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Diasporic social media activism as discursive resistance: Afghan women contest the Taliban's strategic narratives

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how women in the Afghan diaspora deploy social media activism as discursive resistance against the Taliban's strategic narratives following the 2021 resurgence of Taliban rule. It investigates how Afghan women within the diaspora and inside Afghanistan use social media visibility to contest discursive cleansing and erasure, reclaim suppressed voices, and reassert their identities within transnational public spheres.

Design/methodology/approach: Critical discourse analysis and visual rhetorical approaches were used to analyze Twitter/X and Instagram posts ($n = 1,833$) that include the hashtag, #DoNotTouchMyClothes, depicting Afghan women's activism in both local and diasporic contexts.

Findings: The study identifies Afghan women's hashtag activism as both means of cultural resistance and global solidarity. Women inside Afghanistan use digital platforms as safer spaces for community-building and protest, while diasporic voices amplify these narratives. Although online resistance is limited by surveillance, repression, and risks of misinformation, Afghan women's discursive practices destabilize Taliban efforts at erasure, asserting agency and visibility.

Practical implications: The findings highlight how digital activism enables Afghan women to navigate extreme authoritarian restrictions, providing insights into how

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activists in repressive regimes can leverage social media for advocacy. The study underscores the importance of preserving digital records of marginalized voices to resist erasure and discursive cleansing.

Social implications: Afghan women's digital activism contributes to sustaining cultural memory, solidarity, and global awareness despite local silencing. Their resistance challenges gender apartheid and authoritarianism, offering models of resilience for other oppressed communities.

Originality/value: This study extends scholarship on digital diasporas and social media by foregrounding Afghan women's counter-narratives as a form of discursive resistance. It emphasizes intersections of digital activism, feminist theory, and diaspora studies, documenting how diasporic and in-country voices together contest authoritarian discursive cleansing. By situating Afghan women's activism within the global diaspora and its digital practices, this study contributes to broader understandings of how social media mediates diasporic experiences, identity negotiations, and political participation under conditions of authoritarian control. Afghan women's digital resistance should thus be recognized as a critical site for advancing diaspora studies, feminist communication studies, and areas studies of the broader Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan, and Pakistan region.

Keywords: Afghan women; digital diaspora; discursive cleansing; discursive resistance; hashtag activism; Taliban

1 Introduction

Since the Taliban's return to power on August 15, 2021, Afghanistan has entered an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, most acutely suffered by Afghan women and girls. The Taliban has implemented more than 70 decrees systematically restricting women and girls of their rights (Azoulay 2025). Amnesty International (2022) characterized the elimination of women's and girls' rights as "Death in slow motion" (para. 1). Women have been removed from nearly all professional and public sector positions, with limited exceptions in fields where male replacement was not feasible; girls' access to secondary education has been barred; freedom of expression has been eliminated; and women's mobility outside the home has been severely restricted (Attal et al. 2026; Das and Joya 2022; Hamidi 2026; Orfan and Lavigne 2025; Orfan and Shams 2025; Shahir et al. 2025).¹

¹ An analysis of life for women and girls in Afghanistan before the 2021 Taliban takeover is beyond the scope of this study. For a selection of relevant research, see Asraf and Kennedy-Pipe 2022; Atoosa and Pande 2020; Ayotte and Husain 2005; Cloud 2004; Fahmy 2004; Osman and Bajoghli 2024; Stabile and Kumar. 2005; Yousufi 2021.

The reversal is stark when reviewed against gains made in the two decades preceding the Taliban takeover. In 2020, women held more than twenty-five percent of seats in parliament, participated in civil society leadership, and were eligible to run for national office, including presidency. Between 2001 and 2021, primary school enrolment for girls under age 12 increased from near zero to 3.8 million (Beidollahkhani 2025). Under Taliban rule, women have been systematically excluded from formal political life and state governance structures through coordinated legal decrees and institutional dismantling. In its most recent assessment of the women's and girls' rights in Afghanistan, UN Women (2025) reported the "Taliban is closer than ever to achieving its vision of a society that completely erases women from public life" (para. 19).

One mechanism of enforced social regulation by the Taliban is women's dress. Authorities have mandated a form of *hijab* involving full face and body covering in public spaces. Enforcement operates through both formal decrees and informal surveillance, effectively transforming women's visibility into a site of state scrutiny and discipline. Dress is not treated as a private matter of faith but as a public index of political and moral conformity and a regulation of women's bodies (Gökarıksel 2009). Beidollahkhani (2026) frames such Islamist governance policies through a Foucauldian lens of biopolitics and governmentality, emphasizing how the Taliban regime regulates women by disciplining their bodies and normalizing specific forms of embodiment. Afghan women's bodies become a central terrain through which political Islam operationalizes power, using dress codes, surveillance mechanisms, and symbolic propaganda to internalize norms of modesty and obedience. Through such biopolitical governance, the regulation of *hijab* functions as both a disciplinary instrument and a symbolic reaffirmation of the regime's authority.

Against this backdrop of intensified bodily regulation and epistemic control, women in the Afghan diaspora have turned to digital platforms as sites of counter-narration and collective visibility. Their activism operates as a form of *discursive resistance* that challenges both deliberate and inadvertent processes of *discursive amnesia*, the erasure of marginalized histories, and more aggressive forms of *discursive cleansing*, the sanitization of oppressive narratives promoted by the Taliban's strategic communication. Through visual, textual, and hashtag-driven interventions, these activists reclaim suppressed cultural memory and reassert women's presence within transnational public spheres.

This study examines the power dynamics of diasporic Afghan women's digital activism in relation to the Taliban's strategic narratives following the 2021 resurgence. Drawing on theories of discursive amnesia and discursive cleansing, and building on scholarship on digital activism and connective action across diasporas, the study analyses how diasporic Afghan women deploy online media to contest epistemic erasure and reconstruct collective identity. In doing so, it situates Afghan

women activists' discursive resistance within broader debates on biopolitical governance, gendered visibility, and transnational public discourse.

Guided by the following research question: How do women in the Afghan diaspora deploy social media activism as discursive resistance against Taliban's strategic narratives following the Taliban's 2021 resurgence?, the study proceeds in four stages. First, it outlines the Taliban's strategic narratives and regulatory mechanisms shaping Afghan women's exclusion from public life. Second, it develops the theoretical framework of discursive amnesia and discursive cleansing in relation to gendered governance. Third, it analyses the #DoNotTouchMyClothes campaign and related diasporic interventions as forms of counter-narrative production. Finally, the study considers the implications of digital diasporic resistance for understanding power, visibility, and women's activism in response to authoritarian rule.

2 Literature review

2.1 The Taliban take over

The exit of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, the subsequent collapse of the Afghan national infrastructure, and the quick regaining of control by the Taliban marked a substantial geopolitical shift in the region (Abbas 2023; Arghandwal et al. 2025; Maley and Jamal 2022; Mishra and Manhas 2025). The NATO exit, mediated by an agreement between the U.S. government and representatives of the Taliban,² resulted in a rapid reversal of the ground realities in the country, and a loss of faith in U.S. commitment, particularly by allies such as Ukraine and Taiwan. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (renamed as Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan by Taliban), in place since 2001, collapsed nearly instantly³ with the NATO withdrawal and removal of U.S. forces.⁴ The geopolitical shift allowed a global focus on

2 The Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, also known as the Doha Accord as it was signed on February 29, 2020 in Doha, Qatar, was an agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban leadership (U.S. Department of State 2020). This deal stipulated the complete withdrawal of NATO forces within 14 months. It was supposed to safeguard the U.S. exit from Afghanistan and preserve the fledgling democracy in the country (Boyd-Barrett and Lara Martin Lengel 2025; Dastgeer 2020).

3 In the span of merely 10 days, President Ashraf Ghani fled the country and the Taliban forces took over Kabul, making massive gains in the control of Afghanistan. For more details on the Taliban takeover, see Brader 2021; Inukonda et al. 2025.

