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75 Years of women representation in Afghanistan: Looking back to look forward

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Abstract

This article analyzes barriers and facilitators to Afghan women's representation in the last 75 years, from Zahir Shah (1933–1973) to Ashraf Ghani (2014–2021) and now under the Taliban (2021–…). We conducted a qualitative analysis using administrative documents and related academic contributions from each period to address this topic. The analysis shows that the representation of women in Afghanistan's public administration (PA) has been limited and passive in terms of both numbers and impacts. Historically, Afghanistan's PA has remained a mostly patriarchal system, where prejudice and gender-based discrimination are a reality in government organizational structures. Our findings show that socio-economic and political realities have contributed to gender inequality and the underrepresentation of Afghan women in PA. These realities include international invasions, conflicts, frequent regime changes, and cultural elements, which encompass a strong traditional culture, specific religious and patriarchal mindsets, and an overall lack of attention to gender issues. Results also reveal that over the past 75 years, women have not been actively involved in the development and decision-making processes in the country. As a result, Afghanistan has never experienced a representative PA that mirrors the demographic groups of society, notably women. This study indicates that the interests of Afghan women have mostly been ignored in the policy-making process and that issues of diversity and gender equality in PA were not on the agenda of the different Afghan regimes.

KEYWORDS
Afghanistan, development, gender equality, public administration, regime change

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes challenges to Afghan women's representation in public administration (PA) in the last 75 years. It aims to identify the changing barriers and facilitators that have contributed to gender inequality and the underrepresentation of women under different regimes: *Zahir Shah* (1933–1973), *Daoud Khan* (1973–1978), the various *Soviet Union-backed regimes* (1978–1992), the *Mujahideen* (1992–1996), the *Taliban* I (1996–2001), the *republic governments* (2001–2021), and the *Taliban II* (2021–…).

The importance of gender equality has been discussed in public administration and development (PAD) scholarships in recent

decades (Du, 2022; Johnston, 2019; Nasser, 2018; Schachter, 2020; Shields, 2009; Wilson & Wilson, 2014). Studies show that gender equality improves government functions, makes governments more responsive and accountable to diverse interests, enhances service quality, and increases trust in public organizations (UNDP, 2021). Numerous legal instruments have been developed to defend, encourage, structure, and evaluate gender equality. Among them are the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (1979), the *Beijing Platform for Action* (1995), the *United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*, and more recently, Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5), which aims to "*achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*" (Chinkin, 2016; UN, 1995; UNDP, 2018). History, geography, culture, and institutions represent specific challenges in deploying these instruments. This is a particular case in less developed and unstable contexts like Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, gender issues, and specifically women's representation in PA, have encountered several challenges over the last 75 years (Abawe, 2010; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Cameron & Kamminga, 2014; Ibrahim & Mussarat, 2015; Junussova & Hashim, 2019; Khadimi, 2020; Larson, 2016; Mariia et al., 2019; Meera & Yekta, 2021; Mosamim & Villeneuve, 2023; Nehan & Cox, 2022; Nijat & Murtazashvili, 2015). Among numerous drivers, regime change has been a constant.

This article focuses on one specific question: Over the last 75 years, what factors have contributed to the underrepresentation of Afghan women in PA? To answer this question, we first conducted a scientific literature review to describe the theoretical approach for our analysis. We then identified the main barriers and facilitators of women's representation in PA. Next, we built a framework to analyze the various official documents produced in different regimes and the policies pushed forward under the different Afghan regimes.

This allows us to identify barriers and facilitators contextual to Afghanistan and each specific historical period. Ideally, this context-specific approach can be applied to other unstable Global South contexts.

The article is organized as follows. First, it presents the representative bureaucracy theory focused on *Passive* and *Active* representation. Subsequently, based on the existing literature, the article discusses gender representation in PA and the barriers and facilitators of women's representation in PA. Following that, the methodology is explained. Next, the case of Afghanistan is presented, followed by the data sources. Finally, the findings, discussion, and conclusion sections are displayed.

2 | REPRESENTATIVE BUREAUCRACY THEORY

An important proposal for representative bureaucracy was presented by J. Donald Kingsley, in his analysis of the English Civil Service (J. Donald Kingsley, 1945). In this publication, his main concern was that the British Civil Service did not represent the whole population's interests in the policymaking process, as it was composed almost exclusively of members of the economic, political, and social elites

(Gusfield, 1958; Lind, 2020; Meier, 1971). He argued that a more representative bureaucracy is necessary to address everyone's interests (Adusah-Karikari & Ohemeng, 2014).

Representative bureaucracy has been a core area of interest for PA for decades (Andrews et al., 2014; Hindera & Young, 1998; Kim, 1994; Meier, 2019). The concept suggests that public organizations should mirror the demographic composition of the population they serve (Choi et al., 2018; Smith & Monaghan, 2013).

According to Mosher (1982), representative bureaucracy is essential to primary democratic principles such as legitimacy (Mosher, 1982). He underlined that it comprises two distinct forms: *Passive* and *Active* types of representation (Coleman et al., 1998; Mosher, 1982). *Passive Representation* is when government organizations appoint and upgrade employees to keep up with the demographics of society (Johnston & Houston, 2018). This *Passive Representation* becomes *Active Representation* "when these shared demographic characteristics result in the promotion and adoption of programs and policies that benefit the populations being represented" (M. D. Bradbury & Kellough, 2008; Gupta, 2020; Johnston, 2019; Smith & Monaghan, 2013). The theory implies that a demographically diverse public sector workforce *(Passive Representation)* will lead to policy outcomes that reflect the interests of all groups represented *(Active Representation)* (Smith & Monaghan, 2013).

According to representative bureaucracy theory, *Passive Representation* may bring greater trust and cooperation on the part of citizens (Ryzin, 2015). It might also generate a greater willingness among women and marginalized groups to see the civil service as a potential employer (Theobald & Haider-Markel, 2009).

Representative bureaucracy is a fit-for-purpose theoretical approach to analyze the representation of Afghan women in PA and the related barriers and facilitators. This theory will be used to understand the level and characteristics of Afghan women's representation in PA during different historical periods.

3 | GENDER REPRESENTATION IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Gender is "a pattern of social relations in which the positions of women and men are defined, the cultural meanings of being a man and a woman are negotiated, and their trajectories through life are mapped out" (Connell, 2006b). Since the 1980s, women-related research has gradually become central in PA (Connell, 2006a; Du, 2022; R. M. Kelly & Newman, 2001; Wilkins, 2007). According to Du (2022), "Women-related research in PA has roughly experienced three stages: *theoretical exploration*, *theoretical expansion*, and *empirical testing*" (Du, 2022). In the early 1960s, based on theoretical exploration by American feminist PA scholars fully aware of the lack of gender awareness in mainstream PA research, launched a "gender enlightenment" in PA theory (Ahn et al., 2019; Belingheri et al., 2021; Goldin, 1991). Since the 1970s, in the stage of theoretical expansion, PA theory in the U.S. has begun to reflect diversity issues (Bolufer & Serrano, 2022; Du, 2022). In the 1990s, for empirical testing,

Stivers (1995, 2002) reflected on the central role of women progressives in the American government reform movement. He called upon incorporating women's experiences and values into PA and the gender lens to address issues such as "power, status, leadership, legitimacy, and government reform" (Stivers, 1995, 2002).

