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Edited by: MARIAM SAFI & RAJESHWARI KRISHNAMURTHY

د خپرونو او پراختیا بنسټ

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Special Volume with *Peace Prints* (Vol.11, No.2)

EXCLUSION, RESISTANCE, AND RESILIENCE

AFGHAN WOMEN AND THE WPS
AGENDA AFTER 2021



DROPS

ORGANIZATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH
& DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Exclusion, Resistance, and Resilience: Afghan Women and the WPS Agenda After 2021

Edited by

Mariam Safi and Rajeshwari Krishnamurthy



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Contents

Attuning Peace: A Foreword	V
Editorial Note	X
Women, War, and Peace in Afghanistan: Revisiting Two Decades of Struggle for a Sustainable and Inclusive Peace	1
By Maria Raheen	
Women's Access to Justice in Post-August 2021 Afghanistan	33
By Farhuda Rustam	
Girls' Education Under Taliban Rule: Consequences for Afghanistan and the Region	54
By Arpan Tulsyan	
Impact of the Taliban's Return on Afghanistan's Health Sector: A Focus on Women's Health and Well-Being	78
By Asma Kamali	
Opportunities and Obstacles Faced by Afghan Women Entrepreneurs Under Taliban Rule	98
By Rama Mirzada	
Afghan Women Work for Themselves to Emerge From the Shadows	119
By Nilova Roy Chaudhury	
Re-Thinking 'Participation' In-Between and Beyond the WPS Agenda: Visibilizing the 'Afghan Woman' In-Between Epistemic Silences	135
By Shweta Singh	
Seeking Futures Beyond Despair: Afghan Women's Perspectives on Peace, Governance, and Human Security	151
By Shilpi Shabdita	
Consequences of Afghan Women's Civil Activism Inside and Outside the Country Under Taliban Rule	177
By Sara Batoul	
Book Review: 'Gender, Memory, Resilience: Sima Samar's Outspoken as Ecriture Feminine'	199
By Akashleena Chakrabarti	
Editors' Biographies	209
Authors' Biographies	211

Attuning Peace: A Foreword

This special volume of *Peace Prints*, published simultaneously as *Women and Public Policy Journal* Volume 10 (henceforth WPPJ), carries a resonance that is at once intellectual, political, and invested in the ethical compass of Justice. It is the outcome of a unique collaboration between WISCOMP (Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace), India, and DROPS (Organisation for Policy Research and Development Studies), Afghanistan—two institutions rooted in the Global South, committed to shaping knowledge through scholarship that is attentive to lived realities, grounded in praxis, and animated by a shared belief in the transformative potential of women's leadership in peacebuilding.

Both organisations speak to the world through the voices of scholars and peace practitioners who engage critically with the complexities of South Asia and its extended neighbourhood. Both carry a distinct mandate: to foreground women's leadership and to facilitate action-research and praxis that contribute to the re-fashioning and refinement of discourses on peace, security, justice, and inclusion-across borders, boundaries, and ideological divides. This collaborative volume is therefore not merely an academic exercise; it is an act of feminist solidarity and a conscious political intervention in a moment of deep global and regional flux.

The year 2025 is itself a significant conjuncture. It marks twenty-five years since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, the landmark resolution that placed the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda at the centre of global peace and security discourse. It is also a milestone year institutionally: WISCOMP completes twenty-five years of its journey, while DROPS marks a decade since its founding. These anniversaries invite

reflection—not only on achievements, but also on silences, exclusions, unfinished agendas, and the urgent need for renewal.

It is against this backdrop that this issue of *Peace Prints* and *WPPJ* asks a set of difficult, necessary, and unsettling questions. How, and to what extent, does the Women Peace and Security agenda resonate with the lived realities, needs, and aspirations of women in Afghanistan today—particularly in the aftermath of the return of the Taliban to power? What remains of the gains made by Afghan women during the “democratic” interregnum between the two Taliban regimes? Have these gains been entirely eclipsed by the rigid orthodoxies of the current dispensation, or do traces of that opening to education, public participation, global engagement, and civic assertion continue to survive, even if in fragile, fragmented, and subterranean forms?

More fundamentally, what is the status of the “woman question” in contemporary Afghanistan? Has the systematic erosion of human rights and women’s rights under an oppressive regime washed away the very possibility of women’s voice and agency—in the domestic sphere, within communities, and at the national level? Or are there forms of resistance, resilience, and refusal that remain unseen, undocumented, and yet profoundly consequential?

This volume does not presume easy answers. Instead, it seeks to create a space for inquiry, dialogue, and reflection, particularly between young Afghan women scholars and Indian feminist researchers, on how they imagine the future of women reclaiming citizenship, voicing rights, and advancing—socially, economically, and civically—in conditions marked by patriarchal power structures, surveillance, and shrinking public space.

At its heart, this volume represents a carefully curated coming together, metaphorically, of potential and experience. Young women scholars from Afghanistan are encouraged to speak candidly, analytically, and courageously, drawing on painstaking research and sensitive mentoring (by senior experts) to articulate their concerns, hopes, fears, and aspirations regarding women’s rights and empowerment in present-day Afghanistan. Their contributions are neither abstract nor detached; they are grounded in immediacy, loss, memory

and longing, as well as in a deep sense of responsibility towards those whose voices are systematically silenced.

Alongside these voices, Indian scholars are invited—not as distant observers or self-appointed experts—but as dialogic interlocutors. They are encouraged to share perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and comparative insights, while simultaneously nuancing and interrogating their own assumptions and positionalities vis-a-vis Afghan women's realities. This is an exercise in epistemic humility as much as in intellectual engagement.

Like all meaningful feminist interventions, this issue of *Peace Prints* and *WPPJ* aspires to be a dialogue circle, a non-hierarchical, ethically attentive space where scholars and practitioners meet, where theory converses with lived experience, and where knowledge is co-produced rather than imposed. Such an endeavour, particularly in the Afghan context today, is neither simple nor without risk.

Indeed, the very act of writing—of analysing, documenting, and naming injustice—demands immense courage from the young Afghan researchers whose work appears in this volume. The patriarchal structures of family, community, and state are aligned powerfully against them, shaping not only their daily lives but also their access to safety, mobility, and expression. These constraints extend beyond national borders, affecting members of the Afghan diaspora as well. It is for this reason that, in some instances, contributors have had to withhold their real identities from the public domain—a sobering reminder of the conditions under which feminist knowledge is produced in today's embattled world.

At a time when India is increasingly prioritising strategic and geopolitical interests, and when women's rights in Afghanistan appear to have receded from the agenda of global realpolitik, the importance of feminist solidarity through the amplification of women's voices cannot be overstated. In moments such as these, when militarised power speaks loudly, and humanitarian concern is selectively invoked, the pen must indeed substitute the sword. Writing becomes resistance; scholarship becomes witness.

The articles in this volume collectively offer a rich, layered, and at times, an unsettling engagement with the many facets of the woman question in Afghanistan. They range from historical overviews of progress and regression in women's rights to analyses of access to justice under Taliban rule and its ideological underpinnings. They examine the systematic denial of girls' education, the impact of these policies on women's health, well-being, autonomy and poverty, and the emerging opportunities and profound challenges facing women entrepreneurs seeking to reclaim economic rights under deeply constrained conditions.

Other contributions explore women's voices on peace, governance, and human security, the consequences of women's civil activism, and the reflections of a woman activist now located within the diaspora. The volume also suggests a more "decolonised" theoretical framework that pushes the boundaries of existing scholarship, calling for new lenses through which to evaluate the impact—and the limitations—of the Women, Peace and Security agenda in the Afghan context.

What unites these diverse interventions is a shared insistence that a meaningful commemoration of UNSCR 1325 at twenty-five cannot be reduced to ritualistic celebration or institutional self-congratulation. Instead, it must be understood as work in progress—a framework that demands expansion, diversification, and, at times, critical re-reading *against the grain*.

Several contributors argue compellingly that WPS must be seen not only as a mandate for states and multilateral institutions, but as a living, contested space shaped by voices from below—by women practitioners, activists, and scholars who are fashioning new vocabularies of resistance while also invoking epistemic justice. These vocabularies often appear fragmented but are rooted in everyday life. They speak of the unrecorded, unseen, invisibilized daily mutinies, and the quiet, persistent acts of resistance that unfold in kitchens, classrooms, clinics, online spaces, and within fractured communities across the Global South.

Foregrounding justice, these contributions challenge us to rethink what counts as peace, whose security is prioritised, and how agency is exercised under conditions of profound constraint. They invite us to recognise that voice and agency do not always announce themselves in spectacular ways; often, they reside in endurance, refusal, memory, and the determination to remain human in the face of dehumanisation.

This volume is therefore also an invitation—indeed, an exhortation—to re-examine our first principles and *a priori* assumptions. It urges us to question frameworks that may have become overly institutionalised, technocratic, or detached from lived realities. It asks us to listen more carefully, to read more generously, and to remain attentive to contexts where women's rights are being eroded with alarming speed, even as global Realpolitik focuses on the calculus of power.

In bringing together these voices, *Peace Prints* and *WPPJ* seek not closure, but conversation; not certainty, but critical engagement. At a moment when the world seems increasingly deaf to questions of women's rights, this volume compels us to listen-carefully, ethically, and in solidarity.

This volume is dedicated to sustaining solidarities across the geographies of lands and minds.

Thank you.

Meenakshi Gopinath

Editor-in-Chief

Peace Prints

Editorial Note

Twenty-five years after the October 2000 adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) that sought to center women's participation and protection in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, Afghanistan stands as both a sobering reminder and a defining test case for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Four years into the second Taliban rule that was undemocratically imposed on the country on 15 August 2021, Afghan women and girls face what scholars and activists identify as gender-based persecution under the Rome Statute, with efforts underway to codify the conditions women and girls are facing as gender apartheid. This state-of-affairs is a direct consequence of the Taliban regime's systematic and institutional exclusion of women and girls from all forms of public life and its denial of women's autonomy over their bodies, reproductive health, clothing choices, and movement. Yet, amidst this repression, Afghan women continue to resist, reimagine, and rebuild.

This collaborative volume—*Women and Public Policy Journal* (Vol.10) and *Peace Prints* (Vol.11)—published by the Organization for Policy Research & Development Studies (DROPS), Afghanistan, and the Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP), India, respectively, brings together empirical research, feminist theorization, and grounded reflections that capture not only the scale of regression in the Taliban-run Afghanistan but also the resilience, creativity, and agency through which women contest it.

This volume emerges at a critical juncture when the global discourse on women, peace, and security faces fatigue, and its relevance is increasingly tested by the rise of authoritarianism and the resurgence of gender backlash.

At a time when Afghanistan's crisis, which was once central to international agendas, has slipped to the periphery of global policy attention, this collection reclaims both focus and urgency. Collectively, the ten contributions restore analytical and moral clarity to the debate, illuminating how Afghan women's struggles for education, health, justice, and livelihoods are inseparable from the broader pursuit of peace itself.

Undoing Progress: Education, Health, and Justice Under Taliban Rule

Of the 10 essays in this volume, three specifically trace the systematic dismantling of women's rights across key social sectors. In 'Girls' Education Under Taliban Rule: Consequences for Afghanistan and the Region', Dr. Arpan Tulsyan demonstrates that the Taliban's prohibition on female education is not an isolated policy but part of a broader architecture of control that erases women from public knowledge production. Drawing on historical data, the paper shows how the Taliban have undone nearly two decades of educational progress in Afghanistan, with millions of girls projected to remain out of school if the Taliban's ban on girls' education beyond grade six continues. The study connects this educational deprivation to cycles of poverty, radicalization, and regional instability, while highlighting India's potential role in supporting educational diplomacy and digital access for Afghan girls.

Complementing this analysis, 'Impact of the Taliban's Return on Afghanistan's Health Sector: A Focus on Women's Health and Well-Being' documents the near-collapse of women's healthcare infrastructure in the country. Based on mixed-methods research, Dr. Asma Kamali reveals that the convergence of bans on female education and employment has created a generational health crisis. The absence of female medical workers, coupled with mobility restrictions and mandatory *mahram* requirements, have rendered maternal and mental healthcare nearly inaccessible, especially in rural provinces.

Together, these essays demonstrate how the denial of education and healthcare functions not only as a violation of rights but as a deliberate instrument of

governance, reinforcing dependency, fear, and social control.

Farhuda Rustam's 'Women's Access to Justice in Post-August 2021 Afghanistan' extends this argument into the legal sphere. She demonstrates how the Taliban's replacement of Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution with decrees rooted in their selective interpretation of Sharia law has effectively erased women's legal personhood. Through comparative analysis of institutional structures that existed before and after 15 August 2021, this study situates Afghanistan's regression as a case of state-engineered gender persecution that violates the country's obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and UNSCR 1325.

Resisting Erasure: Economic Agency and Civil Activism

Against this backdrop of systemic exclusion, oppression, and subordination, several contributions highlight women's evolving strategies of survival and resistance. Rama Mirzada's 'Opportunities and Obstacles Faced by Afghan Women Entrepreneurs' illustrates how Afghan women are navigating restrictive conditions to sustain micro-businesses and local employment. Drawing on feminist political-economy and intersectionality frameworks, the study shows that entrepreneurship has become both a survival mechanism and a quiet form of resistance—a way to reclaim visibility and community within confinement.

Similarly, in 'Afghan Women Work for Themselves to Emerge from the Shadows', Nilova Roy Chaudhary offers a journalistic yet incisive reflection on how some Taliban officials have begun to tacitly permit women's limited participation in home-based enterprises, recognizing their contributions to household and national economies. These ambivalent spaces of negotiation reveal that even under authoritarianism, women continue to reconfigure agency through moral, religious, and economic ideas that resonate within their context.

Sara Batoul's 'Consequences of Afghan Women's Civil Activism Inside and Outside the Country Under Taliban Rule' moves from the private to the public sphere, tracing how protests and digital activism by women within and beyond Afghanistan have become central to international advocacy against gender apartheid. While documenting the severe reprisals faced by activists such as imprisonment, torture, and exile, the paper also recognizes these movements as critical archives of courage and collective memory. It highlights how, by mobilizing transnational solidarity networks, Afghan women have transformed local resistance into a global political force.

Interpreting Peace and Agency: Feminist Theories and Intra-Afghan Dialogues

At the analytical core of this collaborative volume are contributions that interrogate peace building through feminist and de-colonial lenses. Professor Maria Raheen's 'Women, War, and Peace in Afghanistan: Revisiting Two Decades of Struggle for a Sustainable and Inclusive Peace' revisits the past two decades of the country's peace processes to demonstrate that, despite formal commitments to inclusion, women's participation remained largely symbolic. Drawing on feminist theories of peace and UNSCR 1325, she argues that sustainable peace demands the transformation of patriarchal political cultures that have historically monopolized decision-making. Afghan women's exclusion, she notes, is not an anomaly but a structural feature of the state itself.

In 'Seeking Futures Beyond Despair: Afghan Women's Perspectives on Peace, Governance, and Human Security', Shilpi Shabdita amplifies women's voices from intra-Afghan dialogues convened by WISCOMP, revealing the interplay of hope, pragmatism, and fear that shapes the Afghan civil society's engagement with the Taliban. Her analysis situates Afghan women's security within shifting global realignments from Russia's recognition of the Taliban regime to China and India's cautious recalibration, arguing that sustainable peace cannot be built on the erasure of half the population of a country.

Finally, Dr. Shweta Singh's 'Re-Thinking 'Participation' In-Between and Beyond the WPS Agenda: Visibilizing the 'Afghan Woman' In-Between Epistemic Silences' questions whether liberal conceptions of agency, grounded in visibility and formal participation, can adequately capture Afghan women's everyday acts of negotiation and endurance. Through a feminist epistemic lens, Singh calls for a broader understanding of peace and participation, one that recognizes agency as resistance within constraint and knowledge as survival in silence.

Narrating Defiance: Memory, Writing, and Feminist Testimony

In her memoir, titled *Outspoken: My Fight for Freedom and Human Rights in Afghanistan*, Dr. Sima Samar reclaims women's writing as a form of political testimony. Akashleena Chakrabarti's review of the memoir shows how Afghan women have documented their histories not merely as victims but as historians of their own struggle, offering counter-archives to both Taliban propaganda and Western narratives of rescue.

Together, these essays reaffirm that speaking, writing, and remembering are themselves acts of defiance. They remind us that the WPS agenda must not only secure women's seats at negotiating tables but also safeguard their voices in history.

Conclusion

As the WPS agenda turns 25, the current state-of-affairs in Afghanistan forces us to confront an uncomfortable paradox: that an international framework designed to protect women in conflict has yet to prevent their systematic erasure under a regime that governs through gender apartheid. The contributions in this volume reveal that while laws and declarations matter, peace cannot be imposed from above; it must be built from the ground up, through lived experiences, knowledge, and agency of women themselves.

The Taliban's Afghanistan thus becomes more than a humanitarian crisis. It is a mirror reflecting the dark times we are living through, exposing the limits of

international law, conventions, and feminist gains in an increasingly volatile global order. Yet within these limits lie possibilities. These possibilities are local, grounded in the resilience of communities and in women's daily acts of defiance. The persistence of Afghan women as teachers in secret schools, doctors without clinics, activists without platforms, and scholars without universities challenges both the Taliban's authoritarianism and the world's complacency.

In bringing together these ten diverse voices, this collaborative volume reaffirms its commitment to advancing feminist scholarship that bridges research and policy, theory and practice, and local experience with global responsibility. Essays featured in this collection do not merely document suffering; they articulate visions of justice, dignity, and peace that transcend borders. As editors, scholars, and policymakers, our task is to listen not only to the silence imposed on Afghan women but also to the knowledge that continues to emerge from within it.

Mariam Safi

Executive Director

Organization for Policy Research & Development Studies

December 2025

Women, War, and Peace in Afghanistan: Revisiting Two Decades of Struggle for a Sustainable and Inclusive Peace

By Maria Raheen¹

For Afghanistan, one of the most important gains of the 21st century emerged after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the adoption of the new constitution in 2004, through which the principle of gender equality was incorporated into the formal framework of the Afghan state. Women entered the parliament, gained access to education and public sector employment, and became active participants in civil society. Yet, despite these achievements, women's presence in official peace processes, particularly in negotiations with the Taliban, remained minimal or largely symbolic.

This essay examines the reasons behind the gap between political advancements and the lack of meaningful participation of women in peace processes, especially the peace process that took place between 2018 and 2021. Drawing on feminist theories of peacebuilding and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) (UNSCR 1325), this essay:

- Identifies the structural and political barriers hindering women's participation in the Afghan peace process (2018–2021);
- Analyses the capacities developed by Afghan women in the two decades since 2001; and
- Conducts a comparative assessment of women's roles and efforts in influencing peace processes in the Republic era (2001–2021), and in

1. **Maria Raheen** is a professor and the former head of Balkh University's Faculty of Journalism. She is also a journalist and a human rights activist.

the current context (post–August 2021) within the Afghan diaspora.

Based on this three–pronged approach, this study concludes that sustainable and inclusive peace can only be achieved when meaningful participation of women is guaranteed in all stages of political and social decision–making. The essay is structured as follows: Section 1 provides a contextual overview of conflict(s) and peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan covering contemporary and earlier historical periods. Within this scope, it also summarizes the impact of these conflicts and resulting dynamics on social, political, and cultural realities in Afghanistan. Crucially, it situates the nuances of how and why these dynamics affected Afghan women’s agency and freedoms and delineates the particularities of women’s socio–political and other forms of advancement between 2001 and 2021. Section 2 discusses the theoretical framework and research methodology employed in this study. Section 3 traces the trajectories of women’s capacities and the barriers to their participation in Afghanistan’s peace process(es). Building on the preceding sections, Section 4 provides a comparative review of women’s roles and efforts in influencing Afghanistan’s peace process by examining it in the context of the Islamic Republic era (2001–2021) and that of the present (post–August 2021) within the Afghan diaspora.

A Contextual Overview

Since the early 20th century, Afghanistan, for the first time in its modern history, experienced a full–scale internal war that persisted for several decades. This period witnessed the disintegration of structured systems of power, allowing long–suppressed social, ethnic, and regional grievances to surface and manifest themselves. War, along with the dominance of unrestrained violence, emerged as the only prevailing paradigm, one that offered no prospect for social cohesion.

The study of political coalitions among ethnic groups during this time remains one of the most instructive historical experiences for present–day Afghanistan.

These were alliances repeatedly formed and dissolved; ethnic hostilities that, though temporarily buried under the ashes, were never extinguished; and ambitions that consistently left no space for genuine political consensus.² This was, in essence, a war of all against all, a conflict that further deepened and entrenched social grievances.

With the expansion of the civil war of the 1990s, not only was the political fabric of Afghan society severely damaged, but all social and cultural processes also experienced a catastrophic decline and distortion, further exacerbated by the heavy burden of widespread public ignorance. National belief and confidence were undermined by reckless maneuvers of inexperienced political actors, who operated under the influence and support of self-interested domestic figures and skeptical foreign powers engaged in the Afghan peace question.

As a result, the social strata of the country quickly fragmented under the weight of political, economic, and social injustices born of war, intensified particularly by the promotion of traditional religious prejudices. In this environment, many populist slogans, especially those centered on the utility of male force on the battlefield, were transformed into taboos and rapidly penetrated both the intellectual and practical spheres of society.

This destructive dynamic inflicted irreparable harm upon Afghan women. Despite decades of struggle, whether during the monarchy era, or the brief republican period (2001–2021), women had managed—albeit within the confines of a few major urban centers such as Kabul, Balkh, and Herat—to assert their identity and achieve a modest degree of gender equilibrium. However, in the shadow of war and internal discord, their presence became increasingly marginalized, and their once-emerging social role was significantly diminished (Rashid 2021).

In the new political structure(s) that came into being during the years of civil war (1992–1996), and the Taliban's first regime (1996–2001), and in the

2. It is important to note that the phenomenon of ambition and ethnic hostility in Afghanistan was not confined to any single group. Whenever afforded the slightest opportunity, each faction sought to suppress the others.

period of relative transition beyond it (i.e., the Afghan Transitional Authority that lasted from 2002 to 2004), the processes of ownership and political power remained restricted and exclusively concentrated in the hands of men. Women continued to occupy the lowest tier in national decision-making and power-sharing (and during the Taliban's first regime, women were completely excluded from any kind of political role).

This marginalization was reinforced by men's retrospective reading of women's decades-long exclusion from political struggle—and men's assumptions that women lack the capability to participate in political decision-making—which in turn relegated women's identity-forming political and military roles to a subordinate position. Women's agency was framed merely as an extension of political agendas fractured along ethnic, religious, and linguistic lines, consistently ranking them below their male counterparts.

National thought in Afghanistan, which has consistently developed under a male-dominated paradigm, represents a stark reality of women's compounded marginalization. The absence of balance in political power has prevented women from being supported as a potential force for redirecting the trajectory of society throughout the country's history. Centuries of dominance of patriarchy has deprived Afghan women of opportunities for self-expression and self-determination, binding the framework of their lives and destinies to the authority of men, be it husbands, fathers, or brothers.

This patriarchal structure has enabled men to limit women's life choices and obstruct their social participation. In such a society, where women's freedom as independent human beings is still not recognized, the realization of democracy and human rights is not only difficult but at times perilous. When ownership of women's existence is ascribed to husbands, fathers, or brothers, no law or institutional framework alone can rectify these beliefs unless the level of awareness, social understanding, and human rights consciousness within society is elevated to the point where these values are internalized and accepted as norms.

Otherwise, even when women appear in the streets, in conference halls, or

in classrooms, such visibility does not necessarily signify that they enjoy genuine human freedom. These women remain bound to destinies inscribed centuries ago and continuously imposed upon their lives. Their participation in public life, while seemingly progressive, often reflects the persistence of structural barriers that confine them to predetermined roles. The symbolic presence of women may serve political or social agendas, yet without dismantling entrenched norms and power relations, such visibility risks becoming superficial. Genuine empowerment requires not only access to public spaces but also the transformation of cultural, legal, and institutional frameworks that dictate women's place in society.

Historical experience has demonstrated that transforming this condition is possible only through the collective wisdom of society, rather than through the pressure of a few external actors or the issuance of temporary declarations and programs. Genuine change requires overcoming challenges deeply embedded in the cultural, social, and even material fabric of the nation. Laws enacted in favor of women can only be effective if they are revised in accordance with the demands of the time and made responsive to the real needs of women.

Recognition of women's freedom as independent human beings becomes attainable only when the nation as a whole endorses collective values, and when every individual within the family plays an active role in laying the foundation for these values. This process must be internalized within the very fabric of society to pave the way for consolidating women's legal identity.

In any case, between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan witnessed remarkable developments in the field of women's rights, marking a significant turning point in the country's modern history. With the support of the international community and the enactment of new legislations, women gained unprecedented access to education, employment, and political participation. The establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), the increased representation of women in parliament, and the dramatic rise in the number of girls attending educational institutions stand as key examples of these transformations (Human Rights Watch 2017).

Nevertheless, these achievements were consistently confronted with structural challenges, cultural pressures, and security threats—factors that indicate that the advancement of women’s status in Afghanistan was less the result of sustainable social transformation and more dependent on external support and the specific political conditions of that period (Larson and Coburn 2020).

Methodological Approaches

Theoretical Frameworks

- *United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and Meaningful Participation*

Adopted in 2000, UNSCR 1325 obliges member states to ensure the participation of women in all stages of conflict resolution, post-war reconstruction, and peacekeeping. The Resolution emphasizes four pillars: participation, protection, prevention, and peacebuilding (United Nations Security Council 2000). Meaningful participation does not simply entail the physical presence of women, but rather their ability to influence negotiation agendas and discourses related to justice, sexual violence, and social reconstruction.

- *Feminist Theories of Peace*

Feminist scholars argue that traditional peace processes are often dominated by male elites and patriarchal structures, resulting in a form of peace that restores political order rather than addressing gender-based injustices. Feminist peace theory underscores the importance of recognizing women’s lived experiences of war, including domestic violence, economic discrimination, and exclusion from justice mechanisms. In this view, peace that fails to account for gendered dimensions of conflict is inherently fragile, as it overlooks the structural inequalities and everyday insecurities that women face. By centering women’s perspectives, feminist approaches argue for a transformative model of peace that goes beyond the cessation of hostilities to include

social justice, equality, and long-term reconciliation. This perspective challenges the narrow conception of security as merely the absence of war and instead promotes a holistic understanding that integrates human security, dignity, and inclusive governance.

■ *Gender-sensitive Transitional Justice*

In countries affected by war and systematic human rights violations, transitional justice plays a crucial role in rebuilding public trust. When women are excluded from the design of truth commissions, reparations programs, and legal reforms, their interests and needs are easily overlooked. A gender-sensitive approach ensures that women's perspectives are integrated into all stages of transitional justice, thereby promoting more equitable and sustainable societal reconstruction.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and comparative research design. Data were drawn from secondary sources, including United Nations (UN) reports, academic research, government documents, and publications from human rights organizations. The research featured three stages:

- **Document Analysis:** Examination of legal texts such as Afghanistan's 2004 constitution, the country's National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325, and relevant UN resolutions;
- **Comparative Study:** Investigation of women's experiences both within Afghanistan and in the diaspora in achieving sustainable peace; and
- **Thematic Analysis:** Discussion on key themes, including political will, security, civil society capacity, and legal frameworks.

Women's Capacities and Barriers to Participation in Afghanistan's Peace Process

In 2001, following the collapse of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan entered an unprecedented phase of political restructuring and modern institutional development, with slogans emphasizing human rights, particularly women's rights and freedom of expression. The ensuing reforms rapidly permeated various social strata, and structural transformations in both civil and military spheres entered a new stage of political power distribution.

The consolidation of this power was far from straightforward. Local armed groups, religious leaders, and tribal elders who had wielded significant influence and military power both during the civil wars of the preceding 25 years, and under the Taliban rule, remained highly active in the political arena (Rubin 2002; Giustozzi 2009; Rashid 2021).³ In the new political landscape of the post-2001 period, they continued to vie for governance and political authority, often positioning themselves in direct confrontation with each other. Even the newly formed government, supported broadly by the international community and military forces, was not entirely immune to their influence (Rubin 2002; Giustozzi 2009; Rashid 2021).

From time to time, armed factions negotiated for control over state power, determining their position within the new system according to their own groups and networks (Rubin 2002; Giustozzi 2009). Ethnic, tribal, positional, linguistic, and religious bargaining escalated to levels unprecedented in Afghan history. For these actors, personal interests were paramount. Moreover, they often advanced agendas contrary to national interests, resorting to violence, armed threats, and targeted killings. The consequences of such oppressive individualism and narrow-minded factionalism posed significant risks to the continuity of the state system and indeed, these threats materialized. Persistent challenges of this nature severely undermined national power and central governance, placing the state in a condition of near collapse.

3. These figures include individuals like Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum of the Junbish-e Milli party, and Marshal Mohammad Qasim Fahim of the Jamiat-e Islami party, to name a few.

While political leaders spoke in favor of democracy and democratic processes in their public rhetoric, there was also a sentiment among the general populace that these political frameworks had been imposed on the country from outside and not organically evolved. This led to discourses like lack of national legitimacy and imbalance in national power. This situation undermined the cohesion of the national armed forces under the leadership of the central government, fostering doubt, instability, and mistrust. In the early, clumsy confrontations among these groups, and due to the limited enforcement capacity of the central government, women were the key demographic excluded from power and marginalized. Women's inclusion that was seen in various levels of government and political decision-making was more an outcome of international pressure rather than an inherent desire to include women.