4 It is beyond the scope of this study to include a robust historical analysis of the Taliban's First Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1996–2001), the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001–2021), and the Second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the current occupation by the Taliban 2021–present). For

Afghanistan, emphasized by dramatic scenes on August 16, 2021, one day after Kabul fell to the Taliban, of Afghan citizens clinging onto the last plane out of Kabul International Airport, some falling to their deaths as the plane left the runway (Harding and Doherty 2021; Michaelson and Majidi 2021). These actions illustrate Afghan fears of the resurgence of the Taliban with its patriarchal and fundamentalist ideals; these fears are echoed on the global stage due to growing patriarchal authoritarian regimes worldwide.

The military and political shifts out of Afghanistan were echoed by discursive narratives of western decline, U.S. unreliability, and growing polarizations (Akbari and True 2022, 2023; Harding and Doherty 2021). Chinese and Russian media framed the withdrawal as proof of American weakness, while Taliban rhetoric emphasized victory over imperialism and western influence (Boyd-Barrett and Lengel 2025; Rajmil et al. 2022; Silverman and Fealing 2025), reshaping regional Islamist narratives. Western discourse debated the value and necessity of interventionism, which generated new strategic narratives against Western and U.S. intervention in Ukraine and Taiwan. In South Asia, rhetorical arguments highlighted Pakistan's strategic leverage and the recalibration of India's security. The withdrawal also fuelled debates on humanitarian responsibility, sovereignty, and the limits of nation-building, shaping broader conversations on global power transitions and military interventions in the 21st century. And many of these discursive strategic narratives framed within conservative, patriarchal, fundamentalist perspectives sought to cleanse inconvenient truths and reshape how history, identity, and responsibility would be remembered or forgotten. Collectively, these discursive responses to the withdrawal have been documented across media reporting, policy analysis, and scholarly work examining the geopolitical and rhetorical consequences of the 2021 NATO exit (Akbari and True 2022, 2023; Harding and Doherty 2021).

The Taliban reframed their rule as “liberation,” erasing their association with past human rights abuses. This reframing, however, was not reflected in the lived experiences of the Afghan people. Since the Taliban's return to power, Afghan citizens have faced an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, marked by widespread poverty, food insecurity, conflict, displacement, and recurring natural disasters (Rajmil et al. 2022). The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA 2025) reported that out of the 46 million population in the country, 22.9 million are people in need of aid. Maternal and infant mortality rates have risen quickly, and 97 % of families are at or below the poverty line (Qamar et al. 2024).

relevant scholarly work, please see Barfield 2010; Boyd-Barrett 2025a, 2025b; Farhadi 2023; Inukonda and Lengel 2025; Jalali 2023; Malkasian 2021; Manchanda 2020; Noori and Coburn 2023; Sharma 2017; Whitlock 2021.

2.2 Impact on Afghan women and girls

The humanitarian crisis has most keenly been experienced by Afghan women and girls (Samim 2025). Recent scholarship has increasingly documented the scale and systemic nature of gender-based exclusion under Taliban rule, situating Afghan women's lived experiences within broader debates on gender apartheid, humanitarian governance (Inukonda and Lengel 2025; Khan and Faiz 2025), and feminist resistance in authoritarian contexts (Ike et al. 2025; Litty 2025; Newsom et al. in press). Two days after they regained power, the Taliban vowed that they would respect women's rights in what Seir et al. (2021) called a "publicity blitz aimed at reassuring world powers and a fearful population" (para. 1). Instead, as Heather Barr (2024), Associate Director of the Women's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, reported, the Taliban "carried out a relentless and all-encompassing attack on the human rights of women and girls, violating virtually every aspect of these rights" (para. 3; See, also, Qazi Zada and Qazi Zada 2024).

The implications for Afghan women include the intersectional oppressions of vastly increased economic (Ahmadi and Ali Hikmat 2023) and health disparities, including mental health disparities (Abdullah et al. 2023; Ahmadzai et al. 2025). Research has found rising levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidality among Afghan women and students following the Taliban takeover (Naghavi et al. 2022; Neyazi et al. 2023). Maternal health outcomes have deteriorated amid restrictions on women's mobility and professional participation in medical sectors. These interlocking crises demonstrate that the Taliban's governance is not merely regulatory but structurally transformative, reshaping the conditions under which Afghan women live, work, learn, and survive (Nehan 2022). In one horrifying example, Najibullah et al. (2025) recently reported that "every 2 h a woman dies during childbirth in Afghanistan...[a]nd under the repressive rule of the Taliban, the situation is only getting worse" (para. 2).

3 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the work on discursive amnesia (Lee and Wander 1998), discursive resistance, discursive cleansing, and survivance (Vizenor 2008). These are integrated with the concept of survivance as it manifests in the digital public sphere. This framework provides the foundation to analyze how Afghan women's digital activism through language, imagery, and hashtags functions as a site of counter-narration and power within authoritarian and transnational contexts.

Specifically, these concepts are used to identify how Afghan women's digital practices (a) counter efforts to erase women from public memory and visibility, (b) resist the Taliban's reconstruction of Afghan womanhood through patriarchal and fundamentalist discourse, and (c) circulate counter-narratives within a global digital public sphere that exceeds the Taliban's territorial control.

3.1 Discursive amnesia and discursive cleansing

To investigate how the Taliban's strategic narratives erase Afghan women's historical presence and normalize gender exclusion, this study draws on the concept of *discursive amnesia*, developed by Wenshu Lee and Philip Wander. Discursive amnesia refers to processes of collective silencing and forgetting that are often instituted by individuals or groups in power. Lee and Wander (1998) argue, "specific acts of collective forgetting perpetuate privilege and interest in a particular economic and political context, [as] a group identifies itself not only through what it publicly or officially recalls, but also through what it systematically forgets" (58).

Discursive cleansing extends this logic by describing processes through which identifying attributes associated with marginalized groups are removed through propagandist disinformation and, at times, even violence (Lengel et al. in press). Building on this concept, the present study also employs discursive cleansing to describe the Taliban's strategic efforts to sanitize and reconstruct public narratives about Afghan women. Discursive cleansing operates through the removal of women's visibility, the homogenization of acceptable female embodiment, and the reframing of gender oppression as religious or cultural 'purity'. In this context, discursive cleansing involves replacing historically diverse representations of Afghan women with a narrow, ideologically sanctioned image of obedience, invisibility, and moral containment.

In this study, discursive amnesia and discursive cleansing are operationalized by examining how Taliban narratives erase women's historical presence and reframe exclusion as moral or religious necessity, and how Afghan women's counter-discourses disrupt these processes online.

3.2 Survivance

Survivance is the theoretical concept of Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe/Chippewa) (2008) who identifies "survivance" practices associated with Indigenous activism and advocacy. The survivance – survival, resistance and ongoing presence – of oppressed groups is tied to their abilities to advocate for identity and authority, gain recognition

within legal and legislative frameworks, and continue to thrive despite ongoing layers of oppression. Afghan women's activism is not framed solely as opposition to the Taliban but as an insistence on ongoing existence, memory, and identity despite systematic efforts at erasure.

Survivance is operationalized by examining how digital practices sustain cultural memory, reclaim symbols targeted for erasure (such as traditional dress), and affirm Afghan women's presence across time and space. This framework helps shift the analysis away from deficit-based representations of Afghan women and toward an understanding of their activism as culturally grounded, future-oriented, and resistant to discursive disappearance.

3.3 Discursive resistance

Discursive resistance, presented by Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr and Michelle LaFrance (2014), involves communicative practices that challenges dominant master narratives through the counter-narrative's ability to "reveal, resist, and recast" hegemonic oppressions (192). Rather than opposing power solely through institutional or physical means, discursive resistance operates through storytelling, visual expression, and the re-signification of symbols. In this study, discursive resistance foregrounds the voice and agency of Afghan women under conditions of structural constraint. Afghan women's use of hashtags, images of traditional dress, personal testimonies, and collective framing strategies are analysed as counter-narratives that disrupt the Taliban's claims to cultural and moral authority.