PA research on gender issues led to integrating this perspective into all research frameworks to comprehend better public policy processes and practices (Du, 2022). Existing research on gender is divided into two categories. The first body of the literature analyzes the political and social impact women's representation has on topics such as "governance and policy performance" (Potter & Volden, 2021), "government integrity" (Barnes et al., 2018), "coproduction" (Riccucci et al., 2016), "public-private partnership" (Johnston, 2019), and "women's welfare" (Park & Liang, 2020). A second strand of research focuses on internal administrative issues, elements such as the impact of gender differences on managerial behaviors (Barnes et al., 2018), "gender segregation in the workforce" (Riccucci, 2009), or "the influence of women leaders on employee behaviors, and gender pay gap" (Grissom et al., 2012). Both streams of research explore how gender shapes the experiences of men and women, contributing to the further development of representative bureaucracy as a valid theoretical lens (Du, 2022).

The concrete impact of a more diverse PA workforce has been underlined in various studies. For instance, Disch (2015) shows that when the public sector's employee composition reflects the society it serves, the government will be more responsive and effective (Disch, 2015). Riccucci (2002) concluded that diversity in public sector organizations benefits minority and majority groups and improves overall organizational performance (Riccucci, 2002). Thus, to ensure inclusive development and better democratic governance, help repair trust and confidence in public institutions, and enhance the sustainability and responsiveness of public policies, closing gender gaps in PA is key (Schröter, 2019). Studies show that the integration of women in PA will enable them to share knowledge and

experience with other women, participate in improving work processes, and formulate/support strategies to advance women and greater gender equality (Jones & Presler-Marshall, 2012; Smith & Monaghan, 2013). Additionally, it will allow them to better advocate for other women. They would then serve as role models for younger women inside and outside government (Rawaf, 1990).

Ideally, PA should be representative of society and inclusive of women. Thus, sustainable and practical paths must exist for women to participate and be promoted to decision-making positions at all levels in all sectors (Verba et al., 2014).

In the international policy sphere, we saw the development of instruments to further the gender representativeness of public institutions. For example, the *United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*, the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (1979), and the *Beijing Platform for Action* (1995) (Chinkin, 2016; UN, 1995; UNDP, 2018).

However, women's participation in PA and decision-making positions depends on complex cultural, economic, and societal factors. It varies from country to country, and achieving women's equal participation in PA has remained an ongoing challenge (Madgavkar et al., 2019).

The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) ratified the target of "a minimum of 30% of women in leadership positions" in 1990. This was then reaffirmed in the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 (UN, 1995). While progress is being made regarding the number of women in PA, women still need to be better represented in leadership positions in many countries (Mosamim & Villeneuve, 2023). According to the "International Labor Organization (2020)," the G20 countries' average is below 30% (see Figure 1). None reached the SDG target of 50% women in senior and middle management positions (ILO, 2020).

Studies show that women have made strides in PA advancement. This was achieved through various strategies, policies, and legislation
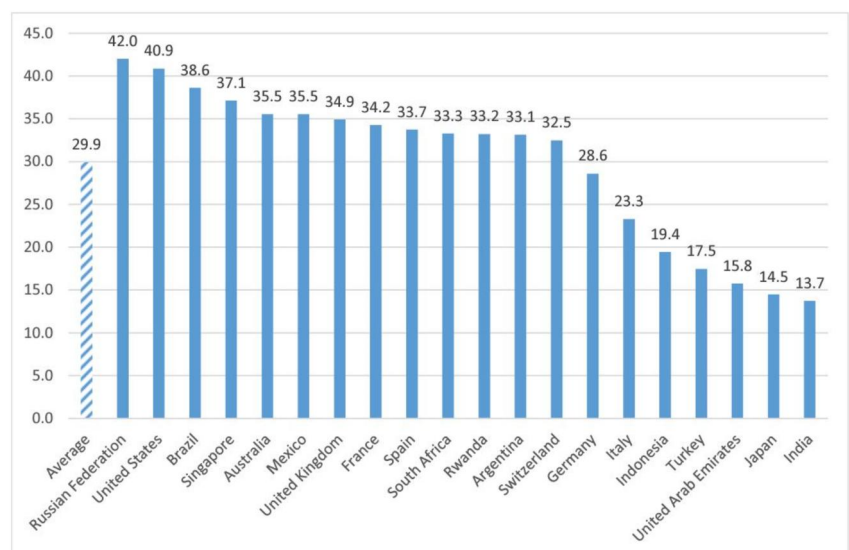

FIGURE 1 Share of women in middle and senior management positions (latest years available, in %). *Source*: International Labor Organization, 2020.

for gender mainstreaming (Verba et al., 2014). However, several barriers to women's equal participation in PA are still present, especially in decision-making positions (Goetz, 1992).

4 | BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS OF WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN PA

In the following sections, we present the barriers and facilitators of women's representation in PA. Most barriers identified are linked to socio-economic and political factors, while facilitators relate to policies and laws.

4.1 | Barriers to female representation in PA

Yun (2020) states that although PA is ideally guided by fairness, accountability, justice, equality, and non-discrimination principles, gender equality and women's empowerment in the civil services workforce are not yet a reality (Yun, 2020). PA often remains a patriarchal institution in many developed and developing countries, "perpetuating gender-biased traditions, attitudes, and practices" (UNDP, 2018).

Globally, women face several challenges in PA due to cultural stereotypes and gender-based discrimination in the workplace. These barriers range from "*discrimination, prejudice, harassment, violence, religious mindsets, stereotyped gender roles, work–life conflicts, unconscious bias, organizational culture, male domination in organizational structures, patriarchal system*, and processes such as *performance evaluation regimes* and some *reforms*" (Connell, 2006a, 2006b; Manganaro & Alozie, 2011). These dynamics are categorized as either *glass ceilings* or *glass walls*. The *glass ceilings* are "invisible artificial barriers created by attitudinal and organizational prejudices, which block women from senior executive positions" (Hejase et al., 2013). On the other hand, *glass walls* are defined as "invisible artificial barriers that limit women's occupational segregation" (Wilson & Wilson, 2014).

In liberal democracies with "traditions of greater equality," such as the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Germany, women are nevertheless underrepresented in PA, and this is despite decades of gender legislation and European Union policy guidance (Johnston, 2019). Literature shows that this situation is due to several factors, including a significant pay differential between the public and private sectors in some countries, the high level of childcare costs, poor implementation of equality policies, and existing 'masculine' organizational cultures (Johnston, 2019).

The reality in contexts with more recent traditions of equality, notably in least-developed countries, is different. A study in Bangladesh reveals that women are underrepresented culturally, socially, and economically in society (Ferdous, 2014). In Nigeria, barriers such as "lack of effective government action, lower levels of female employment and education, sexist attitudes, and a corrupt political system" contributed to the underrepresentation of women in

government (L. Kelly, 2019). In Jordan, the number of women is low in ministries that are considered "male ministries," such as the Ministry of Interior (Jordan, 2007). The situation is the same in Kyrgyzstan (UNDP, 2012b), and in Colombia (UNDP, 2012a). In Ghana, women encounter sociocultural barriers to working in public service, including the belief that women are less capable than their male colleagues. To some scholars, this is due to a colonial legacy that disempowered women and a lack of political will to include women (Bawa & Sanyare, 2013).

In Afghanistan, regime change has had a major impact, in addition to the abovementioned determinants. Afghan institutions have had to deal with international invasions, conflicts, civil wars, and unstable politics and economy. The literature also shows that a 'regime change' not only generates new rules and political opportunities but also may bring alternatives in power distribution and representation of groups, including women (Stockemer & Kchouk, 2017; Waylen, 1994). An analysis shows that most regime changes (1946–2014 and covering more than 140 countries), irrespective of the nature of the transition involved, did not improve the representation of women in PA (Stockemer & Kchouk, 2017).

