

# THE ARCHITECTURE OF TRADITIONAL AND MODERN AFGHAN HOUSES AND THE FUNDAMENTALIST REGIME: IMPACTS ON WOMEN'S LIVES

## A ARQUITETURA DAS CASAS AFEGÃS TRADICIONAIS E MODERNAS E O REGIME FUNDAMENTALISTA: IMPACTOS SOBRE A VIDA DAS MULHERES.

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**Resumo:** Essa pesquisa investiga a relação entre as características arquitetônicas das casas tradicionais e modernas no Afeganistão e as restrições impostas à vida das mulheres afegãs, levando em consideração os incidentes recentes. O estudo se baseia em uma combinação de fontes históricas e artigos de notícias relacionados aos assuntos contemporâneos afegãos como suas principais fontes de dados. Além disso, é realizada uma análise comparativa de duas casas - um exemplo de design tradicional e outra representando a arquitetura moderna - na cidade de Herat, Afeganistão. Ao destacar a interação entre as características arquitetônicas e suas implicações para a vida das mulheres, a pesquisa tem como objetivo lançar luz sobre essa relação com o habitar. Os resultados desta pesquisa indicam que as áreas urbanas apresentam uma manifestação mais evidente de modernização em aspectos físicos, comprovada pela prevalência de casas residenciais modernas. No entanto, com o início de novas restrições impostas pelo Talibã após 2021, as casas modernas, caracterizadas por espaços abertos limitados em comparação com as casas tradicionais, geram uma maior vulnerabilidade para as mulheres afegãs. Consequentemente, confinar as mulheres dentro dessas casas modernas têm um impacto deletério em seu bem-estar físico e mental.

**Palavras-chave:** Arquitetura; Igualdade de gênero; mulheres afegãs; Modernização; Talibã

**Abstract:** This research investigates the relation between the architectural attributes of traditional and modern houses in Afghanistan and the constraints imposed on Afghan women's lives by considering recent incidents. This study draws upon a combination of historical sources and news articles pertaining to contemporary Afghan affairs as its primary data sources. Additionally, it comparatively analyzes two houses — one exemplifying the traditional Afghan design and another, modern architecture — in the City of Herat, Afghanistan. By highlighting the interplay between architectural features and their implications for women's lives, this research aims to shed light on this dwelling relationship. The findings of this research indicate that urban areas more conspicuously manifest modernization in physical aspects, evinced by the prevalence of modern residential houses. However, with the initiation of new restrictions imposed by the Taliban after 2021, modern houses (characterized by more limited open spaces than traditional ones) engender heightened vulnerability for Afghan women. Thus, confining women within these modern houses deleteriously impacts their physical and mental well-being.

**Keywords:** Architecture; Gender Equality; Afghan women; Modernization; Taliban

## Introduction

Modern phenomena are intertwined between the human worldview and the built environment. Attempting to swim against the prevailing current is an endeavor fraught with insurmountable obstacles and the potential for detrimental and unforeseen consequences. Acquiring a comprehensive understanding of the prevailing circumstances and accepting objective realities necessitates a discerning comprehension of the interconnections between various sensitive and subjective phenomena. In the contemporary era, characterized by its intricate worldview and its manifestation in the tangible fabric of existence, inexplicable alterations are often justified by paradoxes that disrupt the customary routines of life and even imperil human well-being. These intersections are particularly conspicuous in regions afflicted by crises, such as Afghanistan.

The pursuit of modernization in Afghanistan and the relentless struggle for fundamental rights, including women's rights, have a longstanding history spanning a century, if not more. Within the confines of this study, we endeavor to concisely overview the modernization process in Afghanistan and the tireless endeavors by women, monarchs, and influential factions to secure rights. Subsequently, we shall delve into the intricate relations between these phenomena.