Although the newly established government, supported by the international community, guaranteed the visibility and participation of Afghan women in society, and despite the creation of influential institutions such as the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), the MoWA, and numerous organizations advocating for women's rights and access to the all branches of government, these efforts did not result in the formation of strong political structures led by women.

In effect, Afghan women became auxiliary forces serving men who competed for power. These groups benefited from the presence of women, using it to demonstrate to both the Afghan government and the international community that women's rights were on par with those of men and that women in Afghanistan had full command of their human rights. At this stage, feminist slogans became largely performative, a fashion signaling a superficial embrace of modernity rather than genuine empowerment.

Despite these numerous internal challenges and the influence of externally backed ethnic groups, Afghan women, through the efforts of certain political, social, and cultural actors, supported by the new system and the international community, managed to secure positions within ministries, parliamentary

seats, and roles in provincial councils, national and international organizations, universities, and other sectors. In these roles, they contributed to consolidating state power and the relative legal authority of governance, paving the way for political, economic, and social transformation.

However, these achievements were often fragile and uneven, constrained by deep-rooted patriarchal traditions, ongoing insecurity, and the instrumentalization of women's rights within broader political agendas. Many women who entered leadership positions faced systemic discrimination, threats, and social backlash, limiting their ability to exercise real influence. While their presence symbolized progress and provided critical models for younger generations, the sustainability of these gains remained contingent on continued institutional support, security guarantees, and a cultural shift toward genuine gender inclusivity.

A new political order was established, and under this framework of governance, the 2004 constitution, despite numerous attempts by jihadist and other factions to alter its provisions, adopted principles of gender equality, reserving at least 27% of parliamentary seats for women ("Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan" 2004). Furthermore, the National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325 (2015-2022) was developed to increase women's participation in peacebuilding (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2007; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015).

Afghan women demonstrated significant capacity and motivation to advance peace, making remarkable efforts at the community and civil society levels. Yet, the political and structural opportunities for their genuine participation in peace processes remained insufficient, superficial, and at times symbolic. Moreover, the involvement of the Taliban in peace negotiations (2018–2021), without guarantees for women's rights, rendered many of these achievements largely unrealized.

Expansion of Women's Civil Institutions

Institutions such as the AIHRC, the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), and the organization 'Women for Peace and Participation' played active roles in education, advocacy, and monitoring of gender-based violence. Women journalists, female members of the parliament, female provincial council representatives, and women activists across the country increased their social impact, participated in peace dialogues, and fearlessly defended women's fundamental freedoms. Women were also prominently present in certain peace processes, such as the Loya Jirgas (grand consultative assemblies).

Between 2001 and 2021, thousands of Afghan women received higher education and entered universities. These educated women made substantive contributions to government institutions, non-government organizations (NGO), and reconstruction projects, and played key roles in promoting peace, human rights, and civic education. A group of human rights defenders, civil society activists, and members of parliament also sought to participate in intra-Afghan negotiations (IAN)—which was scheduled to begin in September 2020, after the US-Taliban Agreement was signed—to achieve peace, particularly in the years leading up to the collapse of the government in 2021.

However, one factor that limited women's influence on these dialogues was the Taliban's authoritarian stance toward women, which constrained their participation in governance under Taliban administration and influenced negotiations during these meetings despite the government portraying itself as a promoter of democracy and human rights in Afghanistan.

Structural and Political Barriers to Women's Participation in the Afghan Peace Process

The limited presence of women in Afghan peace negotiations resulted from a combination of political, cultural, security, and structural factors. The most significant of these processes are explained below:

■ **Patriarchal Structure of Politics and Governance in Afghanistan**

In Afghanistan's traditional political culture and structure, power has typically been concentrated in the hands of men, with women's participation often being symbolic or driven by international pressure. Women rarely occupied positions in key decision-making bodies, such as the High Peace Council (HPC) or main negotiating delegations. While figures such as Dr. Habiba Sarabi, the former governor of Bamyán province, and other women did serve on the HPC and in negotiating delegations, their roles were often constrained in practice. For example, they were frequently excluded from key decision-making discussions, their recommendations were given less weight than those of male counterparts, and they were expected to represent 'women's issues' rather than influence broader political agendas (UN Women 2022). Such limitations illustrate that, despite formal inclusion, women's actual power within these institutions remained circumscribed.

In the final phase of the Afghan peace process that began in 2018, the Afghan government and international powers, particularly the US, prioritized speed and tangible outcomes over inclusive participation. A notable example of this approach was the US-Taliban agreement signed in February 2020, which laid the groundwork for the IAN. However, the agreement was reached without extracting meaningful concessions from the Taliban on reducing violence or ensuring participation of Afghan civil society, political factions, and women. This emphasis on expediency over inclusivity contributed to a peace process that was widely perceived as one-sided and ultimately failed to achieve a sustainable political settlement (Brooking 2022). Consequently, political pressure to compromise with the Taliban dominated these negotiations. The Taliban not only refused women's participation but fundamentally opposed their presence in politics and peace dialogues. Moreover, some actors, seeking to "appease the Taliban," overlooked women's effective involvement, while certain women, to maintain influence within the republican structure and

subsequent governance, engaged in negotiations with the Taliban, sometimes at the cost of compromising the rights and values they had previously championed. For example, Fatima Gailani, a prominent women's rights activist and former president of the Afghan Red Crescent Society, was one of only four women who participated in the 2020 IAN peace talks. Despite her efforts, the process largely marginalized women, and the Taliban's 2021 return led to a dramatic rollback of many rights women had gained since 2001 (UN Women 2022).

- **Lack of Experience and Structural Preparedness for Meaningful Participation**

Many women who entered political dialogues lacked the necessary experience and training to engage effectively in complex political and security negotiations. For instance, during the 2020 IAN peace talks in Doha, only a handful of women were included in the Afghan government's negotiating team, namely Fatima Gailani, Dr. Habiba Sarabi, Fawzia Koofi, and Sharifa Zurmati. Despite their presence, their roles were often marginalized, and their contributions were not given equal weight compared to their male counterparts. The absence of comprehensive capacity-building programs for these women further exacerbated the situation, leaving them ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of the peace process effectively, impeding their ability to influence discussions on critical issues such as women's rights, security, and governance. Educational and advisory institutions designed to prepare women for meaningful participation in such negotiations were extremely limited. Moreover, government policy regarding these dialogues was often unclear and unpredictable. Government spokespersons and, at times, the media, not only failed to inform and encourage public opinion but sometimes contributed to confusion and anxiety, amplifying intellectual tensions and societal disagreements.

■ **Security Conditions and Direct Threats**

Many women engaged in the peace process faced security threats, assassination attempts, and pressures from family and society. These dangers often led to self-censorship or withdrawal from the process. In some cases, active participants faced serious security risks. Even back in 2014 for example, Shukria Barakzai, a female Member of Parliament and women's rights activist was targeted with a bombing attack while on her way from home to the parliament. Women activists were consistently targeted by political and physical violence. High-profile assassinations such as that of Fereshteh Kohistani in 2020 created an unsafe public environment for women during the last peace process.

Women's participation in the Loya Jirgas and the High Peace Council remained highly limited and largely ineffective due to entrenched patriarchal norms and tokenistic inclusion. During all the Doha negotiations (2018-2021)—both during the 2018–2020 US–Taliban talks and the IAN (2020–2021)—only a few women were involved, and their roles were mostly symbolic. For example, despite being a member of the High Peace Council, Habiba Sarabi and other women were often excluded from key decision-making discussions, and their proposals on women's rights were frequently ignored (Giustozzi 2009; UN Women 2022). Moreover, while the then Afghan government did want more women involved, external influences caused the numbers of women to drop. These pressures and external influences resulted in a situation where some women were selected due to nepotism and preferential treatment rather than skill, expertise, or capability.

■ **Weak Implementation of UNSCR 1325**

Afghanistan's NAP on UNSCR 1325 largely remained a paper tiger due to budgetary constraints, a lack of political will, and weak local institutions. However, it did result in some modest achievements, such as the establishment of women's focal points in several provincial government offices and the incorporation of gender perspectives

into a few local development projects (UN Women 2015). Although institutional capacity and international support existed, the then Afghan government and the international community often prioritized tactical compromises with the Taliban and conservative forces over strengthening women's participation. For instance, during the 2020-2021 peace negotiations, the Afghan government's 21-member negotiating team featured only four women, and the Taliban's team had no women at all. This exclusion was largely due to the Taliban's rigid stance against women's involvement in political processes, and the Afghan government's reluctance to jeopardize fragile negotiations by challenging these demands (Allen and Felbab-Brown 2020).

■ **Role of External Actors and Proxy Wars in the Afghan Peace Process**

The establishment of peace in Afghanistan, a country with critical geostrategic and geopolitical significance in Asia, cannot be viewed solely as an internal Afghan matter. Just as the prolonged and extensive internal wars were not the choice of the Afghan public at large, the resulting insecurity and instability were largely imposed. The interests of major powers, the strategic objectives of certain regional countries, political and ideological rivalries, power struggles, unilateral maneuvers in global relations, and the policies of hostile neighbors have consistently complicated and obstructed the peace process. Moreover, extra-regional powers, while ostensibly acting as mediators, have often prioritized their own interests, creating a major obstacle to achieving sustainable peace in Afghanistan (Rashid 2021).

In other words, four decades of war and political instability demonstrate that Afghanistan was forcibly transformed into a battleground for proxy conflicts among global powers, particularly the US and Russia. In recent years, the country has effectively become a haven for groups that manage terror, repression, and mafia networks. A closer examination reveals that in none of these destructive agendas did the Afghan people play a central role in their design or ideology; rather,

a small number of dependent or traitorous actors executed these scenarios to serve personal interests and maintain their grip on power.

The analysis of tactical compromises by the Afghan government and international actors underscores how external involvement both enabled and entrenched barriers to women's participation in Afghanistan's peace processes. By prioritizing expedient agreements with the Taliban and conservative forces over inclusive engagement, international actors often ignored or sidelined women. For example, during the Moscow talks with the Taliban in 2021, there was only one woman in the Afghan government's delegation, and during the UN-led Doha talks with the Taliban in 2024 (i.e., after the Taliban were already in power), Afghan women were excluded from the negotiating table at the behest of the Taliban, effectively rigging the process against women's meaningful participation, reflecting a broader pattern of external actors' willingness to sacrifice gender inclusivity for perceived political expediency (Allen and Felbab-Brown 2020; UN Women 2022). Consequently, peacebuilding lacked a social and justice-oriented dimension.

Women's Roles and Efforts in Influencing the Peace Process: A Comparative Review of the Republic Era, and the Current Era in the Diaspora

Given that internal and external factors that shaped the Afghan peace process (2018–2021) ultimately failed to produce sustainable peace, it becomes clear that the positions and actions of the groups and individuals involved warrant critical examination.

A cursory analysis reveals that political groups affiliated with the Republic era government, which participated in negotiations and peace initiatives as part of the broader process, often prioritized individual or factional objectives over national interests. Consequently, the proposals they advanced rarely promoted sustainable and stable peace. Similarly, political parties and individuals who rose to power during the Afghan civil war and later integrated

into state structures largely favored party, group, or ethnic interests over national priorities. This orientation marginalized the fundamental principles of peace and social reconstruction in their calculations (Goodhand and Hakimi 2021).

Another set of political actors comprised those who, during the 20-year republican period, gained access to extensive economic and political resources. These individuals were not only unwilling to relinquish power but, leveraging their political and economic privileges, demonstrated little commitment to public interest or national values in pursuit of peace and political stability. Many consolidated their influence with the government, the international community, and the public as intermediaries and advisors by exploiting networks of corruption, appropriating public assets, and accessing major financial projects. However, this legitimacy, rather than being grounded in social trust, often functioned as a tool for advancing personal interests (Suhrke 2011).

Additionally, several influential jihadist figures who held religious and popular authority or appeal entered the peace process as mediators and negotiators.⁴ However, their ideological and intellectual proximity to the Taliban meant that their understanding of power and peace was primarily oriented toward reproducing their own political roles rather than achieving a stable and peaceful order for Afghanistan (Giustozzi 2019). Overall, the presence of these groups and individuals diverted the peace negotiations from their main course, creating serious and multiple challenges.

The role of women in the Afghan peace process, like that of other actors such as male political elites, warlords, jihadist leaders, and international negotiators,

4. Notable examples include Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of Hezb-e Islami, who signed a peace agreement with the Afghan government in September 2016. This agreement included a ceasefire, his recognition of Afghanistan's constitution, and his severing of ties with extremist groups, while the government committed to lifting international sanctions against Hekmatyar and recognizing him as a political figure. Another example is Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi, Deputy Head of the Taliban's Political Office in Qatar, who played an active role in the peace talks with the United States and the Afghan government and announced in February 2020 that a U.S.-Taliban peace agreement would be finalized by the end of that month. These cases illustrate the central role that jihadist figures played in shaping Afghanistan's peace processes.

was subject to patriarchal calculations rooted in ethnic, linguistic, party, and religious divisions. For example, during the 2016 peace agreement with the Gulbuddin Hekmatyar-led Hezb-e Islami, the Afghan government prioritized reintegrating insurgent groups over ensuring inclusive representation, leading to limited roles for women in the process. Similarly, in the 2020-2021 Doha negotiations, the Taliban's exclusion of women from the negotiation table was met with acquiescence by international actors, reflecting a broader pattern of sidelining women's participation in favor of political expediency.

Women's participation (direct and/or indirect) in negotiations with the Taliban (2018–2021) emerged largely through three main channels:

- A. The first group consisted of women originating from civil society institutions and active women's rights organizations. These women were primarily selected for participation based on individual merit, social activism, and positive reputation within civil society. Selection was often facilitated by civil society organizations and women's rights networks, which identified and nominated candidates. For instance, Zarqa Yaftali, executive director of the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation, was selected to represent civil society at the UN Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace, and Security in October 2020. Similarly, the AWN and the Afghanistan Mechanism for Inclusive Peace (AMIP) jointly organized the Afghan Women Leaders' Peace Summit 2020 in Dubai, bringing together 50 Afghan women from civil society organizations, the Afghan government, and the diaspora to discuss the importance of women's participation in the peace process. While their presence demonstrated the potential capacity of civil society to influence the peace process, in practice, their influence remained limited by political mechanisms, such as the exclusion of women from key negotiation teams in the Doha talks, and structural limitations, including deeply entrenched patriarchal norms within Afghan society.

- B. The second group consisted primarily of women from influential religious families with ideological ties to the Taliban, such as Fatima Gailani, former President of the Afghan Red Crescent Society and a member of the Afghan government's negotiation team with the Taliban in Doha. In their interactions with the Taliban, this cohort of women adopted a conciliatory and aligned approach, demonstrating a degree of empathy and shared commitment. For this group, negotiating women's rights and freedoms held little priority; instead, under the slogan "let women stay at home, but let Afghanistan achieve peace," they normalized acceptance of the Taliban, prioritizing national peace over immediate advocacy for women's rights. They argued that just as jihadist leaders (from the civil war era) had changed over time, the Taliban would eventually acknowledge and accept women's social and political presence. This discourse, however, lacked historical and logical grounding and, by fostering false hope within society, rendered the peace process superficial and illusory.
- C. The third group comprised women who had mainly emerged from wealthy families dating back to the civil war period (of the 1990s) or who had gained access to the National Assembly through connections with illegal armed groups, subsequently entering peace negotiations via these channels.⁵ Unfortunately, this group also neglected their genuine mission to defend Afghan women's rights, instead pursuing personal fame, power, and political privileges. During peace negotiations with the Taliban, they did not refrain from compromises or deals, contributing to highly challenging and anxiety-inducing phases of the Afghan peace process, the consequences of which remain uncertain and unpredictable to this day.

Thus, the actions of some women participating in the peace process not only failed to strengthen the collective position of Afghan women but also

5. A notable example is Fawzia Koofi, whose father was a long-serving Member of Parliament before being killed during the Afghan-Soviet war; she later became a prominent political figure and women's rights advocate.

undermined women's authority and influence in both the present and future of the country.

Post-2021: Variations in the Political and Ideological Approaches of Some Women's Rights Activists in the Diaspora Toward the Taliban

After the Taliban's return to power, many Afghan professionals and activists emigrated, forming diaspora networks to coordinate anti-Taliban activities and to promote women's rights. The Afghan diaspora has become a key force in supporting Afghan rights and well-being, both inside and outside the country. Notable initiatives include women-led groups like 'Together Stronger', and 'Rawadari', as well as numerous international dialogues demonstrating their active engagement.

Variations exist in the political and ideological approaches of Afghan women's rights activists toward the Taliban. Some adopt a pragmatic stance, seeking limited engagement to preserve women's access to education and health services, while others maintain a principled opposition, refusing any compromise with a regime that they view as fundamentally oppressive. These differences reflect broader debates within Afghan civil society about strategy, risk, and the balance between immediate gains and long-term rights advocacy.

The engagement of certain women's rights activists with the Taliban cannot be simplistically categorized as "betrayal" or "collaboration." Such interactions can encompass a spectrum of objectives and motivations, ranging from survival strategies to hopes for internal reform. These objectives range from pragmatic efforts to ensure personal or community safety, to advancing political ambitions, or seeking legitimacy within evolving governance structures. For some women, engaging with the Taliban has represented a survival strategy in contexts where resistance could invite severe repercussions. For others, it has been a calculated attempt to secure influence, resources, or recognition in a shifting political order. Such interactions cannot be understood solely as betrayals of women's collective cause or as acts of empowerment; rather, they

reveal the complexities of navigating power under conditions of insecurity, exclusion, and contested authority.

A precise assessment requires consideration of individual background, type of engagement, and their socio-political context, as interaction with the Taliban is a complex, multilayered phenomenon with varying goals shaped by personal, political, social, and security circumstances. Broadly, this “engagement” may include several potential objectives:

- **Strategic Compromise for Relative Gains:** Some women believe that engagement with the Taliban, if combined with compromise, can provide a pathway to preserve or moderately improve women’s conditions under current restrictive circumstances. Rather than pursuing direct confrontation, they aim for soft influence, negotiation, and persuasion from within. Yet this approach carries inherent risks, as it can unintentionally legitimize the Taliban’s political standing while undermining the broader struggle for women’s rights. By framing such engagement as a bridge for international actors, these women often walk a fine line between advocacy and complicity, with their actions interpreted differently by domestic and global audiences. While some see them as pragmatic intermediaries ensuring the flow of aid and dialogue, others criticize these efforts as concessions that weaken collective resistance and embolden authoritarian control.

During the 2018-2021 period, many women’s rights activists adopted a pragmatic approach toward the Taliban, particularly in areas where the Taliban had limited or informal presence. They engaged in limited interactions aimed at preserving women’s access to education and social services, without signaling political support. After August 2021, following the Taliban’s full return to power, some activists have continued this pragmatic approach, but the drastically changed security and political environments have forced others to modify or restrict their activities. Consequently, some of these beliefs and strategies have persisted, while others emerged only after August 2021. The

approaches vary depending on region, available support networks, and the type of activism, highlighting the heterogeneity of women's rights strategies in contemporary Afghanistan.

- **Attracting International Attention:** Some women use engagement with the Taliban to create openings for international attention or dialogue, particularly those who believe that only by keeping negotiation channels open can humanitarian aid or effective international pressure be mobilized. While this strategy may allow women to maintain a foothold in political life, it also exposes them to criticism from both domestic and international observers who view collaboration with the Taliban as compromising core principles of women's rights. Their presence in official structures can be instrumentalized by the Taliban's de facto regime to project an image of inclusivity, often masking the continued restrictions and systemic inequalities that women face. Thus, while some women gain strategic leverage, their participation frequently comes at the cost of broader legitimacy and support from women's movements and civil society.

- **Political Positioning Within the New System:** A segment of women seeks engagement with the Taliban to secure a role within the emerging governance structure. They may reason that to exert any political influence, they must become part of the existing system, even if it is Taliban-led. By participating in official structures, these women aim to safeguard their personal interests and prepare for future political power. In some cases, shifts in the positions of certain individuals may reflect genuine changes in ideology, religion, or personal experience.

Shifts in Past Stances and Consequences of Engagement

In some cases, shifts in the positions of certain individuals may reflect genuine changes in ideology, religion, or personal experience. Alternatively, fractures among former activists may have emerged, leading some to alter

their approach.

Women's rights activists in Afghanistan have faced a complex set of political, social, and security conditions that have influenced their strategies and approaches. Engagement with the Taliban, whether limited and pragmatic or principled opposition, has always been shaped by personal experiences, support networks, and local circumstances. Consequently, shifts in the previous positions of these activists can be understood both as responses to changing environments and as reflections of ideological and personal developments.

This raises the question as to what the consequences are of this engagement. The outcomes of women's interactions with the Taliban, like their motivations, are multidimensional and complex. These consequences can be positive, negative, or a combination of both, depending on the nature of engagement, the degree of independence of the women's groups, societal responses, and the Taliban's behavior in practice.

Positive consequences may include increased visibility, access to limited decision-making spaces, or the ability to advocate for specific local needs and humanitarian concerns. Conversely, negative outcomes can involve reputational damage, co-optation by the Taliban de facto regime, or the erosion of collective trust among women's networks and civil society. Often, these consequences coexist, producing mixed effects that shape both individual trajectories and broader perceptions of women's political agency. Understanding these outcomes requires careful attention to context, acknowledging that engagement with the Taliban is neither uniformly empowering nor entirely detrimental, but rather a nuanced negotiation of opportunities and constraints.

However, the negative consequences of this engagement often outweigh the potential diplomatic benefits or the symbolic presence of women at the negotiating table. One immediate negative outcome is the legitimization of the Taliban. For instance, when prominent women's rights activists engage with the Taliban, it may assist the group in gaining both national and international

legitimacy, allowing the Taliban to signal that ‘even women’s rights activists accept us’. Such legitimization can weaken independent women’s movements and create divisions within their ranks. Other women may perceive this engagement as betrayal or compromise, fostering mistrust and fragmentation among activists, a development that ultimately benefits the Taliban.

A fundamental question that must be posed to this group of women is whether such engagement has the potential to gradually influence the Taliban system or bring about meaningful change. The likelihood of substantial impact is limited, given the deeply entrenched ideological and political framework of the Taliban. Although meaningful change is unlikely in most cases, engagement originating from a position of relative power may lead to incremental influence within the existing power structure, or limited reforms. Examples include maintaining local institutions for girls’ education, preserving access to basic health services, or creating spaces for future dialogue and advocacy. However, in a context where women have no role in the Taliban-led governance structures, such hopes are illusory and are more likely to generate public confusion or despair.

For the general public, particularly women and girls, observing individuals who were once vocal activists engaging with the Taliban can produce feelings of confusion, disillusionment, or betrayal. These sentiments may weaken public resolve for civil or cultural resistance.

Consequently, it can be argued that the international community, particularly certain countries that are supportive of the Taliban, may facilitate the instrumentalization of some women activists, enabling the Taliban to gain recognition quickly and without global public scrutiny. For instance, Russia officially recognized the Taliban’s government in July 2025, becoming the first country to do so since the group captured power in August 2021. This move was seen as a strategic alignment to promote bilateral cooperation despite the Taliban’s continued repression of women’s rights, such as by banning girls from education beyond sixth grade. The Taliban may use these women merely as a promotional façade, without implementing any substantive changes to

their repressive policies. In such cases, these engagements serve primarily as tools for misleading public perception rather than advancing genuine reform.

Potential Impact on International Policies

Engagements between these cohorts of women and the Taliban can influence international policies in two contrasting ways:

- Some countries may perceive it as a sign of ‘positive change’ and move closer to the Taliban.
- Others may view it as superficial or performative, conditioning or reducing their support.

Firstly, such engagements may prompt international actors to adopt a more cautious or accommodating stance toward the Taliban, interpreting women’s participation as a signal of legitimacy or potential reform. This can lead to the easing of sanctions, increased diplomatic engagement, or the provision of humanitarian assistance, under the assumption that the regime is responsive to social and political pressures.

Conversely, these interactions can also heighten scrutiny and criticism, as international observers may view the participation of certain women as coerced, superficial, or instrumentalized, reinforcing skepticism about the Taliban’s commitment to women’s rights. In this sense, women’s engagement both shapes, and is shaped by, the delicate dynamics of international policy, revealing the complex interplay between local agency and global diplomacy.

On one hand, the limited and pragmatic engagements of some activists may signal to the international community that the Taliban are negotiable and that cooperation on specific issues is possible. This perception could lead to reduced diplomatic pressure and fewer economic constraints on the Taliban government. On the other hand, observing women’s rights activists interacting with the Taliban may heighten concerns about the regime’s legitimacy and

its violations of women's rights, reinforcing the international community's motivation to apply pressure and advocate for human rights in Afghanistan. Thus, these engagements can have a dual and sometimes contradictory impact on international policies.

The consequences of such engagements depend largely on intent, implementation, and transparency. If engagement occurs alongside silence in the face of oppression, negative outcomes are likely to dominate. Conversely, if engagement is purposeful, transparent, and maintains independence, it may, in the long term, contribute incrementally to change.

A review of Afghanistan's experience with peace processes, highlights three key points:

- The international community in Afghanistan focused excessively on political compromise, often neglecting the strengthening of local women actors.
- A limited presence of women without meaningful participation does not produce inclusive peace.
- Meaningful participation requires long-term political will, security support, and institution-building.

Conclusion

In Afghanistan, the structural exclusion of women from political decision-making and peace processes not only hindered the emergence of an inclusive peace but also produced profound social and political consequences. The absence of women at the negotiation table meant that the needs and aspirations of half of Afghanistan's population were disregarded, thereby undermining the legitimacy of peace agreements in the eyes of the public. Moreover, this exclusion placed many of the achievements of the 2001–2021 period in education, healthcare, and women's civic participation at

serious risk. Afghanistan's experience illustrates that the inclusion of women is not a matter of symbolic choice but a fundamental necessity for ensuring sustainable peace.

Without effective women's participation, peace agreements remain fragile, unjust, and unsustainable. The capacities developed over the past two decades could have contributed to a comprehensive and lasting peace. However, the exclusion of women from key processes squandered this historical opportunity.

Women active in Afghanistan's civil society, particularly at the local level, played a crucial role in promoting dialogue, conflict resolution, and civic rights. Through meetings, workshops, and awareness-raising activities in provinces, districts, and villages, they advocated for women's rights and actively worked to enhance women's political awareness. Although these efforts were limited in scale, they were effective in strengthening social participation and fostering a culture of peace across different societal groups.

However, Afghanistan's fragile political situation, characterized by a lack of national legitimacy, fragmented leadership, structural corruption, and external interventions, has rendered sustainable peace a distant aspiration. Women, facing numerous challenges, often lacked a prominent place on the main negotiation agenda during peace processes. In some cases, some sections of political actors, including certain cohorts of women, quickly engaged in political dealings with the Taliban, digressing from the primary goal of defending women's rights and public interests. Moreover, the lack of transparency, continued instrumentalization of women's participation, and neglect of transitional justice have been among the most significant challenges undermining the Afghan peace process.

Consequently, Afghanistan's peace dialogues were frequently opaque, ambiguous, and contested. These negotiations not only failed to reflect the will of the Afghan people but also never garnered public approval. Experience shows that unless such dialogues are conducted systematically and inclusively, ensuring that the voices of all societal groups—including

women, ethnic minorities, youth, and war victims—are represented, those dialogues will neither be publicly accepted nor be capable of providing sustainable solutions to internal conflicts.

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Women's Access to Justice in Post–August 2021 Afghanistan

By Farhuda Rustam^{**1}

The August 2021 return of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan introduced deep and profound changes for women. The Taliban *de facto* authorities (DFA) have imposed sweeping, discriminatory restrictions on women in all spheres of life by enforcing rules and implementing laws and decrees they (deceptively) claim are based on sharia law. Foremost among these changes has been the dismantling of legal and institutional frameworks that previously provided support to women and aided women's empowerment, particularly *vis-à-vis* advancing gender equality, women's rights, and women's access to justice.

This essay examines the institutional, legal, and social situation under the Taliban rule to understand the ways in which they adversely impact women's access to justice. It does so by contrasting the rights and possibilities that were previously available to Afghan women but no longer exist under the Taliban rule. To that end, the essay begins by briefly introducing the topic and summarizing the methodology used in this study. The subsequent section provides a contextual overview of women's access to justice in Afghanistan between 2001 and August 2021. The essay then traces specific institutional, legal, and social changes enforced by the Taliban that adversely impact Afghan women's access to (and ability and agency to access) justice under the Taliban regime. The conclusion summarizes the findings and the essay ends with three policy recommendations.

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Introduction

Prior to the Taliban's return, Afghan women had some access to legal, social, and institutional mechanisms that enabled them to seek justice in cases of gender-based violence (GBV), human rights violations, and other legal issues. These mechanisms, which worked for women's rights and empowerment, were supported by the erstwhile government, civil society organizations (CSO), non-government organizations (NGO), and international actors who, individually and collectively, played an important role in facilitating the delivery of justice. Since August 2021, in their role as the DFA, the Taliban have severely limited Afghan women's access to education, employment, mobility, healthcare services, legal protections, and social and political participation in Afghanistan's society (Abbassy 2024; Gehrig and Willisicrof 2024; International Planned Parenthood Federation 2024). By doing so, they are in direct violation of Afghanistan's commitments under the UN Charter, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Reid 2024), and those under a slew of other international laws and legal instruments pertaining to gender equality and justice. Broader human rights violations have skyrocketed as a direct consequence of their sweeping decrees against women across the country, which in turn directly and indirectly obstruct women's access to justice and a holistic experience of gender just outcomes.