4.2 | Facilitators of women's representation in PA

Scholarship suggests that "ratifying, strengthening, harmonizing, and implementing relevant constitutional provisions, legislation, and policy frameworks" can offer a robust basis for promoting gender equality and women's representation in PA (Auer et al., 2011; ILO, 2012; Lee, 2015; Strachan et al., 2004). Studies show that national constitutions, laws, and policies can "prioritize women's leadership with temporary special measures" (Abrha, 2017; Strachan et al., 2004).

Globally, countries such as Rwanda have included gender quotas in their constitution (Strachan et al., 2004). South Sudan's Transitional Constitution (2011) has set out the equal rights of men and women to participate in public life (Auer et al., 2011). In Colombia, in addition to constitutional provisions, a quota of 30% is reserved for women in decision–making positions. This applies to all branches of government (ILO, 2012). South Africa's Constitution (1996) focuses on having a representative civil service, which provides for "gender balance" (Lee, 2015). Nepal's parliament (2006) ratified a resolution to its "Civil Service Act" to guarantee that women hold 33% of positions in all state sectors (Neumann, 2018). Belgium has promoted women's presence and participation at all employment levels by establishing an equal opportunity scheme for each civil service sector (OSCE/ODIHR, 2014).

In the literature, good practices are underlined, such as "the Law on Gender Equality" in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2003) and "the Law on Promotion of Gender Equality" in Mongolia (2011) (OSCE/ODIHR, 2014). Countries such as South Africa and Botswana, due to the successful implementation of affirmative action policies and investment in education and PA, are close to "gender parity" in decision-making positions (Johnston, 2019). Among Arab countries,

only two have surpassed "gender parity": UAE (around 66.7% in 2014) and Kuwait (51.8% in 2015) (Nasser, 2018).

The various laws enacted by these countries include "clear definitions of terms and indicators, monitoring and accountability mechanisms, clarification of the responsibilities of critical agencies, coordination mechanisms, and protection of women" during PA reform (Davies & Robison, 2016; Lee, 2015).

What we found in the literature is a lack of studies comprehensively analyzing the barriers and facilitators, including regime change, of women's representation in PA. This article aims to address this gap, particularly in the case of Afghanistan.

5 | METHODOLOGY

This article applies a two-step methodology to address the gap in the literature: (1) It develops an ad hoc analytical framework of barriers and facilitators of women's representation in PA; (2) It applies such a framework to the case of Afghanistan. In particular, the analytical framework is used to analyze relevant administrative documents and academic contributions. We chose this approach to be able to answer our research question on the factors that have contributed to gender inequality and the underrepresentation of Afghan women in PA in the last 75 years. It has to be noted that, except for the last two decades (2001–2021) (Yusufzada et al., 2019), there has not been a clear distinction between administration and politics (Ehler et al., 2015; Lister, 2007) due to a lack of adequate historical research and local discussions about the meaning of PA (Mirwais Ayobi & Haroun Rahimi, 2018). In fact, the Western interpretation of PA traditions, including the separation of administration and politics adopted in developed countries, was not practiced in Afghanistan (Overeem, 2021). For this reason, this article follows the Demir and Nyhan (2008) approach, which argues that politics and administration are inherently interactive due to the shared nature of their responsibilities (Demir & Nyhan, 2008). Therefore, we will address the situation of women in the administration and politics.

5.1 | The case study: Afghanistan

Afghanistan is considered one of the worst places in the world to be a woman (GIWPS, 2021). Throughout history, the status of Afghan women has changed, sometimes radically. Afghan women's rights have rolled back and forth between remarkable progress and destructive rollbacks, from King Amanullah, who granted women the right to vote in 1919, to the Taliban implementation of 'gender apartheid' in the 1990s and now in 2023. Various factors, including culture, geography, religion, and political changes, make the case of Afghanistan interesting. Over the last 75 years, the country has suffered foreign invasions, conflict, and political transformation, and all these factors impact the status of women, especially their representation in PA.

5.2 | Data sources

To analyze the challenges to women's representation in PA, we collected administrative documents such as drafts of the Afghan Constitution from different periods, gender policies, action plans, and other legal frameworks focused on gender issues and women's rights in different regimes. These documents were analyzed using our analytical framework (see Figure 2). In these documents, we reviewed the sections highlighting gender equality, women's rights, and women's representation in government and identifying the main challenges Afghan women faced while integrating into PA under different regimes. The main documents analyzed in this research are listed in Table 1. Reviewing these documents helped us find at least what has been written about gender, women's rights, and women's representation in PA in different regimes.

We also reviewed related academic contributions, including related national and international reports on the topic. By reviewing these academic contributions, we aimed to find out the barriers these women have faced and the effectiveness of gender policy implementation. We conducted a literature review to examine the role of gender in PA, the contribution of PA in advancing women's rights, and the main barriers women face in PA, especially in decision-making positions in the Global South. We used specific keywords such as *gender equality, PA, development, women`s rights, representative bureaucracy, diversity,* and *barriers* to find related academic articles from different journals, including the Public Administration and Development (PAD). Among more than 150 articles related to the topic, we analyzed 45 articles that highlighted and discussed the important aspects of the research topic.

We analyzed the collected data using the analytical framework in Figure 2. The elements mentioned are derived from the literature review. We applied this analytical framework to the identified archival documents. The framework was used to develop a specific codebook for analyzing the documents.

The process of analyzing the documents was followed by "data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification" (Miles & Huberman, 1986). At the end of the data analysis process, the triangulation technique (Miles & Huberman, 1986) was used to enrich the validity and credibility of the literature review findings.

6 | FINDINGS

6.1 | The analytical framework on the barriers and facilitators of women's representation in PA

The analytical framework is developed based on the literature review (see Figure 2). This framework mainly explains the barriers and facilitators of women's representation in PA and its outcome. It shows that barriers and facilitators of women's representation in PA relate to socio-economic and political factors and the effective implementation of facilitators. In the framework, the element of
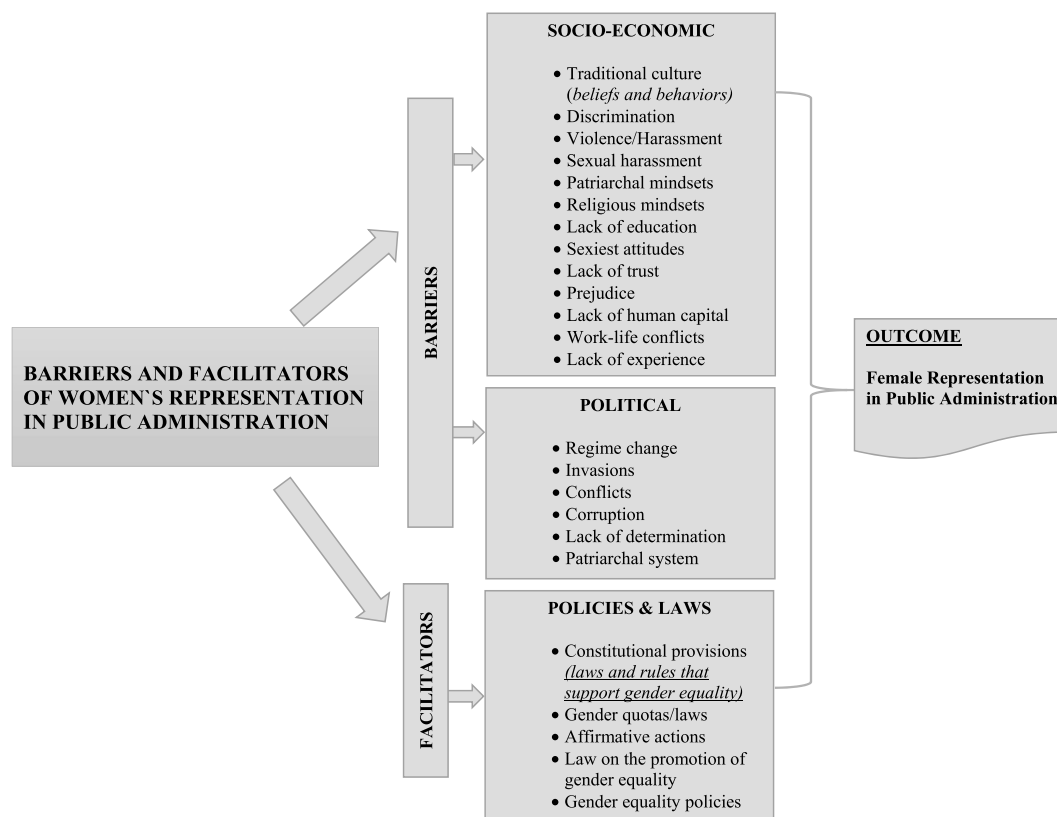
FIGURE 2 The analytical framework. *Source*: (Authors' elaboration of the literature review, 2023).