3.4 The digital public sphere and counter-public formation

Jürgen Habermas' (2022) framework of the digital public sphere is employed to examine how discursive resistance works to disrupt the necessary discursive cleansing, narrative containment, and restrictions of concept and identities that run counter to the authoritarian control of the Taliban.

After the Taliban's resurgence, Afghan women's participation in activism and digital platforms, as well as in efforts for education and entrepreneurship, have focused on countering the severe restrictions on their public presence. This activism is performed as a type of discursive resistance which counters both deliberate and unintentional efforts towards discursive amnesia (the erasure of marginalized histories), and more aggressive forms of discursive cleansing (the sanitization of oppressive narratives) promoted by the Taliban's strategic narratives by actively reclaiming suppressed voices. Discursive resistance is a type of embodied activism

which incorporates indigenous survivance techniques that blend survival and resistance through storytelling and other forms of creative practice, activism, and digital media, ensuring cultural continuity (Fayyaz 2025; Lengel et al. 2022; Olszewska 2007, 2023; Serea 2025).

Social media platforms such as Twitter/X and Instagram, function as imperfect yet crucial platforms in which Afghan women and diasporic communities articulate resistance, build solidarity, and amplify suppressed voices beyond national borders. For instance, online hashtag movements such as #DontTouchMyClothes and its variant #DoNotTouchMyClothes, #AfghanCouture, #AfghanistanCulture, and #MyVoiceIsNotForbidden emerged in response to the Taliban's extreme bans on women's public presence, speech, and singing as well as secondary and higher education, restrictions on employment, and enforcement of rigid dress codes which, arguably, had a little to do with traditional or historical women's attire in Afghanistan.

4 Methodology

Grounded in Foucauldian critical-cultural approaches to examine the power dynamics of Afghani women in relation to the Taliban's strategic narratives, the study focuses on the diasporic campaign #DontTouchMyClothes to reclaim traditional Afghan dress as a symbol of cultural memory and resistance.⁵ It employed a qualitative, interpretive design employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly for social media (Kopf 2025; Veenstra et al. 2015) to examine Afghan women's digital activism both within Afghanistan and across the global diaspora. CDA is well-suited for investigating how power and ideology are embedded in discourse, and feminist orientation highlights how gender, religion, ethnicity, and geopolitics intersect in Afghan women's experiences under Taliban rule. Foucauldian concepts of discourse and biopower, together with Habermas' (2022) digital public sphere, further frame the analysis of women's discursive resistance.

4.1 Data set and data collection

Twitter data were collected for the period September 13–30, 2021, corresponding to the initial surge of online activity surrounding the #DoNotTouchMyClothes campaign. Using the Twitter API, data were retrieved in March 2022 through a

⁵ For our analyses of strategic narratives in other geopolitical contexts see, for instance, Boyd-Barrett and Lengel 2025; Lengel 2025; Ziberi et al. 2024.

keyword and hashtag search for #DoNotTouchMyClothes. From this dataset, only 110 unique, original posts were identified which directly aligned with the study's analytical focus namely, posts authored by Afghan women or members of the Afghan diaspora that explicitly addressed women's dress, cultural identity, resistance to Taliban policies, or lived constraints within Afghanistan.

Beyond API-based collection, the study employed manual, iterative mapping, and live tracing of Twitter. This process involved following tweet–comment branches, replies, quote tweets, and linked content that extended from the original posts. Through this branching method, the dataset expanded to include approximately 923 tweets. Additionally, 800 public posts containing the hashtag #DoNotTouchMyClothes were retrieved from the Meta content library for the same time period. This brought the sample size across all platforms to 1833.

4.2 Analytical procedures

Guided by this critical orientation, the present study follows the CDA procedure outlined by Wodak and Meyer (2009), operationalized through a three-stage analytical process that directly informs data coding and interpretation (See, also, Wodak 2011). The first stage involved open, inductive coding of digital texts, images, and hashtags. This step focused on identifying emergent themes using inductive, without imposing pre-existing categories. Through repeated engagement with the data, codes capture digital texts to identify emergent themes of erasure, resistance, identity, and affect. These open codes correspond to the descriptive level of analysis and capture the central 'aboutness' of Afghan women's digital discourse (Zappettini and Rezazadah 2023).

In the second stage, open codes were systematically grouped and refined through thematic mapping to form higher-order analytical categories, including collective memory, affective solidarity, cultural resistance, and diasporic amplification. This step served as a bridge between descriptive and interpretive analysis, allowing patterns of meaning-making to emerge across posts, platforms, and locations. Thematic mapping revealed how individual expressions merge into shared discursive formations, particularly across diasporic and in-country contexts.

The final stage applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), (van Leeuwen 2008; Wodak and Meyer 2009) particularly the approaches of CDA by researchers in the South Asian, North Africa and Eastern Mediterranean (Abdulmajid 2019; Khosravi-Nik 2018; KhosraviNik and Amer 2022; Mohammed et al. 2025; Noor and Abdul Hamid 2021; Roshan and Abdullah al Tamimi 2025; Zappettini and Rezazadah 2023), to examine how these thematic formations were discursively realized and strategically mobilized to counter Taliban narratives of liberation, morality, and purity. The

analysis examined discursive strategies and their linguistic and rhetorical realization, corresponding to the explanatory level of CDA.

Table 1 illustrates how inductively generated open codes were systematically grouped into higher-order thematic categories and subsequently analyzed through CDA. This structure demonstrates how descriptive coding feeds directly into critical interpretation, allowing discursive strategies to be identified and examined in relation to Taliban strategic narratives. The table clarifies the analytical progression from micro-level meaning-making to macro-level ideological contestation.

4.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations prioritized anonymity and safety. In accordance with ethical best practices for research involving politically sensitive digital activism, identifying

Table 1: Inductive coding, thematic mapping, and critical discourse analytic strategies used in the analysis.

Inductive codes	Thematic category	CDA strategy	Taliban narrative countered
Women forced veiling, black burqa, imposed dress, ban on wearing bright colors in public	Cultural resistance	Delegitimization; re-legitimization	Moral purity; “true Afghan womanhood”
Traditional dress, embroidery, color symbolism	Cultural resistance	Recontextualization; visual re-signification	Cultural homogeneity; erasure of diversity
Loss of voice, silencing, invisibility	Erasure	Exposure; counter-discursive naming	Women’s exclusion from public sphere
Fear, threats, anonymity	Activist risk	Strategic silence; risk-aware discursivity	Surveillance and coercion as control
Historical photographs, pre-Taliban memory	Collective memory	Counter-memory; temporal reframing	Discursive amnesia; historical rupture
Diaspora solidarity, tagging global media	Diasporic amplification	Scale shifting; transnationalization	Domestic containment of resistance
“This is Afghan culture”	Identity assertion	Identity reclamation; nomination	Taliban-defined cultural authenticity
Emotional appeals, grief, anger	Affective solidarity	Moral evaluation; affective framing	Normalization of repression
“Do not recognize Taliban”	Political contestation	De-legitimation; authority challenge	Claims of international legitimacy
Voice-only posts, indirect resistance	Liminal resistance	Modality constraint; discursive adaptation	Visibility-as-control logic

details in social media posts and images have been paraphrased, anonymized, or visually obscured, even when the original content is publicly accessible. While the events and posts discussed here remain discoverable through publicly available information, these measures are intended to avoid further dissemination beyond their original platform and to prioritize the safety and privacy of individuals represented. While digital activism is inherently partial and may exclude voices at greatest risk, triangulation with NGO and UN reports strengthens validity and ensures representation of Afghan women's discursive resistance across local and global contexts. This approach provides methodological rigor by integrating discourse analysis, feminist theory, and diaspora studies, and situates Afghan women's discursive practices within transnational digital public spheres.