To explore the nature and key patterns of disruptions to Afghan women's access to justice post-August 2021, this essay relies on desk research and qualitative methods.

First, decrees and laws issued by the Taliban DFA were reviewed to examine the ways in which they differ from the legal system and redresses available during the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) era (2001–2021). Next, document analysis was undertaken, of international legal conventions like CEDAW, key legal instruments like the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women Peace and Security, and extant research including data and reports published by international organizations

and governments, and news reports. Based on this, practical consequences of these changes for the justice system, women's access to justice, and justice delivery were assessed. Contemporary debates on gender justice and gender apartheid were used as theoretical and discursive framework for analysis.

Gender justice as a concept and (policy) practice pertains to ending gender-based inequality, exclusion, discrimination, and injustice by addressing the root causes in all spheres including (but not limited to) family, society, economy, governance, policymaking, education, and healthcare. The pursuit of gender justice necessitates efforts to transform power relations and rectify structural barriers to ensure that men and women enjoy equal rights, dignity, opportunities, and individual autonomy (United Nations Development Fund for Women 2010). Rooted in the core principles of human rights, gender justice is a fundamental aspect of CEDAW, UNSCR 1325, and Sustainable Development Agenda, especially Goal 5 (SDG 5).²

Gender apartheid is broadly understood as an institutionalized system of governance that enforces systematic segregation of the sexes and subordination of women through laws and policies, typically to maintain male dominance (Bennounne 2024). The difference between gender apartheid and gender discrimination is that the latter pertains more to unequal treatment or prejudice, whereas the former is a structural regime rooted in governance that is designed to exclude women from public life, education, and strips them of individual autonomy (Sathy 2025).

Women's Access to Justice in Afghanistan: A Contextual Overview

After the first Taliban regime collapsed in 2001, beginning in 2002, during the IRA era (which ended in August 2021), Afghan women experienced a progressive state of human rights and enhanced access to rights and justice. Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution endorsed gender equality, various laws and regulations were promulgated to improve and codify women's rights in

2. SDG 5 pertains to gender equality and the empowerment of all girls and women.

policy and practice. A range of institutions were also established to empower Afghan women to exercise their rights and liberties as well as to help women seek and receive legal remedies in the formal justice system.

In the 20 years that followed, Afghan women made notable progress in securing and exercising their rights and accessing justice. For example, they actively engaged both the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) to report GBV cases and the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) to seek further legal services and to ensure accountability for gender-based violence (Qazi Zada and Qazi Zada 2024; "Women's Rights in Afghanistan: Nine Facts on Women's Rights in Afghanistan" 2023).

The entry and presence of female professionals in the legal and judicial sector increased steadily, across roles like lawyers, judges, and law clerks. Legal aid groups for women too burgeoned across all provinces. Within a decade of the promulgation of the 2004 Constitution, 19.3% of the lawyers and 8.4% of the judges in the country were women (International Development Law Organization 2014). The presence of female professionals (as compared to none, just a decade prior) in the justice system made the environment conducive for women to seek out legal representation, legal aid, and justice in formal settings.

Prior to the first Taliban regime (1996–2001), Afghanistan was a signatory to a variety of international legal instruments and conventions concerning women's rights, such as the CEDAW, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (Shariati 2024). During the IRA era, Afghanistan recommitted³ to its obligations under CEDAW and ICCPR, and became a signatory to UNSCR 1325.

Between 2001 and 2021, Afghan women participated in political activities, held civil service jobs, led cases and campaigns to address GBV and human rights violations, and had access to the numerous legal, social, economic,

3. Article 7 of Afghanistan's 2004 constitution says: "[t]he state shall observe the United Nations Charter, interstate agreements, as well as international treaties to which Afghanistan has joined, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

political, and educational opportunities across urban areas, with representation from rural areas growing steadily (Human Rights Watch 2022). To illustrate, by 2020, women constituted 21% of civil service employees, and girls made up 40% of school enrolments. However, they still faced barriers due to entrenched cultural practices, gender norms, and inadequate facilities (Qazi Zada and Qazi Zada 2024). Nevertheless, the trajectory was still clearly in the direction of gender justice (even if at a pace slower than ideal).

Crucially, between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan's homegrown civil society as well as domestic and foreign non-governmental and international organizations played an active and substantive role in improving the human rights situation and women's access to justice. For example, harnessing CEDAW and other United Nations resolutions, local and (inter)national organizations assisted and promoted women's meaningful participation in policymaking, governance, decision making, socio-economic empowerment, presence in public, access to education and work opportunities, and economic activities. Overall, during this period, the legal, political, economic, and social environment was immeasurably more supportive of and conducive for women (Al Mokdad 2024).

Today, under Taliban rule, every one of these achievements, services, facilities, and institutional frameworks has been dismantled (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023).

Key Legal Changes and Afghan Women's Access to Justice Under Taliban Rule

Immediately upon seizing power, the Taliban dismantled the post-2001 Afghan legal framework, voided the 2004 constitution, and replaced it with a strict, inconsistent interpretation of Sharia law without clearly codified laws or a constitution. This unpredictability has eroded legal certainty, disproportionately harming Afghan women, who have now lost fundamental rights and protections that were previously enshrined in the country's 2004 constitution, denying them legal recourse against gender-based discrimination

and abuse in the private and non-private spheres of life.

During the IRA era, laws and legislations in Afghanistan were written and passed through the parliamentary process and drafted in accordance with the 2004 constitution. This provided a uniform standard and consistent basis for law enforcement as well as clarity to determine which action or policy is lawful. Policing and justice systems (including appointments) were also administered and governed based on laws and regulations developed through the democratic process and were all subject to oversight.

However, at present, under the Taliban rule, policies and rules are made through opaque and arbitrary processes, usually according to the whim of the Taliban Chief based in Kandahar, with no public discussion or debate. There is no oversight, check and balances, or even any transparency or consistency. At present, courts in Afghanistan are functioning without codified laws or transparency. Women's complaints, especially on divorce or GBV, are simply dismissed or sidelined, and women are denied fair hearings, which further perpetuates gender bias, and gender-discriminatory outcomes.

Problematically, even in cases where women somehow manage to overcome various socio-legal hurdles and access the justice system, there are broad discrepancies in verdicts because a "lack of legal uniformity has made the system uncertain, unpredictable and arbitrary" (Amnesty International 2025). According to a former Afghan judge, this is because different Taliban-appointed religious judges use different interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence, and that "...[i]n some districts, rulings are based on Bada'i al-Sana'i while in others, they refer to Fatawa-i Qazi Khan. The same crime might result in two completely different verdicts" (Amnesty International 2025).

The sections below discuss key changes the Taliban rule in Afghanistan has made to the legal, social, and institutional processes, making them inconducive and hostile for women, especially in accessing justice.

Institutional Changes

Since August 2021, Afghanistan's institutional systems have broken down, mainly affecting those that worked for gender equality and women's rights during the IRA era (Gehrig and Willisicrof 2024). These changes have affected various national and international institutions, including government offices, justice systems, educational institutions, and humanitarian organizations. The Taliban DFA have shut down several institutions and organizations that previously supported women's rights and empowerment, including the MoWA.

■ **Closure of Legal Support Institutions for Women**

The MoWA, the AIHRC, and family courts were key institutions dispensing and/or enabling justice for women during the IRA era but have now been dismantled (UN Women 2024; Amnesty International 2025). Institutions such as family courts, juvenile justice units, women's protection centers, and violence against women units have either been shut down or rendered dormant, erasing formal legal avenues and support structures for women seeking justice or protection (UN Women 2024; Amnesty International 2025). These institutions worked for women rights, and supported women's rights advocacy, legal aid, and legal education and guidance for Afghan women, including on family law and domestic violence cases (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2022).

■ **Changes in the Justice Sector**

Courts that used to handle cases, including matters of women's rights, family law etc., have been restructured, leading to many cases being dismissed and ignored. These shifts and restructurings have resulted in significant erosion of women's legal rights and protections (Abbasi 2024). For example, under the current system, women are frequently prohibited from testifying in court or seeking legal action for abuses and violence they experience. This has created an environment in which

abuser and perpetrator of violence against women act with impunity (Penn 2024). The Taliban have also voided/limited the independence of defense lawyer associations and weakened the right to legal defense. This disproportionately affects women as it restricts their options *vis-à-vis* legal counsel and removes accountability mechanisms to investigate and prosecute abuses.

- **Changes to Existing Institutions and Creation of New Institutions**

The Taliban replaced the MoWA with the 'Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Preventing of Vice' (PVPV). This ministry is tasked with enforcing the Taliban's gender-discriminatory 'morality' rules and policies (Penn 2024), prioritizing obedience through force and fear, rather than prioritizing truth and justice. The Taliban have also restructured the Afghanistan Independent Bar Association (AIBA) subsuming it as a 'directorate' within the Ministry of Justice. This has fundamentally upended AIBA's independence, with direct and grave consequences for AIBA members and their clients alike, as the Taliban now also have access to all membership data and client files (including those of lawyers and judges who had previously prosecuted Taliban members) (Elyashkil 2023).

Legal Changes

The Taliban have unilaterally introduced several new laws that have completely changed the legal framework governing women's rights in Afghanistan. These changes have obliterated laws, rights, and legal standards that previously established crucial rights, including the right to legal representation, the ability to file complaints independently, and specific protections for women under family and criminal law matters.

- **Ban on Women Practicing Law**

The Taliban have barred Afghan women from practicing law in Afghanistan. All female judges and lawyers have been fired from

their positions; many have fled the country due to security and safety concerns (Abbasi 2024). According to data published by Afghanistan's National Statistics and Information Authority during the IRA era, 252 women were serving as judges and 437 as prosecutors in Afghanistan's judicial institutions as of 2020 (Farzam 2023). This number has now dropped to zero. This has resulted in a significant decrease in female representation within the judiciary and judicial system to help vulnerable Afghan women access justice and exercise their basic rights.

■ **Imposition of Male Guardianship Rules**

The Taliban have imposed strict requirements on women's mobility and public engagement, often necessitating the presence of a mahram (a close male relative chaperone) for women to access public services, including legal institutions. This has made it extremely challenging for women to file complaints independently, especially in cases of GBV where the chaperone(s) themselves might be the perpetrators ("Tracking the Taliban's (Mis)Treatment of Women" 2025).

■ **Imposition of Selective Interpretations of Sharia Law**

As several reports and studies show, the Taliban's strict, extremely narrow and selective interpretation, and enforcement of sharia law has rolled back many legal protections Afghan women previously enjoyed, particularly in areas like marriage, divorce (Paiwandi 2022), and inheritance (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023). UN reports indicate that women are now more exposed to and at risk of forced (even underage) marriage and domestic violence, even as they have very few (if any) legal avenues left to seek justice and protection from these harms. During the IRA era, Afghanistan had established certain strong legal safeguards for women's rights by adopting international legal instruments such as the CEDAW and domestic measures like the Eradication of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law. The Taliban have summarily removed these protections (Kadir and Nurhaliza 2023; Gehrig and Willisicrof 2024).

This is despite the 2004 constitution explicitly recognizing sharia law as the guiding principle for the country's laws and all laws promulgated during the IRA era were designed to not contravene Islamic principles (Elyaskhil 2023).

Social Changes

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has perpetrated a deeply disruptive era characterized by a widespread erosion of women's fundamental human rights, freedoms, and civil liberties. These broad changes have adversely affected all spheres of Afghan women's social, political, and economic lives, directly reshaping their agency by disenfranchising women from education, employment, financial security, social participation and individual autonomy. Each of these changes on the social level—imposed by the Taliban's regressive, patently gender-discriminatory policies, and misogynistic outlook towards women—is systematically and methodically designed to obstruct and erase Afghan women's ability to experience just outcomes in direct and indirect ways, in every aspect of life. Each of the restrictions also entrenches and compounds the specific ill-effects brought about by the changes in the legal system and legal order.

■ **Restrictions on Women's Education**

The Taliban have introduced numerous restrictions and limitations on women's secondary school education and university studies. Thousands of Afghan girls have been deprived from attending schools beyond the sixth grade (Ahmadi and Worden 2023). This has led to a dramatic decline in female literacy levels and educational aspirations (Barr 2024). To illustrate, girls have been prohibited from attending secondary schools since March 2022, resulting in 80% of school-age girls not being in school. As of December 2022, girls have also been barred from attending universities. As of January 2023, Afghan girls have not been allowed to appear for the Kankor exam (university entrance exam) ("FAQs: Afghan Women Three Years after the Taliban

Takeover” 2024). Although girls were still permitted to pursue medical education to become doctors, nurses, and midwives, in December 2024, the Taliban banned girls from studying or teaching at medical institutes as well (International Planned Parenthood Federation 2024). These restrictions deeply affect the current generation, and its knock-on effects on future generations will be particularly severe as lack of education is predicted to increase early childbearing rates by 45% and maternal mortality risks by at least 50% as early as 2026 in Afghanistan (“FAQs: Afghan Women Three Years after the Taliban Takeover” 2024). These bans on female education restrict women’s legal literacy and capacity to understand or claim legal rights in multiple spheres, creating longer-term systemic disempowerment.

■ **Restrictions on Women’s Employment**

The Taliban have banned women from working in most sectors, including in national and international NGOs. Women continue to face widespread job and income losses, particularly in sectors like education, media, and healthcare (“FAQs: Afghan Women Three Years after the Taliban Takeover” 2024). The annual economic cost of banning women from the workforce is estimated at USD 1 billion, which is approximately 5% of Afghanistan gross domestic product (GDP) (Qazizada 2024). The restrictions on women’s employment thus render a large section of Afghanistan’s female population dependent on their male relatives in virtually all aspects of their lives, thereby directly and indirectly stripping them of their individual agency and access to justice.

For instance, the ban on women’s employment in the legal field removes women from judicial and legal professions, including from roles like judges and lawyers, and bars women from workplaces providing legal and support services. Indirectly, these employment bans exacerbate women’s economic dependency and social isolation, undermining their ability to seek legal redress or participate in legal processes where women are now obligated to be accompanied

by a *mahram* (close male relative chaperone), and where verdicts are often being delivered in the concerned women's absence.

■ **Restrictions on Women's Personal Freedoms**

The Taliban DFA have implemented strict dress codes which require women and girls to wear a full body covering as a hijab. They also published a long list of their PVPV laws, which include edicts that state women should avoid leaving their homes unless they have an urgent need to do so ("FAQs: Afghan Women Three Years after the Taliban Takeover" 2024). They have also obligated women to be accompanied by a mahram (a close male relative chaperone) when traveling beyond certain distances (Barr 2024; "Afghanistan: Rapid Gender Analysis (November 2023)" 2023). These decrees and restrictions have created significant and multi-dimensional barriers and limitations to women's public and private lives and personal choices. These restrictions on women's clothing and mobility, the imposition of mahram rules, and prohibition of interactions between unrelated men and women severely hamper women's ability to attend judicial proceedings, or meet with male lawyers (especially given as female legal professionals have been barred from practicing law), all of which directly obstruct women's access to and participation in legal processes, thereby institutionalizing exclusion and gender inequality as the standard and inclusion and gender equality as aberrations/exceptions.

Ensuring gender justice through systemic change, accountability, and inclusion is crucial to achieving lasting peace and sustainable development, especially in (post-)conflict contexts. However, the Taliban's policies categorically undermine the foundational principles of gender justice by obliterating Afghan women's rights in all spheres of life and obstructing their equal and equitable access to legal recourse. These actions directly contravene Afghanistan's international commitments embodied in the UN Charter, CEDAW, UNSCR 1325, and SDG 5, all of which advocate for

the inclusion, protection, and empowerment of women and gender equality within legal processes.

Under the Taliban's gender apartheid regime, institutional mechanisms are designed to enforce the subjugation of women within society. The Taliban's decrees have instituted a regime of structural gender segregation and systemic oppression, which severely restricts women's autonomy and denies them their fundamental rights to justice, equality, and liberty. Problematically however, whereas all forms of gender discrimination are prohibited under international law, 'gender apartheid' has not yet been codified or defined in international (criminal) law, with apartheid only defined in relation to racial apartheid (Soltan 2025).

The denial of Afghan women's access to justice under Taliban rule also illustrates how regressive legal systems institutionalize gender-based injustice while entrenching misogynistic exclusion. Afghanistan's case illustrates how law can be misused as a tool to maintain male-controlled authority over women. This state-of-affairs vindicates feminist legal critiques that law is not (necessarily) inherently neutral but embedded in socio-political, politico-economic, and politico-legal power structures that (can) perpetuate the subjugation of women.

Conclusion

This essay explored Afghan's women's access to justice under Taliban rule from a broader gender (justice) lens. This allowed the analysis to consider aspects directly related to and beyond the 'formal' justice system and related constraints, as well as Afghan women's experience of (in)justice in everyday aspects of life.

Since August 2021, Afghan women have been severely disenfranchised from their legal right to seek legal resolutions for their legal problems. The DFA have eliminated legal protections and state support and advocacy for women's rights ("Gender Alert I: Women's Rights in Afghanistan: Where Are We Now?" 2021). There are no female lawyers and judges in Afghanistan's

justice system anymore, creating a massive and concerning gap in legal representation for women (Rawadari 2024). Women speaking out against these developments and advocating for their rights have faced a grim spate of arrests, intimidation, and violence like being beaten by DFA police and soldiers (Fetrat and Barr 2022). The Taliban carry out public punishments, arbitrary detentions, and social intimidation, which disproportionately target women for ‘infractions’, such as violations of the Taliban’s dress code. This climate of fear suppresses women’s willingness and ability to pursue legal claims and challenges, compounding barriers to justice.

A clear pattern is discernible in the Taliban’s strategy to disenfranchise Afghan women from their rights and access to justice. Specifically, they are using at least five key methods simultaneously: legal and institutional disempowerment; exclusion from the judiciary and legal professions; imposition of male guardianship requirements, sex-segregation, and restrictions on women’s freedom of movement; instituting opaque, arbitrary judicial processes (controlled by male religious figures); and inducing widespread gender-based repression, social control, intimidation, and fear.

It is apparent that the Taliban-imposed structural restrictions on all aspects of women’s lives function as tools of gendered oppression designed to maintain patriarchal control, denying women autonomy and substantive equality within the Taliban’s arbitrary legal system. These restrictions represent systemic gender apartheid that excludes women from both formal justice mechanisms and broader social participation, reinforcing marginalization, and limiting and handicapping women’s agency and ability to claim and enforce their rights. The Taliban’s restrictions on women’s education, employment, and social and political participation compound injustice by eroding women’s legal capacity and access to justice institutions.

Policy Recommendations

- **Establish Safe Community Centers:** Small safe places should be established where Afghan women can report violence in private and get legal advice, self-help advice, and psychosocial support. These centers should be managed by local women with help from international groups to keep them safe and well-treated. If the Taliban ignore women's cases or issues, local women mediators should handle cases and reports should be sent to international human rights groups. For example, Women's Justice Centres in Nairobi provide free legal help and counselling to survivors of violence. In Nepal, paralegal committees train rural women to solve small disputes and guide survivors to legal services.
- **Foster and Strengthen Grassroots (Women's) Legal Networks:** Donor governments and international NGOs should provide funding and training to local women leaders and small women's groups so they can act as mediators and legal helpers in their communities. This will help give women a trusted way to find justice close to home. In Rwanda for example, 'Village Mediation Committees', often led by women, help solve family and land disputes locally. In India, women's legal aid groups train women in villages to guide survivors of domestic violence to access courts and legal help.
- **Set-up Secure Hotlines and Digital Platforms:** Human rights organizations and tech organizations and groups must collaborate with support from donor governments to create safe and private phone hotlines and low bandwidth mobile apps. This can help women in far flung or restricted areas to call or message to get legal advice, counselling, and to report abuse without revealing their identity publicly, while also helping them overcome the mobility restrictions in their pursuit of legal and/or psychosocial assistance. In Pakistan for example, the 'Madadgar Helpline' gives women private legal advice and connects

them to shelters and lawyers. In Jordan, the 'Family Protection Hotline' provides legal help and connects women to emergency services.

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Girls' Education Under Taliban Rule: Consequences for Afghanistan and the Region

By Arpan Tulsyan¹

Since the beginning of Taliban rule in Afghanistan in August 2021, its decrees have systematically banned girls' and women's rights to education, training, and work. This is a rollback on gender equality, deepening cycles of poverty, and fuelling radicalisation with far-reaching consequences for Afghan society and regional stability.

Against this backdrop, this paper discusses Taliban's ban on education for women and girls and analyses its far-reaching consequences – not only for Afghanistan, but also for peace and global stability and, more specifically, for India's regional interests. It examines how Indian foreign policy can respond to this challenge, balancing national security concerns with a commitment to regional peace and humanitarian values.

The paper is organised in four sections: the first section reviews the progress made and setbacks in girls' education in 21st century Afghanistan, focussing on Taliban's second regime. The next section discusses social, economic, geopolitical and global consequences of this ban. The third section explores why this ban matters for India and the fourth, and final section offers policy recommendations on how India must navigate the crisis of girls' education under Taliban ruled Afghanistan.

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The Denial of Education for Afghan Girls

Afghanistan's education sector has not witnessed a linear progress. In some years, there have been advancements—but regime changes, and conflicts have often slowed down, paused, or even reversed progress from time to time (Easar et al 2023). Therefore, historically, the country has recorded some of the world's lowest literacy rates, with education for girls being a special area of concern.

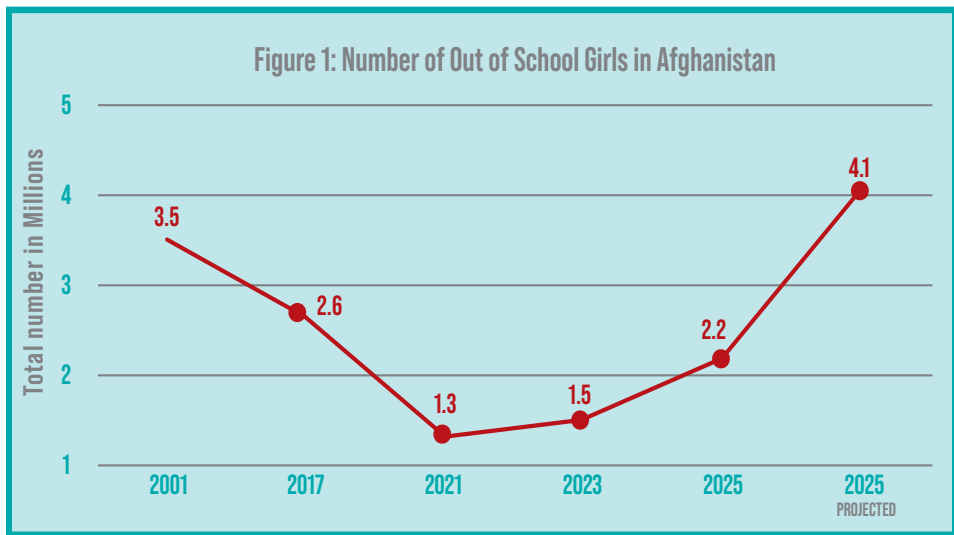
Formal schooling for girls started in 1920 (UN Women 2023), but for much of the 20th century, girls' schooling was often met with social resistance and was therefore limited. While still under monarchy, first women's institute was opened in Kabul in 1946, followed by a women's college of education in 1947 (Middle East Council on Global Affairs 2023). First cohort of female elementary school teachers began teaching in 1949. Investments accelerated during periods of modernisation, like the 1950s and 1960s, but fell during Taliban takeover between 1996–2001. Just prior to when the 1st Taliban regime (1996), girls comprised 27% of elementary students and 30% of secondary students, while women formed 58% of elementary teachers and 52% of secondary teachers. Higher education enrolled 28% female students (Middle East Council on Global Affairs 2023).

From 1996 to 2002, Taliban regime banned girls' education and women's employment. Education became entirely informal, and girls learnt at homes or in secret underground schools, risking prosecution for studying. In 2009, Shukria Barakzai, a leading Afghan women's rights activist and politician, publicly called for “30,000 scholars or engineers” instead of 30,000 soldiers in response to President Barack Obama's troop surge plans for Afghanistan (University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School 2023). Her request for scholars and engineers was not just rhetorical; it reflected a strategic vision for Afghanistan's future, emphasising that long-term peace and security depends on education and capacity-building, not just military intervention.

Post the collapse of 1st Taliban regime, international and Afghan efforts led to millions of girls returning to classrooms and female literacy and enrolment

rates rose sharply. Before the Taliban regained control in August 2021, girls constituted 40% of primary school students, 35.7% of middle school students, 34% of high school students and 24.6% of university students. The female literacy rate almost doubled, reaching from 17% to 30%, from 2011 to 2018 (UNESCO, 2023).

However, with the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, these gains have been rapidly reversed and affected estimated 2.5 million school-age girls. Ban on secondary schooling, followed by ban on higher education, effectively erased any educational opportunities for Afghan women and girls beyond the age of 12 years (See Figure 1).

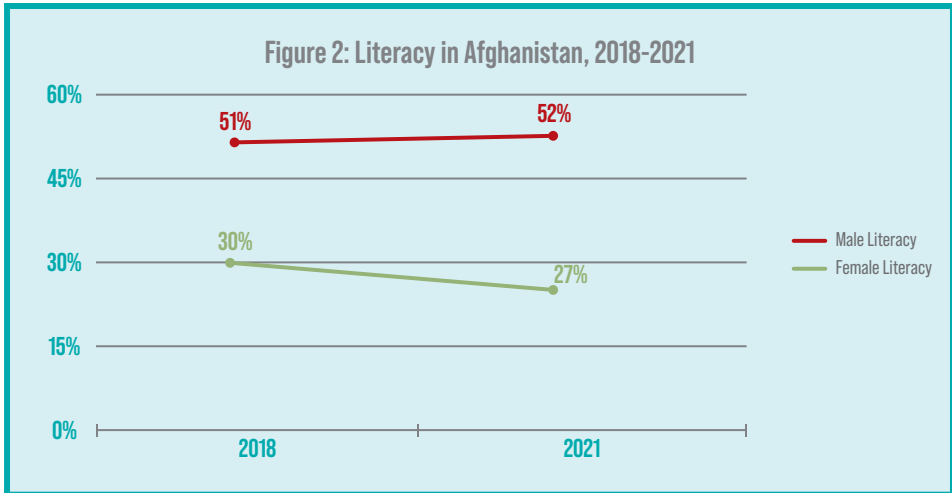


Source: UNICEF 2022; UNICEF 2025

Figure 1 shows declining number of out of school girls since 2001 (end of first Taliban rule) and rising again since 2021 - the beginning of second Taliban rule. It is projected that if the ban persists until 2030, over four million girls will likely be deprived of education beyond primary schooling. This will lead to a wider gender gap in literacy. (See Figure 2)

Existing gender gaps in literacy are further widening in Afghanistan. In 2018, 70% women aged 15 and above were illiterate, compared to 49% men

in the same age group. However, soon after Taliban rule, this increased to 73.4% for women, whereas male illiteracy decreased slightly to 48%. The previous data which showed girls' enrollment in schools before the Taliban takeover had highlighted progress in access, while the widening gaps in male and female literacy rates discussed above, a reversal of these hard-won gains.



Source: UNICEF 2022

In addition to institutional bans, Taliban has systematically targeted girls' education through violent tactics i.e. through attacks on schools, students and teachers. According to UN Security Council (2023), between 2021 and 2022, there were 125 attacks on schools and their staff, which resulted in the death of 326 students. Girls and their families fear harassment, kidnapping, acid attacks or school bombings if they seek to violate the ban (Human Rights Watch 2022). Reports also suggest that school wells have been poisoned (Popalzai, Popalzai and Nasser 2023). In May 2021, a bombing at Kabul's Sayed al-Shuhada High School killed over 60 people, mostly school-going girls (BBC 2021).

The only place girls are allowed to study are madrasas, which prioritise religious and differentiated education, short-changing academic knowledge for household duties (UNESCO 2025).

Consequences of the Ban

Education is a fundamental human right under Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, further reinforced by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). These obligate states to ensure equal access to education for all children, regardless of gender. Accordingly, Taliban's exclusion of girls contravenes international law, and has been termed "gender apartheid"² by United Nations (UNESCO, 2025). They argue that denying girls access to education will lead to serious setbacks on various fronts: social, economic, peace and security and across global developmental goals.

Social Costs

The denial of education carries far-reaching social costs, undermining not only girl's individual well-being and future opportunities, but also weakening family and community resilience, and broader societal progress in Afghanistan. It reinforces harmful gender norms, increases the prevalence of early and forced marriages, negatively impacts women's physical and mental health and deprives entire communities of the transformative potential of educated women and girls (Hamidi 2024).

First, it inflicts psychological trauma on girls who face despair and depression due to loss of aspirations, autonomy and agency. A 2024 survey of 426 Afghan girls revealed that 87.6% of respondents exhibited clinical depression symptoms, while 49.8% reported suicidal thoughts (Mohammadi et al 2024). Through a multivariate analysis, they found these to be directly correlated with the education ban. The UN Special Rapporteur also noted that the ban has caused a "dramatic rise in self-harm" among girls (Kabul Now 2024).

2. Gender apartheid can be understood as systematic and institutionalised, social and economic exclusion of women, because of their gender or sex.

With rising economic and humanitarian crisis, families who struggle for survival often cope through strategies like early, forced or child marriages. UN Women reports that in 2023, 28.7% of Afghan girls were married before the age of 18. UN Women projects that by 2026, the impact of education ban will lead to an increase in early childbearing by 45%; and an increase in maternal mortality by 50% (UN Women 2024).

