to in previous reports (Saboor et al., 2022; Shoib et al., 2022; Taheri et al., 2024), our findings indicated the pervasive sense of discrimination among Afghan women stemming from the Taliban's regulations. This was accompanied by feelings of terror and uncertainty about the future. The following discussion is structured around the study's two central research questions to facilitate a clear and focused interpretation of the findings.

How do Afghan women experience the loss of rights and its impact on their psychological needs under the new regime?

The first theme, "Deprived human dignity," illustrates how acts of violence and dehumanization have severely endangered Afghan women's fundamental human needs, particularly safety and dignity, as outlined in Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. These findings also align with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) notion of existential insecurity and Haslam and Loughnan's (2016) model of dehumanization as a mechanism of moral disengagement. As a consequence, Afghan women felt panic, despair and a lack of control and power, shaking their fundamental need for autonomy and competence.

The second theme, "The domestic prison," reflects the Taliban's systematic efforts to control women's movement, appearance, and public participation, which resulted in dismantling Afghan women's autonomy and competence needs as described in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The imposed dress code and bans on education and employment left participants feeling invisible and trapped in domestic roles. Together, these constraints negatively affect psychological well-being. This links directly to the Self-Determination Theory framework, where autonomy (sense of volition) and competence (feeling effective) are central to psychological well-being and in line with previous studies (Martela et al., 2023; Tay & Diener, 2011; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013) demonstrates that the frustration of basic psychological needs is associated with declines in well-being and life satisfaction. Participants' experiences also

revealed how restrictive family norms reinforced political oppression, highlighting the intersection of systemic and cultural repression, consistent with findings from prior research on the anti–Extradition Bill Movement in Hong Kong (Lai, 2024, 2025). Moreover, some Afghan women feel unsupported since they believe that the international community have overlooked them from the time the Taliban returned to power.

The third theme, "The dual edge of nostalgia," shows how reflecting on the pre-Taliban period served as both a source of emotional pain and simultaneously a motivator for resistance. While the feeling of loss related to prior achievements provokes a sense of despair and frustration, it simultaneously moves Afghan women to remember their fundamental rights and to think about how to reclaim them. This finding highlights the dual edge of nostalgia in negating well-being (Newman et al., 2020; Newman & Sachs, 2023) and the mobilising power of a nostalgic past (Boym, 2001; Versteegen, 2024; Wohl et al., 2020). This means that Afghan women draw strength from their past achievements, using nostalgia as a tool to challenge the newly established patriarchal norms.

What psychological coping strategies do they adopt in the face of systemic discrimination and repression?

The fourth theme, "Resilience in adversity," indicates how Afghan women respond to repression through silence, subtle resistance, and exit (i.e., migration). Many of the participants expressed admiration for those women who protested publicly, but few joined protests themselves, mainly attributed to fear of Taliban retaliation and lack of familial support. We also found that out-group threats foster a sense of shared identity among Afghan women, as referred to in previous studies (Paolini et al., 2010; Simon & Klandermans, 2001). However, the sense of identity did not necessarily lead to engagement in collective protests against the status quo. This does not seem consistent with earlier research (e.g., S. A. Haslam & Reicher, 2012; Livingstone et al., 2022; Van Laar et al., 2010) that collective identity unites disadvantaged members and aligns their interests and status and hence motivates them to collectively resist external challenges. In our case, brutal repression signalled by the Taliban and oppressive family and ethnic atmosphere (in some cases) hindered the resistance, at least the overt and direct types.

Importantly, our findings highlight that even in a highly repressive social and political environment, some signs of resistance are still identifiable (Einwohner, 2006; Haslam & Reicher, 2012; Jiménez-Moya et al., 2017) though not in overt forms. In the case of Afghan women who wish to resist, the sense of "we" expressed by participants fuels covert resistance strategies such as informal education networks, online school initiatives, and mutual support groups that minimize the risk of prosecution. This highlights the role of contextual factors, here repressive rulers and patriarchal culture in shaping the form of resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Vollhardt et al., 2020).

However, for some participants, the frustration caused by the sense of inability to change the situation provoked the intention to exit. This aligns with SIT literature on social mobility strategies (Ellemers, 1991, 2001), in which individuals may escape a low-status group rather than engage in collective protest on behalf of the group. This observation is supported by recent reports that over 1.6 million Afghans have left the country since the Taliban takeover in August 2021 (UNHCR, 2024).

In sum, our findings demonstrate that the loss of autonomy and safety under an oppressive situation led to significant psychological consequences for Afghan women, including heightened distress and diminished well-being. Also, we found that nostalgia and shared social identity can serve as vital sources of resilience, even in risky contexts where overt resistance is untenable. These insights go beyond simplistic binaries of resistance versus passivity and acknowledge the subtle, adaptive, and context-dependent strategies that oppressed groups employ to navigate and contest their realities (Bou Zeineddine & Vollhardt, 2024).

Notwithstanding the novelty of our work, we believe that there are still limitations that may impact our conclusions. First, due to the risky conditions in Afghanistan, we opted to conduct the interviews remotely via online platforms, which may have excluded women without reliable internet access. Second, our focus on young, educated women, particularly those with internet access, may bias our findings toward those with greater exposure to global discourses, educational tools, and digital spaces. Likely, these women may articulate their expressions more aligned with global rights-based language or academic frameworks. So, their experiences may differ from those of older, less educated, or rural women whose coping strategies, constraints, and psychological responses might be shaped by different social and cultural norms and material conditions. We recommend that future research include older women, those with limited connectivity, and adopt longitudinal designs to explore how coping strategies evolve over time under ongoing repression. Additionally, while SDT and SIT provide a useful lens to understand participants' experiences and while we took care to let participants' voices guide our analysis, we acknowledge that these Western-developed frameworks may not fully account for the culturally specific dimensions of Afghan women's experiences.

Conclusion

We found that Afghan women experience a pervasive sense of terror and fear in response to the rapid reactionary changes of the Taliban's second era. The anti-women regulations, along with the dehumanization of women, have severely undermined the basic psychological needs of Afghan women for autonomy, competence, and social bonding. We showed how repressive regimes not only restrict external freedoms but also destabilize internal resources for resilience and identity formation. The experiences of Afghan women under Taliban rule underscore the urgent need for sustained global advocacy and intervention to prioritise the protection of women's rights in conflict zones. Afghan women's perception of abandonment by the international community, as we explored, reinforces the psychological toll of isolation. The strategies adopted by women are shaped by the brutal and repressive ruling power and patriarchal cultural elements, pushing them to less overt forms of resistance. The digital strategies employed by some participants underline the importance of transnational digital solidarity that can include, but is not limited to, online education, knowledge-sharing, and community-building, as relatively safe forms of support for women in conflict zones. Future longitudinal and

comparative studies on women in other contexts of reactionary change are needed to assess the long-term psychological impacts of resistance, silence, or migration, and how these strategies evolve within post-conflict settings, rising authoritarian regimes, or conservative backlashes.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Saeed Keshavarzi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Fatema Ebrahimi:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Julia C. Becker:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Ali Ruhani:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the Central Research Ethics Committee of Yazd University (IR.YAZ.REC.1401.108).

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT in order to translate/improve the language. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Funding

Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – SFB 1604 – 501120656.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2025.102250.

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