4.3.1 Positionality statements

Saadia: My engagement with this research is shaped by lived experience and long-standing proximity to the sociopolitical consequences of Taliban violence and US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. I spent eleven formative years of my early life in Peshawar, Pakistan, a city that has historically hosted large populations of Afghan refugees. During this time, I witnessed firsthand the everyday struggles of Afghan families living in refugee camps, including precarious living conditions, restricted mobility, and limited access to education. These early encounters informed my awareness of displacement, statelessness, and the gendered vulnerabilities that accompany prolonged conflict.

My positionality is further shaped by the events following September 11, 2001. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when Pakistan aligned with the United States and opened its airspace as a strategic ally, the effects of global geopolitics were felt acutely at the local level. Pakistan continues to bear the consequences of Taliban violence, including repeated attacks on schools, public institutions, and civilian populations. These experiences shape my scholarly orientation toward critically examining narratives of extremism, legitimacy, and resistance, while remaining attentive to the uneven distribution of risk across borders (Farooq 2025). At the same time, I am mindful of the ethical responsibility involved in representing Afghan women's voices especially those produced under conditions of surveillance and danger.

Victoria and Lara: We have collaborated and published together for more than twenty years in the areas of embodied activism in the Maghreb (Lengel et al. 2022), feminist media studies (Newsom and Lengel 2003), gender mainstreaming in the North Africa and Eastern Mediterranean region (Lengel et al. 2019; Newsom et al. 2011), and the *Ath-thawrāt al-'arabiyyah* (widely known as the Arab Spring) (Lengel and Newsom 2014; Newsom and Lengel 2012). We bring together Victoria's expertise

in critical rhetorical studies and Lara's long-standing field-based engagement in the region, including a year as a Fulbright Scholar in Tunisia and sustained field research and scholarly engagement across North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Gulf states. This regional research has involved sustained, direct engagement with women across diverse national and cultural contexts, learning from their accounts of media representation, political constraint, everyday negotiation, and resistance. This engagement has also included collaborative curricular development with a Tunisian university focused on women and the media, reflecting a commitment to reciprocal knowledge production and feminist pedagogical practice. These experiences shape Lara's scholarly orientation toward methodological humility and reflexivity, grounded in direct engagement with women across the region and sustained attention to the challenges they navigate in their everyday lives (Lengel 1998). Our collaboration reflects a shared commitment to women in the broader region and to ethically grounded scholarship that remains attentive to the responsibilities involved in interpreting and amplifying women's voices, particularly under conditions of political constraint, surveillance, and unevenly distributed risk.

5 Findings

Findings center on the discursive resistance by women digital activists in Afghanistan and in the Afghan diaspora, and how these activists develop counter-narratives to ensure their cultural and identity-based existence as a global presence in the public sphere. This situates the analysis at the intersection of how the Taliban and the women activists fighting back against the regime apply language and the rhetoric of discursive resistance to shape power, ideology, and social structures.

5.1 Resistance to Taliban's reconstruction of identities

Afghan women were systematically eliminated from public life by the Taliban in the period between the peace treaty in 2020 and the takeover in August 2021. This erasure was not simply material but discursive: the Taliban engaged in a reconstruction of women's identities, redefining them through patriarchal and fundamentalist norms that cast women as silent, dependent, and confined to the domestic sphere. In contrast, women activists, both within Afghanistan and in the diaspora, insisted on reclaiming their identities as self-determining actors. Their protests, digital campaigns, and testimonies articulated the principle that women's identities are not given by men or by the state, but are defined by women themselves in relation to their histories, communities, and futures.

This identity struggle is central to understanding Afghan women's activism. By protesting in the streets of Kabul or Herat, and by posting images, stories, and cultural symbols online, women assert that their existence cannot be reduced to what authoritarian power dictates. Their counter-narratives destabilize the Taliban's attempts at discursive cleansing by insisting that Afghan women are agents of cultural continuity and political participation. In this sense, activism becomes both embodied, through physical demonstrations at great personal risk, and discursive, through social media campaigns that circulate beyond borders and shape international awareness (Lengel and Newsom 2014). For example, the diasporic #DoNotTouchMyClothes campaign reclaimed traditional Afghan dress as a symbol of cultural memory and resistance. By circulating images of colorful Afghan garments in sharp contrast to the Taliban's enforced black hijab and burqa, women activists and others in the Afghan diaspora women highlighted the struggle over who has the authority to define Afghan womanhood. This global amplification reinforced the messages of women on the ground, showing that identity reclamation is both a local and transnational project.

5.2 Transnational leadership and diasporic political advocacy

Diaspora communities are central to sustaining transnational networks of resistance. Afghan women in exile exemplify what digital diaspora scholarship identifies as cross-border community building and identity preservation through online platforms. Outside the country, Afghan women in the global diaspora have continued to mobilize in the nearly four years since the Taliban takeover. Forming coalitions, engaging in advocacy and diplomacy, launching social media campaigns, and engaging with international institutions, women in the diaspora amplify and elevate the voices of those still inside their country.

In addition to grassroots social media mobilization, prominent diasporic Afghan women leaders have played visible roles in advocating for Afghan women's rights in international arenas. Public figures such as Mahbouba Seraj, Freshta Karim, and Shaharзад Akbar have leveraged transnational networks, media interviews, and institutional affiliations to draw sustained global attention to the elimination of women's and girls' rights under Taliban rule. Operating from exile or from outside Taliban-controlled territories, these leaders function as political mediaries, translating domestic repression into internationally legible human rights claims. Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Mahbouba Seraj, is Executive Director of the Afghan Women Skills Development Centre in Kabul. Seraj fled Afghanistan in 1978 during the first Taliban rule. However, she returned to establish and manage what is the last remaining shelter for women survivors of abuse in the country (UN Women 2022).

She is now a prominent advocate for Afghan women's rights at numerous international forums including the UN Security Council. Another is Freshta Karim, a children's rights advocate and founder of Charmaghz, a Kabul-based NGO dedicated to promoting children's education in Afghanistan. Charmaghz uses mobile libraries to promote literacy, peacebuilding, and critical thinking for Afghan children (Charmaghz 2024). Currently in exile in the UK, Karim has used her platform to highlight the impact of the Taliban's bans on education. Shaharзад Akbar, former chair of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission, also in exile, continues to campaign globally for human rights and justice, states "since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, 20 years of progress – especially for women and girls – has been systematically erased." She warns that "normalizing the Taliban is accepting the erasure of women" (Akbar and Verveer 2023: para. 1).

Their advocacy reflects a broader diasporic dynamic in which displacement generates both constraint and opportunity. While exile distances activists from direct participation within Afghanistan, it simultaneously enables engagement with global institutions, transnational media, and digital publics. In this sense, diasporic leadership extends Afghan women's political presence beyond territorial borders, preserving visibility in spaces where domestic avenues for dissent have been foreclosed.

This formalized leadership context provides an important backdrop for understanding the emergence of decentralized social media campaigns that circulate alongside and sometimes beyond institutional advocacy channels.

5.3 Reclaiming cultural dress as digital resistance

The Taliban's enforcement of gendered dress mandates transformed women's bodies into visible sites of ideological regulation. In response, women in the Afghan diaspora mobilized traditional dress as a form of resistance. The campaign emerged following a highly choreographed pro-Taliban demonstration staged three weeks after the takeover. Dressed in black headscarves, *niqabs*, and *abayas*⁶ and carrying Taliban flags, approximately 300 women marched to Shaheed Rabbani Education University, publicly affirming support for the new regime and its directives (Eddy and Blue 2021). Subsequent demonstrations featured placards asserting that

⁶ A small number of the Pro-Taliban protestors wore the traditional blue shuttlecock burqas (AFP 2021). An *abaya* is a long, loose-fitting, robe-like, usually black garment that covers the entire body, except for the face, hands and feet. It is typically paired with a headscarf to cover the hair. By contrast, a *burqa* is a loose, full-length outer garment that covers the entire body and face, often with a mesh screen for vision. A *niqab* covers the face, leaving only the eyes visible, and is worn with an accompanying headscarf.