Evidently, the architectural and structural fabric of residential dwellings and living environments have undergone profound transformations as a result of the modernization

endeavors during recent decades. The alteration of the physical environment and its consequential impact on the process of modernization is irreversible. Any attempt to engender a lifestyle incongruous with the physical environment is poised to yield unforeseeable and adverse effects on both physical and mental well-being.

Hafizullah Emadi (1991: 225) described the condition of women in Afghan society, the discrimination they faced, and how women's movements emerged, evolved, and forced those movements to move out of the country.

Following the independence in 1919, King Amanullah attempted to modernize the country using European models of development and to free women from social and cultural oppression (Emadi, 1991: 227). However, Habibullah gave rise and led the resistance, taking power in 1929. As a result, all modern schools were closed, female students were recalled from abroad, and the polygamy law was reinstated (Vartan Gregorian, 1969: 275). Habibullah's reign was short-lived, and King Nader (1929-1934) subsequently assumed power, followed by his son King Zahir (1934-1973), who implemented conservative policies regarding women's education.

During the modernization decade (from 1963 to 1973), Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud supported women's movements and their participation in economic, management, and political spheres (Figure 1). He later seized power in a family coup and declared Afghanistan a republic. However, in 1979, the Soviet Union occupied the country, diverting the women's movement from its struggle for rights and equality toward either supporting or opposing the Soviet occupation (Emadi, 1991: 242). Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the Mujahidin assumed power (1992-1996), leading to an internal conflict.

The Taliban, primarily originating from rural villages in southern Afghanistan, seized power for the first time from 1996 to 2001, imposing strict rules that curtailed movement, education, and the values women's movements had fought for throughout the century. In 2001, the US War



a) Photo is taken in 1927.



b) Biology class, Kabul University (1960s).



c) Kabul Hospital: Educating Young Mothers on Post-Natal Care (1960s).



d) Entrance to the Faculty of Medicine in Kabul (1977).



e) Photo is taken in 2021. By: Milad Hamadi for the Tasnim News Agency.

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Figure 1 - Photos from Afghanistan. Available at: [commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org)

on Terror ousted the Taliban, and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was established. From 2001 to 2021, the women's movement resurfaced and evolved, with women pursuing education and work and participating in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Various campaigns supporting women's fundamental rights emerged, such as "MyRedLine" (UNWomen, 2019: online) and "WhereIsMyName?" (Mahjooba Nowrouzi, 2020: online).

However, in August 2021, the Taliban regained power and began imposing new norms on women's lives. Afghan women lost the rights they had acquired over the years and started suffering under the Taliban's established norms, which included:

- mandatory *hijab*;
- exclusion of girls from secondary schools;
- restrictions on women attending universities;
- loss of freedom of movement;
- prohibition of women traveling alone;
- directives for city government employees to stay at home;
- and dissolution of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (BBC, 2022).

According to Huma Ahmed-Ghosh (2003: 11), Afghanistan has always had elite and middle-class women who asserted their rights and championed modernization. However, despite these examples, the majority of Afghan women in rural areas have been subjected to oppression by tribal customs and dictates.

This study examines the adaptation of rural Afghan women's lives to the infrastructure and housing in which they have lived throughout the centuries. Rural women face their own unique challenges and difficulties due to patriarchal beliefs and religious perceptions. On the other hand, urban women have experienced significant transformations in infrastructure and living environments due to long-standing struggles and recent urbanization. These changes have emerged from the recognition of women's basic rights, including their freedom of movement and the acknowledgment of their individual identities. However, the modernization of residential houses and the associated changes in living environments have introduced new challenges for urban women, conflicting with traditional norms and posing serious mental and physical health concerns.