TABLE 1 The main archival documents analyzed in the context of Afghanistan.

No	Document
1	Constitution drafts of 1923, 1964, 1977, 1980, 1987, and 2004
2	The Bonn Agreement 2001
3	Afghanistan Millennium Development Goals—2001–2015
4	Declaration of Essential Rights of Afghan Women 2002
5	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women 2003
6	Work Plan of the Afghan Government 2004
7	Gender and the MDGs 2007
8	The Afghanistan Compact 2006
9	The Afghanistan National Development Strategy 2008–2013
10	National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan 2008–2018

"traditional culture" in the case of Afghanistan means the traditional and cultural beliefs and attitudes of people toward women's rights and gender equality. In addition, the "constitutional provision" here refers to laws and rules mentioned in the constitution to support women's rights and gender equality in society and government. Properly addressing these elements should lead to better outcomes. We used this analytical framework to categorize the barriers and facilitators of Afghan women's representation in PA.

6.2 | Document analysis: Barriers and facilitators of women's representation in PA in Afghanistan

Applying the analytical framework to the document analysis shows that Afghan women's status and representation in PA have moved back and forth between remarkable progress and destructive setbacks in the different regimes (Meera & Yekta, 2021). We present below the results of our findings in different regimes based on the elements in the framework (see Figure 2).

6.2.1 | The first efforts toward modernizing Afghanistan and gender equality (1880–1929)

In the case of Afghanistan, the modernization era had a visible impact on the status of Afghan women. Abdul Rahman Khan (1880–1978) was the first king who tried to modernize Afghanistan by establishing a centralized state and implementing social reforms, including removing specific customary practices related to women (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Ibrahimi, 2009). He raised the age of marriage and gave women the right to divorce - under particular conditions - and inheritance rights to their father's and husband's properties (Rashidi & Uğur Göksel, 2019). His wife, Bobo Jan, was a liberal woman and the first Afghan queen to publicly appear in European-style dress without a veil (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Also, she was entrusted with numerous important missions to mediate debates between opposing parties

(Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). In this period, "the stage was set for women's rights to become entwined with power struggles and contesting visions of modernity, nationalism, and cultural integrity" (Gabija & Rosamund, 2023).

In the reign of Amanullah Khan (1919–1929), the modernization process became central for the government. Inspired by Mustafa KemalAtatürk's reforms in Turkey, he ordered administrative, economic, and social reforms to improve women's rights (Gabija & Rosamund, 2023). In the Constitution, the King also guaranteed civil rights for men and women (Constitution, 1923) and gave women the right to vote in 1919 *(one year before white women got the right to vote in the United States)* (Burki, 2019; Roya, 2023). Moreover, Amanullah Khan opened new schools for boys and girls, banished forced marriages, and advocated against bigamy and obligatory dress codes (Roya, 2023). In addition, his family members engaged in social and political activities—for instance, the King's sister, Kobra, founded "Anjuman-I-Himayat-I-Niswan" *(Organization for Women´s Protection)* in the early 1920s (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Amanullah's wife, Queen Soraya, took her veil, founded Afghanistan's first women's journal, and encouraged women to participate actively in nation-building (Nehan & Cox, 2022). In fact, Queen Bobo Jan and Queen Soraya were the first two queens who promoted gender equality and encouraged Afghan women to participate in political activities and government (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Nehan & Cox, 2022). The King and Queen's social reforms accelerated after their trip to Europe (1927–1928) (Ibrahimi, 2009). However, these reforms were not equally welcomed across the country. The reactions against these reforms, led by conservative groups, forced the King to leave the country in 1929 (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). The main challenge to modernizing and promoting gender equality during Abdul Rahman Khan and Amanullah Khan's time was the resistance and revolt of conservative and religious leaders *(mostly living in rural areas)* (Roya, 2023).

6.2.2 | The longest monarchy under Zahir Shah (1933–1973)

Another attempt to modernize Afghanistan happened under Mohammad Zahir Shah's rule (1933–1973). He revived many of Amanullah's initiatives (Roya, 2023). Overall, women's status, especially their representation in PA, showed visible progress in this era. In education, the first women's college *"Masturat"* was established in Kabul in 1950, and the first girls' school was founded in Herat in 1957 (Burki, 2019). In urban areas, women could attend colleges and participate in economic and political activities. The Constitution of 1964, a milestone document for women's rights, restored women's right to vote, instituted their right to run for office and ratified their legal equality with men (Constitution, 1964). After Queen Soraya's overthrow, women's first active engagement at the national level occurred at the Constitutional Loya Jirga, where four women participated in the Consultative Council (Roya, 2023). Later, Kubra Nurzai became the first female minister (Public Health) in January

1966, followed by Shafiqah Ziyai in 1969 (Sarwar et al., 2021). In this era, several women worked in leadership positions (see Table 2) in the government, parliament, and the Senate (Burki, 2019; Nehan & Cox, 2022).

As a Prime Minister (1953–1963), Daoud Khan played a key role in the country's development process and women's rights (Roya, 2023). Under his leadership, women were offered positions as "air stewardesses for the national Ariana Airlines, receptionists in government offices, and telephone operators with the national service" (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). But almost all the reforms, laws, and decrees related to women were implemented mainly in urban areas (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Ibrahim & Mussarat, 2015; Roya, 2023). When the government attempted to push urban modernization efforts in rural areas, it encountered opposition from religious and local leaders (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). As a result, an upheaval broke out in December 1959, led by tribal and religious leaders, that destroyed government buildings and killed many of the women who dared to go out and demonstrate their rights (Kandiyoti, 2005).

6.2.3 | The first republic period under Daoud Khan's rule (1973–1978)

In 1973, Daoud Khan removed Zahir Shah from power in a bloodless coup. He declared Afghanistan a Republic with him as its first president. This resulted in moderate improvements for women (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). The Constitution of 1975 stated that all Afghans are

TABLE 2 Women's representation in government, parliament, and the Senate during Zahir Shah.