Prohibition of women's medical training has blocked the pipeline of female doctors, midwives, and nurses, leading to significant decline in female health workers. Studies suggest that National density of key health workers was only 10.3 per 10,000 population in 2023, way below the WHO (World Health Organisation) accepted threshold of 44.5 per 10,000 for Universal Health Coverage. Among them, only 18% of specialised physicians and 29% of nurses in Afghanistan were female (Neyazi et al. 2025).

The Taliban's simultaneous ban on female medical education and mandating that women be treated only by female healthcare workers creates an impossible dilemma for Afghan women's health. UN experts state that together they "will undoubtedly lead to unnecessary suffering, illness, and possibly deaths of Afghan women and children" (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 2024).

Economic Costs

The prohibition on girls' education has triggered economic setbacks that could have crippling consequences for Afghanistan's economy and future prospects. Analysis by UNDP (2024) reveals that about 85% of Afghans live on less than USD 1 a day. According to UNICEF (2022), ban on female education will lead to at least 2.5% decline in its annual GDP (gross domestic product), which amounts to over USD 500 million. This economic hit will cascade into compounding losses every year, till the ban remains in place, undermining national productivity and growth. Similarly, a 2024 UNESCO study projected that if the ban on women's higher education continues, Afghanistan will lose up to USD 9.6 billion by 2066, an amount which

is equal to two-thirds of the country's current GDP. The absolute cost to individuals, in terms of lost income could reach USD 1.5 billion by 2030 (Mixed Migration Centre 2024).

Much of this loss will be due to exclusion of women from the workforce. UNESCO (2024) estimates that over the next 35 years, Afghanistan will lose nearly 600,000 women from the workforce, with no pipeline for replacement due to the education ban. This includes teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, and other professionals essential for national development and public service delivery.

In 2019, female teachers made up 36.16% of primary school teaching staff (World Bank 2019). However, ban on girl's education and prohibitions on female teachers from teaching boys rendered a large proportion of female teachers unemployed. Media reports suggest that hundreds of female teachers - from kindergarten to university lecturers have been barred from teaching, losing their jobs and livelihoods (Kabul Now 2025; Al Jazeera 2023; University World News 2025). Such mass displacement from the workforce has not only deepened gender inequality but also contributed to rising poverty levels.

These conditions have triggered a widespread exodus of professionals, resulting in a significant brain drain that weakens Afghanistan's intellectual and institutional foundations (Amiri and Ashoori 2024). This erosion of academic and professional talent will not only undermine the quality of higher education and public services but also reduce mentorship and role models for younger generations, particularly girls. Together, these trends will soon hollow out the country's human capital, disrupt intergenerational knowledge transfer, and weaken the very social infrastructure needed for future recovery and resilience. This will lead to generational impact, forcing millions of Afghan girls and their families into deeper poverty and poor health, reducing household incomes and incurring measurable losses in GDP, workforce participation, productivity, and human capital accumulation.

Setbacks for Global Development Goals

Afghan girls' education crisis has profound implications for the achievement of global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The UN Women Gender Index 2024: Afghanistan Report (UN Women 2024) documents a deep and lasting rollback in Afghanistan's, and the world's progress, with far reaching consequences, including the following:

- **SDG 4 (Quality Education):** In 2024, 78% of Afghan women were not in education, employment, or training, nearly four times the rate for men.
- **SDG 5 (Gender Equality):** The gender equality gap in Afghanistan, particularly with reference to women's education and economic participation is now among the widest in the world, with Afghan women reaching only 17.3% of their estimated full potential.
- **SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth):** Women's labour force participation has dropped to 24% (compared to 89% for men), and they are mostly employed in informal, low-paid roles.
- **SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being):** The report highlights that bans on female medical education and training, along with loss of autonomy and agency will further widen health disparities and worsen maternal and child health outcomes. As stated before, maternal mortality could increase by 50% in 2026 (UN Women 2024).

The UN Women report states,

“with targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its accompanying SDGs only five years away, Afghanistan risks falling catastrophically far behind global efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment... Afghanistan's scores across these development indicators are unfortunately predicted to continuously spiral downward

until the women's rights crisis is addressed, demonstrating how equality between women and men is a critical element of a nation's development." (UN Women Gender Index 2024: Afghanistan 2024, 6).

Afghanistan is also the world's sixth most climate-vulnerable country, yet among the least prepared to cope with its impacts (UNESCO 2025). The ban on girls' education will further undermine the country's resilience, limiting its future capacity to build an aware, adaptive, and gender-inclusive response to climate challenges.

Peace and Security Costs

The crisis of girl's education in Afghanistan is a catalyst for deepening insecurity, radicalisation, and instability, both within the country and in the region in at least three ways. First, it increases the risks of cross-border radicalisation (UN Security Council 2025). Experience from last Taliban rule shows that marginalised and poor youth, who have lost faith in a peaceful and prosperous future are more vulnerable to recruitment by transnational extremist groups, threatening peace within the country and security in neighbours like India. At the same time, shortage of women in crucial sectors like health, education and civil society will undermine basic services and public trust in institutions (Hamidi 2024). Second, by driving forced migration and refugee flows—as families seeking education and safety for their daughters may attempt exodus—strain regional resources and social cohesion. In 2023, Afghans were the second largest refugee population, with an estimated 6.1 million of them living in neighbouring countries like Iran and Pakistan (IOM; UNHCR and World Bank 2024). Third, it will undermine international peacebuilding efforts by causing a setback on women's rights. It is well recognised that women's exclusion from public life weakens governance, reduces oversight, and eliminates diverse voices

essential for meaningful policymaking.³ If the resulting vacuum is filled by non-state actors, particularly extremist and criminal networks, it could further destabilise the country and regional peace. The Taliban's previous rule (1996-2001) demonstrated how such exclusionary policies can transform Afghanistan into a haven for global terrorism (Ahmadi and Lakhani 2016).

Particularly India, a country which is invested in Afghanistan's reconstruction and committed to a peaceful neighbourhood, faces several direct and indirect consequences of Taliban's ban on female education. The absence of educated women and rise of radicalisation in Afghanistan makes it a potential base of anti-India groups, with a clear security risk in sensitive regions like Kashmir. Moreover, with Taliban's rule, India's longstanding efforts to promote democratic values and inclusive development in Afghanistan suffers diplomatic setbacks, complicating its regional diplomacy. Humanitarian and ethical stakes are also high, as India has consistently championed girls' education and women's empowerment in its foreign policy, and the Taliban's ban challenges these values. A more detailed discussion on India's stake in girls' education in Afghanistan, the need for a recalibrated response is discussed in the next section.

India's Strategic Stake in Girls' Education in Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan

Besides being a humanitarian imperative, restoring girls' education in Afghanistan is also deeply entwined with India's broader strategic interests in central Asia. A stable, inclusive Afghanistan, where women participate meaningfully in the society and economy is essential for advancing India's security, economic, energy, and geopolitical objectives.

3. The landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) recognises that women's equal and full participation in conflict prevention, resolution, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction results in more durable and inclusive peace. Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is rooted in extensive evidence showing that peace processes involving women are more likely to result in agreements that are reached and implemented, and that gender equality itself is a predictor of a society's resilience to conflict and violence. Therefore, Resolution 1325 obliges all actors, governments, the UN, and non-state entities, to ensure women's effective participation in decision-making on peace and security and protect them from gender-based violence in conflict settings.

First, Afghanistan has been consistently cited by the UN Security Council as an area emanating global terrorism and a destabilising factor for the region and the world. The recent report in February 2025 observed, that there are over two dozen terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, including ISIL-K, which the UN describes as the “greatest extra regional terrorist threat” (UN Security Council 2025). This makes the country a continuing driver of instability for regional peace, which India must be vigilant about.

Second, lack of inclusive governance, respect for human rights, and ongoing security concerns have led to diplomatic isolation, sanctions and cuts in international aid for Afghanistan. The deteriorating situation has led to forced migration to neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan, which has responded with mass deportations of Afghan refugees and heightened border security (*Al Jazeera* 2025), further destabilizing the region.

Third, geographically, Afghanistan is important for India because it helps India reach energy resources and markets in Central Asia. Indian projects like the Chabahar Port and the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) create routes and enhance connectivity without going through Pakistan (Wani 2023). These projects will work well only if Afghanistan has a stable, inclusive and cooperative government (Azmi, Khan and Ekstrom 2025).

Fourth, India has invested over USD 3 billion in Afghanistan’s reconstruction post Taliban’s first regime – building roads, dams, power lines, and the Afghan Parliament building, as well as hundreds of schools and hospitals (Prabhu 2021). These investments have fostered goodwill and people-to-people ties, but their long-term viability is threatened by ongoing instability (Shekhawat 2022).

In this situation, India’s principled stance on girls’ education and women’s rights enhances its reputation as a responsible regional power, strengthens its diplomatic alliances in multilateral forums and helps to shape the regional order in alignment with India’s interests. It also allows India to leverage its soft power to maintain a positive presence to counter intensified competition

from China and Pakistan narratives that fuel extremism and instability.

India's Educational Relationship with Afghanistan

India has had a long-standing educational tie of people-to-people engagement, capacity building, and developmental partnership with Afghanistan. Since the fall of the Taliban's first rule in 2001, India has emerged as the largest regional donor for Afghanistan, investing over \$3 billion in reconstruction and development projects (Prabhu 2021). A significant portion of this support was invested into the education sector, a recognition of its significance for Afghanistan's stability and progress. Key initiatives included:

1. **Strengthen educational infrastructure:** Construction and renovation of schools, including the Habibia High School and the Afghanistan National Agricultural Sciences and Technology University (ANASTU).
2. **Expanding scholarship opportunities:** Thousands of Afghan students, including women, received scholarships to study in Indian universities and technical institutes.
3. **Enhancing teacher capacity building:** Indian institutions provided training for Afghan teachers, administrators, and professionals, with a focus on empowering women educators. **Promoting community development:** India's High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) supported local schools, literacy programs, and vocational training, often prioritizing female participation.
4. **Advancing digital learning programs:** India extended the Pan-Africa e-Network Project to Afghanistan, enabling online education and telemedicine; launched the e-Vidya Bharati (e-VB) portal for distance learning; and supported virtual classrooms and partnerships between Afghan students and Indian universities.

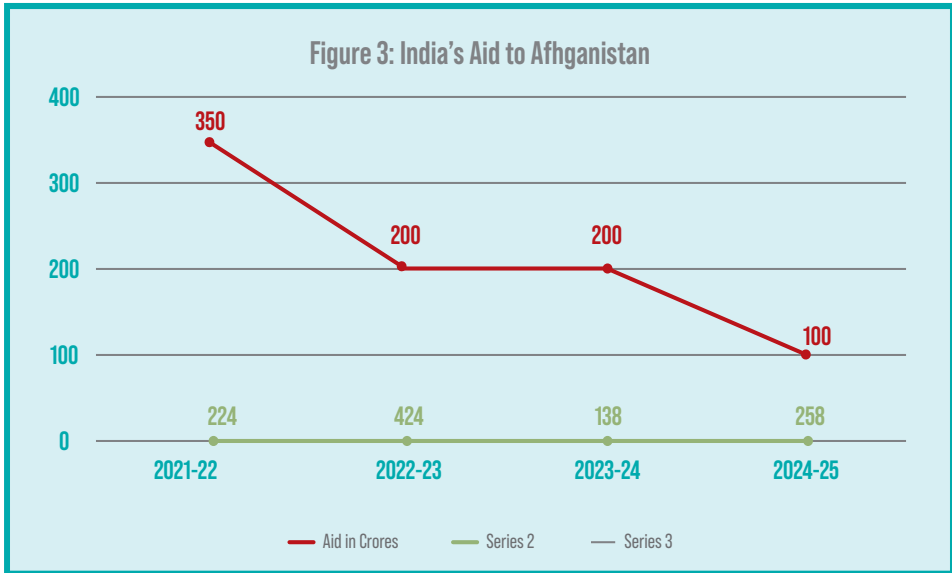
Through these interventions, India not only helped rebuild Afghanistan's shattered education system but also contributed to the dramatic rise in girls' enrolment and women's participation in higher education and the workforce between 2001 and 2021.

Post Taliban takeover, Government of India expressed concern over its ban on education for women and girls, with the Ministry of External Affairs calling for the need to uphold human rights and equal participation of women. India's approach is guided by "historical relations, friendship with its people," (Ministry of External Affairs 2023) i.e. the long-standing cultural, economic, and diplomatic ties with Afghanistan, which go beyond government-to-government relations. Positioning itself as a partner to the Afghan people, India stays committed to their welfare and development regardless of the ruling regime. This approach emphasises continuity in support through humanitarian aid, development projects, and educational initiatives, while adapting to the new political realities.

Accordingly, India continues to offer scholarships to Afghan students, with a focus on online and distance learning, under the Special Scholarship Scheme for Afghan Nationals (SSSAN), facilitated through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) via the e-Vidya Bharati (e-VB) iLearn portal. This portal provides access to online undergraduate and postgraduate programs at multiple Indian universities, covering tuition, examination fees, and related academic charges, thereby enabling Afghan youth to pursue higher education remotely despite the ongoing restrictions in Afghanistan. In 2023, India announced 1,000 online scholarships for Afghan students, including women, enabling access to higher education from within Afghanistan or as refugees in third countries. Indian EdTech companies and universities have expanded free or subsidised online courses for Afghan women and girls, providing them an alternative to banned physical classrooms. These platforms offer not just academic content but also language training, vocational skills, and mental health support. Indian universities and NGOs have launched special programs for Afghan refugees in India and neighbouring countries, including

preparatory courses, language support, and psychosocial counselling for women and girls (Deepak and Bidhuri 2024).

Following the pattern of overall international aid, India's aid to Afghanistan peaked in 2021–2022, immediately after the Taliban takeover, but has consistently reduced since then (See Figure 3).



Source: Basu and Krishnankutty 2022; Shukla 2025

Despite these cuts, India has consistently raised the issue of girls' education at multilateral forums, including the United Nations and G20, calling for the unconditional reopening of schools and universities for Afghan girls. It has joined the South Asian digital education initiative and UNESCO's global appeals for educational access in Afghanistan. Indian think tanks and academic institutions have published research and policy briefs highlighting the humanitarian and strategic imperatives of supporting Afghan women's education.

The challenges and opportunities for the Indian government in engaging with girls' education in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan are deeply intertwined with broader strategic, humanitarian, and regional stability considerations.

This situation offers India the opportunity to assert its role as a champion of human rights and gender equality in the region. By scaling up educational aid, scholarships, and digital learning programs aimed at empowering Afghan girls and women, India can reinforce its image as a responsible regional power that prioritises inclusive development. Such efforts strengthen India's diplomatic alliances, boost its soft power, and provide a counter-narrative to extremist ideologies that thrive on exclusion and marginalisation. Supporting education through digital platforms and online scholarships also allows India to bypass Taliban-imposed restrictions and reach those most in need, allowing it to quietly support female education. This initiative can circumvent physical and ideological barriers. Additionally, India's influence within regional platforms and the global diplomatic community can allow it to advocate for the urgent resumption of girls' education in Afghanistan, while fostering partnerships with civil society, diaspora groups, and international agencies to create alternative educational models.

By supporting educational initiatives, India can support creation of a skilled workforce in Afghanistan, resulting in a conducive environment for sustained economic collaboration in sectors like agriculture, energy, and manufacturing. This aligns with India's broader regional connectivity goals via projects like the Chabahar Port and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, which facilitate trade and reduce reliance on hostile transit routes. Effective support for Afghan education thus directly feeds into India's long-term strategic vision of a stable and economically integrated Central Asia.

On the other hand, the challenges for India are substantial. The evolving political landscape and the Taliban's control complicate direct engagement, demanding a delicate balance between diplomatic pragmatism and committed advocacy for women's rights. In addition to a formal ban, the lack of infrastructure, such as schools and trained female teachers, coupled with widespread societal and familial resistance rooted in conservative cultural norms, pose significant barriers to advancing gender-inclusive educational

initiatives. A constrained international aid and diplomatic isolation of Afghanistan limit the scope for large-scale intervention, requiring India to work closely with multilateral coalitions, Afghan civil society, and diaspora networks to amplify its education diplomacy.

Although India has not officially recognised Taliban government⁴, it has pragmatically engaged with it to deepen cooperation in trade, infrastructure, capacity-building, and humanitarian aid. Amidst regional geopolitical shifts, including growing Chinese influence in Afghanistan and its strained ties with Pakistan, India needs a patient, multifaceted, and adaptive approach, in line with the changing realities, ensuring that efforts to sustain girls' education remain resilient against political headwinds while advancing regional cooperation, peace and development. This nuanced balancing act of seizing opportunities for humanitarian leadership while managing geopolitical risks defines the path forward for India as it navigates the crisis of girls' education under Taliban rule. The next section offers some recommendations for India to translate these opportunities and strategies into actionable policies.

Navigating the Taliban Challenge: Recommendations for India

India should adopt a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach to navigating the Taliban challenge and balance humanitarian, diplomatic, strategic, and geopolitical imperatives. To this end, six recommendations are made:

- India should enhance well targeted and monitored educational aid to Afghanistan, and continue and scale up scholarships, digital learning initiatives, and capacity-building programs for Afghan girls and women, both within Afghanistan (though digital learning) and for refugees in India and third countries. Leveraging partnerships with Indian EdTech firms and universities can help bridge access gaps, while

4. Editor's note: As the paper went into publication in October 2025, the Government of India decided to upgrade its 'technical mission' in Kabul to 'embassy' with immediate effect without according a formal recognition to the Taliban regime. This development came during the visit of Amir Khan Muttaqi, acting Foreign Minister of Taliban administration of Afghanistan to New Delhi.

supporting community-based education initiatives can ensure outreach to those most vulnerable. India should also explore overcoming the language barrier that hinders many rural Afghan students from online courses by offering select programs (especially in ICT, business, and technical fields), in Persian (Dari) and other regional languages to widen accessibility without compromising educational rigour.

- India should integrate educational materials and support for girls' learning into broader humanitarian aid packages, ensuring that food, health, and psychosocial support are linked to education delivery, especially in remote and underserved areas of Afghanistan. For example, India can partner with UNICEF to distribute a joint India-UNICEF 'learning and nutrition kits' attached to hospitals or aid distribution centres, where girls receive food, health checkups, and informal education concurrently.
- It should also grant asylum or temporary protected status to female students and educators, and allow them to pursue higher education or teaching roles in India. Some of these educators can be hired to teach Afghan students via online courses using Afghan languages.
- India should continue to raise the issue of girl's education in UN forums and G20 pushing for sustained international pressure on the Taliban government. It should also strengthen regional coalitions (like South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)) to collectively advocate for women's education, at least in essential professions like health care.
- India should maintain pragmatic engagement with the *de facto* Taliban government, without formal recognition, and advocate for inclusive governance and women's rights. High-level dialogues must be held more often, with a focus on security concerns, educational access, humanitarian assistance and development cooperation. It should particularly press for delivering community-based education for girls and modernisation of madrassa education.

- India should support Afghan civil society, women's groups and diaspora networks, offering them technical and financial assistance and platforms for advocacy. It should support Indian NGOs, think tanks and Afghan diaspora in India, to collaborate with Afghan civil society groups and to amplify grassroots voices from Afghanistan.
- While India already engages in intelligence cooperation and diplomatic efforts to prevent Afghan territory from being used against it, it should deepen real-time intelligence sharing and joint counterterrorism operations with regional partners, enhance cyber surveillance capabilities focused on terrorist financing and recruitment networks within Afghanistan, and establish a dedicated liaison mechanism with Taliban security agencies to monitor and address emerging threats proactively. This comprehensive approach goes beyond general vigilance and leverages India's diplomatic relations with Afghanistan to build trust-based security channels despite the absence of formal recognition, thus strengthening India's preventive and response capacity for security.

For India, supporting Afghan girls' education is both a moral responsibility and a strategic necessity. Therefore, by combining these strategies, India can uphold its humanitarian values, protect its strategic interests, and play a leading role in shaping a more stable and inclusive future for Afghanistan and the region. These strategies should remain adaptive and responsive to the evolving needs of Afghan girls and women.

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Impact of the Taliban's Return on Afghanistan's Health Sector: A Focus on Women's Health and Well-Being

By Asma Kamali¹

Following the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) in August 2021, the Taliban's capture of power led to radical changes in political, social, economic, and healthcare systems, severely restricting Afghan women's access to vital medical services. This essay examines the detrimental impact of the Taliban's 2021 return to power in Afghanistan on women's health and access to healthcare in the country.

To do so, this study relies on a mixed-method approach, drawing on both primary and secondary data, including interviews, surveys, and consideration of extant research. Section 1 provides a contextual overview of healthcare in Afghanistan and discusses the Taliban *de facto* authorities' (DFA) policies *vis-a-vis* healthcare sector as well as on women. Section 2 explains the methodology used in this essay. Section 3 articulates the interplay of these developments and dynamics and the ways in which they are (in)directly affecting women's healthcare and health outcomes in the near and long terms. Section 4 discusses the findings of interviews and surveys conducted as part of this study to examine the immediate and long-term impacts of the Taliban's return to power on the health sector in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on women's health and well-being. The essay concludes with four policy recommendations.

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Healthcare in Afghanistan: A Brief Overview

Decades of war and instability had already resulted in inadequate healthcare facilities and access in Afghanistan (Groteclaes et al. 2025). This has now worsened with the return of the Taliban, deeply affecting both the physical and mental health of Afghan women. The already fragile healthcare system in Afghanistan has virtually collapsed in terms of service delivery since the Taliban takeover, especially for women, due to the highly restrictive policies imposed by the Taliban on women that affects their access to health services.

Moreover, healthcare in Afghanistan is largely underfunded, and most medical expenses are typically paid out-of-pocket, posing a significant financial burden, especially for women with limited financial means and/or independence. Private healthcare facilities are expensive and inaccessible to most, while rural areas rely on insufficient aid from NGOs. Health insurance is almost non-existent, forcing individuals to pay for treatment through savings or loans, leading to financial strain. Though the state-run healthcare system offers treatment at nominal costs, it often faces shortages of medicines, staff, and quality services, pushing people to seek more expensive alternatives.

Several of these problems existed during the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan era (2001–2021) as well. However, the Taliban's August 2021 return to power has caused dramatic changes and disturbing shifts in the country in terms of its socio-political environment, which have in turn produced serious implications for the health sector, especially for women's health and well-being.

Although the devastation in the healthcare sector affects men and women both, the latter are the most gravely affected demographic as severe and stringent restrictions have been imposed on women's mobility, choice of doctors, and ability to avail several important health services. These restrictions and various (other) counterproductive policies have resulted in severe negative health consequences in both urban and rural areas. However, in rural provinces and areas, these consequences are even more severe because these policies multiply impediments to women's healthcare access by compounding pre-

existing challenges like economic constraints, and cultural and social barriers to seeking medical help, especially in maternal and mental healthcare.

At present, lack of availability of female healthcare workers, poor infrastructure, malnutrition, and a general lack of healthcare related awareness are some of the factors contributing to the deterioration in maternal and child health outcomes. Moreover, most women have been exposed to preventable or treatable complications in rural areas due to a large void created by the lack of female doctors, in addition to closures of health centers owing to multiple reasons including steep drops in funding.

Key Taliban Policies Impeding Women's Healthcare Access and Outcomes

- **Restrictions on Female Health Workers:** One of the most significant and problematic policies under the Taliban rule has been the imposition of restrictions on female healthcare workers. This has disrupted the delivery of essential healthcare services, particularly for women. In 2025, for instance, female doctors and nurses were even (temporarily) prevented from working in a variety of healthcare settings (e.g., mixed gender medical facilities), causing a severe shortage of qualified personnel to provide medical care for women, especially in rural areas. Although this prohibition was lifted a few months later when the healthcare situation became too dire, they nevertheless did so only after spatial gender segregation was implemented in the facilities. The Taliban's ban on women working for non-government organizations (NGO) has also severely affected the availability of supplementary medical professionals to fill critical gaps in healthcare service delivery. This is exacerbating the already dire situation given that the numbers of female doctors, nurses, and other healthcare service providers is already abysmally low, and several female healthcare professionals are either leaving the country or have already left.

- **Mobility Restrictions and Gender Segregation in Healthcare Services:** The Taliban have imposed strict mobility restrictions on women, limiting their ability to travel freely to access or perform healthcare services. These mobility restrictions include limits on distances women can travel, and mandatory requirement of a *mahram* (close male relative chaperone) to accompany women traveling to any destination outdoors. These restrictions apply to female doctors, nurses, and patients alike. Due to the introduction of gender segregation in healthcare settings, many hospitals and clinics no longer provide mixed-gender healthcare, forcing women to either seek treatment from male doctors (which also the Taliban has banned) or travel long distances to access female healthcare professionals, who are increasingly difficult to find. This has made it especially difficult for women in rural areas to access medical care, particularly during critical times such as childbirth, leading to preventable maternal and infant deaths. Problematically, in many areas, even pharmacies have been compelled by the Taliban (Zaman 2025) to be staffed exclusively (or predominantly) by men. They are instructed to not provide medications to women without *mahrams*. There have also been reports of male hospital staff being punished for holding meetings with female staff (Zaman 2025).

- **Prohibition of Women's Education and Training in Health-Related Fields:** The Taliban's restrictions on female education extend to medical training. Women and girls are no longer allowed to attend universities, including medical schools for nursing, midwifery, and dentistry, which in turn severely reduces the numbers of future generations of female healthcare professionals. The Taliban have also instructed female lecturers in medical schools to stop working. Individually and cumulatively, this state-of-affairs risks a long-term healthcare crisis, especially in women's health, as fewer women are able to enter the medical field to serve their communities.

Methodology

In light of these developments, this study examined the challenges and opportunities encountered by women, with a particular emphasis on mental health, empowerment, and socio-economic conditions in both urban and rural contexts. An additional objective was to offer a contextual analysis of the interplay between the Taliban's policies and the Afghan women's health related outcomes.

To achieve this, the study employed a mixed-methods research design featuring a survey and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders for primary data collection. The diverse backgrounds of the participants enriched the findings and provided valuable insights into the experiences of women in Afghanistan. This was supplemented by secondary data sourced from official reports, surveys, and extant research.

This study involved the participation of 51 women between 22 and 38 years of age from diverse backgrounds across four Afghan provinces: Kabul (26), Herat (12), Kandahar (9), and Ghazni (4). The survey was limited to respondents from Kabul, and interviews were conducted with the respondents from Herat, Kandahar, and Ghazni. The combined cohort featured a mix of healthcare professionals (doctors and nurses, including doctors who manage clinics), psychosocial counsellors, patients, and students, ensuring a diversity of perspectives inform the policy recommendations.

Interviews

In January 2025, semi-structured interviews were conducted with healthcare providers, including female doctors and psychosocial counsellors in the country. These interviews offered valuable insights into the challenges women encounter in accessing healthcare services under the Taliban regime. The interviews were conducted in four key provincial hubs: Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, and Ghazni, where the scoping studies were carried out virtually.

- **Respondent Selection:** Healthcare providers and psychosocial counsellors were chosen based on their expertise and direct involvement with women's health issues. Respondents were selected from both urban and rural areas to capture the diverse challenges women face across different geographical and socio-economic contexts. To maintain safety and confidentiality of all the respondents, this study does not elaborate on the details of the respondent selection process.
- **Interviewing Practices:** Secure methods, including telephonic communication and encrypted messaging platforms, were used to conduct² the interviews to ensure safety and confidentiality. Open-ended questions were posed to participants to explore various aspects of healthcare service restrictions, the psychological consequences of Taliban policies, and to gather their observations regarding changes in maternal health outcomes.
- **Data Analysis:** The interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically. Key themes identified include accessibility to healthcare, mental health issues, and socio-cultural barriers that impede women's healthcare and health outcomes.

Survey

In January 2025, a survey was conducted with 26 respondents from Kabul and online focus group discussions were conducted with women from four provinces (Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Ghazni), particularly those most impacted by the healthcare restrictions imposed by the Taliban. The primary objective of the survey was to assess women's subjective perceptions of health, access, and overall well-being in light of the Taliban's resurgence. The survey questions focused on the following key areas:

2. The interviews were not recorded electronically but all the responses were noted down manually.

- Access to maternal healthcare
- Perceptions and experiences of domestic violence
- Mental health and well-being
- Access to education and employment

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure a diverse representation of respondents, encompassing women from both urban and rural settings, as well as varying socio-economic backgrounds. Data collected through surveys and focus groups was analyzed to identify trends and response patterns.

Analysis of Extant Research

Secondary data was sourced from extant research, including reports by international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), government health ministries, and academic studies. The primary purpose of analyzing these documents was to better understand more general trends in women's health, especially maternal health and mental health, that have come to the fore following the Taliban regime's return to power. For example, WHO and UNFPA reports were used to examine statistics of maternal mortality, closure of health centers, and those concerning mental health outcomes. Extant academic studies were also reviewed to understand socio-cultural and socio-economic barriers to accessing healthcare that already existed in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban's return and have continued to exist since. This provided additional context for interviews and survey findings in the larger socio-political environment that women in Afghanistan are negotiating.

Key Areas (and Patterns) of Impact on Women's Health

The Taliban's policies have not only complicated physical health challenges in the country but have also aggravated the mental health crisis in Afghanistan, especially among women, who now bear the brunt of multiple traumas. The

dramatic increase in suicide(s) (attempts) among women is case in point (Safi and Rivas 2023), with Afghanistan being the only country globally, where female suicide rates are higher than those of males (Nader 2023).