## **Urban-rural divide and modernization in Afghanistan**

The conflict in Afghanistan may stem from a divergence in religious beliefs and tribal values between urban and rural communities. This ideological divide became more pronounced and entrenched with the emergence of modern lifestyles in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

From then on, the predominantly traditional rural population of Afghanistan struggled to reconcile the laws and governmental influences that encroached upon their established way of life. The land reform implemented by the communist government in 1978 (Erwin Grötzbach, 1980: 15) significantly impacted farmers and rural residents, leading to a

heightened sense of discontent toward a government they deemed non-Islamic. Consequently, the subsequent wars in Afghanistan were largely fueled by this fundamental difference in ideologies and interpretations of *Shariah* (the Muslim divine guidance for morality and closeness to God).

In rural areas, women's lifestyle typically revolves around domestic responsibilities such as cooking for the family, caring for children, and assisting livestock rearing, which is often directly connected to the household. They may venture outside their homes to nearby farms for agricultural activities and to obtain essential supplies but their primary residence is typically a relatively spacious traditional house. These households are often larger in size, with extended family members and relatives residing in close proximity within the community. Access to education for children was limited in the past as they actively engaged in assisting farming and agricultural tasks.

However, the situation gradually changed during the Islamic Republic era in Afghanistan (from 2001 to 2021). During this period, the government of Afghanistan, in collaboration with international organizations, implemented various initiatives to incentivize education, including building schools and providing meals for students. These efforts aimed to encourage rural families to prioritize education for their children. Meanwhile, the Taliban and other armed groups targeted schools, seeking to impede educational opportunities for rural children.

Given the traditional rural housing typology, which typically features larger-sized houses with ample open spaces, the notion of women spending a significant portion of their day at home is more socially acceptable in rural areas. These houses serve as multifunctional spaces, allowing extended families to convene and engage in collective work and activities.

From 2001 to 2021, urban women in Afghanistan experienced a significant shift in their roles and opportunities. In addition to their traditional domestic responsibilities, urban women increasingly ventured outside their homes to pursue work and educational endeavors. According to Larry Goodson (2001: 416), the tides of 20<sup>th</sup>-century secularization and modernization in Afghanistan provided greater opportunities for women to participate in public life, especially in urban areas in the north of the country. In this context, urban Afghan women, who valued education for both girls and boys, rejected the practice of requiring women to be accompanied by a male relative (mahram) when appearing in public, a policy enforced by the Taliban.

