

## **The Burqa: Prison or Protection?**

**Author:** [Salima Ghafari](#)

The oppressive Taleban regime is long gone, but many Afghan women are still afraid to abandon their burqas.

"I feel naked without my burqa," said Kabul woman Roqia, dragging large shopping bags and gasping in the heat. "I cannot take it off. I would feel that everyone was looking at me."

More than three years after the fall of the Taleban, the streets of Kabul are still awash with ghostly blue shapes. Burqa-clad women surround cars at traffic lights begging for "baksheesh". They float through the city's bazaars and perch on motorcycles behind their husbands, often holding a cellular phone to their azure-covered ears.

But now that the baton-wielding religious police are no longer around, what makes a woman cling to a stifling nylon shroud? Soraya Parlika, director of the Afghanistan Women's Union, believes the burqa provides a sense of security in dangerous times.

"Kidnapping of women and children is on the rise, crime is increasing, and women feel safe in a burqa," said the diminutive 60-year-old, who is an outspoken advocate for women's rights.

The all-encompassing covering also affords a measure of privacy, she added, allowing women to hide embarrassing or shameful activities. "If a woman is reduced to begging for bread or goes to people's houses to clean or wash clothes, she will wear the burqa so her relatives will not see her," said Parlika.

Parlika dresses in stylish, if conservative, clothing and wears a filmy headscarf rather than a burqa, but understands the concerns of her more timid sisters, saying, "I am against the burqa, but until security is restored completely, I do not think women will take them off."

Mir Akram, a psychology professor at Kabul University, agrees that the burqa is necessary to protect women from unwanted attention.

"Wearing a burqa is a kind of exploitation that men visit on women," he said. "A woman on the street without a burqa is seen as fair game for any sort of male overtures. Men are always making remarks and cursing women, and this certainly has a negative effect."

Afghan burqas cover a woman completely, giving prying eyes no way to gauge her age or appearance. They are usually sky-blue, although white, brown and other shades are occasionally seen. Most are made of cheap synthetic material, with a mesh covering that allows only a limited view of the outside world.

While in the West the garment has become virtually synonymous with the Taleban regime, the burqa has a long tradition in Afghanistan.

Women have been wearing them for centuries, but until the Taleban era they were just one of several choices for Muslim women who wished to conform to Islamic standards of modesty. Islam requires that a woman wear the hijab, or veil, to cover the head and neck, and long sleeves and trousers.

King Amanullah, who ruled from 1919 to 1929, shocked the nation by allowing his wife, Queen Soraya, to tear off her veil at a public function. And in the communist era from 1978 to 1989, the majority of women and girls in the larger cities were not overly concerned with the hijab. But a woman on the street without a full body covering during the oppressive Taleban years risked severe punishment.

"Wearing a burqa was a tradition in our society, and then tradition changed to coercion," said 30-year-old Kabul woman Zahira. "The Taleban made it an Islamic duty, but hijab does not mean a burqa."

One prominent Kabul mullah, who asked to remain anonymous, agrees the Muslim faith does not prescribe the wearing of the burqa, saying the Taleban's actions in forcing women to wear the garment were actually against the laws of Islam. "Women are required to wear the hijab, which allows the face, hands, and feet to remain uncovered," he said. "Those who say that the burqa is part of Islamic law are mistaken."

But tradition dies hard, particularly in a society where literacy rates are low and most people get their information by word of mouth. In the Taimani neighborhood of Kabul, IWPR's questions about the burqa provoked an angry reaction from one woman.

"Wearing the burqa is part of Islam. Every Muslim woman must wear one. Why are you disobeying the laws of Islam?" said the woman before rushing away with her burqa billowing behind her.

Even some of Kabul's more progressive women were in no hurry to throw away their burqas after the fall of the Taleban in late 2001.

Nadira, a psychology lecturer in her thirties at Kabul University, kept hers until last year because her family feared for her safety. But she chafed at the anonymity of the veil, which she felt deprived her of the respect her position deserved.

"No one recognised me under it. Faculty and students just called me 'khala' [auntie] which made me very upset," she said. "So I used all my powers to persuade my family to let me get rid of my burqa."

And Tajwar Kakar, the former deputy minister of women's affairs, is staunchly anti-burqa. "While it is an Afghan tradition, the situation for women has now improved 100 per cent. Women, particularly those in government, should not be confined in these coverings."

There is, however, one group that bitterly regrets the passing of the compulsory covering - Kabul's burqa-sellers, who have seen their incomes plummet as women throw off the veil.

"We used to sell 20 to 30 burqas a day under the Taleban," said a shopkeeper in mid-town Kabul. "Now we sell only five to ten, and those mostly to women from the provinces. Burqas are no longer profitable."

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**Location:** [Afghanistan](#)

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