No	Name	Position
1	Najiba Popalzai	Minister of Labor
2	Shegufa Sherzai	Representative of the Northern Rug Cartel
3	Storai Zadran	Minister of Interior Affairs
4	Laleh Rahmanzai	Fruit Magnate
5	Dornaaz Jalbani	Minister of Rural Development
6	Nasrin Hussani	Minister of Urban Development and Housing
7	Jamila Karzai	Leader of the Afghanistan Women's Council
8	Dr. Anahita Ratibzad	Member of Parliament
9	Ruqiyyah Habib Abu Bakr	Member of Parliament
10	Masumah Ismati Wardak	Member of Parliament
11	Humaira Malikyar	Member of Senate
12	Saljuqi Gardizi	Member of Senate
13	Azizah Gardizi	Member of Senate

Source: (Burki, 2019).

equal before the law, and women are free to choose their spouses (Ehler et al., 2015). Later, in 1977, a legislative change was ratified in the civil code declaring that "women would be free to choose their spouses regardless of their families' wishes or choices" (Berry, 2003; Nemat, 2011). The Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women (RAWA) was founded in the same year, representing a prime example of women's political and social engagement in the new Afghan Republic (Roya, 2023). Despite Daoud Khan's "cautious approach" to women's rights to avoid opposition, women were elected to the parliament and worked in leadership positions in the government (Nehan & Cox, 2022; Nemat, 2011). However, the laws establishing women's rights and social reforms were only implemented and followed among a small elite population in a few big cities such as Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif (Roya, 2023).

6.2.4 | The Soviet Union backed regimes (1978–1992)

As a Soviet-backed socialist organization, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was established in 1965. They overthrew and killed President Daoud Khan in a bloody coup in April 1978 (Sarwar et al., 2021). The Democratic Organization of Afghan Women, a component of the PDPA, was also established in 1965 to "eliminate illiteracy among women, ban forced marriages, and do away with dowries" (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). The communist regimes' agenda led to implementing compulsory education and ensuring women's equal rights in all social spheres - including the government (Gabija & Rosamund, 2023). The government insistently followed gender equality in line with Communist ideals and sought the support of women for legitimacy (Roya, 2023). Afghan communists proclaimed they would lead the society toward greater prosperity, equality, and freedom for both men and women (Gabija & Rosamund, 2023). The government initiated several social reforms, including obligatory education for girls and instituting a minimum marriage age *(16 for girls)* (Ehler et al., 2015). In October 1978, a decree was issued ensuring equal rights for women (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

Afghanistan also signed the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1983 (Gabija & Rosamund, 2023). In this era, urban women became important for the continued performance of the state, particularly in the education and health sectors leadership positions in government, and seven women were members of parliament in 1989 (Roya, 2023). However, many Afghans did not welcome the Communists due to their anti-religion ideologies and gender equality reforms; for that, like the previous regimes, conservative and religious leaders, mostly living in rural areas, started rebellions against the Communists (Burki, 2019; Roya, 2023). The United States also used this opportunity to counter the Soviet Union by supporting the Mujahideen financially and militarily (Roya, 2023). During this era, incidents of "shootings of women in Western clothes, the killing of PDPA reformers in the rural areas, and general harassment of women social workers" increased

(Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). After the departure of the last Soviet soldiers in 1989, Afghanistan turned into a civil war ground between the Mujahideen and the tribal powers. The barriers and facilitators of Afghan women's representation in PA during the regimes mentioned above are summarized in Table 3.

This table indicates that, besides others, conservative and religious mindsets, along with traditional cultures, mostly in rural areas of Afghanistan, contributed to the underrepresentation of women in PA and the rise of more Islamist, fundamentalist, and totalitarian regimes such as the Mujahideen and the Taliban. These drivers also contributed to banning the country's modernization, liberalization, and development processes.

6.2.5 | The beginning of a tragedy for Afghan women (1992–1996)

Even though the Communist state collapsed in 1992, "the civil war continued as the deterioration of women's rights accelerated" (Roya, 2023). As a result, women were once again confined to their homes (Nemat, 2011), veil stipulations returned, and women were deprived of office work and girls of education. The Mujahideen proclaimed these to be a "hub of debauchery and adulterous practice," and therefore shutdown (Roya, 2023). In fact, Afghan women were the main victims of civil war during the Mujahideen (Vijay et al., 2016). In this period (1992–1996), there was almost no progress on women's rights, and women were increasingly prohibited from public services (Amiri et al., 2004; Berry, 2003). The conflict, an extreme religious ideology, a lack of political and economic stability, and the patriarchal mindsets were the main barriers confronting the representation of women in PA in this period (Abawe, 2010; Khadimi, 2020; Nijat & Murtazashvili, 2015).

6.2.6 | Afghan women's status under the Taliban regime I (1996–2001)

In 1996, the Taliban *(a fundamentalist and extreme militant Islamic group)* regained power in Afghanistan (UNAMA & OHCHR, 2009). The Taliban enforced a strict separation between men and women, as per their ideological understanding of Islam (Hassany et al., 2009). To monitor and control women's behavior and banish them from all aspects of public life, the Taliban formed a department for the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice (Amar Bil Maroof Wa Nahi An al-Munkar) (Nemat, 2011). The Taliban banned TV but used *Radio Sharia* daily to announce their new strict edicts to the citizens, especially women, and reminding the duty of citizens to the country and Islam (Bajraktari & Parajon, 2008). Under the Taliban, wearing a veil (Burqa) was compulsory. Women were prohibited from leaving home except to buy food (Denied, 2001). If women did leave home, they had to be accompanied by a *Mahram* (male relative).

Under the Taliban I, women were deprived of all areas of public life, including access to employment, education, and healthcare

TABLE 3 Barriers and facilitators of Afghan women's representation in PA (1933–1992).

Zahir Shah's rule (1933–1973) **(Including the time Daoud Khan was the Prime Minister 1953–1963)**	
Female Representation in PA	
• Women worked in public services, leadership positions in PA, and politics (see Table 2) *(more data on the exact number and percentage of these women are not available)*	

Barriers	**Facilitators**
➢ Rebellion broke out in December 1959, led by some religious and tribal leaders, mainly in Kandahar, Jalalabad, Khost, and Wardak provinces	✓ The establishment of the first women's college (Masturat—Kabul, 1950)
➢ One of the main reasons for this resistance and rebellion was the centered government's efforts to impose gender "equality" reforms	✓ The foundation of the first girls' school (Herat, 1957)
➢ Government buildings were attacked and destroyed, and mobs killed some women who dared to venture out unveiled	✓ The Constitution of 1964 gave women the right to vote and run for office
	✓ The acceleration of the pace of social reforms
	✓ Large-scale external funding for developmental projects from the USA and the Soviet Union
	✓ Encouraging women to seek out less traditional opportunities (government positions)
	✓ No large-scale public protest against the reforms
	✓ Enough determination to implement more ambitious modernization programs
	✓ Gender policies and reforms were supported by women of the urban upper and middle class
	✓ The expansion of implementing female empowerment initiatives

Daoud Khan`s period as president (1973–1978)	
Female Representation in PA	
• Women worked in public services and leadership positions in PA *(more data on the exact number and percentage of these women are not available)*	

Barriers	**Facilitators**
➢ In reality, the enacted laws on women's rights and gender equality were only implemented and adhered to among the small elite population of Kabul, Herat, and Mazari Sharif, outside the conservative areas	✓ 1975 Constitution enacted the issue of "gender equality"—also declared that all Afghans are equal before the law
	✓ Women had the right to choose their spouses regardless of their families' wishes or choices
	✓ The establishment of (RAWA) in 1977

The Soviet Union regimes (1978–1992)	
Female Representation in PA	
• Women worked in public services - in urban areas, 70% of teachers and 50% of doctors were women *(more data on the exact number and percentage of these women are not available)*	

Barriers	**Facilitators**
➢ The revolutionary pace of social change caused concern among the religious leaders and tribal chiefs in the interior	✓ A rise in women's education
➢ They viewed compulsory education, especially for women, as going against the grain of tradition, anti-religious, and a challenge to male authority	✓ Women's representation in parliament
➢ Women in Western clothes were shot	✓ Women were also prominent in other traditionally male careers, such as law and engineering
➢ General harassment of female social workers increased	✓ Mass literacy for women and men of all ages was introduced
➢ Religious sensitivities increased against the regime/s policies—especially in rural areas	✓ In October 1978, a decree was issued with the explicit intention of ensuring equal right/s for women

Source: (Authors' elaboration/takeaway from analyzing documents on Afghanistan, 2023).