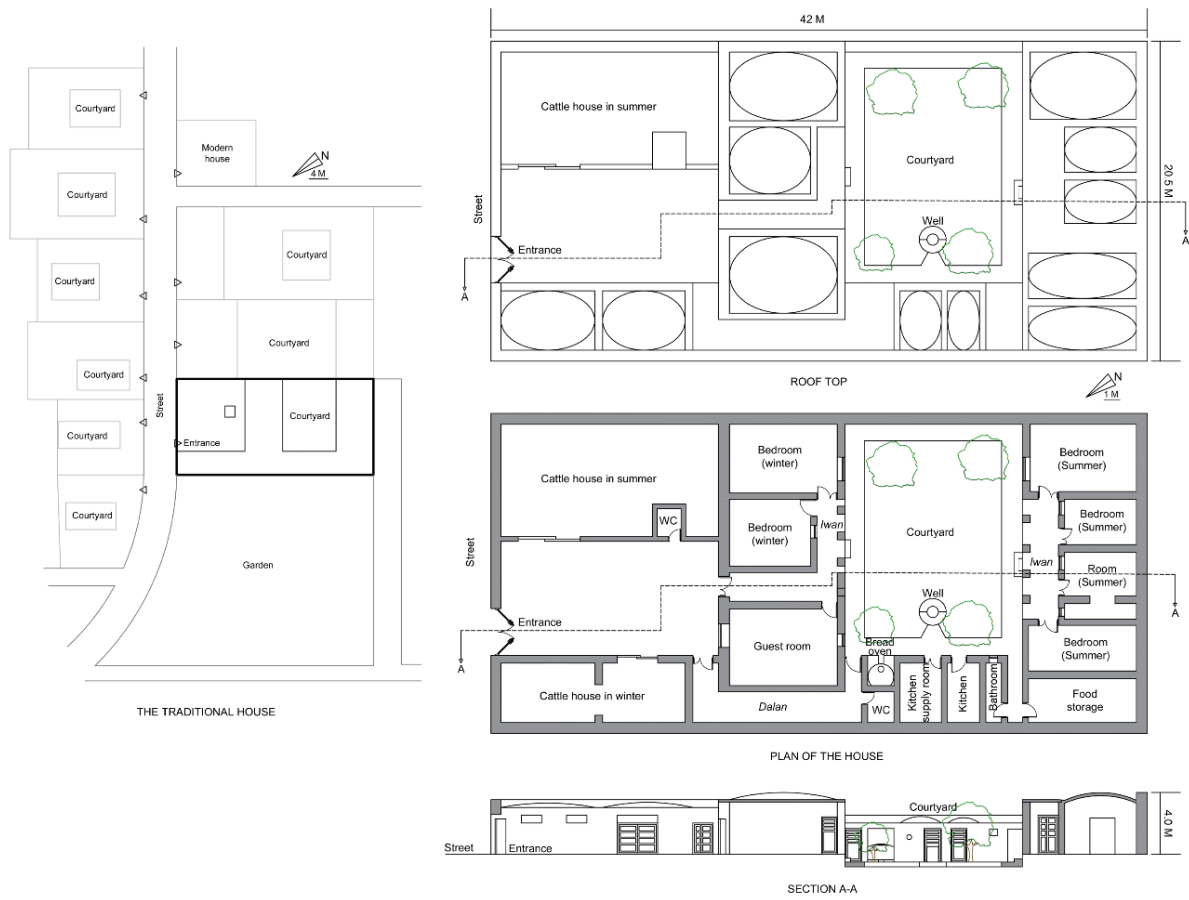
The Taliban, whose origins are rooted in rural Pushtun communities, regained power in August 2021, implementing new regulations that reflect their understanding and interpretation of *Shariah*. The Taliban's rural background and lifestyle influenced their worldview and adherence to conservative interpretations of Islamic teachings. Many of their policies based on their interpretation of *Shariah* are widely rejected outside rural Pushtun areas in which they originate (Goodson, 2001: 424). This societal change was accompanied by a notable physical change and an increase in the construction of modern

housing typologies that catered to the evolving needs and realities of women's participation in public urban spaces.

### **Traditional Afghan Houses and Women's Spatial Needs**

Like other Islamic cities, the use of space in domestic housing and the formation of living quarters evolved over time and were influenced by Islamic jurisprudence and local conditions (Mustapha Hamouche, 2009: 224). Gender roles often influence the division of space in traditional households, with women predominantly spending their time indoors and men engaging in outdoor activities. This spatial distinction aligns with cultural norms and societal expectations, reflecting the traditional roles and responsibilities assigned to each gender within the household.

Khojesta Kawish et al. (2017) studied traditional houses with domical vault roofs in Herat City. It specifically examined three traditional houses (aged 110, 75, and 30 years) in different locations within Herat. These three houses were constructed using conventional construction methods and materials commonly employed in the region, such as masonry and domical vaults roofs.



a) Summer rooms



b) Well



c) Courtyard



d) Bread oven



e) Cattle house in winter



f) Entrance and guest room

Figure 2 – An example of a traditional house (in the village of Sarwestan in southern Herat City). Photos: Ahmadi 2023. Drawings: Authors.

As a case study, Figure 2 shows a traditional house in a rural area in southern Herat city (the village of Sarwestan), representatively exemplifying the architectural style and spatial use of these structures. This illustration highlights the physical characteristics of such houses and emphasizes how they cater to the specific needs of female residents. The architectural design and layout of traditional rural houses consider the practical requirements and cultural norms of women living in Afghan rural communities.