“Women who left Afghanistan cannot represent us” (Radio France Internationale 2021), reinforcing the regime’s attempt to define authentic Afghan womanhood through visual conformity and political loyalty.

After the Pro-Taliban demonstration was covered by several international news organizations, a woman activist in the Afghan diaspora⁷ posted two tweets that included hashtags #DoNotTouchmyClothes and #AfghanistanCulture. The first tweet includes a photograph of the activist in traditional Afghan dress with the hashtag #DoNotTouchMyClothes. The following day, she tweeted another picture of her from her teen years that explained that she was wearing a traditional Afghan dress from a different region of Afghanistan (see Figure 1). The tweet included a statement that Afghan women will not let their culture be misappropriated by the Taliban and its effort to erase women. The tweet also tagged the Twitter/X handle of Paris-based journalist and photographer.

Hundreds of women (and men) responded with a cascade of supportive tweets, with many women in the Afghan diaspora posting their own pictures in traditional dress in solidarity. The hashtag #DontTouchMyClothes trended.

5.4 Cultural dress functions as a discursive counter-narrative to Taliban moral authority

Across the dataset of social media activity, Afghan women repeatedly frame traditional clothing as evidence of “authentic Afghan culture” positioning vivid color, intricate embroidery, and historical continuity against the Taliban’s imposition of black burqas. Tweets such as “Our colorful clothing symbolizes our original culture” and “This spirit is what the Taliban want to destroy” explicitly reframe dress from a moral obligation into a cultural and political symbol. These posts function as discursive rebuttals to the Taliban’s strict dress code for women and Taliban narratives of purity and religious legitimacy. Clothing becomes a semiotic resource through which women reclaim Afghan identity and expose the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam as foreign, imposed, and historically inaccurate.

This campaign illustrates how diasporic Afghan women mobilize affect, employing nostalgia, anger, and pride, as connective tissue in digital activism, echoing broader patterns in global diaspora social media use. Responses to the

⁷ In accordance with ethical best practices involving politically sensitive digital activism discussed in section 4.3, identifying details in social media posts and images have been paraphrased, anonymized, or visually obscured, even when the original content is publicly accessible. While the events and posts discussed here remain discoverable through publicly available information, these measures are intended to avoid further dissemination beyond their original platform and to prioritize the safety and privacy of individuals represented.



Figure 1: Twitter/X post by a diasporic Afghan woman in traditional Afghan dress.

woman activist's first two tweets include numerous requests from journalists to interview her, harkening back to the substantial media attention to Afghan women after 9/11, fuelling the Bush administration's "rescue narratives" (Abu-Lughod 2002, 2015; Ashraf and Kennedy-Pipe 2022; Fahmy 2004; Wimpelmann 2026). Muhtaseb (2020) argues that, in 2001 and in 2021, Arab, Afghan, and Muslim women activists were "US media darlings" (7). So, too, were they darlings of the Bush administration; On November 17, 2001 from Crawford, Texas, First Lady Laura Bush (2001) addressed

the nation by radio on “the Taliban’s war against women”. Twenty years later, it was up to Afghan women themselves to maintain the global attention to this ‘war’.

What began as a commentary by one woman activist in the Afghan diaspora, on the restrictive clothing mandates by the Taliban regime, quickly expanded to a broad, global exchange of ideas on the history and culture of Afghanistan, the immigrant experience of the Afghan expatriates, and the freedom many felt in sharing their own culture with their adoptive homelands across the diaspora. Hashtags including #AfghanCulture, #AfghanistanCulture, and #AfghanWomen quickly appeared and dominated the Afghan Twitter sphere. The activist’s social media campaign calling for preservation of cultural heritage in Afghanistan received extensive coverage in the international press and triggered wide-ranging discussions on protection of women’s and broader human rights and cultural heritage in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime.

The narratives of the international media focused more on the courageous Afghan women, showcasing the vibrant colors of Afghan culture. However, media largely ignored the underlying current of anger, fear, betrayal, and disappointment that this campaign was created, in part, by the lack of international support for Afghan citizens. The activist said in interviews that the Taliban were invaders, born and trained in Pakistan, and had no understanding of Afghan culture and identity. She said that the Afghan people had been abandoned and appealed to the people to pressure their governments not to recognize the Taliban.

5.5 Diasporic connective and collective action

Through the social media posts of the activist and other Afghan women in the diaspora, the hashtag #DoNotTouchMyClothes built connective and collective message frames (Abbas et al. 2022; Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Tarrow 2005). Frames used by Afghan women, particularly in the diaspora, attracted and signalled supporters and garner global media attention. Women in the diaspora provided a counter narrative to the Pro-Taliban women’s demonstration that occurred days before the activist posted her first #DoNotTouchMyClothes tweet. The tweets condemned the Taliban’s attack on Afghan identity, however, given the aesthetic focus on women in traditional Afghan clothing, it appears to be both a bold and transgressive strategy while still being relatively easy to enact. This strategy worked out in that it quickly attracted the attention not only of other Afghan women in the diaspora but also of those that had recently managed to escape the Taliban takeover.

Women in the Afghan diaspora participating in the #DoNotTouchMyClothes campaign also included other aspects of women’s lived experience that were banned by the Taliban. A prominent singer posted a video of her singing a traditional Afghan

song wearing traditional Afghan clothes, in response to the Taliban declaring that even women's voice should be kept hidden from the public sphere. Preliminary data analysis of the thousands of tweets posted, liked, and retweeted in the #DoNotTouchMyClothes campaign shows the emerging themes of, first, the global trend of politicizing women's clothes, second, the international community normalizing the Taliban, third, the sanctioning of Pakistan and, fourth, the discursive cleansing of Afghan cultural identity.

Diasporic women used social media to challenge how Taliban narratives positioned 'true' Afghan women and encouraged other women in the diaspora to share authentic representations of Afghan women. Several commented that the campaign was not a fashion statement but an "online dress protest" and a "cultural resistance" to the Taliban's propaganda and disinformation and its attack on Afghan cultural identity. They shared images of a woman wearing black burqas, abayas, niqab and gloves, stating that this attire did not belong to Afghan culture and was completely foreign and alien for Afghan women. The originator of the campaign posted a tweet indicating that she teaches colleges and that her students often tell her that they learn visually. She went on to say that images are powerful and that the #DoNotTouchMyClothes campaign is not a fashion display but a form of cultural resistance.

5.6 Responses to the diasporic campaign from within Afghanistan

Responses to the social media posts were overwhelmingly supportive. Along with sharing images of themselves and family members wearing traditional Afghan dresses, Afghan women shared their memories of their country before the first and second Taliban regimes and their critiques of the regimes. Some responses included images of the Pro-Taliban women demonstrators wearing black *abayas*, *niqabs*, and *burqas* on the streets outside Kabul University and in a lecture hall. There were adverse responses, however. For instance, in a response to the tweet pictured in Figure 1, a male Twitter/X user posted a response that included profanity and an accusation that the activist was spreading propaganda against Islam. The following day another male user tweeted the following that the pornography industry is looking for women like her.

Women who remained in Kabul and elsewhere in the country acknowledged the diasporic Afghan women for becoming the voice of unrepresented voices of the women living under the oppressive Taliban regime. For instance, a 22-year-old Afghan woman in Kabul expressed her thoughts with Zeba Siddiqui, a reporter with Reuters, about the online protest by diasporic Afghan women telling the world that the Afghan women did not support the Taliban. She shared her concerns and

inability to do the same while living in Afghanistan as it risks her safety. She said that she could no longer wear such clothes in Afghanistan or post her photos in these ongoing social media protests (Siddiqui 2021).