(Farooqi, 2018). This period was the darkest era for women's rights in Afghanistan (Manganaro & Alozie, 2011). In reality, there was no PA system under the Taliban, except for some male-led offices that were used for their administrative activities (Berry, 2003). There was no constitution draft; they only used the Quran *(the holy Islamic book)* and Sharia law as the basis of the laws, including regarding women's rights (Mobasher et al., 2022). As a result, women `s representation in government agencies and other sectors decreased almost to 0% (Jureńczyk, 2019). The role of women was reduced to housework, with doors closed and windows painted over (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014). In the Taliban State, "a woman had the value of a thing, an object, not a living creature" (Robson et al., 2002). However, the fall of this regime (2001) brought new hope for Afghanistan, specifically regarding women's rights and freedom (Naz, 2018).

6.2.7 | A new hope for Afghan women's rights (2001–2021)

After the September 11 events, the United States, with its allies, invaded Afghanistan to fight Al-Qaeda and terrorism. This caused the fall of the Taliban in 2001. In the same year, the Bonn Conference was held by the UN to establish new democratic institutions for Afghanistan. Various international donors invested and provided financial assistance in building democracy and supporting gender equality initiatives (Khadimi, 2020). In fact, several initiatives and legal frameworks were adopted in this direction. For instance, in early 2001, the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) was established as a leading institution to promote women's rights and advancement and to push for adopting gender policies in the country. Later, in 2004, Ministerial Gender Units were introduced. The Afghan government transferred $10 million to the MoWA to promote the status of women in society (Sumitra et al., 2023). The international community and the Afghan government set a target—ensuring at least 30% of women's representation in public services and decision-making positions in PA by 2020 (Khadimi, 2020). Gender units and the MoWA were responsible for monitoring the progress of women's representation in each ministry. To achieve this target, different gender policies were implemented. Among them, the "National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) 2008–2018" was the main gender policy document in the country (Mosamim & Villeneuve, 2023).

In 2004, Afghanistan adopted a new constitution that supported gender equality and women's representation in PA and forbade discrimination (Pasarlay, 2016). Although the Constitution (2004) was noted as advancing women's rights (Constitution, 2004), "it nonetheless lacked protection and enforcement, as neither a supremacy nor a remedy clause was included" (Gabija & Rosamund, 2023). The same year, Afghanistan experienced its first presidential election in which a woman *(Massouda Jala)* was a candidate. Overall, the status of Afghan women changed positively *(mostly in urban areas)*, and the representation of women in PA increased. For instance, Afghan women comprised 27% of the parliamentary seats,

20% of the provincial councils' seats, 28% of the public services, and 11% of decision-making positions (Mosamim & Villeneuve, 2023). However, the results reveal that the Ministerial Gender Units were established only in 15 out of 56 ministries (Khadimi, 2020; Mosamim & Villeneuve, 2023). Findings also show that women who worked in leadership positions had more of a symbolic representational role, and this Passive Representation did not turn into Active Representation due to institutional and non-institutional barriers (present mostly in rural areas) (Mosamim & Villeneuve, 2023; Nijat & Murtazashvili, 2015). With the return of the Taliban to power in August 2021, nearly all the investments and achievements on the issue of women's rights were annihilated.

6.2.8 | A destructive rollback for Afghan women (2021–...)

The regaining of power by the Taliban in August 2021 has not only led to the collapse of a democratic government but represented a considerable step back for women (Sumitra et al., 2023). Women are once again deprived of their fundamental rights, including the right to education and work (Mallyar, 2023). The Taliban II is following the same ideology and policy on women's rights as the Taliban I did back in 1996. The Taliban banned schools for female students above sixth grade, shut the doors of universities for female students, and fired almost all female civil servants - except those working in the education and health sectors *(but under strict regulation—including wearing Hijab)* (Akbari & True, 2022). Currently, there are no women in the Taliban's interim cabinet or other leadership positions in the government. Despite national and international concerns about systematic gender discrimination, not being recognized by any countries, suffering from sanctions, and diplomatic pressures, the Taliban authorities are still implementing strict gender-based discrimination against women. The recent UN reports conclude that 'gender apartheid' is happening under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, and its seriousness needs to be addressed in international laws (Banjo, 2023).

The barriers and facilitators of Afghan women's representation in PA during the Mujahideen, Taliban I, the republic governments, and Taliban II are explained in Table 4. This table shows that under the Mujahideen and the Taliban, while we see countless barriers, there are no facilitators. Under republic governments, although several facilitators existed, some of these same barriers still contributed to the underrepresentation of women in PA.

As a result, although the issue of women's position in various sociopolitical spheres has been a vital part of the political discourse over the last hundred years (Ashraf Nemat & Nemat, 2011), gender equality and women's representation in PA have confronted various barriers and facilitators in the last 75 years (see Figure 3), in which some of them are entirely different compared to other developing countries (Vijay et al., 2016). Despite some progress being made in this regard in a few regimes, the fact is that the country has remained more of a rural, patriarchal, traditional, and religious society (Nijat &

TABLE 4 Barriers and facilitators of Afghan women's representation in PA (1992–…).

The Mujahideen's period (1992–1996)	
Female Representation in PA	
• Women were increasingly prohibited from public services *(more data on the exact number and percentage of these women are not available)*	
Barriers	**Facilitators**
➢ Women were the main victims of civil war	✓ None
➢ Extreme religious ideology	
➢ Traditional cultures	
➢ Patriarchal mindsets	
➢ A lack of political and economic stability	

The Taliban's first rule (1996–2001)	
Female Representation in PA	
• Female representation in PA almost decreased to 0% *(more data on the exact number and percentage of these women are not available)*	
Barriers	**Facilitators**
➢ The darkest period for Afghan women in history	✓ None
➢ Women were banned from education and work	
➢ Strict limitations on women's social freedoms	
➢ Extreme religious mindset	
➢ Extreme patriarchal mindset/system	
➢ No Constitutional draft	
➢ Afghanistan looked like a real jail for women	

The republic governments (2001–2021)	
Female Representation in PA	
• Women comprised almost 28% of public services and around 11% of leadership positions in PA in 2021	
• Women working in leadership positions had more of a symbolic representation	
Barriers	**Facilitators**
➢ Traditional cultures	✓ Constitution 2004—equal rights
➢ Lack of gender awareness programs	✓ The ratification of CEDAW
➢ Patriarchal mindsets/system	✓ The establishment of MoWA (2001) and the Ministerial Gender Units (2004)
➢ Religious mindsets	✓ The first presidential election (2004) and the first female candidate
➢ Violence against women	✓ The endorsement of the law on the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW—2009)
➢ Sexual harassment	✓ The reservation of 27% of the parliamentary seats and 20% of the provincial councils' seats for women
➢ Lack of trust in women's ability	✓ The implementation of Positive Discrimination Action Policies
➢ Corruption	✓ The implementation of NAPWA
➢ Discrimination against women	
➢ Lack of security, including job security	
➢ Lack of political determination	
➢ Political tensions	
➢ Copy-past/imported gender policy drafts	

(Continues)

T A B L E 4 (Continued)