The ongoing, multi-dimensional oppression—ranging from the closure of schools and universities for girls and restrictions on women’s employment and mobility, to the return of a heavily male-dominated society—have all led to abject hopelessness among women and girls. Psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have burgeoned (Safi and Rivas 2023). Young girls and women are suffering immense emotional and psychological upheaval as they lose opportunities for education and work, and are compelled into forced marriages, and subjected to pervasive violence and other risks without any recourse or respite.

■ **Worsening Maternal Health (Care and Access) Outcomes**

The Taliban’s return has significantly contributed to a severe reduction in healthcare access for women, especially for maternal and child healthcare (Glass et al. 2023). Most rural Afghans face economic constraints, which strongly inhibit mothers from seeking professional medical services during pregnancy and childbirth. Additionally, women from rural provinces like Ghazni are often unable to afford transport to health facilities that can ensure safe delivery services. Moreover, due to cultural and religious inhibitions, women typically avoid visiting male doctors and prefer to be treated by female doctors and nurses (Ibrahimi et al. 2025). Meanwhile female healthcare providers are increasingly in short supply (with numbers continuing to dwindle), posing a significant challenge in many rural areas. The Taliban have also obstructed health literacy by enabling unscientific misinformation via religious actors to discourage women from seeking out modern healthcare (Ibrahimi et al. 2025).

Consequently, maternal mortality rates have risen sharply due to lack of skilled birth assistance and access to basic health services. For instance, at least 638 maternal deaths were recorded for every 100,000 births

in 2024 alone (Najibullah, Sarwar, and Hakimi 2025), with the actual number estimated to be higher due to lack of comprehensive reporting from rural areas (UNFPA Afghanistan 2022). Several of these maternal deaths were caused by otherwise preventable complications during childbirth, including infections and hemorrhage. A considerable number of these deaths were those of rural women facing socio-economic disadvantages in addition to poor health infrastructure and limited healthcare access (Bjelica 2025).

■ **Deterioration in Psychological/Mental Health**

Women's mental health has deteriorated severely, with a dramatic increase in depression, anxiety, and PTSD following the return of the Taliban (Shafaqna Farsi 2022). Sudden curbs on education, employment, and mobility have propelled hopelessness and despair among the most affected, namely among young girls and women who had thus far made significant strides in education and professional development. The prevailing social, political, and economic oppression of women by the Taliban has contributed to increased suicide rates, especially among young girls, with women now accounting for 80% of the suicide attempts in Afghanistan (Shafaqna Farsi 2022). Domestic violence, forced marriages, lack of educational and employment prospects, increasing risk and instances of physical and psychological violence are often cited as direct contributors to their worsening mental health (Safi and Rivas 2023).

Compounding the variety of Taliban decrees that already make women's lives miserable, the deep-rooted social stigma associated with mental illnesses is also preventing and discouraging vulnerable women from seeking and receiving help when they need it. Under these dire circumstances, women have resorted to traditional (often unscientific and potentially harmful) avenues for solutions rather than scientific therapy, as they have been limited in their access to professional therapy

by cultural taboos and fear of condemnation/ostracization (Shafaqna Farsi 2022).

■ **Impact of Education Bans on Women's Current and Future Health**

One of the most evident and problematic features of the Taliban's return has been the curtailment of women's education, as this directly affects women's physical and mental health in the near and long terms. Initially limited to the closing of girls' secondary-school for two years, the Taliban's ban on women's education now extends to secondary schooling and university-level studies, excluding women from any possibility of access to essential knowledge and skills. Today, education is widely regarded as a primary determinant in the health and well-being of women. Deprivation of education bears down on individual women and, its impacts go well beyond the immediate community.

To illustrate, in December 2024, the Taliban extended the ban on women's education to include medical studies, nursing, midwifery, and dentistry. Up until this ban was announced, these were among the only fields of study the Taliban had permitted for women. This ban stands to produce considerably fewer female doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists and other medical professionals, rendering more women without access to care in the long run, thereby straining the already heavily strained healthcare system even as women's healthcare outcomes plummet dangerously. For instance, among the many ill-effects caused by these prohibitions on women's education, child marriages (resulting in risky, underage pregnancies and consequent medical complications) (Dadras, Khampaya and Nakayama 2022), and child labor are on the rise. Crucially, the reduction and (potential) eventual absence of female educators, doctors, and other healthcare professionals are rapidly undoing the gains made in women's healthcare outcomes between 2001 and 2021. It also severely limits community health outreach and erodes women's ability to advocate for themselves and others.

■ **Exacerbation of Socioeconomic and Cultural Barriers to Healthcare**

Healthcare related barriers that Afghan women confront are often also compounded by deep-rooted cultural mores and social attitudes toward women. Gender inequality exists in most areas of the country, contributing to women not enjoying autonomy over decisions related to their health. Moreover, the economic collapse following the Taliban's return to power has left many households struggling to afford even the most basic of necessities, leading women to forgo important medical interventions due to prohibitive costs. Culturally, restrictions on women's mobility and preference for using traditional medicine further deprive opportunities to access safe, modern healthcare services, particularly in rural areas where health facilities are relatively limited (Shafaqna Farsi 2022).

From a systemic vantage point, the Taliban's gender-discriminatory policies have reinforced gendered divisions in the health system, preventing women from holding decision-making positions within health institutions and from having any say in shaping healthcare related policies that affect women. The drop in funding for hospitals and district health centers has also crippled service delivery, especially for women's health issues. Thus, many women, especially those in rural areas, have been left with no option but to rely on the male-dominated healthcare services or forgo treatment altogether. Such systemic barriers underline the urgent need for gender-sensitive health interventions that can address both the immediate healthcare needs of women and the socio-cultural barriers to them (Ibrahimi et al. 2025).

Findings

Data from interviews of healthcare providers and survey of women from different regions, along with secondary sources, was collected to determine the immediate and long-term effects of the Taliban's return to power on women's health in Afghanistan. The findings derived through the multifaceted approach used in this study provide a nuanced understanding of the current state of women's healthcare in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Inter alia,

this study found deteriorations in maternal health outcomes, mental health, and access to healthcare.

QUESTIONS	YES	NO	PERCENTAGE YES
Q1: Have you witnessed a decline in the number of women seeking maternal healthcare service since Taliban took power?	41	10	80.392175%
Q2: Are women in your region avoiding healthcare services due to cultural barriers or restrictions on mobility?	38	13	74.509804%
Q3: Have you faced difficulty accessing healthcare services since the Taliban returned to power?	45	6	88.235294%
Q4: Have you experienced complications during childbirth that could have been prevented with better healthcare?	28	22	54.901961%
Q5: Have you been affected by the closure of schools or universities due to the Taliban's policies?	30	21	58.823529%
Q6: Do you feel that the Taliban's restrictions on education have negatively impacted your future career prospects?	35	16	68.627451%

1. Impact on Maternal Health and Access to Healthcare

Both the interviews and the survey revealed that there is a drastic decline in the access to maternal health services since Taliban seized power. Women, especially those in some rural areas like Ghazni and Herat, responded that it has been difficult to reach pre-natal and post-natal healthcare services. They felt that security concerns and transport limitations had made it more difficult for them to access healthcare facilities.

- Access to Healthcare:** Over 70% of the survey respondents indicated that they experienced difficulties accessing health services, notably with transportation as the main barrier. Absence of female medical professionals in many areas has worsened the situation because women are culturally unwilling to visit male doctors.

- **Maternal Mortality and Pre- and Post-Natal Complications:** Healthcare providers interviewed for this study said maternal mortality and complications during delivery have been on the rise. They also reported that a lack of trained medical manpower, particularly female health workers, has greatly dented the quality of maternal health services available in majority of regions.
- **Infrastructure and Facility Closure:** Respondents and interviewees said several healthcare centers in rural regions have either shut down or are operating with bare minimal staff. This has meant reduced healthcare options, thereby escalating risks involved during childbirth, which in turn leads to an increasing pattern of preventable maternal and infant mortality.

2. Issues Related to Mental Health

Mental health has become a major issue for Afghan women, particularly after the restrictions imposed by the Taliban. Over 80% of the interviewees reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Nearly all these individuals were from rural settings, and this pattern was visible among respondents who were medical professionals, patients, and students.

- **Suicide Rates and Mental Health Crises:** Several of the doctors and nurses who were interviewed for this study mentioned that suicide attempts have become more frequent among women since the Taliban returned. They also stated that the reasons often cited by women for why they were thinking of ending their lives was hopelessness and despair owing to lost freedoms. There is no official reporting on suicides in Afghanistan at present, but these responses are also borne out by media reporting on this issue (Iltaf 2024).

- **Psychosocial Effect of Restrictions:** Mental health experts and health professionals said that many women including doctors, patients, college students and other adults have reported increasing levels of anxiety and depression citing restrictions on education, employment, and freedom of movement as the reason. These increasing feelings of isolation and helplessness among Afghan women are worsening pre-existing issues regarding their mental health.

3. **Socio-Cultural Barriers and Gender Inequalities in Healthcare Due to Taliban Rule**

Gender inequality that has already been culturally prevalent in Afghanistan has become an additional hindrance, multiplying the barriers to healthcare that women face. It continues to further reinforce socio-cultural barriers affecting women's health in addition to impeding women's access to healthcare services.

- **Cultural Resistance to Seeking Healthcare:** Due to prevailing cultural mores in rural provinces like Ghazni, it is nearly impossible for women to approach male doctors for health care services. Many respondents cited male relatives as generally being those who prevent them from accessing healthcare, mostly on cultural or religious grounds.
- **Limited Awareness of Health Rights:** The interviews revealed a more concerning state-of-affairs wherein most women are unaware of their rights *vis-a-vis* healthcare. This is particularly exacerbated by low literacy rates and poor educational attainment, especially in rural areas.

4. **Economic Factors**

Economic deprivation has for long been among the major factors limiting women's ability to access clean, safe hospitals and care. Due to the cost of healthcare services, most families are unable to afford them and in rural areas, many have had to forgo necessary treatments, eventually causing them ill

health that later proved to be preventable/treatable.

- **Affordability and Accessibility:** For 65% of women in rural areas, delayed or forgone treatment was because of financial constraints. They are also the most disadvantaged women who require maternal health services, especially as economic conditions worsen.

The findings of the interviews and surveys, considered in relation to extant research, shows that interplays and correlations between Taliban policies and women's health prospects can be discerned in at least four key areas.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the multifaceted effects of the Taliban's return to power on Afghanistan's health sector, with a focus on women's health. The findings reveal severe deterioration in the state of women's health in Afghanistan and the broader implications for gender equality, mental health, and well-being of Afghan women. This makes a case for raising international awareness and policy reform around the growing health and human rights crisis in Afghanistan.

The study also highlights the significant mental health crisis among Afghan women, with rising levels of anxiety, depression, and stress due to violence, social isolation, and the loss of personal freedoms. The study underscores the need for urgent policy reform to reverse these harmful trends and restore safe, accessible healthcare for women in Afghanistan, enabling them to recover both physically and mentally in a supportive environment.

Evidence gathered from both primary and secondary sources clearly demonstrates the devastating consequences of restricted healthcare access, heightened mental health crises, and its correlation with entrenched gender inequalities (pre-existing and/or Taliban-introduced). From the dire maternal health outcomes due to the lack of trained female healthcare providers and the closure of healthcare centers, to the widespread psychological distress

exacerbated by the Taliban's oppressive policies, the situation in Afghanistan presents an urgent call to action for all those committed to improving women's rights and health globally.

The resilience of Afghan women, who continue to navigate these challenges with remarkable strength and courage, must be recognized and supported. Empowering Afghan women, ensuring their access to healthcare, and fostering a societal transformation that values their rights and well-being is not only a moral imperative but also an essential step toward securing a brighter, more equitable future for Afghanistan. For the international community, this is a clarion call to re-prioritize Afghanistan's women's health crisis in diplomatic, humanitarian, and developmental policies.

Policy Recommendations

- **Restore and Protect Women's Access to Healthcare as a Fundamental Human Right**

The international community should treat women's access to healthcare—including maternal care, mental health services, and reproductive health—as a non-negotiable human right. Any international aid distributed through or in cooperation with Taliban structures must be strictly conditional on the immediate reopening of women's health centers and the reinstatement of female healthcare professionals. Aid providers and UN bodies must work with neutral health actors and community-based women's networks to deliver direct support to Afghan women, bypassing state channels where necessary.

- **Expand Community-Based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services**

Given the widespread trauma caused by restrictions on education, employment, and freedom of movement, urgent action is needed to expand community-centered mental health services across Afghanistan. The international community, donor governments, aid

organizations, UN agencies, other humanitarian actors, and academic institutions should collaborate to expand support to female counsellors, educators, and local organizations to deliver culturally appropriate support through safe, trusted networks in both urban and rural areas. These services must address depression, anxiety, and PTSD, particularly among adolescent girls, young mothers, and displaced women.

- **Support the Development of a Contextual, Gender-Sensitive Health Data Infrastructure**

The Taliban's censorship, restrictions on digital access, and lack of transparency have created a data vacuum around women's health conditions in Afghanistan. The international community must support the creation of a secure, independent, and gender-responsive health data (reporting) system in collaboration with local experts, NGOs, and diaspora researchers. This will enable real-time, evidence-based tracking of maternal mortality, mental health trends, and service accessibility across diverse regions. A reliable knowledge base is essential for crafting agile, effective, and region-specific health interventions for Afghan women.

- **Counter Digital Suppression and Promote Safe Access to Health Information and Media**

Restrictions on internet access, digital journalism, and social media have significantly weakened Afghan women's access to life-saving health information, education, and psychosocial support. The international community, in collaboration with media freedom organizations and technology companies, must work to enable safe digital access for women and girls—including through alternative platforms such as secure mobile networks, radio programming, telemedicine programmes, and satellite technologies. Special attention should be paid to supporting female journalists, content creators, and health educators targeted by Taliban-imposed licensing and censorship regulations.

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Opportunities and Obstacles Faced by Afghan Women Entrepreneurs Under Taliban Rule

By Rama Mirzada¹**

Women's economic empowerment and financial security are among the crucial factors that shape crisis recovery, conflict resolution, and lasting peace (United Nations Development Programme 2025). Conversely, women's economic exclusion and financial insecurity entrench instability, and inhibit the prospects of lasting and sustainable peace and development. This essay explores the opportunities and challenges that women entrepreneurs have encountered under the Taliban's *de facto* regime. In doing so, this essay relies on primary and secondary data, extant research, and insights from four in-depth online interviews with women entrepreneurs from three Afghan provinces (two northern and one, southern).

Section 1 discusses the theoretical frameworks this study builds on, and the methodological steps taken. Given the Taliban's insistence on enforcing sharia-compliant policies and practices in the country, Section 2 articulates the difference between Islamic perspectives on women's entrepreneurship and employment (which enjoy broad consensus in the Islamic world) and the Taliban *de facto* authorities' (DFA) stance on the subject. In doing so, it juxtaposes those stances in relation to Afghan women's experience of entrepreneurship thus far, as well as with Islamic historical facts and perspectives pertaining to women's entrepreneurship. Section 3 discusses the nature and scope of challenges and opportunities women entrepreneurs

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in Afghanistan have been encountering since August 2021, in three thematic areas of policy relevance. This is supplemented by a short discussion on women's participation in trade exhibitions as an illustrative case study. The concluding section recapitulates the findings, following which the essay ends with three policy recommendations.

Methodology

Since their August 2021 return to power in Afghanistan, the Taliban DFA have imposed several restrictions on women, including bans on women's education beyond primary schooling, and employment at most government institutions, non-government organizations (NGO), and in the private sector. Therefore, numerous women began establishing their own businesses, reasoning that it could help them earn a living. Since then, although women have been prohibited from taking up certain jobs and studying at schools and universities, the opportunity for women to start their own businesses has somewhat continued to exist. Nevertheless, women entrepreneurs are facing obstacles that make it challenging for them to thrive in this sector.

Given the gendered and intersectional dimensions of these challenges and their impacts, this study approaches this topic by combining feminist political economy and intersectionality theory lenses and supplements it with perspectives of four women entrepreneurs from Afghanistan.

The conventional study of political economy pertains to how people are integrated or excluded from the economy by analyzing, among other things, the relationship between labor, trade, government policies, and wealth distribution. However, it typically does so without factoring in gendered dynamics ("A WILPF Guide to Feminist Political Economy" 2018). Feminist political economy on the other hand goes beyond the state and market to examine a wider field with a gender-disaggregated lens, factoring in social policies, distribution of (and access to) resources, intra-household division of labor, and disparities in wages, opportunities, individual agency, and financial security to name a few ("A WILPF Guide to Feminist Political

Economy” 2018). Intersectional theory and the study of intersectionality pertain to understanding how various distinct aspects of one’s identity and circumstances intersect and overlap in unique ways, resulting in unique experiences and assortments of advantage and/or disadvantage (Feree 2018).

Integrating the feminist political economy and intersectional theory lenses helps provide a context-sensitive framework to understand how gender intersects with entrepreneurship and economic development in the Taliban-run Afghanistan. It also helps shed light on the ways in which the gender-discriminatory policies and social practices imposed and/or reinforced by the Taliban DFA marginalize women, restricting their access to resources, networks, markets, and overall socio-economic security and development.

Between December 2024 and January 2025, comprehensive semi-structured interviews were conducted with four women entrepreneurs from Balkh, Bamyan, and Kandahar provinces, some who employed over 10 women and others who employed over 100 women. Their perspectives provide contextual insights and illustrate the nature and scale of impact on women’s entrepreneurship in the country and what it might portend for the future.

Overall, when considered with perspectives from Afghan women entrepreneurs, this methodological approach provides a useful basis for understanding the multi-layered challenges facing women’s entrepreneurship under Taliban rule, while situating analysis within broader peace, security, and development agenda, as it ensures the contextualization of findings within international frameworks and lived realities, offering both depth and practical relevance.

Women’s Employment and Entrepreneurship: The Contrast Between Islamic Perspectives and the Taliban’s Views

Since their violent return to power in August 2021, the Taliban have considered themselves to be champions in implementing full Islamic sharia law in Afghanistan. In their rhetoric and justifications, the Taliban DFA relate their policies towards women’s employment and economic activities to

Islamic sharia law—both in terms of work women are permitted to and barred from performing, and sectors they (the Taliban) deem permissible for women to function in. Their claims notwithstanding, although the Taliban claim that they are implementing sharia law, they have been selective in enforcing Afghan women's rights, including as underscored in Islamic precepts.

For instance, Islam—and the Muslim world—is not opposed to women's employment. In all Islamic countries, both women and men enjoy the right to participate in their countries' social, economic, and political prosperity. Even in the early years of Islam and thereon, women were permitted to work, including in business activities—the only right that has been ensured under the Taliban, albeit only partially. During Prophet Muhammad's lifetime, his first wife was a merchant trading between Mecca and various trading cities of the time and even employed men as her business partners (Yamani 2011). Moreover, she was not the only woman who worked; other women too enjoyed the right to work. The Holy Quran and Sunnah encourage Muslim men and women to earn lawful money. Jobs that are not permitted for men were also not permitted for women. The Holy Quran (At-Tawbah 9:71) mentions that both men and women are friends and protectors of one another; they all enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and are constant in prayer, and render the purifying dues, and pay heed unto God and His Messenger' (Irshad et al. 2021).

Historically too, in Afghanistan, women have had the right to work, conduct businesses, and even participate in wars. Unlike present day Afghanistan, women's roles were never described as inappropriate by the governments of the day. Importantly, in today's Afghanistan, a majority of the country's populace is in favor of women's right to employment, education, and entrepreneurship. To illustrate, nearly half (40%) of the country's 10 million high school students in 2020, were girls (Alizada 2022, 52); 20% of Afghanistan's labor market was comprised of women (Sahar 2023, 58); and by 2020, Afghanistan had nearly 60,000 women-owned businesses (Wafeq 2022).

In the contemporary period (2001–2021), before the August 2021 fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA), nearly 26% of Afghanistan’s public workforce were women (AFP 2024), and they enjoyed the freedom to perform a variety of activities within the framework of country’s laws. Being treated as free citizens under the constitution, Afghan women were respecting customary and sharia laws both in their daily lives and in the professional sphere. During this period, women also got—and successfully harnessed—the opportunity to lay strong foundations for women’s entrepreneurship in the country.

Consequently, female entrepreneurship continued to grow steadily and significantly up until the fall of the IRA. Afghan women entrepreneurs’ investments reached USD 77 million in 2019 (Arman 2019), rising to USD 90 million in 2020 (Ahmadi and Rahimi 2024). In a survey conducted by the Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI), as of 2020, women owned 2,471 formal businesses and around 56,000 informal businesses, creating over 130,000 job opportunities (Ahmadi and Rahimi 2024).

However, as the DFA, the Taliban have failed to recognize some of these Islamic worldviews on women’s education, work, and independence—which enjoy broad consensus—by severely and arbitrarily narrowing the scope of Afghan women’s participation and activities in society and daily life. For instance, on 24 June 2023, Taliban leader Habibullah Akhundzada issued a decree ordering the closure of beauty salons in the country, without clarifying the reason (Al Jazeera 2023).

As more Afghan women lost their jobs under the Taliban regime, more turned to the private sector, where they are still allowed to invest in businesses (albeit only those deemed ‘acceptable’ by the Taliban) (Yawar and Greenfield 2024). Consequently, home-based businesses and entrepreneurship have emerged as a potential solution to foster, preserve, and advance women’s economic empowerment under the Taliban’s restrictive regime (Husain and Suwannarat 2024).

Impediments to Afghan Women's Entrepreneurship in Taliban-Run Afghanistan

Today, despite having been in power for four years since August 2021, the Taliban's *de facto* government still passes the buck to the former government whenever they are unable to resolve social problems or fulfil people's demands. The Taliban blame the former government of not being an Islamic one, but their own policies are more based on *Pashtunwali* than Islam (Rzehak 2011), resulting in the decline of the female workforce in Afghanistan under their rule.

Over the past four years, as the space and job opportunities for Afghan women employees in the public and private sector continued to shrink, the numbers of Afghan women starting their own businesses began to grow. The number of licensed businesswomen rose to 9,162 by 2024 and there are an estimated 120,000 unlicensed women-led businesses in the country today (Haidari 2024). The desire to become self-sufficient, provide a livelihood for their families, serve the country, help the destitute, come out of the current dark situation, avoid mental stress, and lack of opportunities in other sectors are among the main factors motivating Afghan women to become entrepreneurs.

According to Salama Yousafzai, the director of the AWCCI, since August 2021, female business owners and entrepreneurs have managed to keep their business activities stable despite a four-fold increase in their numbers (and the resulting competition), and most of these are small sized businesses that could recruit a smaller number of women (Haidari 2024). That said, this promising development is inadequate to overcome the challenges and unfavorable patterns of developments that affect these businesses.

The recent drops in the profits of Afghan women entrepreneurs residing inside the country can be attributed to, *inter alia*, an increase in competition as the numbers of women entrepreneurs rises, activities of male entrepreneurs (who enjoy advantages over women, *vis-a-vis* networking, mobility, socio-cultural freedom, and access to capital, among others), and the emigration of many successful women entrepreneurs to foreign countries including

Pakistan, Iran and Turkey. Most women entrepreneurs in Afghanistan are producing similar goods, in large part because these tend to be the sectors in which the Taliban have permitted (or at least not obstructed) women from conducting business. According to the AWCCI, business areas Afghan women entrepreneurs are currently working in are handicrafts, agriculture, health, food, industry, mines, and jewelry (Haidari 2024). However, during the IRA era (2001–2021), Afghan women's businesses were able to operate in more wide-ranging areas of business.

Afghan women entrepreneurs also face additional challenges caused by lack of ease of doing business in and with Afghanistan for international customers and business partners. For example, international customers prefer to purchase products with easy accessibility. Additionally, the international sanctions on Afghanistan stand to generate wariness among external businesses to transact financially with counterparts inside Afghanistan, and in many cases, payment instructions for international bank transactions mentioning Afghanistan get blocked (Moret 2023). Such factors add considerably higher burdens on women-owned businesses than those owned by men, as the latter have more options and opportunities to seek recourse than the former.

Although the Taliban's *de facto* government continues to argue that it supports and facilitates Afghan women entrepreneurs, the latter have raised several concerns about the future of their businesses. Contrary to the DFA's claim of supporting Afghan women entrepreneurs, the Taliban have made the situation more difficult for this cohort. Based on a contextual review of extant literature, survey and news reports, and key stakeholder interviews in relation to the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study, the main challenges to Afghan women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment emanating from the current state-of-affairs can be categorized as (and attributed to):

- a. Structural barriers;
- b. An inconducive business environment; *and*
- c. (In)direct restrictions on women.

The following sections succinctly articulate these dynamics and their practical consequences, supplemented by snippets of perspectives from four Afghan women entrepreneurs from the north and south of the country, interviewed for this study. Each of these featured interviewees also employ several women in their businesses. For instance, Mina (alias), a woman entrepreneur in Balkh province, employs around 300 women. Zahra (alias), a woman entrepreneur from Balkh province, employs over 200 women. Zarmina (alias), a woman entrepreneur from Kandahar province, employs nearly 10 women. Samina (alias), a woman entrepreneur from Bamyan province, employs over 100 women.²

■ Structural Barriers

After the Taliban seized power in August 2021, almost all women-related government bodies, including the Ministry of Women's Affairs, were permanently closed. The AWCCI's central branch was reopened in November 2022 with the support of Economic Commission led by the Taliban's acting Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund (Hasrat 2022). However, the AWCCI's operation has shrunk in those provinces where their branches were more active in the past. This indicates that the Taliban DFA's policy lacks seriousness when it comes to Afghan women entrepreneurs in Afghanistan as they are not as supportive as they claim to be.

Moreover, there is no consistency in terms of whether the Taliban-run government ministries and departments entertain or respond to the concerns raised by women entrepreneurs, with many such public bodies even refusing

2. Shirzad, M [Alias]. 2024. Interview by Rama Mirzada. 27 Dec. Online.; Noori, Z. [Alias] 2024. Interview by Rama Mirzada. 27 Dec. Online.; Batur, S. [Alias] 2024. Interview by Rama Mirzada. 28 Dec. Online.; Samim, Z. [Alias] 2025. Interview by Rama Mirzada. 2 Jan. Online.

to engage with them. Compounding these issues is the fact that after August 2021, many NGOs that previously helped women access new markets have reduced their projects, which in turn prevents women from accessing new markets (Finckenstein 2023). Another important aspect in the current environment is that when in need of business financing, a vast majority of women entrepreneurs in Afghanistan typically rely on family members or friends. According to the UN, a very small percentage of women (5%) currently receive loans from formal banks, with an even smaller percentage (2%) obtaining loans from microfinance institutions and community savings groups (Inan et al. 2024). Given how many women entrepreneurs are unlicensed due to high license fee costs (currently, upwards of USD 200), they are unable to access formal loans due to business license related requirements for securing loans.

“The activities of the AWCCI are online and lack a physical presence in Balkh province...its programs have also not expanded yet and it is not in touch with the donors. There is no specific government body to play the role of a bridge between the government and women entrepreneurs.”

– **Mina**, a woman entrepreneur in Balkh province

“In Balkh, the AWCCI’s operations were suspended by the government. Women entrepreneurs went to discuss this issue with the Department of Industry and Commerce. They responded that this issue would be resolved. Some other women were not allowed to enter the department to talk about it.”

– **Zahra**, a woman entrepreneur from Balkh province

“In the past, the women’s affairs department was working with women. Now it has been changed to *Amr bil Maruf* [Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice].”

– **Zarmina**, a woman entrepreneur from Kandahar province

■ **Inconducive Business Environment**

The Taliban DFA continue to claim that their foreign policy is economy-oriented and that they have established bilateral economic, trade and transit ties with many countries in the region. However, the opposite is true as they have failed to find markets (Ehsas 2024), and to secure stable transit routes for Afghan goods and services. This has affected women entrepreneurs the most. A decline in people’s purchasing power inside the country and an absence of suitable international markets have mainly affected farmers, the carpet weaving industry, dry fruits sector, and factories, (Amu TV 2022; Hasht-e-Sobh 2023; Radio Azadi 2023; Radio Azadi 2024) which are also some of the main sectors featuring substantial numbers of women-owned businesses. More recently, clashes between the Taliban DFA forces and Pakistani forces in 2025 and the closure of the Torkham border crossing between February and March 2025 caused over 5,000 commercial trucks to remain stuck at the border and inflicted around USD 500,000 in losses to Afghan traders daily (Al Jazeera 2025). This too has had a disproportionate impact on women-owned businesses in the affected sectors as compared to those owned by men.

Afghan women entrepreneurs have been struggling to find markets, support women working for them, gain government support, and find customers and programs through which Afghan women entrepreneurs can sell their products. All women entrepreneurs interviewed for this essay mentioned that a drop in their customer base and lack of international markets were major factors affecting their businesses. Samina, an Afghan entrepreneur from Bamyan province who employed over 100 women lamented that the market is not good and that the demand has dropped. Mina, a female entrepreneur in Balkh province, said people inside Afghanistan are unable to afford to purchase

carpets, and that most of her products are exported to the US and Germany, and some to China. She also added that Afghanistan's carpet exports dropped by 60% in 2024, and that a drop in global demand has affected all businesses producing carpets.

“My business has been affected because now our customers say that they do not have a job and cannot pay for their expenses.”