The statements of Afghan women align with Antonakis-Nashif's (2015) idea of "hashtagging the invisible" where the desire to change realities is enacted by speaking publicly on social injustice through hashtags should be defined as activism, and the women voicing hashtags counter-publics are activists. The narration process of sharing personal stories in the public domain to pursue social change is an action, "everyday activism" (Antonakis-Nashif 2015: 110). Hence, Afghan diaspora, mostly women, flooded Twitter with photos with and/or without statements, condemning Taliban's strict and conservative interpretation of sharia laws and violation of basic human rights for women in Afghanistan where women had been barred from working and some were beaten for taking part in protests against the Taliban.

Tweets from Afghan social media influencers, journalists, physicians, academics, activists and all tweeting their photos in Afghani traditional attire, from both past and present directed heavy traffic to the hashtags used by them at their posts. The hashtags #DoNotTouchMyClothes and #AfghanistanCulture, and variants of them (e.g., #DontTouchMyClothes and #AfghanCulture) were widely adopted. Many tweets also acknowledged the activist who originated the campaign for encouraging the Afghans to remind the world of the ancient rich culture of Afghanistan. In media interviews, the diasporic Afghan woman activist who initiated the #DoNotTouchMyClothes campaign framed the Taliban's restrictions on women's dress, education, and employment as mechanisms of patriarchal control rather than religious obligation, emphasizing how such policies eliminate women's agency and political equality. She also underscored the importance of sustaining international attention on Afghanistan, noting that the visibility generated by the campaign was intended to mobilize global support for Afghan women's rights.

5.7 Activist risk

Platforms such as Instagram and Twitter/X have facilitated online opportunities for Afghani women under the Taliban, and have allowed women opportunities for self-expression navigating around Taliban imposed barriers. For example, Afghani women shared videos of themselves singing defiance under the #MyVoiceIsNotForbidden campaign on Instagram (Jalliet 2024). But these activisms come with immense risks, including safety, concerns and challenges in operationalizing the activism due to restrictions on social movements (UN Women 2024). Further, online platforms environments are shaped by algorithmic and political constraints (Habermas 2022; Newsom 2022).

The discursive resistance of Afghan women's hashtag activism is therefore empowering yet structurally constrained. The voices of Afghan women are promoted through their discursive resistance, even when primarily liminal and only capable of indirect impact it challenges Taliban's strategic narratives (Hurley 2022, 2023). Afghan women's efforts persist online, as they strive for rights, recognition, and the amplification of their voices on a digital global stage as an example of discursive resistance to the intentional discursive cleansing of Afghan women's identities and characteristics prior to and in contrast with Taliban strategic narratives of fundamentalist, patriarchal traditions and norms.

The dataset shows that risk organizes the form of resistance itself. Posts authored from outside Afghanistan frequently include identifiable self-images in traditional dress and protest settings (see Figures 1 and 3), whereas posts attributable to those emerging from inside Afghanistan avoid face-forward imagery and instead rely on anonymized voice, symbolic visuals, generalized captions, or secondary sharing through safer accounts. Figure 2 includes side-by-side self-portrait images shared by an Afghan woman on Twitter/X in September 2021, contrasting clothing worn before and after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul to illustrate the loss of personal choice under Taliban rule. The juxtaposition functions as embodied evidence of coercion and surveillance under authoritarian rule and helps explain why visual self-representation is treated as risky capital inside Afghanistan.

Figure 2 illustrates this constraint directly: the author frames the shift in clothing as "not my choice", positioning dress as survival rather than preference.

Importantly, the dataset reveals a clear asymmetry in how resistance is visually and discursively enacted across location and access to safety. Only diasporic Afghan women publicly shared photographs of themselves wearing traditional Afghan clothing as part of the #DoNotTouchMyClothes campaign. These visual performances of cultural identity often accompanied by historical references and explicit rejection of Taliban-imposed dress code were made possible by the relative safety afforded to women outside Afghanistan.

In contrast, Afghan women residing inside Afghanistan, even when they had access to digital resources, engaged in resistance indirectly. Posts authored by women inside the country avoided visual self-representation until they were certain that they will get a safe exit. Majority of Afghan women residing in Afghanistan instead relied on voice-based content, anonymized captions, symbolic language, or appeals circulated through secondary accounts. This pattern reflects the material risks associated with visual visibility under Taliban rule and demonstrates how discursive resistance is shaped by differential exposure to surveillance and punishment.

Discursive resistance, even when primarily liminal and only capable of indirect impact on political structure, is a necessary means of destabilizing the constructed



Figure 2: Clothing before and after the Taliban's return to power in Kabul.

strategic narratives of discursive cleansing and discursive amnesia. Discursive resistance reclaims suppressed narratives and challenges dominant discourse as a means of destabilizing and undermining the influence of intentional erasure of history and identity. This is why oppressed communities use discursive resistance through oral tradition, storytelling, as a means of survivance that ensures cultural and historical continuity against colonial and authoritarian efforts of erasure. This is also why Afghan women's digital activism since the Taliban's 2021 resurgence is imperative, so that the historical and cultural identities of Afghan women are not limited to a story told by an oppressive, invasive ideology.

5.8 Foregrounding human rights violations

Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban rapidly consolidated control over state institutions and the social fabric, resulting in severe human rights setbacks, particularly for women (Butt 2024; Popalzay and Singh 2025; Tulli 2023). These changes were not only material but discursive, as governance, law, and punishment were rearticulated through a rigid interpretation of Sharia law, to normalize women's exclusion from public life. Practices such as public floggings, amputations, and executions (Global Conflict Tracker 2025), alongside bans on girls' secondary and higher education, restrictions on women's employment, and enforced dress and mobility codes (Wani 2024), functioned rhetorically to redefine women as moral subjects requiring surveillance rather than as rights-bearing citizens. Public executions and gender-based violence increased at the same time international aid dwindled, exacerbating the economic hardships faced by the Afghani people. Despite the assurances of a more moderate Afghanistan under the Taliban rule (Seir et al. 2021), the new Taliban government resurrected their policies for women and girls.⁸ These practices served to systematically erase women's presence from public life and reshape societal norms to exclude them. The Taliban's systematic exclusion of women from public life effectively silences women's voices, which undermines the inclusivity essential to a functioning public sphere (Habermas 2022; See, also, Le Renard 2019). This erasure not only violates women's rights but also degrades the quality of public discourse, resulting in a fragmented and less representative society. These acts of erasure also constitute an assault on collective memory, as the Taliban seek to overwrite women's historical presence in Afghan society. Such attempts at discursive cleansing are resisted not only within Afghanistan but also by diasporic Afghan women, who use social media to preserve cultural memory and to contest the Taliban's imposed discursive amnesia.

As examples of the Taliban's human rights violations, girls were prohibited from attending secondary schools and universities (Ahmed 2025; Essar et al. 2023). The Taliban's promises to the west to be inclusive and less rigid from past stance on women's rights to education and employment were strategic and deceptive (Sahill 2023). Their resurgence, accompanied by severe campaigns, instilled fear among female teachers and students for their safety and that of their families. Female teachers and students constantly face the looming threat of Taliban violence. The strict segregation imposed in various professional sectors makes it extremely difficult for women to seek education and work outside their homes (Yousufi 2021).

⁸ Taliban leadership stated on the Kabul-based station, Spogmai Radio, they would "commit to women rights within the confines of the sharia" (cited in Sahill 2023: 1). See, also, Rahimi and Din 2024; Sabbah 2024; Sahill 2023; Sarwari and Adnan 2023.