Spaces within the house are strategically organized with the justification of providing privacy, security, and functional areas for women to fulfill their daily activities. This includes separate living spaces, designated personal care and hygiene areas, secluded spaces for relaxation or engagement in domestic tasks, and a space for sun bathing and visiting family guests; a domestic architecture that reflects the asymmetrical relations between genders in Afghan society.

The context of traditional Afghan houses shows that society believes that three primary elements play a crucial role in enhancing women's quality of life and providing accessible open spaces. These elements consist of

1. *the courtyard;*
2. *the takht-bam;*
3. *and the iwan,*

each contributing to the overall functionality of a traditional dwelling.

The World Health Organization (WHO) conceptualizes quality of life as "*an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns.*" It covers psychological states, physical health, social relationships, levels of independence, personal beliefs, and their relationships with the accentuated characteristics of the environment. It represents a subjective, multidimensional assessment inserted in a social, cultural, and environmental context (WHO, 2012: online).

If we consider quality of life from the perspective of subjectivities and individual perceptions within a specific cultural and social context, although the architecture of Afghan homes elucidates the unequal relationships between the female and male genders, their design is part of the idea of guaranteeing the quality of life of women in that society.

However, when we consider physical, psychological, and social well-being (elements that are part of the concept of health), the design of traditional Afghan houses can also have repercussions on women's illness. After all, it is organized to ensure their isolation and the development of unpaid care work, involving domestic tasks and care for children and other family members. Furthermore, in the domestic context of Afghanistan, women are commonly given away for marriage at a very young age, become pregnant early and repeatedly, and experience violence. Such factors contribute to women's illness and deaths.



According to a WHO report, 15% of Afghan women were married before the age of 15 years and 46%, before 18 (2010/2011 data). In total, 90% of Afghan women have experienced at least one form of domestic violence; 17%, sexual violence; and 52%, physical violence (WHO, 2015: online).

In 2016, the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies released alarming data from the United Nations (UN) Women in which 87.2% of Afghan women suffered some type of physical, psychological, sexual or economic violence perpetrated predominantly by family members. Forced marriage and domestic violence are endemic in the country (Center for Gender & Refugee Studies, 2016: online).

The United Nations Children's Fund showed that, in 2015, the percentage of women with early pregnancy (who gave birth before age 18 years) totaled 20.4% (UNICEF, 2015). Afghanistan holds the record for maternal mortality. The 2015 Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) reported maternal mortality at 1,291/100,000 live births (WHO, 2018: online). In 2020, the maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan totaled 620. Although reduced, it remains alarming and is considered very high (WHO, 2023: online).

Given the above, it becomes evident that the quality of life for Afghan women is influenced by a societal framework that relegates them to passive roles within an immutable cultural and social framework. This influence is notably reflected in the architectural design of traditional and modern houses, which perpetuates the manifestation of multiple layers of *Hijab*. This concept, extending from the physical body to the domestic sphere and urban environment, conceals women's individuality.

Regrettably, modern houses generally lack these essential features (a *courtyard*, *takht-bam*, and *iwan*), failing to meet women's fundamental requirements within the domestic setting. While some modern houses may incorporate balconies, they are often inadequate in size and unable to adequately address the privacy concerns (within cultural and social perspectives) to fulfill women's basic needs in the household environment.

In traditional houses, the prevalence of extended families, including tribal units, and the cultural norm of women's limited public presence have contributed to the emergence of open-air *courtyards*. These *courtyards* provide a conducive environment for domestic activities throughout a significant portion of the year (Bashir Kazimee, 2002: 24). The *courtyard* in traditional houses functions as an enclosed, secure, and open space within the household, providing privacy for all family members, especially women and children. Additionally, the *takht-bam*, a raised platform or seating area, serves as a communal gathering space for family members during the evenings and is utilized for sleeping during the warmer seasons of spring and summer. Furthermore, it serves as a location for social interactions and communication with neighbors, facilitating community engagement (Kawish et al., 2019: 2745).