– **Zarmina**, a woman entrepreneur from Kandahar province

“Due to fall of the government, many women had to stop their businesses including myself, but in 2023, UN Women, the UNDP, and the Agha Khan Foundation supported us, and many women entrepreneurs resumed their activities. I am not hopeful for 2025 because the NGOs might not continue supporting us.”

– **Samina**, a woman entrepreneur from Bamyan province

“If the international community does not support women entrepreneurs, their businesses will go bankrupt. Most women working with us are living on the 100-300 Afghanis they earn weekly by weaving carpets.”

– **Zahra**, a woman entrepreneur from Balkh province

■ **Taliban-Imposed Restrictions on Women**

Between the August 2021 establishment of the Taliban government and October 2024, the Taliban Supreme Leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada issued 118 decrees concerning women (Amu TV 2024b). These decrees (many of which were abruptly announced) also changed the general atmosphere for women entrepreneurs and hindered women from progressing in their business activities. Sweeping restrictions on women's mobility, the mandatory *mahram* (close male relative chaperone) rule, the dissolution of women related government bodies (Inan et al. 2024), and bans on women visiting

leisure places like parks have directly and indirectly affected women's entrepreneurship and prospects of financial security and socio-economic advancement.

For example, the Taliban's ban on beauty salons across the country caused around 60,000 job losses (Gharanai 2023). The compulsory *mahram* rule imposes additional costs as businesswomen now have to also factor in the expenses of their male chaperones during travel and other activities. Meanwhile, the Taliban's ban on interactions between unrelated men and women limit women's ability to develop, conduct/oversee, and grow their businesses and partnerships (especially in export-oriented businesses where women need to engage with male traders).

“The situation for businesses is very difficult. Now the restrictions and limitations have increased. We cannot travel alone, participate in meetings or meet or talk with the government officials. We should have men who help us in doing the activities that we are not allowed to.”

— **Mina**, a woman entrepreneur in Balkh province

“The problem is that restrictions on women are announced overnight completely change the situation. This is of course affecting our business.”

— **Zahra**, a woman entrepreneur from Balkh province

“When I talked with Amr bil Maruf [the Taliban’s Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice] about establishing a factory, they told me that women should stay home and should not leave their houses. There are some women who do not have any man, so what they should do? Due to this, I had to give up.”

– **Zarmina**, a woman entrepreneur from Kandahar province

“We are stuck in an uncertain situation where we cannot decide what to do for our future. Every day, the government brings changes. The restrictions are increasing day by day and God forbid, I am afraid the government might ban our businesses. In the past, I was able to travel to Kabul with four or five other women to buy the materials we needed for handicrafts. Now, each of us are required to have a mahram, due to which our travel costs have increased.”

– **Samina**, a woman entrepreneur from Bamyan province

With nearly 60% of women-led businesses in Afghanistan being from women-headed households, and 80% of these businesses dependent on revenues from those businesses as the primary source of household income (Inan et al. 2024), the Taliban’s sweeping restrictions on all spheres of women’s lives, exacerbates the economic crisis, and stymies any prospects of socio-economic progress, and that of lasting peace and development in the near and long terms.

Challenges Afghan Women Entrepreneurs Face at Trade Exhibitions

During the Republic era (2001–2021), international and domestic trade exhibitions played a crucial role in helping women entrepreneurs to showcase and sell their products and to establish business networks in the country and overseas. However, this changed after the fall of the Republic. Exhibitions became less profitable and accessible for women entrepreneurs; and opportunities for their inclusion in such programs declined due to the

restrictions on women. For instance, in 2024, the Taliban DFA planned to organize 50 international and domestic exhibitions across the country (Amu TV 2024a). However, women were either fully prohibited from participating in some of the exhibitions or did not profit due to the secluded locations of their booths and gender segregated halls.

Moreover, the Taliban's restrictions on women entrepreneurs too are gradually but steadily increasing, much like the patterns in restrictions they have imposed on other spheres of Afghan women's lives and activities. For instance, in January 2025, the Taliban barred women from attending and participating in a trade exhibition in Kandahar province, resulting in those women entrepreneurs having to send their male family members to showcase their products (Mohammadi 2025). In addition to other challenges under the Taliban, restrictions and other countries' reluctance to issue visas to Afghans, women entrepreneurs have lost opportunities to showcase their products like Afghan men are able to.

“I participated in an exhibition with six other entrepreneurs in one of neighboring countries after we received the permission letter from the Taliban. After we returned to Afghanistan, they investigated us asking how we went there without a mahram [a close male relative chaperone]. The fear and anxiety after we returned to Afghanistan was too difficult to bear...I participated in many exhibitions, but recently it has been announced that based on the order of the Amirul Mominen [Taliban Chief, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada] women are not allowed in the exhibitions anymore. I heard this through the department of Industry and Mines. I participated in many exhibitions in Kabul and Balkh. There was an exhibition in the UAE [organized] by the UN. We could not participate in that exhibition because of not receiving visa and not being allowed by the Taliban but could [only] send our carpets.”

— **Zahra**, a woman entrepreneur from Balkh province

“This year I participated in two exhibitions. In one of the exhibitions, women were allowed to participate, but in a separate hall from men. In the latest exhibition, neither women entrepreneurs who booked booths had the permission to participate nor women visitors. My male colleagues showcased our products in that exhibition, but I was not able to participate....The major obstacle for participating at international exhibitions is that countries issue visas only to the business leaders, but not to their mahram [close male relative chaperone]. If we send men in our stead, they cannot be as effective as the main business leaders.”

— **Mina**, a woman entrepreneur in Balkh province

“[Under the Taliban rule], I have participated in exhibitions, but our sales were not as good as they were during the Republic. The contracts that we could sign under the Republic are not available anymore. I participated in an exhibition in Chaman-e Hozuri in Kabul, but men were not allowed to visit women’s [stalls and] products. My sales were less than my travel cost. The numbers of exhibitions have also decreased.”

— **Samina**, a woman entrepreneur from Bamyan province

The three thematic areas of problems discussed above, as well as the problems women face in trade exhibitions, demonstrate that although the Taliban permit women to conduct businesses (albeit with considerable limitations), the group is essentially only giving lip service in this regard. Moreover, the Taliban appear to be actively introducing and creating impediments that indirectly suppress women’s agency and opportunities to empower themselves economically and achieve financial security.

The Taliban DFA’s policies like enforcement of restrictions on women’s businesses, lack of cooperation and support, and general apathy has placed women entrepreneurs on the edge of a precipice. The resulting impact on

revenues affects the incomes of women business owners and those of the women those businesses employ. The ensuing effects of this state-of-affairs stands to cascade into negative outcomes in socio-economic upliftment, health, overall human development, and indeed, the prospects of lasting peace and recovery from conflict (Finckenstein 2023).

Conclusion

Women's financial security and economic empowerment are among the crucial factors that shape crisis recovery, conflict resolution, and lasting peace (United Nations Development Programme 2025). Conversely, women's economic exclusion and financial insecurity entrench instability and inhibits the prospects of lasting, sustainable peace and development. From the standpoint of Afghanistan's national economic recovery needs, women entrepreneurs are crucial to help the country transition away from aid dependency to a reasonably self-reliant, private sector-led economy.

Yet, over the past four years, the Taliban have responded to international concerns and criticisms by misleadingly stating that women are allowed to work in sectors deemed 'suitable' for them. While Afghan women entrepreneurs' activities have not been entirely banned, they are still significantly impacted by the Taliban-imposed restrictions on women.

Due to the Taliban-imposed bans on women's education and employment, entrepreneurship has become one of the primary sources of income for many women and their families in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban have largely been indifferent to addressing the challenges that impede their operations and success. Despite these obstacles, Afghan women entrepreneurs have shown immense courage in pursuing their ambitions. Nevertheless, the increasing challenges imposed by Taliban policies have raised concerns about the future of their businesses and the well-being of the women employed by those businesses.

Policy Recommendations

- The international community should increase business assistance to, and projects engagements with, Afghan women entrepreneurs. In doing so, all concerned actors should (develop and) implement measures that ensure that the Taliban does not interfere in aid and projects allocated to these entrepreneurs.
- International institutions, including UN organizations, can play a crucial role in supporting Afghan women in accessing global markets. The UN, in particular, should increase efforts to arrange international exhibitions inside and outside Afghanistan exclusively for women to showcase and sell their products.
- The Taliban DFA should change its policies towards women entrepreneurs by removing all decrees that erase women from the society. In terms of entrepreneurship, the DFA should reserve the clothing, handicrafts, and carpet weaving industries exclusively to Afghan women led businesses.

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Afghan Women Work for Themselves to Emerge from the Shadows

By Nilova Roy Chaudhury¹

An Afghan media professional who must remain unnamed for her security, was informed that she had received an international award in 2025 for efforts to uphold women's rights and keep the world informed about what was happening to her and women like her within Afghanistan under the Taliban 2.0 regime. When notified about the award, the woman, got out her valid passport and looked forward to a brief reprieve from the harsh conditions of her life just outside of Kabul. The journalist, nurtured in the post-Taliban 1.0 era after 2001 when India, as a close friend, became Afghanistan's first strategic partner, did not get a visa to come to India, despite multiple requests. Instead, she found herself under Taliban 2.0's critical scrutiny.

Disappointed, she criticised those who had nominated her for getting her hopes up. India turning down legitimate visa requests from women of a 'supposedly' friendly neighbour seemed unfair. "We do not want charity, we just want a chance," she said to interlocutors in India.

Even worse, her personal security was threatened for receiving recognition abroad. Highlighting the very difficult circumstances in which a scattered few women function as journalists inside Afghanistan, the woman, in a mail to the awarding organisation, said,

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“On February 5, 2025, I received an email from your organization regarding the award we were to receive. However, since receiving your email, I have personally encountered serious challenges. I am under severe threats from anonymous individuals who appear to be aware of my past work. These threats have significantly escalated, and unknown people have even come to our home in an attempt to arrest us. Currently, my husband and I are living separately in undisclosed locations, far from our family, in order to protect ourselves. This situation has become extremely dangerous, and I am deeply concerned for my safety and the safety of my loved ones.”²

She has not written again and has gone underground, remaining cloistered inside a home somewhere.

This anecdote highlights the issues this paper aims to consider: One, as the Taliban regime establishes complete sway over Afghanistan, traditional avenues of employment have largely closed for women; Two, the critical importance for Afghan women to know that the international community maintains scrutiny on the misogynist regime, though the international community’s increasing engagement with the Taliban appears to further push women of Afghanistan into the shadows; and Three, having established their sway, the Taliban is desperate to get the economy moving and realise that half the country’s population cannot be kept out, providing women a path to emerge from the shadows. Therein lies a chance for women to fight back and make a mark.

The media as an industry burgeoned in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, bringing large numbers of women out of their homes into a space which gave them voice, respect and financial independence. That and other more regular avenues of employment have been closed for them since Taliban 2.0 assumed power, enforcing their special brand of misogyny.

In addition to impeding women’s movements in public spaces, the Taliban has

2. Source of author information withheld for safety.

also banned women and girls from secondary and higher education. Taken together, these two edicts have profound ramifications at all levels of society. Now, not only is it functionally impossible for women to receive educational degrees, it is also unduly difficult for them to get jobs and enter into training programmes. According to UN Women, as a result, over 78% of Afghan women are not in education, employment or training (UN Women 2025a).

Women's participation in the labour force in 2024 is markedly lower than that of men, 24% compared to 89%, respectively (UN Women 2025b). Afghan de facto authority's decrees and societal norms have limited women's employment in specific sectors (e.g., non-governmental organizations [NGOs], the United Nations and beauty salons) and restricted their access to financial resources, such as bank accounts and mobile money services, crucial for economic autonomy and resilience (UN Women 2025b).

In the absence of more traditional avenues of employment, does there exist a possible opportunity to allow Afghan women to regain financial strength by becoming entrepreneurs within their narrow confines, to gain some space and economic heft?

Examples of their nascent efforts contributing to improving the country's economic health are causing parts of the regressive regime to nuance their positions to allow women to function, within restrictive parameters, without active discouragement.

Authentic data is difficult to come by, but some available figures suggest that possibilities, albeit limited, do exist. In February 2019, the Afghanistan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI) said 1,150 women entrepreneurs had invested in different businesses in the country over the past 18 years. According to AWCCI, figures showed that investments by women reached more than USD77 million. (Rohullah 2019) AWCCI figures from 2019 showed that 300 women entrepreneurs started their businesses in 2018 and that investments by women investors had provided jobs for 77,000 individuals across the country.

“Many differences can be seen in the last three years. We had 650 women in our database, and it was 830 women in 2017 and now it is 1,150 women and 300 of them have registered their business last year,” said Parwarish Oryakhail, chairperson of business development services at AWCCI (Rohullah 2019).

In August 2024, the same AWCCI reported that approximately 130,000 women are engaged in business activities. The availability of such official data from the Afghan Ministry of Industry and Commerce (MoIC) is however, severely limited following the Taliban takeover in August 2021 (Ahmadi and Rahimi 2024).

It is also difficult to access information directly from women about the kind of opportunities they have in Afghanistan today. Options appear limited, as women try to cope between a ruling regime that is stifling their existence, because of their gender, and an international community that conveniently looks away and forgets they exist.

When the Taliban banned women from formal employment and public education in 2021, millions of Afghan families lost vital income sources. Amid this uncertainty, women like Frozan Ahmadzai refused to remain idle, or recede into the shadows, like the journalist from the *ZAN Times*. Once a medical student, Ahmadzai now leads a collective of more than 50 women sewing clothes and making pickles from a Kabul basement (Butt 2024). Their home-based work brings in around 30,000 afghani (USD425) per month, providing essential support and a sense of purpose (Butt 2024).

A report in *The Washington Post* spoke of a salon owner’s struggles to continue her business, despite Taliban curbs. The beauty sector was considered safe for women even after the Taliban takeover and Afghanistan’s 12,000 beauty salons initially seemed exempt from the crackdown—among few public spaces where women could gather—and Simin seized the opportunity. Afghan brides could not get enough of pre-wedding makeovers. However, renewed Taliban scrutiny now views these practices as “un-Islamic,” leading to a blanket ban on salons.

“I’m worried that the Taliban will find us, but I have no other choice than to

keep running it,” Simin told *The Washington Post* in Kabul. Her earnings could feed the entire family on their earnings, including an unemployed father and brother (Noack 2025).

The first Taliban regime, between 1996 and 2001, was ousted by strong domestic opposition within Afghanistan, led by Ahmad Shah Masood, and sharp international scrutiny and censure, for its maltreatment of women, and support for terrorist activities, culminating in 11 September 2001. That global focus and censure gave women who lived through that period some hope. So now, as then, Afghan women want the world to hold the Taliban to account on women’s rights before they engage with them.

Despite appearing less regressive than their previous avatar at international negotiations in the run up to their power grab in August 2021, Taliban 2.0 headed by Haibatullah Akhundzada has outdone its predecessor in imposing repressive, life-stifling restrictions on women. They have dismantled protections for women and girls experiencing gender-based violence, created barriers to their accessing health care, and barred them from playing sports and visiting parks. Women and girls must cover their faces in public and are not permitted to sing in public or let their voices be heard outside the house (Hassan 2025). Taliban 1.0 could not outlaw women to these lengths.

Akhundzada and his support base in Kandahar rely on strict tribal norms and widespread gender discrimination to enact stringent laws to keep women secluded. His regime has enforced draconian laws cutting off women’s avenues of communication, fearing that women meeting and communicating with each other is a threat.

Despite this, governments worldwide are increasingly engaging with the Taliban regime. Russia, on 3 July 2025, became the first country to formally recognise Afghanistan’s Taliban government, placing an international seal of acceptance on them, which could prompt others to do the same (Roy-Chaudhury 2025). China has posted an ambassador-level envoy in Kabul, although it has not formally recognised the regime. India does not formally

recognize the Taliban regime but, in perhaps the most shockingly insensitive gesture to Afghanistan's women, rolled out a red carpet to welcome a minister of that harshly misogynist Taliban 2.0 regime to India (Mustafa 2025).

New Delhi actually sought a waiver of UN sanctions so it could host the Taliban's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in India for a week and upgraded its mission in Kabul to embassy status. (Sengupta 2025) India had never engaged with any member of Taliban 1.0. It needed a waiver from the UN because Taliban regime members have been sanctioned by the United Nations as terrorists (*The Wire* 2025).

For Afghan women, particularly, India welcoming Muttaqi was a betrayal. Calling it "Complicity, not Diplomacy," Afghan journalist Zahra Nader wrote, "When a democracy like India welcomes the Taliban as political interlocutors, it sends a chilling message: That systematic erasure of women can be tolerated for strategic convenience, that women's rights are expendable, a collateral cost of diplomacy" (Nader 2025). Nader, who edits the *ZAN Times* from Canada, said the Indian government hosting Muttaqi was beyond belief and did not augur well for all women, everywhere.

Afghanistan's women did win a significant international victory earlier this year, on 8 July, when the International Criminal Court in The Hague issued arrest warrants against Akhundzada, the Taliban 'Emir,' and Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani. Judges found reasonable grounds to believe that they have committed - by ordering, inducing or soliciting - the crime against humanity of persecution, under article 7(1)(h) of the Rome Statute, on gender grounds, against girls, women and other persons non-conforming with the Taliban's policy on gender, gender identity or expression; and against persons perceived as "allies of girls and women" (ICC 2025).

"The issuance of the first arrest warrants in the Situation in Afghanistan is an important vindication and acknowledgement of the rights of Afghan women and girls... Through the Taliban's deprivation of fundamental rights to education, privacy and family life, among others, Afghan women

and girls were increasingly erased from public life. The decision of the judges of the ICC affirms that their rights are valuable, and that their plight and voices matter” (ICC 2025).

“The ICC’s announcement comes at a time when the international community has slowly started to normalize and accept the Taliban’s draconian regime. The request for arrest warrants is an important reminder to the international community about its obligation under international law conventions to tackle impunity and not to recognize the Taliban, whose members have been deemed criminal actors, as the legitimate government of Afghanistan,” the Atlantic Council (2025) explained in a blog.

“Issuing warrants is the first step to holding the Taliban to account, validating the efforts of women and girls of Afghanistan to document, resist and dismantle the Taliban’s systematic gender-based oppression” (Atlantic Council 2025).

For those in the Taliban opposed to Akhundzada’s ideology, this could be the required wake-up call. Most analysts believe most of the Taliban administration realise that women must be involved in the country’s economic revival, and are being quietly encouraged to set up SMEs, within certain sectors.

Taliban 2.0 has quashed domestic opposition and ensured that law and order is maintained. After 2001, they constantly fought Afghan governments supported by the US and allied forces through a spate of kidnappings, beheadings, grenade and landmine attacks and bombings. Having achieved their goal of returning to power, they stopped the attacks and have imposed a draconian peace.

Now, desperately, they seek to stamp their legitimacy by getting the economy to move. Afghanistan has become one of the poorest countries in the world, with a population growth of around 2% and a peak decline in the economy due to strict gender-based employment policies. A glance at available figures highlights the dire situation of the Afghan economy. After the August 2021 Taliban takeover,

the economy contracted by 20.7 %, with another 3.6 % contraction in 2022 (The World Bank 2022).

International organisations and research studies indicate that women in Afghanistan are increasingly turning to entrepreneurship as an economic lifeline, despite significant challenges in accessing capital and operating under Taliban restrictions.

By restricting work permits, shuttering female-run NGOs and barring women's travel and NGO employment, the Taliban are curbing progress to the extent that the UN estimates that the participation of Afghan women in the labour force has dropped from 11% in 2022 to about 6% in 2023. However, even the limited data available, primarily from the AWCCI, suggests that there has been a definite increase in women's entrepreneurship and female-led businesses, mostly small and home-based enterprises focused on handicrafts and food products (Ciplak 2025).

Some women have found a place for themselves in the new order. Fariba Noori, a 50-year-old female entrepreneur who coaches Afghan women on launching market stalls or starting businesses, said she has not faced interference from Taliban officials (Noack 2025).

A 2019 research study that aggregated findings from existing sources observed that among the key motivations for the women to start a micro-business is to be economically independent. Most working women in Afghanistan believe that entrepreneurship allows them to fulfil their economic potential. Family support is critical for their economic engagement. Almost 96% of women entrepreneurs said they started and ran businesses with family support. Overall, 91.3% of Afghan women were able to be engaged in economic activity due to the support of family and friends. More than 95% of Afghanistan's production occurs in homes, with family participation (Junussova et al. 2019).

With women's employment at just 7% (in 2024) and increasing restrictions on mobility and access to jobs, women-owned businesses are among the few

viable alternatives for income and jobs for women-led households. (UNDP 2024) Female-led businesses continue to be a vital source of income, with some women finding new avenues like YouTube to bypass limitations on traditional work (Yawar and Greenfield 2024).

A 2024 survey by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) spotlights the struggles and resilience of Afghan women entrepreneurs. Of the 3,100 women they surveyed, 41% are in debt, with only about 5% having secured formal bank or microfinance loans. Yet 80% of these women-led businesses remain the primary income source for their families (Inan 2024, 25). UNDP reports that its targeted support, combining microloans, digital literacy and market access, has benefited 75,000 women-led ventures and created 900,000 jobs, supporting more than 4.5 million Afghans (Inan 2024, 3). Women-owned and -led businesses in Afghanistan continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, serving as vital pillars of economic stability and hope amidst adversity.

While the Taliban ostensibly support women working in the private sector, the gender segregation enforced by them poses a significant obstacle. Female entrepreneurs face hurdles in acquiring or renewing their business licenses under Taliban rule. A significant number of established, professional and trained female entrepreneurs have left the country due to these restrictive policies and ban on education (Ahmadi and Rahimi 2024). Still, Afghan women entrepreneurs are launching small businesses and cooperatives, though most face struggles accessing capital. Many manage by using tailoring, food preparation, dairy cooperatives and handicrafts to build income and resilience.

Options for women seeking to set up small businesses are quite basic. They include tailoring and handicraft centres; fruits and vegetables processing centres; honeybee keeper centres; poultry farms; bakery and cake making centres; beauty salons; and women photography centres where women can take pictures of other women for government documentation, ID cards, schools and passports (Junussova et al 2019, 14).

Additionally, covert efforts to revive skills training, in stitching, for example, are being led by groups such as Ideas Beyond Borders. More than 8,000 students have enrolled in covert schools across Afghanistan since 2021. Students learn essential skills like sewing, literacy and business without Taliban interference. About 38 such sites operate discreetly nationwide.

The agriculture sector employs nearly half of Afghanistan's national workforce and is also the largest source of livelihood for over half the rural workforce. Women constitute over 50% of the total agricultural workforce. They perform crucial roles alongside men in all areas of agricultural activity, be it crop cultivation, vegetable farming, or animal husbandry. A majority of the female agricultural workforce is engaged in animal husbandry and livestock sectors (Ahmadi 2023).

In Bamyán province, for example, Mahroo, a dairy entrepreneur supports women farmers by organizing cooperatives that process milk into cheese and yogurt. She provides training and equipment, purchasing their produce at fair prices. These cooperatives strengthen community resilience by bringing women farmers into the formal market while preserving traditional livelihoods (Taban 2025).

According to a 2025 UN Women report (UN Women 2025c), the organisation has, with funding from the Japanese government, worked across Afghanistan over the past three years to expand women's access to livelihoods, income and essential services. These initiatives provide business development skills, financial support, market access, and safe spaces for literacy and vocational training.

“From greenhouse cultivation to poultry farming and tailoring to handicrafts, women are using these tools to make income and gain a stronger voice in making decisions in households and building resilience in communities. More than 5,100 women entrepreneurs have been supported to launch or grow their businesses and 3,700 women have accessed services through safe spaces.” (UN Women c 2025)

Afghan women entrepreneurs like Frozan, Shimin, Mahroo and others are reclaiming autonomy through enterprise. They are not just making products; they are building community resilience, preserving cultural identity and pushing back quietly against injustice (Ciplak 2025). UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous, speaking at the UN Security Council meeting on the situation in Afghanistan on 23 June 2025, said, “Despite multiple Security Council resolutions demanding safe and unhindered access for female aid workers, the ability of the UN and our partners to deliver for Afghan women has been drastically undermined. Legal and bureaucratic barriers imposed by the de facto authorities make it harder than ever to hire women safely, to even reach them, all while deep funding cuts have ever more devastating consequences” (Bahous 2025).

Yet, “Afghan women continue to lead the way. They have opened underground schools, organized in silence, built lives in those slivers of space left to them. They have shown unshakable determination, even when the world faltered” (Bahous 2025).

It took a devastating natural disaster to focus the global spotlight back on Afghanistan and remind the world that women there have not disappeared; they are only missing from public view; dispensable without even hope of getting rescued after an earthquake. When Taliban authorities appealed for emergency international assistance on 2 September 2025 after a powerful earthquake struck the mountainous provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar, killing and injuring thousands, media reports stated that, despite rescue operations, women were left to fend for themselves (ANI 2025; NYT 2025).

As Afghan women make fledgling attempts to fight back and live their lives, governments across the world must not look away from their struggle to live productive lives.

Although they have made small inroads to make ends meet, efforts at effacement that Afghan women face daily while they struggle to survive needs a vigilant global community to not forget about them. As geostrategic compulsions bring increasing international engagement with the misogynist

Taliban regime, it is vital that women's survival and livelihood opportunities increasingly feature on the negotiating table and women's voices continue to be heard both within and outside Afghanistan.

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Re-Thinking 'Participation' In-Between and Beyond the WPS Agenda: Visibilizing the 'Afghan Woman' In-Between Epistemic Silences

By Shweta Singh¹

The United Nations Security Council Resolution was adopted in the year 2000, and the year 2025 marks its twenty fifth anniversary. As we celebrate the twenty fifth anniversary of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, in many ways the 'Afghan woman' stands at a crossroads, with the Taliban in power in Afghanistan (since August 2021) and the fading global commitment to women's rights in Afghanistan, which also includes its commitment to the WPS agenda. The UNSCR 1325 was a landmark resolution which foregrounded many 'firsts': the recognition that conflict impacts men and women differently; importance of women's equal participation in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security; and protection of women and girls from gender-based violence during conflict. It rests on four key pillars: the prevention of violence; women's participation in peace and security practices; the protection of women's rights; and the need for gender-sensitive post-conflict reconstruction and recovery strategies. Subsequent to the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, there were nine additional resolutions that were passed. Together the ten resolutions constitute the formal architecture of the WPS Agenda.

Scepticism abounds on the achievements of the WPS agenda. In an open letter

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to UN permanent representatives, the NGO Working Group (2025) notes “that the world is a ‘long way’ from fully realising the WPS principles, norms and commitments formulated during the past 25 years” (Security Council Report, 30 September 2025). It warns about an “alarming backlash against women’s autonomy and rights, and against those who advocate for them”, noting that “[t]he very term gender” is being “blatantly undermined.” Further, the Security Council, October (2025) monthly report notes with concern the situation of women’s rights in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Myanmar, Sudan, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Security Council Report, September 30, 2025).

From 2001, Afghanistan had made slow but significant progress with the WPS agenda. It adopted key policy frameworks at the national level, such as the Afghanistan Compact, the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), and the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA). This was a period marked by significant changes in national legislation, policies and strategies which subsequently led to the adoption of the NAPWA in 2015. A significant step in this forward movement was the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) of 2010, which made provisions for the participation of women in its key structures like the High Peace Council (HPC) and the Provincial Peace Committees (PPCs).

The Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021, and since then they have curtailed women’s rights, and propelled violations that could well be described as ‘Gender Apartheid’. Women have been denied equal right to participation in political processes, and decision making, and the Ministry of Women Affairs stands abolished. The Taliban’s actions are in direct contravention of the guarantees enshrined in the 2004 constitution, and Afghanistan’s commitment to the WPS agenda. Even before Taliban took control in 2021, Afghanistan was struggling to translate the 4P’s as stated in the UNSCR 1325, on ground - post 2021, it stands further pushed back in its emancipatory project towards gender equality and transformative justice. Further, despite the celebratory tones of the WPS agenda, and the emphasis on the agential capacity of the

Woman, the Afghan woman was/is (in)visibilized in the global, and local discourse. This is especially perplexing as the Afghan woman has been at the forefront of gender transformative change, as well as in the efforts to translate the gains of the WPS agenda on the ground in Afghanistan.

The case of Afghanistan is an interesting site for analysis from the standpoint of the WPS agenda, and women's agency. The bulk of scholarship on Afghanistan, and more specifically WPS, and women's agency tends to caricature the Afghan woman, as a victim whose voice, or agency has been subsumed by social, and cultural gender norms. More broadly, in the WPS agenda (though fiercely contested) the normative pillar of participation rests on the agential capacity of women, where agency is defined in terms of 'free self-will, and more generally the capacity to act'.² Very little attention has been given to the complex dynamics of gender relations, with a few notable exceptions (Rostami-Povey 2012). While it is important to recognize that women in Afghanistan have had limited voice or participation in high-level state-building and peace processes despite the advent of the WPS agenda and the gender-specific impacts of conflict, including their experiences of extreme forms of gender-based violence (Barnett 1997; Farrell and Mc Dermott 2005; Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2014; Duncanson and Farr 2019), it is equally important to underline that women, have used the WPS agenda to script their agency, and resistance differently; often negotiating patriarchal norms like gender segregation.