The evidence shows that the Taliban's stance has not significantly changed. Rigid conditions of enforced dress codes, isolated school facilities with tall perimeter walls, and tight oversight on educational materials severely limit their ostensibly more lenient stance. The Taliban's strict enforcement of their ideology has led to the closure of hundreds of girls' secondary schools in their controlled areas (Yousufi 2021). Women university students were required to be clad in black burqas to attend classes. Women were told to stay home and, when they left their homes for their own safety, were required to be accompanied by a male if they were traveling beyond a narrow radius (Rubin 2021). Notably, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, established in 2002, was replaced with the *د امر بالمعروف، نهی عن المنکر او شکایتونو اور بدلو وزارت* [Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice], which quickly became known as the Taliban's "moral police", given it is the arm of the Taliban state charged with enforcing and policing the observance of their strict interpretation of Islam. This interpretation has wide mandates from dress codes to harsh punishments including public flogging and hangings (ARC Foundation 2021). Women were barred from most publicly visible employment opportunities, particularly roles within non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and jobs with the United Nations, further marginalizing their societal participation in the public sphere (Essar et al. 2023).

Despite their attempts at projecting a more moderate Taliban before, during, and after the takeover (Inukonda and Lengel 2025), the Taliban have resumed their fundamentalist discursive interpretation of Islam they implemented during its repressive regime from 1996 to 2001, the First Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This interpretation is at odds with current worldviews of human rights yet reinforces the strategic narratives of Islamic fundamentalism that require women's oppression to reinforce patriarchal control and symbolize ideological purity. This is reflected in the Taliban claiming that they would respect women's rights, while they were abolishing the Ministry of Women's Affairs and replacing it with the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, as discussed above. This is one example of many illustrating how discursive cleansing of women's voices and presence in the public sphere is a direct representation of extremist patriarchal purity standards.

Under Taliban rule, Afghan women's bodies have become battlegrounds for moral authority. Gender oppression is discursively framed as divine rather than as a political argument. This adds an element of control to the strategic narrative, as silencing women removes a crucial voice for reform. Beidollahkhani (2026) explains, "a value-laden epistemic system is established, distinguishing between a virtuous Muslim woman and an impure non-Muslim woman who does not adhere to the prescribed embodiment and surveillance norms of Islamic society" (151). The resulting restrictions on women and girls are particularly brutal (Graham-Harrison and Harding 2021). In September 2021, the Taliban removed 254 Afghan women judges from office (Cooper 2023: 5). Many of those judges fled, along with female

prosecutors, seeking asylum in other nations with the help of privately funded, legal-based agencies (Appelman et al. 2022; Calin 2021). This need was instigated by the Taliban freeing 5,000 Taliban from jail as a part of the peace treaty in 2020 (Cooper 2022). Subsequently, the Karachi, Pakistan-based newspaper, *Dawn* (2021), reported that after the Taliban freed these prisoners from Afghan jails, many hunted the women judges who had put them behind bars. Women judges became high-profile targets; two “high-level women judges were gunned down on their way to work by unknown assailants” in January 2021, after the treaty was put in place but before the Taliban had taken over (Cooper 2022: 3).

On September 10, 2021, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNCHR) condemned the Taliban’s “increasingly violent” response to shut down these peaceful demonstrations. The UNCHR reported that, from August 15 to 19, 2021, the Taliban killed a man and a boy and injured eight others with open fire. In Herat on September 7 the Taliban shot and killed two men and injured seven more. During a demonstration in Kabul on the same day, the Taliban beat and detained several women and fifteen journalists. The following day to stop a peaceful demonstration of most women activists in the Dashti-Barchi area of Kabul, five journalists were arrested; two were severely beaten for several hours (UNCHR 2021). Women demonstrated outside the former location of the Ministry of Women affairs, protesting the closure of the Ministry and advocating for women’s right to work and education. UNCHR spokesperson, Ravina Shamdasani, said that as Afghan women (and men) take to the streets during this time of great uncertainty, “it is crucial that those in power listen to their voices” (UNCHR 2021: para. 2).

5.9 Exposing the suppression of activists

The protests continued well after the weeks following the Taliban takeover. For instance, in early 2022, a woman in Kabul posted a video pleading for help as a group of armed men broke into her apartment, arrested, imprisoned, and tortured her. Her three sisters and a fellow peaceful protestor were also abducted by the Taliban (Front Line Defenders 2022). Three days before her arrest she participated in a peaceful demonstration near Kabul University, demanding the rights of women to be able to work and receive education, and to regain the freedom they had before August 2021. The Taliban suppressed the protest by firing pepper spray at the women demonstrators (France24 2022). After being detained for one month, she fled the country and is now in the Afghan diaspora in Europe. However, she continues to experience online harassment and bullying by pro-Taliban groups.

The abduction and disappearance of the five young women received international attention. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the

United Nations Secretary General, the European Union, and the Permanent Mission on Afghanistan in Geneva expressed their grave concern and called on Taliban Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, to release information on their whereabouts and to release them. Four days later, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid responded that the Taliban maintains its right to arrest and detain dissidents.

Protests continue, particularly on and around the anniversary of the Taliban takeover. Demonstrators carry banners that read “August 15 is a black day” and chant “Justice, justice. We’re fed up with ignorance,” as they demand rights to work and engage in political participation. Journalists covering these demonstrations have been beaten by Taliban militants. One of the most recent of these occurred on September 11, 2024, just days after the takeover when a group of around ten women, organized by the Afghan Women’s History Transformation Movement, demonstrated on the streets of Kabul, demanding their rights and calling on “the international community to denounce Taliban rule” (RadioFreeEurope/Radio Liberty 2024: para. 1). The head of the Transformation Movement, Ruqiya Sa’i, reported that the protest ended after 30 min because of the possibility of a violent retaliatory attack by the Taliban. Protesters who fled the country to live in exile reported they have been beaten, abused, jailed and threatened with death by stoning (Nowrouzi 2024).

These examples of extreme violence add to the discursive cleansing of women’s voices by forcing the physical removal of publicly notable, professional women. Female doctors were treated in a similar fashion. In 2022, as “the harsh winter” approached, the American Bar Association reported that “the Taliban is prohibiting male doctors from treating women, but there are no women doctors, so there is no healthcare for women” in Afghanistan (Appelman et al. 2022: 413). Women’s access to healthcare in the country has worsened since then (UN Women 2025). Women were banned from education and training in medicine, including midwifery and nursing, practice is long associated with women’s gender roles in Afghanistan, as well as other parts of the world. These are also practices that had flourished under the governance of the Islamic Republic (Speakman et al. 2014). Therefore, the Taliban needed to remove and erase these women’s achievements as part of its argument that it was freeing or liberating the Afghani people from an oppressive regime. This example illustrates the necessity of discursive cleansing, by the Taliban, to promote its own strategic narratives and control the messaging.

Another way in which the Taliban sought to control and erase women’s presence in the public sphere is through behavior controls, and the enforcement of gendered bio-power (Foucault 1976/2004), where governmental agencies regulate bodies to maintain authority. Through enforced dress codes, such as mandatory burqas, the Taliban regulated women’s physical appearance, transforming their bodies into symbols of ideological control. By restricting movement, e.g. banning women from traveling without male guardians, they extended this control beyond the body,

limiting spatial autonomy. The restrictions on work and education also reflect bio-power as a means of discursive cleansing. Kabul's Taliban-appointed interim mayor said that women must return to their homes and not work, excepting "only for those [positions that] cannot be replaced by men" (Mehrzaad and Rostan 2024: 147).

By barring women from schools, workplaces, and even public parks, the Taliban curtailed women's societal participation, rendering them invisible. The policing of women's voices in media and public life further reinforced their erasure. These restrictions transformed women's bodies into sites of state power, where obedience was not only enforced through law but internalized through fear. The Taliban's biopolitical control ensured that gender segregation became normalized, reinforcing patriarchal rule. This systematic discursive cleansing of women's presence was not just about enforcing morality but about monopolizing power by eliminating half the population from the public sphere, silencing potential resistance and alternative narratives of governance.