Within the traditional Afghan context, the *iwan* serves as a designated space in which esteemed guests, particularly elders, are entertained during the evening. This area is reserved

for more formal social interactions. The *iwan* may also serve as a setting for formal daytime gatherings involving women and their neighbors, facilitating social connections within the community (Kazimee, 2002: 26).

Mohammad Sharifzai et al. (2016: 414) examined the prevalent architectural forms of Afghan traditional *courtyard* houses and its contemporary variations in Afghanistan. It aimed to investigate and analyze the characteristics and features of traditional and modern Afghan *courtyard* house designs (It is worth noting that such typology is uncommon in urban housing). Samimi et al., 2017, 2018 and 2019, and Samimi and Maraschin, 2023, show that traditional houses in urban areas are demolished and transformed into modern houses and multi-story apartments.

The transformation of houses in Afghanistan is a widespread phenomenon across all cities, including Herat. This process notably accelerated following the establishment of a new government in 2001 and the subsequent improvement in the economic conditions of families. The shift toward modern housing styles and construction practices became more pronounced during this period, reflecting changing societal dynamics and economic opportunities. The desire for improved living standards and the availability of resources facilitated the rapid transformation of houses in Herat and other urban areas throughout Afghanistan. Before the first Taliban period (1996-2001), the Old City of Herat had no modern houses. However, in 2016, most houses in Herat have undergone modernization and adopted contemporary architectural styles (Sayed Samimi et al., 2018: 2227).

### **Constraints for Afghan Women in Modern Houses**

The verticalization trend and increasing land values deter homeowners from constructing or acquiring detached houses with *courtyards*. In neighborhoods in which most buildings consist of multiple stories, *courtyards* cease to provide a private space for women since higher-story neighboring houses would have a direct line of sight into the *courtyard*, rendering it ineffective as a traditional *courtyard*. Traditional houses, in contrast, typically consist of one — or two — story high abodes that better maintain the privacy and functionality of a traditional *courtyard*.