Barriers	Facilitators
➢ The ineffectiveness of gender policy implementation	
➢ Lack of access and less attention to the rural areas	

The Taliban's second regime (2021–2023)

Female Representation in PA

- Almost all female civil servants have been fired *(except in some of the Health and Education sectors)*

- There are no women in the Taliban interim cabinet and other leadership positions in the PA

Barriers	Facilitators
➢ A dark flashback for Afghan women's rights	✓ None
➢ Girls are banned from education above 6th grade	
➢ The doors of universities are shut for girls	
➢ Strict limitations on women's social freedoms	
➢ Afghanistan has turned again into a jail for women	

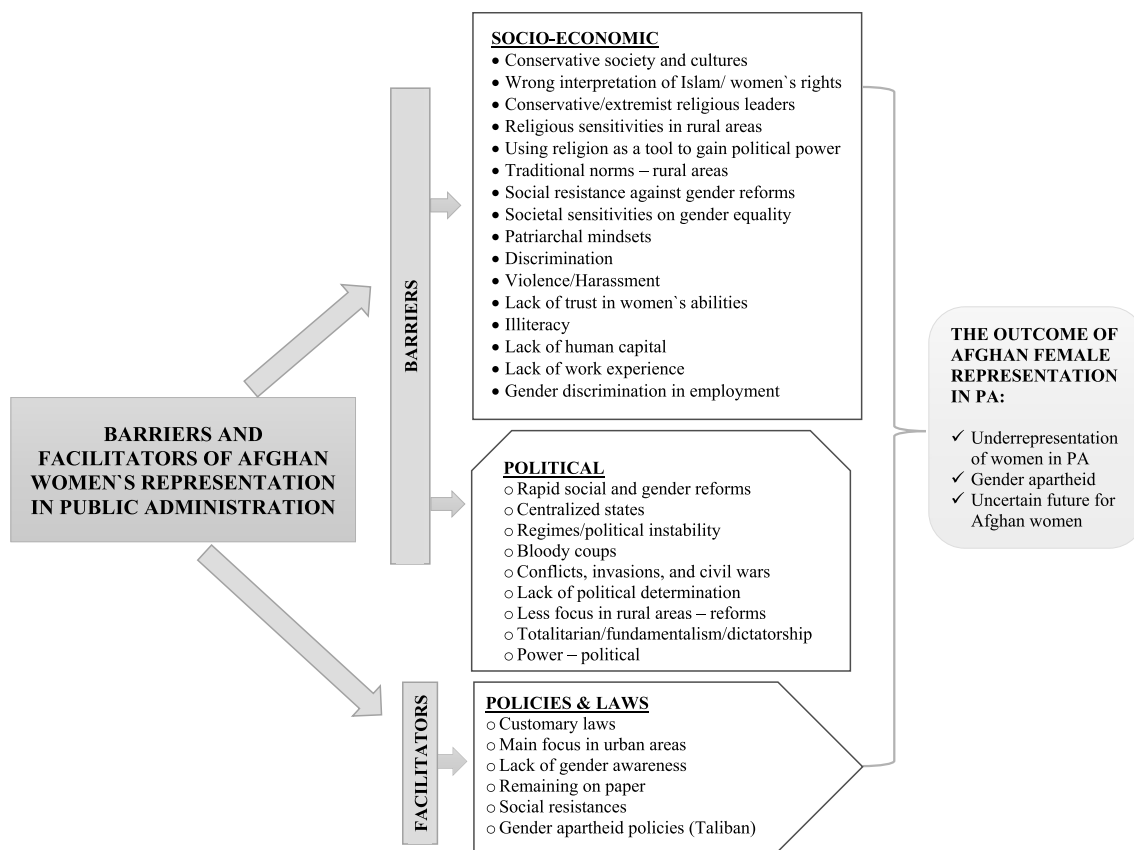*Source*: (Authors' elaboration/takeaway from analyzing documents on Afghanistan, 2023).

F I G U R E 3 Barriers and Facilitators of Afghan women's representation in PA. *Source*: (Authors' elaboration/takeaway from analyzing documents on Afghanistan, 2023).

Murtazashvili, 2015). In fact, Afghan PAs have never been the actual representation of society. They have never reflected the demographic composition of the population they served, especially women (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Berry, 2003; Burki, 2019; Kandiyoti, 2005; Lieberman, 1980; Mosamim & Villeneuve, 2023; Roya, 2023).

Figure 3 shows that the underrepresentation of women in PA, the implementation of gender apartheid under Taliban II, and the uncertain future for Afghan women have been the outcome of various factors, including the socio-economic, regime change, and the ineffective implementation of gender policies and legal frameworks.

7 | DISCUSSION

Academic literature shows that the impact of greater women's representation in PAs is diverse. It ranges from creating more and better job opportunities for women to supporting their involvement in the policy process, leading to the development of frameworks and initiatives more attuned to their expectations and realities (Goetz, 1992; Johnston, 2019; Madgavkar et al., 2019; Stivers, 2002). Women's representation in PA has also been shown to be key to greater government legitimacy, higher public trust (Goetz, 1992), and better institutional performance (Blanco-Mancilla, 2013). The literature also evaluates the progress toward a more representative PA. In doing so, it underlines the *glass ceilings* and *glass walls* that have contributed to women's underrepresentation, especially in decision-making positions (Nasser, 2018; Yun, 2020). PAs have remained "patriarchal, perpetuating gender-biased traditions, attitudes, and practices" in many developed and developing countries (Schröter, 2019; UNDP, 2018).

In looking at the specific case of Afghanistan, this article has identified various barriers and facilitators to women's representation in PA, including socio-economic, political, and regulatory frameworks (see Figure 2). It is believed that properly addressing these factors should lead to better outcomes.

We evaluated, over the past 75 years, the ups and downs of women's representation in Afghanistan under the country's various regimes. Our findings show that the representation of women in Afghanistan's PA has been limited and passive both in terms of number and impact (Meera & Yekta, 2021). This *Passive Representation* of Afghan women in PA has never transformed into an *Active Representation* due to certain/specific barriers rooted both in society and the administrative structure of different regimes (see Figure 3). This indicates that, on the one hand, in most regimes, there has not been a strong belief and determination to gender equality reforms and create a diverse PA representative of the different groups in society, notably women. On the other hand, the traditional, religious, and patriarchal society of Afghanistan (especially present in rural areas) has limited the ability of many regimes to effectively implement gender equality reforms in PA (Nehan & Cox, 2022; Povey, 2003; Roya, 2023).

For this reason, gender equality reforms and laws related to women's rights in most regimes, including Zahir Shah (1933–1973), Dawood Khan (1973–1978), the Communists (1978–1992), and the Republic (2001–2021), have been more urban-focused (Burki, 2019; Roya, 2023). During the Republic, international efforts to implement gender equality reforms and ensure women's *Active Representation* in Afghanistan's administrative and political system were greater compared to the past. For instance, various gender policies were implemented, and millions of dollars were invested in women's capacity-building and leadership skills (Roya, 2023). But, due to war, corruption, and deep-rooted barriers both in society (especially in rural areas) and in the PA system itself, these gender policies and reforms could not be effectively implemented all over the country. During the Mujahedeen (1992–1996) and the Taliban I (1996–2001), there was almost no determination and effort to implement gender equality reforms in PA (Berry, 2003; Larson, 2016; Meera & Yekta, 2021; Sumitra et al., 2023). Now, under the Taliban II, women are even deprived of their fundamental rights.

The analysis of all these regimes shows that, over the past 75 years, Afghan women have not enjoyed equal rights and *Active Representation* in the administrative and political system of the country. But, it also needs to be underlined that under some regimes, women in urban areas had freedom and the right to vote and run for office, but this was not inclusive throughout the country.