5.10 Diaspora as transnational digital counter-public

While women inside Afghanistan continue to risk their lives protesting on the streets, Afghan women in the global diaspora have emerged as crucial amplifiers of these narratives, creating transnational digital counter-publics. This intersection of local and diasporic activism aligns with and extends scholarship on digital diasporas, particularly in how social media enables dispersed communities to negotiate identity, memory, and collective resistance across borders. Immediately after the Taliban returned to power and swiftly rolled back women's rights, Afghan women, both in Afghanistan and across the globe, mobilized in unprecedented ways, emerging as powerful voices of resistance. Despite facing brutal crackdowns, arrests, and threats, women inside Afghanistan, primarily in Kabul and Herat, organized protests demanding the right to education, work, and freedom of movement. Protests by Afghan feminists and allies began on August 17, 2021, two days after Taliban seized Kabul. A few weeks later, a group of women demonstrated in Herat to urge the Taliban to allow their daughters to continue going to school (Nowrouzi 2024). Organizations, such as the Spontaneous Movement of Afghan Women Fighters for Freedom, led public demonstrations which were often dispersed violently by Taliban forces. Such acts of resistance have been exceptionally dangerous within the country. During a peaceful demonstration in Faizabad city in the province of Badakhshan province, several women activists and human rights defenders, Taliban dissolved the protest by firing into the air and reportedly beat a group of young Afghan women demonstrators with whips and batons (UNCHR 2021).

The images in Figure 3 reflect diasporic and transnational expressions of solidarity associated with the #DoNotTouchMyClothes campaign, showing Afghan women and allies participating in public demonstrations and holding placards such as “This Is Not Freedom”, “We Want Freedom”, “We Stand with Afghan Women”, and “My Clothes, My Identity”. These are not neutral statements; they function as declarative counter-speech that reclaims visibility and political voice, operating within what Foucault (1976) describes as the immanent relationship between power, discourse, and resistance. Traditional Afghan clothing is re-signified not as Taliban-imposed morality, but as cultural pride and resistance, deliberately worn in public to contest narratives that render Afghan women silent, erased, or uniformly oppressed. The visual artifacts women are holding during their peaceful demonstration provide documentation from women in the Afghan diaspora, which circulates collective counter-speech through placards and traditional dress, transforming civic space into evidence of visibility, solidarity, and refusal of erasure.

Such collective counter-speech can also serve as crucial memory work to illustrate how Afghan women’s identities and cultural attributes are more complex and varied than those imprinted upon them by the authoritarian regime. These



Figure 3: Transnational protest actions associated with the #DoNotTouchMyClothes campaign.

representations, however, need to be more fully recognized beyond the strategic Orientalist (Said 1978) and Islamophobic gender-based narratives that imperial feminisms often promote which vilify and demonize the cultures of South Asia, North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Afghanistan and Pakistan by illustrating women as victims of patriarchal oppression at the core of fundamentalist Islam. These narratives are constrained by a conflict of progressive versus conservative frameworks both inside and outside of the region, and reinforce the very arguments promoted by the Taliban regarding the conflict between Western and Islamic conservativisms at the heart of the “War on Terror” and the Taliban’s resulting fight for “liberation” from western, imperial interference. This results in women’s identities being erased and removed from public discourse, both in formal law and informal policy, even while their bodies are present. Diasporic digital storytelling also constitutes transnational cultural interaction, as Afghan women’s narratives circulate globally, creating cross-cultural dialogues that complicate Orientalist framings and highlight Afghan women as agents of cultural continuity.

Ensuring Afghan women’s activism and narratives are present in the public sphere is necessary to the potential success of their discursive resistance. This is of particular importance given the Taliban’s continual efforts to discursively cleanse women’s identities that do not fit within the regime’s strategic narratives. True and Akbari (2024) argue that “counter-narratives supported by political strategies are an effective instrument for empowering marginalized women and legitimizing their activism that protests the continuation of war against women despite the end of military war” (1). Such counter-narratives work as discursive resistance to what United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres (2023) has identified the Taliban’s actions as “gender-based apartheid” (para. 30). Guterres’ profound statement has been echoed by scholars and legal experts (Akbari and True 2022, 2023; Altunay and Petó 2022; Bennoune 2022; Dato-Caballero 2026; Litty 2025; Nadery 2023). Afghan women continue to be threatened in their professional, social, and personal lives in Afghanistan. The future of young girls is at stake, and women who served in the armed forces, female judges, journalists, and social activists are actively targeted by the Taliban. Afghan women activists, both within the country and in the diaspora, continue to play a crucial role in documenting human rights abuses, pressuring global governments and non-governmental organizations to take action, and preserving Afghan women’s demands for gender and other forms of justice and their stories of resilience and bravery since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. While the Taliban has sought to erase women from public life, Afghan women continue to resist through acts of courage, visibility, and defiance, asserting their agency and fighting for a future of equality and dignity (Ike et al. 2025).

These diasporic activist practices illuminate a profound contest over who has the authority to define Afghan womanhood. The Taliban’s strategic narratives attempt to

erase women's presence and replace it with a narrow ideal of piety and obedience, while women's local and diasporic activism foregrounds plurality, resilience, and self-definition. This ongoing struggle underscores how identity itself becomes a battleground in conditions of authoritarian repression, with Afghan women asserting that their voices, bodies, and histories cannot be silenced into oblivion. These activist practices reveal not only Afghan women's demand for political rights but also their negotiation of identities under siege – as women, as citizens, and as global actors. Emotions such as fear, hope, and resilience surface in both street protests and digital activism, shaping transnational solidarity. By situating Afghan women's activism within the global diaspora and its digital practices, this study contributes to broader understandings of how social media mediates diasporic experiences, identity negotiations, and political participation under conditions of authoritarian control. Afghan women's digital resistance should thus be recognized as a critical site for advancing diaspora studies, feminist communication studies, and areas studies of the broader Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, Afghanistan, and Pakistan region.

6 Directions for future research

Through their activism inside Afghanistan and across the diaspora, Afghan women activists counter the Taliban's continued attempts to silence women through discursive cleansing. Future research must continue to elevate Afghan women's voices and activist efforts and amplify their collective resistance commitments as part of broader, transnational feminist activations grounded in solidarity, resilience, and the pursuit of gender justice, as it intersects with other forms of justice from economic to ethnic to environmental.

We will continue to analyze the #DoNotTouchMyClothes digital activism. We also aim to investigate the online, offline, and traditional media conversations around the compatibility of traditional or religious clothing with women's and human rights. Analyses on the restrictions on women's clothing as it intersects with Muslim women's and girls' rights in various global, geopolitical contexts also continue to be timely and relevant. One example is the banning of the *hijab* in certain states in India where Muslim girls have been barred from secondary schools. This, too, is an act of discursive cleansing and an exercise of power over women's and girls' bodies that robs them of their agency.

Future research on Afghan women activists, both within the country and in the diaspora, is much needed to understand the humanitarian and human rights crises in Afghanistan. Diasporic Afghan women's social media activism demonstrates that authoritarian discursive cleansing is never uncontested. While the Taliban regulate

women's bodies and monopolize representations of Afghan identity, women across borders reassert plurality, historical memory, and embodied agency through transnational digital publics. Women's activism underscores the role of diaspora communities in sustaining collective visibility and contesting epistemic erasure under conditions of repression. In doing so, social media becomes not merely a site of communication but a terrain of resistance.

Research ethics: This study is based on the analysis of publicly available digital content, media texts, and visual materials. It did not involve the collection of data from human subjects, nor did it involve interaction with or intervention involving living individuals. As such, ethical review and informed consent were not required.

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