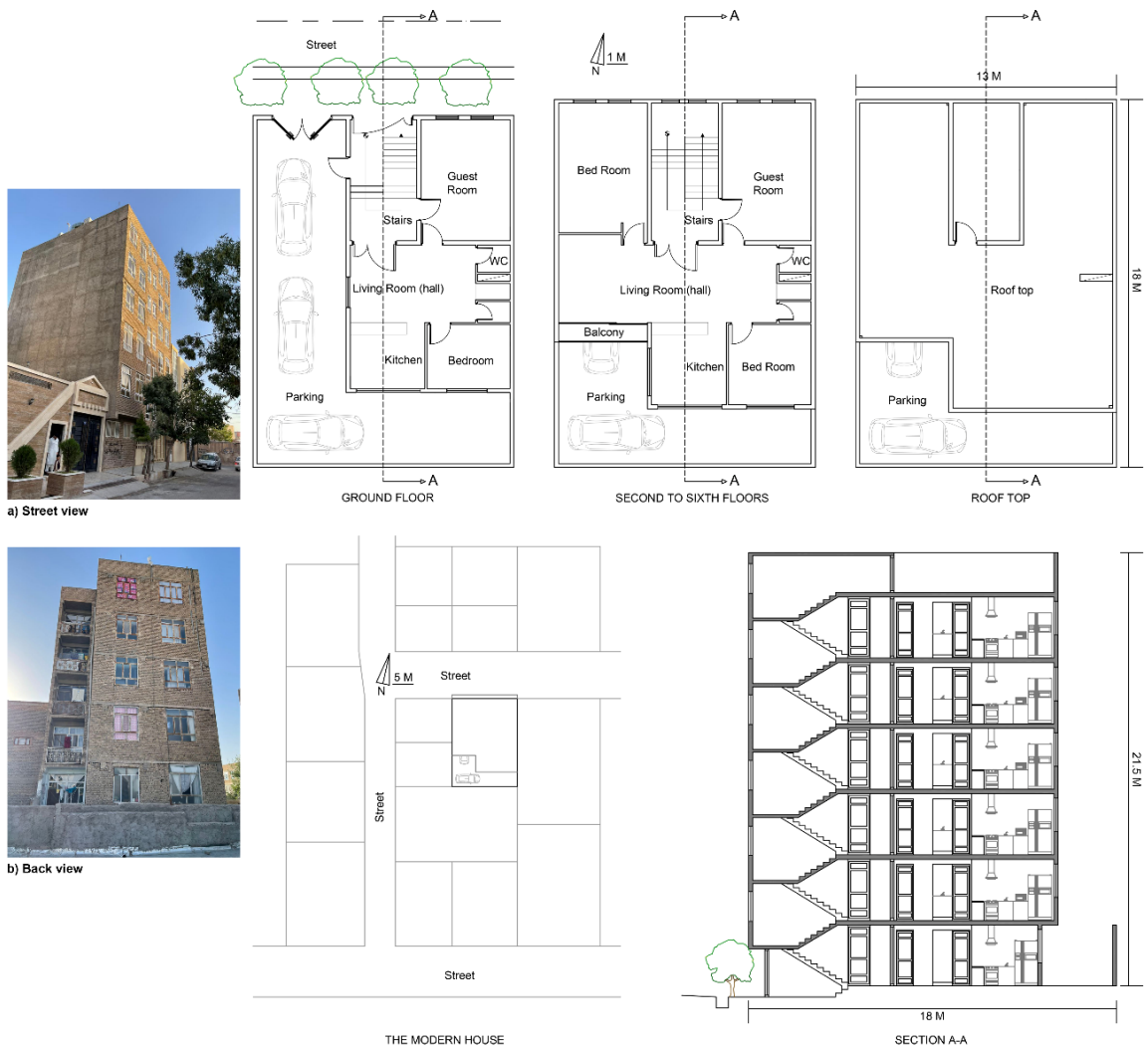


Figure 3 – An example of a modern house (located in Herat City).  
Photos: Ahmadi 2023, and drawings: Authors.

Modern houses in Afghanistan predominantly feature multiple stories inhabited by several families. Each floor is typically designated for one or more families. Rooftops serve as a designated space for housing building utilities access to which is restricted by building users. These apartments adhere to Islamic traditions by incorporating separate spaces for guests. As in Figure 3, our case study highlights an apartment with two primary entrances. An entrance leads to the main hall, exclusively accessible to family members. A second entrance, accessed via stairs, leads to a private room that can also be reached from the hall. This room serves as a designated area for guests, in which a door from the hall facilitates family members delivering tea or food from the kitchen. Such modern houses rarely include balconies as they pose security concerns for children and fail to offer privacy for women. Instead, balconies serve as spaces for drying clothes or displaying flowers. Unfortunately, these apartments lack designated areas in which women can enjoy the sunlight or use a

*courtyard*- or *iwan*-like space. As known, deprivation of sunlight exposure can pose health risks.

Afghanistan has a very high prevalence of low levels of vitamin D, recording levels <30 nmol/L (or 12 ng/ml) in >20% of its population (Karin Amrein et al., 2020). A cross-sectional analytical survey, which aimed to determine the frequency of vitamin D deficiency (25-OH-D level <20 ng/ml) in apparently healthy Afghan adolescents, found that women had the lowest and most pronounced such levels, suggesting the use of traditional clothes, length of exposure to the sun, lifestyle, and inadequate consumption of vitamin-D rich foods as determinants of this condition (Azizi; Tariq, 2019). Another study that investigated vitamin D status in the Eastern Mediterranean Region found that almost all women in reproductive age screened in Afghanistan lacked enough vitamin D (Eglal Elrayah et al., 2020).