Our findings also show that most of the gender equality reforms and policies were influenced and inspired by foreign countries. For example, during the Soviet Union regimes, these reforms were implemented based on the Communist ideology. In the Republic period, most of the gender initiatives were made and implemented by Western policymakers and international allies, especially the United States, which unfortunately did not account for the realities of women in Afghanistan. In fact, almost none of the regimes tried to work on gender initiatives that reflect the realities of Afghan society. As a result, Afghan women have not been actively involved in the policy-making process and implementation over the last seven decades. This should be taken into consideration in the future.

These findings matter for different reasons. First, the reforms on women's rights and their representation in PA have been urban-focused (Roya, 2023). This has occurred due to factors including (1) some central governments were not strongly determined to implement gender equality reforms in rural areas, (2) since the influence of ethnic and religious leaders in rural areas was so strong and influential, the central governments were afraid of implementing these policies in those areas so as not to face revolts and protests, and (3) in some regimes, especially the republic period, besides the influence of religious and ethnic leaders, conflict in rural areas was also a challenge.

Second, however, women's representation has always been at the core of Afghan political and administrative discourses, but this representation requires a new narrative based on society's current realities (Roya, 2023). Lessons should be learned from history to create this narrative and the social, cultural, and religious realities and values should be addressed properly. Governments, civil society, or international donors cannot simply wish them away. Afghanistan will have a representative bureaucracy if gender policies and quotas meet society's cultural and religious norms, values, and sensitivities, particularly in rural areas. These elements are considered important because they directly or indirectly play a key role in the effective implementation of gender policies in a developing, traditional, religious, and patriarchal society such as Afghanistan.

Third, findings show that the interests of Afghan women, most of the time, have been ignored in the policy-making process in different regimes, especially during the Mujahideen and the Taliban. In some regimes, even the issues of diversity and gender equality in PA have not been on the agenda. Thus, this article suggests that Afghanistan's future PA should be based on the principles of inclusiveness, diversity, accountability, transparency, and legitimacy. Adherence to these points will help build a representative bureaucracy in the country. Gender diversity should be respected and included in government policies and organizational structures.

To address all these challenges, some policy initiatives should be enacted. Elements such as gender awareness programs should be promoted all over the country to change the patriarchal mindset of the people. But, all of this can only happen when 'gender apartheid' is finished under the Taliban II.

Since our study analyzes Afghan women's representation in PA from a historical perspective, and the results are the outcome of analyzing administrative documents and scientific contributions, more in-depth research is required, including interviews and surveys targeting these women. Therefore, we would recommend that the representation of Afghan women in PA should be further investigated by researchers with a direct connection to the field, preferably from inter-disciplinary angles, from political science, but also anthropology, history, economics, and others. From the conceptual perspective, this also needs to be researched on how *Passive Representation* of women in PA in countries like Afghanistan can lead to *Active Representation*. Hence, further qualitative and quantitative research should investigate the direct and indirect impact of factors such as traditional cultures, religion, and regime change on women's representation in PA. There is a need for more focused research on specific cultural and socio-political environments, like that of Afghanistan. Specific challenges require specific strategies and targeted solutions. A one-size-fits-all cannot, and in fact, has been shown not to work.

8 | CONCLUSION

To conclude, the representation of Afghan women in PA has faced more barriers than facilitators in different regimes. These barriers are categorized into socio-economic and political factors. Findings show that despite other barriers that women in many developed and developing countries face in PA, political changes, conflicts, religious and patriarchal mindsets, and traditional cultures have been the main factors contributing to the underrepresentation of Afghan women in PA. In addition, customary laws, especially in rural areas, have been a constant challenge for Afghan women. As a result, Afghan women have never been actively involved in the country's development and decision-making process.

The study also shows that the main barriers confronting women's representation in PA have remained over the decades. Thus, future legitimate government in Afghanistan should first address these barriers seriously, especially in rural areas, to be able to implement gender policies effectively. Without addressing the rooted barriers both in society and the government, ensuring equal representation of Afghan women in PA is impossible. In addition, reforms, laws, and policies on women's rights should be reached and implemented both in urban and rural areas. Throughout history, the country's rural areas have remained less developed and more religious, patriarchal, traditional, and conservative. As a result, almost all the resistance and protests against gender equality and social reforms have risen from the country's rural areas.

One of the main contributions of this study to the global literature, especially for non-Western and Islamic countries, is how wrong interpretations of Islamic laws/studies, using religion as a tool to gain power, and political changes can impact women's representation in PA. In addition, this article shows how the above elements can make a society with conservative, patriarchal, and religious mindsets that resist any gender equality reforms. As a result, the case of Afghanistan can be a lesson learned for other developing countries in terms of women's rights rollbacks over decades. This study has also shown that giving women equal rights in the constitution drafts and mentioning many rights for women in various laws and policies cannot guarantee gender equality and women's representation in PA until effective actions are taken by governments/regimes.

The current situation of Afghan women under Taliban II has raised severe national and international concerns. The implementation of the strictest limitations and regulations on Afghan women by this regime *(not recognized by any country)* indicates the concept of 'gender apartheid.' The expectation is that the international community put more sanctions on the Taliban leaders and make them accountable.

Theoretically, findings show that the interests of Afghan women, most of the time, have been ignored in the policy-making process in different regimes, especially during the Mujahideen and the Taliban. In these regimes, the issues of diversity and gender equality in PA were not on the agenda. In addition, almost all the regimes have not reflected the demographic composition of the population they serve. As a result, the *Passive Representation* of Afghan women in PA has not become *Active Representation* due to specific barriers that have existed over decades, both in society and government institutions.

8.1 | Research limitations

In general, researching in war-torn countries like Afghanistan, especially about the issues related to women, is always challenging and risky for researchers. Besides the risky topic we have written about, collecting data, especially administrative documents, has been a primary challenge during this research study. The administrative documents were not all in English; we had to translate most of them from Pashto and Farsi to English. With all the research limitations, we believe such topics are vital to research because they fill a gap in the literature. The findings of this research not only help for the future reconstruction of the PA system in Afghanistan but also can be lessons learned for other countries facing similarly challenging conditions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
There is no conflict of statement between the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

The current research addresses three key points that summarize the main messages of the article. These are as follows:

1. The representation of women in public administrations (PA) is important to foster greater legitimacy, better responsiveness, and increased accountability. A diverse PA can also im-prove organizational performance and contribute to effective service delivery. To achieve this objective, gender policies should address the main barriers confronting women`s repre-sentation and identify ways (facilitators) to ensure their active integration. Notably, glass ceilings and glass walls should be kept in mind. Importantly, women should be actively en-gaged in the related policymaking processes. Their voices should be heard clearly and loudly.

2. In the case of Afghanistan, the research shows that various socio-economic and political fac-tors have contributed to gender inequality and the underrepresentation of women in PA over the last 75 years - international invasions, conflicts, traditional cultures, patriarchal and religious mindsets, discrimination, and regime change. Policymakers and practitioners should consider these factors when designing and implementing gender policies in such a country.

3. Copy-pasted imported gender policies from developed countries cannot always be effective in developing and less-developed countries. Cultural and political aspects do have an impact. The case of Afghanistan proves this. Three steps should be considered in this regard: a) gen-der policies should address the realities of Afghan women (societal, religious, and cultural) in the policy-making and policy implementation processes; b) gender policies should be de-signed and implemented by Afghans themselves, notably Afghan women; c) clear mecha-nisms should be introduced to remove or lessen the various barriers to greater women`s representation in PA.

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