This paper is an attempt in that direction and aims to highlight how Afghan women in their everyday have reclaimed both resistance, and agency, deploying the language of the WPS agenda, with a particular focus on the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program. The limited point of emphasis is that despite the challenges on ground to the WPS agenda, it provided a language for transformative gender justice in everyday spaces for the Afghan

2. For an alternative analysis of agency see: Saba Mahmood. 2001. "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival." *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2): 202–236. Amy Borovoy and Kristen Ghodsee. 2012. "Decentering Agency in Feminist Theory: Recuperating the Family as a Social Project." *Women's Studies International Forum* 35(3): 153–165.

woman. This paper, builds, and expands on author's earlier work, which focused on how global norms like the participation pillar of the UNSCR 1325, translate in everyday spaces for women (for details see Singh 2020).

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, Participation and Agency: The Missing Script?

The central point of contention remains: can women's agency in differing socio-temporal, and geographical contexts be captured, by a definition of agency that remains deeply intertwined with liberal normative script, with its focus on 'capacity to act'? How does this understanding of agency, delimit perspectives on norms diffusion or norms translation in deeply patriarchal societies, with intersecting constellation of oppression? Further, how does this marginalize or invisibilize women's articulation of agency 'differently'—for instance, in a language of resistance that is subtle, and dispersed? Does this also stand on slippery terrain, as what might seem like agency, is in substantive terms 'patriarchal bargain'? Kandiyoti (1988), identifies patriarchal bargain in terms of how 'women strategize, and navigate differing cultural, and structural constraints' - and in the process reclaim their agency differently. Women, in these differing socio-political contexts, may not seem to be exercising agency, if we subscribe to a definition of agency that is focused only on capacity to act. However, the push precisely is to pay attention to differing ways in which women act, resist and reclaim agency despite restrictive patriarchal structures. So, a key question then is - what are the pathways available in the literature to navigate a more encompassing idea of agency, which recognise subtle ways of resistance? Against the backdrop of these critical contentions, a review of the existing scholarship on UNSCR 1325 and the normative pillar of participation is undertaken here.

In the literature, the subject of women's agency and participation has been intertwined with the discussion on gender equality and patriarchy. While there is a broad consensus that the WPS agenda provides a language, and way forward in the diffusion of global norms about gender equality (Barrow

2009; Sheri Lynn Gibbings 2011; Hudson 2017), the nature and extent of this progress remain contested, particularly in the writings of scholars from the Global South (Singh 2017). Further, while there is consensus that the agenda offers a language that can potentially address issues of gender equality, it is argued 'that it is not radical enough to be used as a transformative gender-mainstreaming tool' (Barrow 2009). Most scholars writing on the subject underline that UNSCR 1325, cannot address deep-seated issues at the root of gender inequality, including patriarchy, constructions of masculinity, and militarized power (Chenoy 2008; Olonisakin, Barnes and Ikpe 2011; Cohn 2017; Singh 2017), which they posit as inhibitors to translation of women's agency. Thus, the focus in this strand of literature is on translation of agency, or what facilitates /or inhibits that translation.

Relatedly, there is limited but growing emphasis on "contexts in which the agenda operates, illustrating how the potential for agency differs in each space" (Newby and Malley 2021). Critical feminist scholars, here draw attention to the agenda's neo-imperial tendencies, and argue that the agenda falls short of being context sensitive or transformative (Parashar 2019). Scholars underline that the agenda frames post-conflict states as targets of intervention rather than architects of transformation (Parashar 2019; Pratt 2013). They highlight that in this normative framing even the expression of agency remains soaked in neo-imperial intent, for instance the tendency to characterize women as victims, and thus as possible targets of intervention. There has also been extensive debate on the characterisation of agency. The contestations range from the discursive construction of women as victims to 'superheroines' (Shepherd 2011), 'ambivalent agents' (Manchanda 2005), or 'controlled actors' (Singh 2017). Though scholars like Basu, differ and argue that the 'discursive power, for instance in the very language of the agenda in the Global South may also foreground possibilities to take the WPS agenda forward' (Basu 2016).

Interestingly, there has been growing scholarship on the translation, and success or failure of the agenda locally (Singh 2017; Yadav 2020). Much

of the relevant writings in this direction have focused on the National Action Plans. One group of scholars highlight that in most cases NAPs are externally driven, operate with an international blueprint, and fail to address structural causes of inequality, like entrenched patriarchy in differing geographical contexts (Donais 2012; Björkdahl and Selimovic 2015; Ryan and Basini 2016). While the discussion on the NAPs is significant, it tends to fall short of exploring the agential capacity of women either individually or collectively to translate or align with the normative agenda as put forth by the NAPs. Further, while there has been extensive discussion on the implementation of the agenda locally, the indicators deployed to evaluate the success or failure of this agenda are deeply embedded in the liberal script of agency (Akbari and True 2024), that tends to marginalise subtle ways of resistance as agential capacity of women. The discussion falls short of unravelling the complex socio-temporal terrains that women navigate, and in the process also script an agency, that doesn't necessarily align with a liberal script but which nonetheless calls for deeper research and understanding.

More recently, there is growing recognition on the need to pay attention to differing geographical contexts. This it is argued is pertinent to not only understand structural inhibitors to norms translation, but also the relevance of context(s) in facilitating women's agency in 'driving, controlling and implementing the WPS at all levels' (Newby and O'Malley 2021) Scholars highlight the differing ways in which women, and local civil actors have scripted agency and have developed different strategies, structures and forms of cooperation to overcome their distinct, local, national or regional challenges. For instance, Valerie Hudson et al. highlight that the space where women first experience prejudicial treatment is in the home and this has enormous impact on the peace and security of women (Hudson, Bowen and Nielsen 2020). However, the same space can also be a site of resistance, or a means to reconfigure gender relations. In fact, one can discern the blurring of lines between women as victims, agents or controlled actors as case insights from South Asia on India (Kashmir) and Sri Lanka have illustrated (Pandit 2023; Parashar 2014; Singh 2017).

Visibilizing the Afghan Woman in the Everyday: Perspectives on the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Programme

The construction of the Afghan women is not just “manifestation of patriarchy” (Akbari and True 2024) but also a reflection of hierarchical knowledge production that “flatten[s] the subjectivities of [Global South] women” (Rivas and Safi 2022). This paper draws attention to two related points, first it highlights how Afghan woman—caricatured as ‘victim’ or struggling in terms of capacity to act—has been navigating the patriarchal structures to reclaim agency. Women navigate patriarchal structures - deeply embedded and crisscrossed by everyday practices of control, and subordination. Further women are not just navigating patriarchal structures of family, and community, but also contours of Sharia (Islamic) law, and Pashtunwali code (customary law). The idea of honor (*nang*) is fundamental in the Pashtunwali code of conduct,³ and calls for protection of female family members (*namus*)⁴, and advocates strict gender boundaries through practices such as gender segregation and purdah (Khan 2015).

The following section highlights how woman reclaim agency particularly in the familial, and community spaces, by acts of subtle resistance, that blur restrictive boundaries between public and private. Further expanding on my previous research (Singh 2020), I draw on the conceptual hooks of everyday, and define it “not as a restrictive or proscriptive level of analysis (such as the state, the individual, or the international system), but rather as a fluid site of activity, densely populated with actors, objects, and practices (Guillaume and Huysmans 2018). While the conceptual hook of everyday is not new to feminist scholarship, this definition of everyday allows a shift away from scales/ or levels of analysis, and allows for ‘densification of politics, objects, and actors’ (Guillaume and Huysmans 2018). Further, from an analytical standpoint it draws attention to the epistemic silences in the scholarship on

3. It is important to note that *Pashtunwali* is not standard, or the only customary law, across Afghanistan, as there are differing practices, and codes of conduct subject to specific ethnic and religious groups. However, the point on gender boundaries, and female honor cut across differing customary codes of conduct and practices.

4. *Nang* and *Namus* are Pashto words.

WPS, and why the discursive framing of the Afghan woman, remains caught in the binary of the victim/ and the agent– despite the need to recognise the in-between or liminal spaces, where woman resist, and deploy subtle strategies of negotiation in ways that chip away embedded patriarchal power structures.

This paper expands and builds on my previous research on Provincial Peace Committees (PPCs), which played a significant role in the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) (Singh 2020). The National Consultative Peace Jirga, held in Kabul in June 2010, was a significant step forward in the efforts towards peace and reconciliation. One of the significant aims of the National Consultative Peace Jirga was to establish a nationwide framework for inclusive peace, which included among other objectives, the reintegration of ex-combatants, particularly the Taliban (Quie 2017). The National Jirga and the consultative process led to the creation of the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) and the High Peace Council (HPC) in June and October 2010. The HPC was a 70-member body, which included nine women. A key pivot in the working of the peacebuilding programs was the Provincial Peace Committees (PPCs). Most PPCs, across 32 provinces had 2–3 women. Further, it needs to be highlighted that there was significant progress in terms of global, regional and national level gender related normative framework, and constitutional law. First, and foremost the Bonn Agreement 2002, was signed against the backdrop of the adoption of UNSCR 1325 in 2000. Second, Afghanistan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2003, which was designed to end discrimination against women and support the full development and advancement of women. Third, Article 22 of the Constitution emphasizes that all Afghan citizens, both men and women, have the same rights and responsibilities before the law. Further, Afghanistan adopted the NAPWA in the year 2015.

An Afghan women's rights activist, Wazhma Frogh⁵ highlights that one of

5. Wazhma Frogh is an Afghan women's rights activist, and the director of the Women & Peace Studies Organization (WPSO), which she co-founded in 2012.

the core functions of the HPC and PPC was the outreach to the insurgents and encourage them to lay arms.⁶ While in my previous research (Singh 2020), I highlighted some of the challenges that women faced in terms of their participation in PPC, given that most other members of the PPC are warlords, tribal leaders and religious leaders. In this paper, I draw attention to how women navigate these challenges and, in the process not just negotiate socio-temporal boundaries but also resist and blur them. To understand this process attention is brought back to families as sites for resistance and agency. This analysis draws empirically on the insights provided by Wazhma Frogh, Samira Hamidi⁷ and Pulwasha Hassan⁸ and other Afghan women that I met and continue to interact with in formal and informal spaces, since 2016.⁹

The assertions made are reaffirmed by other research like, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) study titled, *Women Participation in the Afghan Peace Process* (Azadmanesh and Ghafoori 2020) that underlines how women used ‘creative strategies’ to engage with both insurgent, and insurgent families to raise basic awareness about peace. This study also highlights that women drew in on customary practices to strengthen their role as negotiators, within the family units. Further, women have historically played a role, in decision making process -for instance, the participation of women in *nanawati* a conflict resolution tradition where the whole family of an accused person repents and asks for forgiveness (Azadmanesh and Ghafoori 2020). The point of emphasis is that there is need for greater focus on these subtle acts, and practices both as acts of agency, and resistance.

Activists like Wazhma Frogh (2019) underline, “when you bring in women, it’s not just about power sharing. It becomes about responsibility sharing. So, when women engage in the process, we talk about the needs of the

6. Wazhma Frogh, Personal Communication(s) 2016-2019.

7. Samira Hamidi is an Afghan women’s rights activist and is currently Amnesty International’s South Asia Regional Campaigner.

8. Palwasha Hassan is the director of the Afghan Women’s Educational Center and founding member of the Afghan Women’s Network.

9. As a member of Track II Dialogue facilitated by South Asians for Human Rights and the Afghan Women’s Network (AWN) the author spent time in Kabul in November 2016 during which time interactions were conducted with members of civil society.

communities, about justice, about schools, about health, about education. It becomes about communities and issues, not just about men deciding which power positions to hold.” This aligns with the findings of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit study which reaffirms that women, deployed their identities of being mother/wife/ sister to talk to insurgent families, and were able to establish connection, and trust, deploying informal, and subtle strategies of negotiation (Azadmanesh and Ghafoori 2020). In this context, Wazhma Frogh further draws attention to the role of mother’s groups. She states, “The mothers have started coming together to come up with ways on how to prevent their sons from becoming suicide bombers. So, they began with recognizing initial signs that a son has been approached by the Taliban, to be a suicide bomber or become engaged in the insurgency. Like she reads some notes in his pockets, because it’s the mother who washes his clothes. Or he’s coming home late, because it’s mother who gives him food” (Wazhma Frogh 2019).

The point of emphasis is that these subtle strategies of negotiations deployed by Afghan women, in their everyday spaces like family, and community need to be recognized as acts of subtle resistance. And in many ways despite the many challenges that UNSCR 1325 continues to face on ground, it needs to be underlined that UNSCR 1325 opened up possibilities and provided a language to push for gender sensitive peace and security agenda. This in no way undermines the challenges that Afghan woman continue to face to translate global normative frameworks like United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 locally on ground -but it is a ‘push’ to recognize that there is need to shift the liberal gaze from a singular definition of agency, and recognize the subtle forms of negotiations, even within deeply rooted patriarchal structures. In sum, there needs to be greater attention to alternative sites like family and community, to understand how women navigate their roles in their everyday both as part of PPC and HPC, and beyond in Afghanistan.

Afghan Woman In-Between Epistemic Silences, and Gender Tradeoffs: Beyond August 2021

The Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021 and initiated policy acts that fit the template of 'Gender Apartheid'. Relatedly, the future of National Action Plan (NAP) is in abeyance. While we mark the 25th anniversary of the WPS agenda, we do so in the age of ruptures, marked by the crisis of the liberal world order, rise of authoritarian/ and nativist politics, with noted rise in gender backlash. Against this backdrop, it is important to recognise that in many ways despite the celebratory tone of the WPS agenda in its 25th year (since the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325), the Afghan woman is fighting a battle, bereft of solidarity promised by the architecture of the WPS agenda. Further, the current moment in time, and space, can be classified as what Gramsci, calls as 'Age of Ruptures' —marked by rise of authoritarianism, extremism, and populism. The age of ruptures is seeing a going back to the politics of nativism, and reification of borders, and boundaries marked by gender backlash, and an onslaught on liberal architecture on peace and security. Afghanistan and the 'Afghan Woman' needs to be re-situated in this changing scenario, where gender normative frameworks like UNSCR 1325 stand deeply challenged. It is time that the WPS agenda pays greater attention to changing (in)securities that women continue to experience across differing geographies (Aroussi 2017) as for instance the case of Afghanistan demonstrates. In some ways perhaps, there is need to go back to the drawing board and recognise that the agenda now needs to move beyond the framing of WPS as a limited foreign policy tool (Aroussi 2017), where it gets intertwined in the politics of national interest, and shifting geopolitical calculus, particularly in the Global North.

The Afghan woman in many ways is lost in between depleting liberal commitment to gender transformative projects, epistemic silences, and waning commitment to transnational solidarities. In the process, I am attentive to the point that even the category of 'Afghan' woman, is not a monolithic category, but what surely needs attention is foregrounding of these differing voices, and

a recognition that despite the multifaceted challenges that the WPS agenda continues to face on ground, it still brought for the Afghan woman, some hard fought gains, sites to reclaim agency, and pathways towards transformative change. This journey, for the Afghan woman may seem interrupted from the outside, but on ground she continues to fight a solitary battle, offering resistance, and reclaiming agency.

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Seeking Futures Beyond Despair: Afghan Women's Perspectives on Peace, Governance, and Human Security¹

By Shilpi Shabdita²

Afghanistan has long been a theatre of geopolitical contestation and witnessed several transitions in its recent political trajectory—from constitutional monarchy to Islamic Republic to Islamic Emirate post the second Taliban takeover. Four years since the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan (in 2021), the country rapidly recedes from the global spotlight as ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza dominate the discourse on foreign policy and command international media attention. Against an increasingly complicated geopolitical backdrop, the Western impetus appears to have shifted from pursuing regime change in Afghanistan to regime transformation, relying on regional actors and discreet diplomacy to nudge the Taliban towards international reintegration (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2024). Strategic recalibrations in foreign policy and diplomatic regional engagement with the Taliban are evident across Asian countries such as China, India, Iran, Uzbekistan and Pakistan, among others. With Russia becoming the first country to diplomatically recognize the Taliban government in 2025, a gradual trend of tacit normalization of the regime internationally seems to belie the domestic reality of an escalating human rights and humanitarian crisis (Human Rights Watch 2024) within Afghanistan.

1. The title of this paper is drawn from one of the reports on the WISCOMP dialogues that form the basis of this paper. See Meenakshi Gopinath and Shilpi Shabdita, *Afghanistan in Transition: Seeking Futures Beyond Despair* (New Delhi: Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace, 2023).

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The conditions inside Afghanistan remain dire, with institutionalized gender oppression, media censorship, targeted violence against ethnic and religious minorities, economic collapse and armed resistance defining the precarious status quo. Persistent fear of persecution under Taliban rule, exacerbated by natural disasters, have triggered alarming rates of displacement, with over 3.3 million internally displaced persons and approximately 5.8 million Afghan refugees—rendering it the third-largest displaced population globally after those in Venezuela and Syria (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2024). Afghanistan also remains the only country in the world where women and girls are denied access to secondary and higher education.

As the country navigates these complex dynamics, understanding the internal struggles and aspirations of its people—particularly through the often-marginalized voices of Afghan women—becomes vital to imagining sustainable pathways for the future.

This paper synthesizes insights and perspectives of Afghan women gathered during two virtual intra-Afghan dialogues convened by the South Asian NGO, Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) with groups of Afghan journalists, scholars, policymakers, former government officials, and civil society leaders in 2022 and 2023. The ‘Afghanistan in Transition’ dialogue series foregrounded the voices of Afghan women—both within the country and in the diaspora³—regarding key developments in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover in 2021 and the prospects for peace in the context of the unfolding global realpolitik. This paper attempts to distil the perspectives of the women, while staying as close as possible to the tenor of their original reflection on myriad issues. What are the prospects for just peace and stability in Afghanistan? Is it likely to remain in a perpetual state of war and armed resistance over the next decade or is there potential for a transition toward peace? What direction does the country seem to be moving towards—radical theocracy, civil war, anarchy or political

3. This paper uses the analyses and statements of Afghan women who participated at the dialogues, except in some places where male quotes are used. In all such places the fact that it is a male Afghan voice is specifically mentioned.

stabilization? Will Afghanistan continue to be a theatre for international power play and geopolitical leverage? To what extent might the Taliban's pursuit of international recognition and financial assistance facilitate a shift toward more moderate or progressive governance? Can the Taliban's current governance strategies and policy frameworks effectively promote stability, national unity, and human security within Afghanistan?

Deconstructing the Taliban

Seeking International Recognition versus Maintaining Ideological Cohesion

“At the Great Gathering of the Ulema organized by the Taliban in June 2022, Haibatullah Akhundzada, head of the Taliban, spoke about the demands of the international community to uphold human rights and women's rights in Afghanistan as the ‘imposition of non-Muslim beliefs on the Muslim community’ and ‘restrictions on Islamic practices’, and affirmed the Taliban's commitment to its religious ideological moorings.”

– Afghan Human Rights Advocate, 2023

The Taliban seek international diplomatic recognition, engagement and resources to transition from a militant group to a recognized political movement that establishes their legitimacy as the Government of Afghanistan. Simultaneously, they already receive support from an ‘alternative international community’—the violent extremist ‘jihadist networks’⁴—that provide protection, funding, weapons, manpower, and propaganda essential for their survival. As an ideological movement, their power and cohesiveness depend on remaining connected with this core constituency. This strategy aims to unify the Taliban, leverage their ideological narrative to instil fear in regional and global communities, and forge alliances with like-minded actors.

The ideological rigor of the Taliban contributes significantly to the

4. The Afghan speakers at the dialogue used the word ‘jihadist’ to refer to individuals or groups that interpret or employ the concept of jihad as violent religious extremism.

movement's cohesion. They are unlikely to transform from a radical, extremist group into a liberal, democratic force within Afghanistan. While some analysts cite the example of Afghans who fought against the Soviet invasion under the banner of Islam—motivated primarily by resistance to foreign invasion rather than religious extremism—the current Taliban regime has radicalized its fighters through extremist propaganda, reinforcing resilience against a superpower's external military threats (Watkins 2023).

In June 2022, the Taliban organized the Great Gathering of the *Ulema*, a three-day conference attended by three to four thousand male Islamic scholars and tribal elders from across the country, to demonstrate their ideological cohesion and domestic legitimacy. The head of the Taliban, Haibatullah Akhundzada, addressed the gathering, emphasizing that the Taliban's 'victorious *jihad*' in Afghanistan was not only a source of pride for the Afghans but for the global Muslim community. He called upon the *ulema* (religious scholars) to help establish a 'pure Islamic regime' in Afghanistan, where Sharia law is fully implemented, and sought to position the Taliban as a leadership force for the broader Muslim world (Hakimi and Fair 2023). Alluding to the growing pressure of the international community to uphold women's rights in Afghanistan, Akhundzada referred to them as 'the imposition of non-Muslim beliefs on the Muslim community' and 'restrictions on Islamic practices' and affirmed the Taliban's commitment to its religious ideological moorings (Hakimi and Fair 2023).

However, internal fissures among diverse factions of the Taliban are gradually surfacing. Senior leaders such as Sirajuddin Haqqani, Taliban's Acting Minister of Interior Affairs, and Mohammad Yaqoub, Taliban's Acting Defense Minister, have publicly commented on the Taliban's "monopolization" of power which was "defaming" their entire system, and asserted the need for the Taliban to listen to the "legitimate demands of the people" (Watkins 2023). These fissures and dissenting views are rooted in policy differences and concerns over the future direction of the country, along

with contestations for power and how the state will apportion it (Watkins 2023).

Capacity for Governance and Links with Terrorism

“Historically, the Taliban have been soldiers of proxy war, furthering the larger project for the continuation of war and instability in Afghanistan. They were never built for governance. Their policies have been shaped by military imperatives, the exigencies of waging an insurgency and the subjugation of civilians.”

– Senior Afghan Academic, 2023

Despite controlling all the classical elements of a state—territory, population, government and sovereignty—the Taliban lack international recognition. Governments derive legitimacy from safeguarding citizens’ rights, ensuring accountability among leaders, and institutionalizing laws that serve the interests of their people while adhering to international norms. The Taliban’s ascent through violence remains imprinted in the collective consciousness as emblematic of their intrinsic nature and their means of consolidating power and governance. Their regime has been characterized by violations of various international legal frameworks including the UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 2513, escalating poverty and unemployment, appointment of non-expert Taliban loyalists in leadership and technical positions (The Diplomatic Service of the European Union 2022), extrajudicial killings of former security forces and government officials, institutionalized denial of women’s rights, and systematic marginalization of ethnic minorities from positions of power. In light of suspension of the 2004 Constitution, governance is carried out through a strict Sunni interpretation of Sharia, influenced by local traditions and tribal dynamics, under an authoritarian, all-male, predominantly Pashtun *de facto* regime, with little prospect of establishing an inclusive, multi-ethnic cabinet.

Afghanistan also remains a safe haven for terrorism and shelters several radical extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Haqqani network among

others, which threaten regional and international security. While the Afghans condemn the governance failures of the previous regime led by Ashraf Ghani, it is unlikely that the Taliban can usher stability and unity in the country through oppressive means of governance and continued support to terrorist networks. These governance complexities are further intensified by the Taliban's regional strategies, which adapt differently across ethnic and tribal lines within Afghanistan.

Taliban's Two-Tier Strategy: Pashtun Areas versus Non-Pashtun Areas

“In the non-Pashtun areas of Afghanistan, the consolidation of ethnic power dominates the Taliban's strategy, where a non-Pashtun cannot be allowed to become too powerful. In Pashtun areas, the Taliban's approach focuses on religion and inter-tribal rivalry.”

- Former Afghan Male Government Official and Academic, 2023

Since 2021, the Taliban have been implementing a two-tier approach to policymaking and governance, which differs starkly between Pashtun and non-Pashtun areas of Afghanistan.⁵

In the non-Pashtun areas, ethnic considerations significantly influence decision-making, particularly regarding the appointment of Governors and District Governors, to contain non-Pashtun Taliban commanders from occupying influential positions. In provinces such as Badakhshan and Takhar, established non-Pashtun Taliban commanders have been systematically sidelined, while Pashtun governors and commanders who bear loyalty to either the Haqqanis or Kandaharis have been appointed to key positions. Ethnic fissures within the Taliban are deepening, as exemplified by the 2022 protest following the arrest of Uzbek commander Makhдум Alem (Pannier 2025). The protest was less about anti-Taliban resistance and more about

5. This analysis was shared by a former Afghan government official and academic at the virtual intra-Afghan Dialogue convened by WISCOMP in 2023.

longstanding ethnic rivalries, highlighting how the Taliban's strategy in non-Pashtun areas emphasizes the consolidation of ethnic power.

In Pashtun areas, the Taliban's approach centres on religious ideology, with two distinct sub-conflicts emerging. The first involves a tension between conservative religious factions and more liberal segments within the Pashtun community. The second involves ongoing inter-tribal rivalries among groups such as the Noorzais, Ishaqzais, and Popalzais, each vying for influence and dominance.

This two-tier strategy, implemented since 2021, reveals inherent limitations, with visible fissures and gaps emerging within the Taliban's approach.

Agenda for Legitimization

“ To treat an erstwhile terrorist group as a de facto government without ensuring accountability, speaks to the complicity of the international community. Instead of demanding women's right to education in Afghanistan, if the international community starts to question the legitimacy of the Taliban and the lack of a Constitution that guarantees fundamental rights, all other related issues will get resolved.”

– Afghan Human Rights Activist, 2022

Since the Taliban returned to power in 2021, there was an informal international consensus that diplomatic recognition of the Taliban regime would depend on its fulfilment of certain conditions, including mitigating terrorism threats from Afghan soil, transitioning to an inclusive government, and ensuring the rights of women and girls (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2024). However, there is a gradual 'normalization' of the Taliban regime and a *de facto* accordance of legitimacy with increased diplomatic presence in Kabul and Taliban officials abroad. Thirty four embassies and eighteen consulates operate in Afghanistan as on November 2025. Taliban delegations are invited to global conferences, UN-led meetings, talks with US representatives in

Doha, and for interactions with foreign ministers of various countries. Over the last one year, Kazakhstan (Putz 2024) and Russia (Al Jazeera 2025) have removed the Taliban from their list of terrorist organizations citing reasons of trade and economic cooperation. Cautioning the international community in light of Russia's recent diplomatic recognition of the Taliban regime, a former Afghan national security adviser noted, "This is just the beginning; in the absence of widespread resistance, others will follow Russia." (Drury and Wilson 2025)

At a dialogue in 2022, Taliban leaders claimed they were 'as good as recognized' as they were already receiving economic support and humanitarian aid from the international community, which provides tacit recognition. This raises several questions: what does it really mean to expect the Taliban to transform? How much strategic leverage will the Taliban give, to which country and for what? How will the Taliban shape their future agenda on international policy and domestic governance? What implications do these trends have for the Taliban's adherence to international law and the covenants ratified by Afghanistan?

As the conundrum of diplomatic recognition unfolds in the international arena, the stark reality of Afghanistan's human rights crisis underscores the urgent need to scrutinize the Taliban's approach to justice and fundamental freedoms.

'Security of the Graveyard': Situation of Human Rights

Defunct Institutions of Justice

"Afghanistan has a paralyzed justice sector, with extrajudicial killings, issuing verdicts without considering the due process, illegal arrests, detention and no right to fair trial without discrimination especially for women and minorities."

- Former Afghan Government Official and Civil Society Leader, 2022

Taliban's suspension of the 2004 Constitution and declaration of Sharia as Afghanistan's supreme law fundamentally alter the legal and judicial architecture, nullifying most national and international frameworks established over the past two decades.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission has been disbanded. The Afghanistan Independent Bar Association, with over 6,000 lawyers of which 25 per cent were women, was dissolved into the Ministry of Justice, compelling thousands of legal professionals to either flee the country or remain unemployed. All judges appointed under the previous government, including around 270 women, have been dismissed, replaced by all male, mostly ethnic Pashtun, Taliban-affiliated judges who lack professional legal training (Bennett 2025). Notably, Taliban leaders accused of severe human rights violations and listed on UN terrorism sanctions now helm key justice institutions including the Supreme Court, Ministry of Interior, and Attorney General's Office (Hazim 2022).

In a climate of fear, surveillance and impunity, there are widespread incidents (Bennett 2025) of arbitrary arrest, detention, torture and extrajudicial killings of journalists, activists, human rights defenders, political commentators, loyalists of the old government and parties to the 'new resistance'. Absence of clear legal frameworks and due process, coupled with harsh and arbitrary enforcement including corporal and capital punishments, severely hinder Afghans' access to justice.

Challenging the Taliban's approach to justice, Islamic scholars and experts raise concerns about the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia, unparalleled in other Muslim majority states, asserting that it does not adhere to Islamic teachings in principle or in practice (Bennett 2025). They criticize the group's selective, distorted, or de-contextualised use of *Hanafi* sources and the failure of the Taliban's justice system to adhere to key principles of mercy, due process, and evidentiary rigour which are foundational in Sharia (Bennett 2025).

This judicial paralysis disproportionately impacts women and girls, whose

rights are systematically eroded through laws and policies that institutionalize gender discrimination.

‘Gender Apartheid’: Women’s Systematic Erasure from Public Life

“The Taliban claims they are restoring security in Afghanistan. What does security mean when women in Afghanistan face domestic violence at home and violations of their human rights outside it? This is security of the graveyard.”