The confinement of individuals within their homes has been found to amplify mental health challenges. The World Happiness Report, which assesses happiness rankings based on a three-year average (2020-2022), finds war-ravaged Afghanistan as the least happy country in the globe (John Helliwell et al., 2023: 36).

After the establishment of a new government in Afghanistan in 2001, the construction of modern houses significantly increased, destroying traditional housing structures (Samimi et al., 2019: 151). As mentioned, such improved economic situation prompted many families to demolish their traditional houses and replace them with multi-story modern houses. According to Samimi et al. (2018: 2224), the city of Herat alone 84,956 houses, with 11,756 (13.84%) classified as traditional houses and 73,203 (86.16%) as modern houses. Herat and other major cities throughout Afghanistan show such dominance of modern houses.

The design of modern houses considers the local cultural context and acknowledges the need for women (and men) accessing public spaces beyond their homes. These houses were designed and constructed based on the reality that women can engage in activities such as work, education, and recreational activities outside their domestic environment.

However, following the Taliban's rise to power in August 2021 and its implementation of new rules has drastically transformed modern houses into restricted private spaces that fail to meet women's basic needs of women and significantly affected their quality of life and health conditions.

## Conclusion

Gender inequality is historic in the world and its marks are present in architecture and urbanism, whether in private or collective and public spaces. Historically traditional houses in Afghanistan were originally constructed in accordance with Islamic jurisprudence and, over time, changed to respect the cultural norms of the *Hijab* and cater to the specific needs of family and especially women who spend most of their time inside the home.

The process of modernization in Afghanistan has significantly transformed the physical structure of houses and living environments by changing traditional houses to modern ones. New constructions speeded up after 2001, along with economic growth and the establishment of a new government in Afghanistan. Urban areas have witnessed a prevalence of modern apartments with separate rooms for living, bedrooms, and kitchens. These apartments also incorporate a guest room with a separate entrance to accommodate the cultural practice of the *Hijab*, which involves separating women from unfamiliar men using partitions.

Recent political changes and the rise of fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries have had a detrimental impact on women's lives. Modern houses, designed to meet contemporary standards, no longer adequately address the basic needs of women. Now, in Afghanistan, based on the Taliban's new rules, women face severe restrictions. They are being banned from pursuing education, employment, or even leaving their homes without a *mahram*. Thus, their modern homes/apartments have become confining spaces lacking open *courtyards* or areas in which they can freely move and breathe.

The process of modernization has progressed at a faster pace in urban areas than in rural Afghan villages. This has significantly changed the construction of modern houses and substituted traditional dwellings. The recent regulations imposed by the Taliban, rooted in Islamic jurisprudence and traditional behavior among rural Pushtuns, are gradually reverting the lifestyle to its historical form. However, the physical infrastructure has already undergone modernization, leading to a contradiction between the prevailing lifestyle and the infrastructure. This contradiction negatively impacts not only the lifestyle of urban women in particular but also their overall health.

In light of the current situation, the Taliban faces two options: it can either acknowledge the reality of modernization, which extends beyond mere ideological differences and is visibly manifested in the physical structures of houses, or it can disregard this fact. Modernization reflects the evolving needs and aspirations of a significant part of the Afghan population. Recognizing this new reality entails accepting the presence of modern houses and adapting policies accordingly.

By acknowledging the significance of modernization, the Taliban can show a willingness to accommodate the changing dynamics of Afghan society. This approach acknowledges that modernization is not solely confined to the mindset of the people but is also reflected in the built environment concerning architecture and urban spaces. Respecting and addressing this new reality can contribute to fostering a critical perspective that could lead to a more inclusive and adaptable society in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, it is imperative for the international community, which has been actively engaged in Afghanistan in recent years, to acknowledge the reality and remain mindful of Afghan society. Merely assisting civil activists and women's movement leaders to relocate abroad is insufficient as this approach has proven ineffective on numerous occasions

throughout the modern history of Afghanistan. The pursuit of gender equality in all facets requires sustained international attention and concerted efforts.

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