– Afghan Human Rights Advocate and former Government Official, 2022

Systematically deprived of their rights to freedom of movement, education, work, healthcare, and expression, Afghan women and girls have been effectively erased from public life since the Taliban’s return to power in 2021 (Bennett 2025). Over 70 edicts, decrees and laws (UN Women 2024) have been passed denying secondary and university education to women, prohibiting them from working in non-governmental organizations, mandating long-distance travels only when accompanied by a *mahram* (close male relative), and dissolving institutional mechanisms to seek redressal for gender-based violence. These directives fit the pattern of gender-based institutional discrimination and contravene Afghanistan’s obligations under numerous international human rights treaties to which it is a state party.

The ban on secondary education for girls will have far reaching effects on a country where 63% of the population is under 25 years of age (UNFPA 2024). Lack of access to secondary education for girls implies *de facto* exclusion from universities and workplaces, denying women the right to participate in public and political life. In December 2022, the Taliban banned university education for Afghan women and prohibited them from working for national and international non-governmental organizations. In December 2024, a ban was placed on women’s access to private medical institutions, closing the last remaining pathway to higher education and also eroding women’s access to

healthcare. The annual economic cost of women's retreat from the workforce in Afghanistan is estimated at USD 1 billion or 5% of the country's GDP (Qazizada 2024).

The Taliban's dissolution of key institutions has severely limited access to justice for victims of gender-based violence. The Ministry for Women's Affairs was repurposed as the *de facto* Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, while the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission was disbanded, leaving female victims of violence with no legal recourse or support. The incidence of domestic violence is on the rise and shelters for women fleeing violence have been closed. The EVAW (Elimination of Violence Against Women) law stands annulled along with several progressive legal reforms enacted between 2001–2021, which were heralded as significant advances for Afghan women and girls.

It appears that the Taliban frame the 'women's rights agenda' as a Western imperialist imposition on Afghanistan, and thus the institutional legitimization of misogyny and patriarchal structures seem to bolster their ideological cohesion. Despite repression, some Afghan women are leading nonviolent protests in the streets. These numbers are small owing to the Taliban's threats of punishment to the male members of the women's families. In doing so, the Taliban are reinforcing patriarchy in practice and policy in Afghanistan.

While women face systemic oppression, ethnic and religious minorities also endure targeted violence and marginalization, further fragmenting Afghanistan's social fabric.

Plight of Ethnic and Religious Minorities

“The Hazaras and other religious minorities are being repeatedly attacked at their mosques, schools, workplaces and homes in Afghanistan. The world watches in silence and a systematic crackdown on the local media by the Taliban means several attacks will likely go unreported.”

– Afghan Human Rights Advocate and former Government Official, 2023

In 2022, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Afghanistan stated that the attacks specifically targeting the Hazaras, other Shia communities and Sufis are becoming increasingly systematic in nature and reflect elements of an organizational policy, thus bearing hallmarks of crimes against humanity (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2022). Predominantly orchestrated by groups such as Islamic State – Khorasan Province, these assaults against ethnic and religious minorities occur at their places of worship, education and homes, with notable incidents including the 2022 suicide bombing targeting the Hazaras at the Kaaj Educational Center in western Afghanistan. Additionally, the illegal seizure of land and forced evictions disproportionately affect Hazara communities; in 2021, displacements in Daikundi and Uruzgan provinces alone totalled at least 2,800 individuals (Harrison 2021).

Such systematic violence has elicited international condemnation, framing these attacks not only as atrocities against Hazaras but as affronts to Afghanistan's broader social fabric. Voices advocating justice for the Hazaras, which were previously seen as 'obstacles' to nation-building and national unity in Afghanistan, are finding resonance and support across ethnic divides. While ethnic fault lines are being exploited by the Taliban to sustain power structures, the systematic targeting of the Hazaras has become a rallying point for Afghans across ethnicities. The #StopHazaraGenocide campaign on Twitter has surpassed 11 million supporters (Bamyan Foundation 2025), bringing the culture of impunity against the historical persecution of the Hazara community to global attention.

The ongoing violence and instability extend to former security personnel and their families, complicating efforts toward national reconciliation and peace.

Former Afghan National Security Forces

Despite announcing a 'general amnesty' for former government officials and Afghan National Security and Defense Force members, at least 218 extrajudicial killings, 14 enforced disappearances, 424 arbitrary arrests

and detentions, and 144 instances of torture and ill-treatment of former government and security officials, as well as their families, by the Taliban have been reported between 2021 to 2023 (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2023). Around 7,500 families of martyred security officials have been removed from the pension scheme and are systematically excluded from humanitarian assistance. While the announcement of the general amnesty was a welcome step, the *de facto* authorities' failure to fully enforce their publicly stated commitment to it, and to uphold their obligations under international human rights law, have the potential to seriously impact both the cohesion and stability of Afghan society and the prospects for securing lasting peace in the country (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2023).

In a climate of insecurity, control over information and media becomes a vital tool for the Taliban, shaping narratives and suppressing dissent within Afghanistan.

Information Flow

Media Censorship

“During the Doha Talks, when the media delegation asked Khairullah Khairkhwa, Taliban’s Minister of Information and Culture, what he thought of the media, he responded, ‘Media has the power to collapse a government.’”

– Afghan Scholar and Author, 2023

During the Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, there was only one domestic radio station, broadcasting Taliban messaging and religious programming (Cary 2012). Initiating press freedom and freedom of expression in Afghanistan were remarkable achievements of the last two decades. The return of the Taliban reign from 2021 has been marked by stringent media censorship, suppression of reporting on critical issues, and detention and torture of journalists.

Between 2021 to 2024, human rights violations have been documented against 336 journalists and media workers—256 instances of arbitrary arrest and detention, 130 torture and ill-treatment, and 75 threats or intimidation (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2024). Journalists are released from detention on coercive conditions of not publishing negatively on the Taliban or the Emirate, failing which threats of physical mutilation are routine. Several remain in hiding with precarious futures and careers. Out of approximately 11,000 journalists working prior to 15 August 2021, around 7,000 remain inactive.⁶

While print media has all but ceased, financial constraints have caused several media outlets to scale down operations. Reporting on sensitive issues—such as targeted assassinations of former government officials and Afghan National Security Forces, persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, and detention and torture of human rights activists and women in prisons—is heavily restricted. Independent outlets previously serving marginalized groups like Hazaras are largely absent. In September 2021, the *de facto* authorities' Government Media and Information Centre issued an 11-Point Guidance to media, forbidding the publication of content deemed contrary to Islam and Afghan culture, or more broadly deemed to be against national interests (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2024). Interference with editorial content, pre-vetting of news agendas, mandatory clearance from the *de facto* authorities prior to publication of reports—all practices amount to censorship.

Taliban's digital surveillance also spans social media, particularly monitoring posts from activists, journalists and civil society leaders. Fear of reprisals leads to widespread self-policing, with many refraining from online criticism of the Taliban to protect themselves and their families. This climate affects even Afghans abroad, many of whom self-censor to safeguard their relatives in Afghanistan (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2024).

6. This figure was quoted by a senior Afghan journalist at the virtual intra-Afghan Dialogue convened by WISCOMP in 2023.

In such a controlled context, even the presence of international media as ‘witness’ is scarce.

Afghanistan currently lacks free and transparent media reporting on daily developments within the country. The quality of media coverage originating from Afghanistan has direct implications for accurate needs assessment and understanding of humanitarian and human rights conditions on the ground. In the context of an information blackout, some Afghan media personnel and civil society figures aligned with the Taliban continue to present a normalized view of the situation internationally, further complicating accurate reporting.

Impact on Women in the Media

Prior to the Taliban regime, there were 1,400 female journalists in Afghanistan. While this number drastically reduced to 400 in 2023, the number of active female journalists has steadily increased to 600 in 2024 (International Media Support 2024).

Women in the media sector have been disproportionately affected. Their access to information is severely curtailed as the de facto authorities often do not invite women journalists to press conferences, deny them significant interviews, and require an official letter to access reporting sites. Additionally, women are required to be accompanied by a *mahram* (close male relative) to travel over 78 kilometres, making it a severe impediment for female journalists to be involved in field work (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2024). In May 2022, the Taliban ordered all women television presenters to cover their faces. In protest, male presenters at several major news channels in Afghanistan wore masks on air in solidarity with their female colleague—an act that prompted the #FreeHerFace campaign.

The suppression of women’s rights extends into the sphere of education, where ideological battles over curriculum threaten to deepen societal divisions in an already fragmented society.

Education as a Source of Conflict

Geopolitical Influences on Education: Modern versus Traditional Ideologies

From the early 1900s, the issue of education in Afghanistan, particularly for women, has served as a source of conflict rather than unity. At a national level, there is need for reconciliation between two conflicting ideological factions around education: the faction supporting progressive thought, and the faction comprising the traditionalists and Islamic education experts. In the absence of a consensus between these, education for women persists as a bone of contention.

Geopolitical influences on education in Afghanistan have been historically significant. When Amanullah Khan was in power, he linked the education system of Afghanistan to Aligarh Muslim University, opened the first girls' school in Afghanistan, and provided women the right to vote in 1919. Amanullah Khan was removed from power in 1929, and the successive rulers overturned the education system, attempting to link it with the Deobandi movement. Throughout the Cold War, Afghan women were targeted for being in violation of 'Islamic values'. The situation worsened during the 'Islamization' campaign of Pakistan's General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s, when religious extremist thoughts were propagated in Pakistani *madrasas* where many young Afghan boys were educated.

Politics of Madrasas

“The Taliban appointed Education Minister openly stated that Masters’ and PhD degrees have no value in a society where the Taliban, trained in madrasas, rule.”

– Afghan Human Rights Activist, 2022

Historically, *madrasas* have played an important role in Afghanistan, particularly in educating children in rural and impoverished regions, often

offering shelter, food and clothing alongside religious education. The politicization of religion in Afghanistan and Pakistan, coupled with the emergence of the Taliban movement from a network of Pakistani and Afghan *madrasas* in the 1990s, has contributed to some *madrasas* becoming sites to proliferate fundamentalist religious ideologies and facilitate military recruitment for political ends. In a 2023 speech, Taliban's acting Minister of Education, Mawlawi Habibullah Agha, announced the regime's initiative to establish 'jihadi' *madrasas* across Afghanistan to teach students about Islamic Jihad as interpreted by the Taliban (Centre for Information and Resilience 2023).

Prior to the Taliban's return to power in 2021, approximately 5,000 *madrasas* were registered across Afghanistan which have mushroomed to 22,972 in 2025 with a total enrolment of 3.6 million students (Kawa 2025). This marks a shift in the educational landscape of Afghanistan, where *madrasas* now outnumber the more than 18,000 public and private schools (Kawa 2025). With no access to secondary and higher education, many girls and women increasingly rely on *madrasas* for educational opportunities.

Curricular content within these institutions is systematically being reshaped to align with the Taliban's ideological narratives. The Ministry of Education announced revisions to the content of 18 religious textbooks covering Hadith, Seerat (Islamic Biography), and Taaleem-ul-Islam (Islamic Teachings), which were under review by the Taliban's Quality Assurance Committee (Kawa 2025). Additionally, textbooks for history and geography for grades 7 to 12 in *madrasas* have been revised under the Taliban's ideological framework (Kawa 2025), further entrenching their influence over educational content.

Mohammad Moheq, a religious scholar and former Afghan Ambassador to Egypt, contends that the Taliban's '*madrasa*-building campaign' is a 'recipe for future crises in Afghanistan' and will impact the country's long-term socio-economic development (Centre for Information and Resilience 2023). It exacerbates sectarian tensions by promoting a singular religious interpretation and risks precipitating a looming expertise crises where

Afghanistan will require diverse fields of modern knowledge to sustain social life and development (Centre for Information and Resilience 2023). Such shifts in educational policies will increasingly shape cultures that prioritize ideological conformity over social justice.

Inclusion and National Unity at the Cost of Social Justice

“Afghanistan needs robust systems of citizen-oriented governance, instead of symbolic representation of different ethnicities and social groups in the governance structures.”

– Afghan Human Rights Advocate and former Government Official, 2022

The ‘add and stir’ approach⁷ of ensuring diversity and inclusion in governance structures was a major shortcoming of the Bonn Agreement that laid the foundation for US and NATO-backed state-building efforts in Afghanistan. Ill-suited to Afghanistan’s context, this strategy fuelled challenges such as skewed political power, inequitable resource distribution, intra-cabinet rivalries, corruption, and incompetence. A shift towards structural reforms is essential to establish truly inclusive and representative governance.

While fostering national unity among Afghans from diverse ethnicities, genders, and political leanings remains urgent, this unity must not come at the cost of social justice. The façade of ‘national unity’ over the past two decades has often silenced critical discussions on issues that were seen as obstacles to nation-building, such as systemic persecution of Hazaras, women’s rights, inter-tribal rivalries, status of religious minorities, corrupt governance structures and skewed power-sharing. Addressing these root causes is crucial to building a sustainable future rooted in peace and coexistence.

While efforts to forge national unity confront deep-rooted social inequities,

7. The Bonn Agreement, established in 2001 to help Afghanistan transition to stability and governance after the fall of the Taliban, faced criticism regarding its shortcomings in promoting inclusion and diversity. Specifically, its ‘add and stir’ approach—where policies were added onto existing frameworks without comprehensive integration or sustained engagement—often failed to address deep-seated issues of marginalization, resulting in persistent social divides and undermining long-term stability and reconciliation.

Afghan-led dialogues domestically and in the diaspora are emerging as vital platforms for re-imagining a peaceful and inclusive future.

Intra-Afghan Dialogue: Ongoing Re-thinking and Re-imagination among Afghans

The previous cycles of conflict in Afghanistan were primarily located in the regional and international paradigms including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the US-NATO intervention. After the Taliban takeover in 2021, for the first time a sustained Afghan-led, Afghan owned series of dialogues are taking place among Afghanistan's intelligentsia across faultlines of ethnicity, gender and political affiliations, to analyze why Afghanistan has been embroiled in protracted cycles of violence and instability, and to imagine prospects for sustainable peace. This attempt to enable a bottom-up analysis fosters an Afghan-centric narrative, countering the historically dominant international narratives, and represents a constructive form of diaspora engagement in nation-building.

Over the years, various dialogue platforms have emerged globally—in Vienna, Qatar, Istanbul, as well as structured groups across USA and Australia. The focus of these is as expansive as the diverse range of perspectives participating in them, and they address devastating cuts in humanitarian funding, deteriorating economic and environmental conditions, new regime restrictions on female education, and a lack of recognition compounded by governance weaknesses (Samad 2025).

Among all Afghanistan diasporic subgroups, the Taliban is viewed to be a common concern and threat that targets the sub-identities of all the citizens of Afghanistan. Although the definitions and perceptions of the different diasporic groups about the Taliban are not the same, the general consensus is that continuation of Taliban rule is not promising for the future of Afghanistan (Balkhi 2023).

The #StopHazaraGenocide campaign exemplifies this collective dialogue, mobilizing support across ethnic lines. International gatherings of young

Afghan political and diplomatic leaders further reflect an unprecedented willingness among Afghans globally to collaboratively envision a resilient future. Afghan women leaders—both within Afghanistan and in the diaspora—have sustained efforts to ensure women’s inclusion in political dialogue and peace processes.

As a fragile state, Afghanistan will need the support of regional interlocutors to amplify its own voice and demands in the international diplomatic space, and to resist foreign intervention for purely strategic ends.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendations for India

India must adopt a more proactive stance in Afghanistan, leveraging its longstanding friendship and regional influence. Key recommendations presented at the two intra-Afghan Dialogues convened by WISCOMP include:

- Implement a liberal visa policy for Afghan nationals, prioritizing women students, medical patients, and those at risk of Taliban persecution, such as journalists, women’s rights activists, civil society leaders, human rights defenders and former government officials. Grant extensions to visas as needed.
- Resume Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues between India and Afghanistan, especially foregrounding the voices of women where they can share their concerns with policymakers in India.
- Provide targeted medical aid and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and support local organizations engaged in similar efforts. Ensure that the aid is accessible to women, religious and ethnic minorities, former security personnel, and families of martyred security forces.

- Unlike countries that are engaging predominantly with the Taliban leaders, India should engage with diverse stakeholders in Afghanistan including women, youth, civil society groups, political parties, among others.
- Mobilize transnational solidarity to condemn systematic gender-based violence, galvanizing the Indian government into action for both humanitarian assistance and the promotion of an official public discourse that foregrounds women's rights to education and employment in Afghanistan. South Asian women's networks can lead these efforts.
- India could explore with other concerned countries the possibility of a policy of 'neutrality' on Afghanistan to prevent it from being enmeshed in another 'Great Game'.
- Lead regional efforts to foster inclusive peace and political stability, reaffirming Afghanistan's sovereignty and India's historic ties to the Afghan people, with a focus on serving the best interests of the people.

Recommendations for the International Community

While a uniform international policy towards the Taliban is challenging given the constantly evolving situation in Afghanistan, the following recommendations emerged at the two intra-Afghan Dialogues:

- The international community needs to prevent the gradual 'recognition' of the Taliban. Taliban are a reality in Afghanistan, but they are not the only reality. There is a thriving civil society working hard to protect its hard-won democratic gains, who need support and encouragement.
- Promote Track 2 diplomacy to expand people-to-people exchanges and foster trust among diverse Afghan stakeholders.

- The international community and regional partners of Afghanistan need to engage in a broad-based inclusive dialogue with diverse stakeholders both within Afghanistan and in the diaspora to explore a political solution for Afghanistan. Emerging Afghan leaders can be found among the recently formed diaspora community, longtime exiles, former Afghan diplomats who continue to have convening power and are respected in the international diplomatic space, civil society groups in Afghanistan, the private sector, and the religious and tribal leaders who are not a part of the Taliban.
- Only moderate levels of engagement by the international community is advised because high levels of international engagement and external interventions in the last two decades drained agency and leadership from the Afghans and made them 'passive beneficiaries' and 'puppets'. A lasting peace process requires Afghan ownership and leadership.
- Condition any engagement, support, or recognition of the Taliban on their adherence to international human rights standards, reversal of oppressive decrees particularly concerning women, and inclusive participation of all Afghans in shaping the country's political future.
- Strengthen links between the Afghan diaspora and civil society within Afghanistan, enhancing access to international networks and resources.
- Recalibrate regional policies to share responsibility for stability, addressing security threats posed by terrorism and radicalism emanating from Afghanistan.
- Long-term sustainable peace in Afghanistan is possible only through a political process. Prioritize a negotiated, Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process involving the Taliban, Afghan leaders, and international stakeholders.

- The systematic persecution of the Hazaras in Afghanistan requires an urgent response, including investigating the atrocities and prosecuting the perpetrators. It can serve as a common rallying point for Afghans across ethnic divides and the international community.
- Systematically document ongoing human rights violations to build a case for accountability and justice.
- Support the women of Afghanistan who are at the forefront of non-violent resistance against the Taliban. Their resistance is not only for the women of Afghanistan, but to craft a better future for all the people of the country.
- There is a need for regional interlocutors to listen to the discourse being shaped by the Afghans and amplify their voices to the broader regional and international community. This must be done in the interest of the people of Afghanistan - not for purely 'strategic' influence and presence.

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Consequences of Afghan Women's Civil Activism Inside and Outside the Country Under Taliban Rule

By Sara Batoul**¹

After re-capturing power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban swiftly imposed numerous restrictions on women, including bans on their education, employment, freedom, and social and political activities. In response, Afghan women based inside as well as outside the country immediately began resisting these regressive changes, by organizing, carrying out public protests, and advocating for the restoration of the full spectrum of women's rights in the country. This resistance, which is now in its fourth year, has grown, evolved, and become stronger. These efforts have borne substantive positive outcomes during this period, but Afghan women inside the country have also paid a high price for standing up for their rights.

Using an analytical-descriptive approach, this essay: **a)** identifies key positive outcomes and negative consequences of women's civil resistance under Taliban rule; and **b)** articulates how the Taliban's ideological views influence their harsh responses to Afghan women's civil resistance. The findings indicate that women's civil protests have led to violence, beatings, threats, humiliation, murder, sexual assault, forced migration, hostage-taking, and other oppressive actions by the Taliban against participating women. However, the continuation and persistence of civic advocacy and activism by Afghan women and girls have laid the groundwork for ensuring

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women's human rights in the future and have significantly impeded the Taliban's political engagement with the international community.

The essay begins with a brief introduction, followed by a concise discussion on the Taliban's ideological foundations. The two subsequent sections respectively analyze and contextualize the achievements made by women's civil resistance so far, and the risks and reprisals Afghan women face for their activism. This is followed by a short discussion exploring how the Taliban's ideological frameworks shape how they view women's rights and how they have responded to women's activism. The essay concludes with three policy recommendations.

Introduction

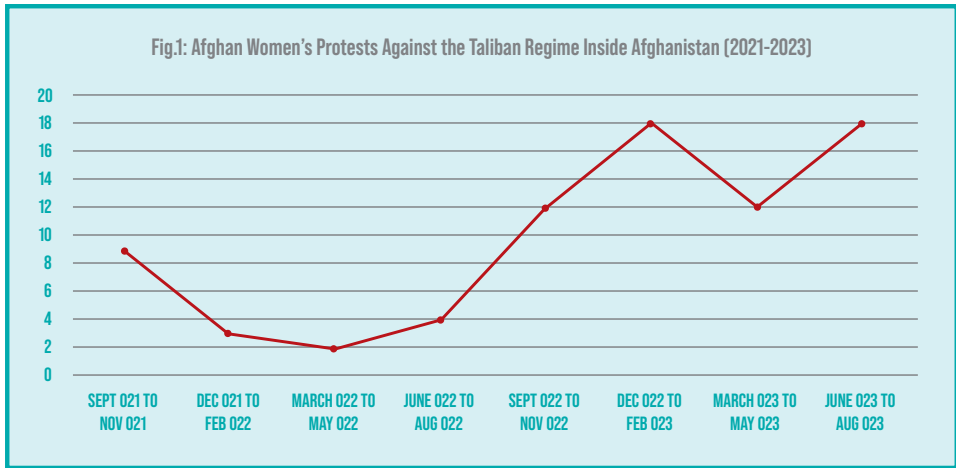
Following the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) to the Taliban in August 2021, the Taliban *de facto* authorities (DFA) began imposing numerous restrictions on women's education, employment, and economic, social, political, and cultural activities. Through these restrictions, they are denying women the right to education, employment in foreign institutions and non-government organizations (NGO), engage in trade, drive, participate in elections, and partake in other social, political, and artistic activities. The Taliban justify their opposition to women's rights and freedoms as 'religious duty'.

As a group claiming to uphold Islamic principles, the Taliban have adopted the most rigid and inflexible interpretations of Islam, unprecedented even within the broader Islamic world and among other religions. They demand unconditional adherence to their interpretation of Islamic behavior, requiring people to pray five times daily, avoid shaving their beards, and forbidding women from appearing in public without a *mahram* (close male relative chaperone). They have deemed filmmaking, photography, and cinema as forbidden, and have established sharia courts and makeshift tribunals as a means of instilling fear among the public and setting examples. These extreme

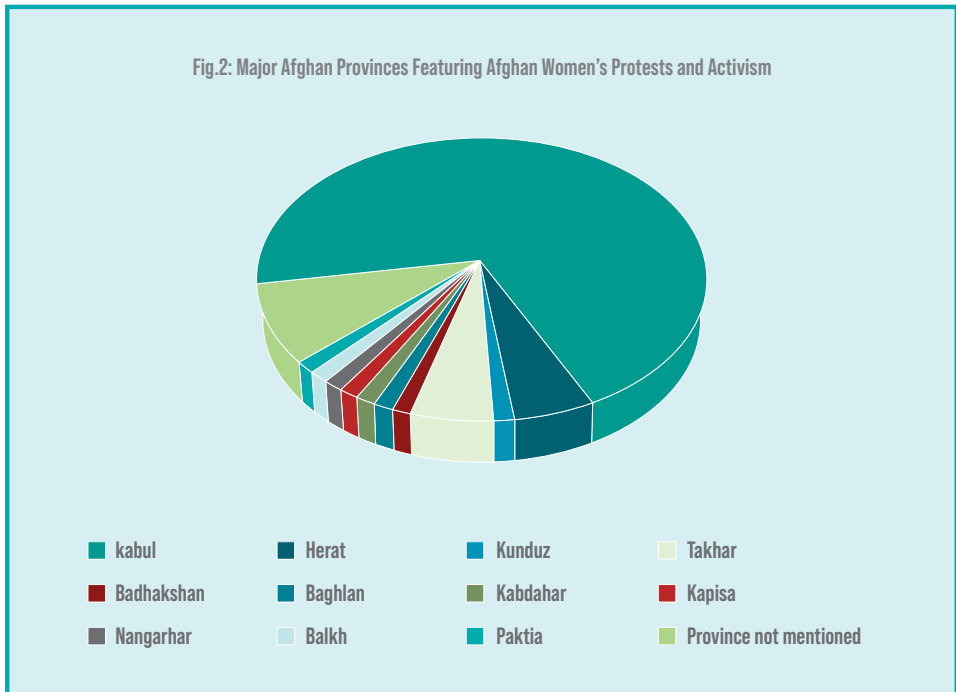
postures and policies are perceived as unnecessary even by some members of the Taliban (Gul 2025).

The Taliban-imposed restrictions, especially on women, contradict the country's 2004 constitution (which the Taliban voided shortly after seizing power), various international conventions and legal instruments to which Afghanistan is a signatory, and even Islamic principles. Mainstream Islamic jurisprudence across the Muslim world supports women's right to education, employment, and participation in society. This is evidenced by policies in Indonesia, Turkey, Jordan, Morocco, and most Gulf Arab states. Key authorities on Hanafi jurisprudence and various Islamic institutions worldwide too do not endorse the Taliban's sweeping bans.

However, the Taliban have remained unfazed, obstinate in their intent to subjugate women and impose their narrow interpretation of Islamic principles, in their pursuit of increasing and retaining absolute control and power over the people and state of Afghanistan. Afghan women have been the primary bulwark against the Taliban, with their sustained activism and civil resistance—both inside and outside the country—playing a crucial role in slowing the pace of the Taliban's regressive sprint, often at immense personal cost. A 2024 study that examined Afghan women's protests inside Afghanistan provides a glimpse into these civil movements (see Fig.1 and Fig.2).



Source: Dangol 2024, 24



Source: Dangol 2024, 26

The Ideological Underpinnings of The Taliban

From a religious standpoint, the Taliban identify as Muslims and followers of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence. However, the Taliban's ideologies, policies, and practices merit critical examination in relation to the principles of the Hanafi school and other intellectual and theological traditions (Mahdavi 2014, 87). This is because the patterns/details in the Taliban's stated views and actions (including many inherent contradictions) are among the core factors influencing the Taliban's opposition to women's rights even as prescribed in Islam, and the nature of the Taliban's responses to women's civil activism.

A. The Hanafi School of Thought

The Hanafi school is one of the four major Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence, which recognizes the first four caliphs—Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali—in the order of succession. The founder of this school of Islamic thought, Imam Abu Hanifa (Nu'man ibn Thabit), was of Persian origin and is known for his reliance on analogy (*qiyas*) and rational judgment in deriving legal rulings. For instance, Abu Hanifa's stance on apostasy (*ridda*) and retribution (*qisas*) emphasized caution and rational discourse. He argued that any accusation of apostasy must first be verified, followed by engaging the accused in dialogue to offer convincing arguments, rather than rushing to punishment.

In this regard, the Taliban's practices align with the Hanafi school only in their method of attaining governance—i.e., via dominance, one of the four traditional methods of claiming a caliphate. However, their approach to social and political matters diverges significantly from Hanafi teachings. Whereas Abu Hanifa advocated for analogy and rational inference in interpreting religious rulings, the Taliban adhere to superficial and Salafist interpretations of Islam in their social and political policies. Thus, the Taliban's ideology finds little alignment with the jurisprudential framework of the Hanafi school (Mahdavi 2014, 88–90).

B. Salafism

Salafists reject any interpretation or exegesis of Quranic verses, advocating instead for unquestioning belief in the Quran as the word of God as inherently correct and beyond objection. Their ideology emphasizes adherence to the practices of the early generations of Muslims (the *salaf*) in all political and social matters. Similarly, the Taliban adopt a literalist and superficial interpretation of Quranic verses, opposing any form of interpretation or exegesis. In this regard, the Taliban's stances align closely with Salafist ideology. Another point of convergence between the Taliban and the Salafists is their shared belief that Shia Muslims are infidels and that killing them constitutes a form of jihad. However, significant differences also exist in practice, amongst the Talib. For instance, some Taliban members have (occasionally) shown respect for shrines and the tombs of Shia saints, and certain Taliban leaders have favorable views of Sufi sects, including the Naqshbandi order (Hamidi 2019, 43).

C. Wahhabism

Founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in Arabia, the Wahhabi movement, focuses on fighting polytheism and rejecting rationalism, philosophy, independent legal reasoning (*ijtihad*), Quranic exegesis, mysticism, civil society, and women's participation in public life without *mahram* (close male relative chaperone/guardian). Wahhabis also oppose any form of innovation (*bid'ah*). The Taliban's beliefs and practices share a strong resemblance to Wahhabi teachings, such as their claim that their interpretation of Islam is the only authentic one, opposition to *ijtihad*, rejection of philosophical methods, hostility toward innovation, and the killing of individuals accused of polytheism. However, not all Taliban leaders subscribe to the Wahhabi view of labelling Shias as infidels. Despite this distinction, the ideological and operational ties between the Taliban and Wahhabis are so close that it is difficult to draw a clear line between their practices (Mahdavi 2014, 101–104).

D. Deobandism

The Deobandi movement initially emerged as a progressive force resisting British colonial rule in India. It declared its mission as ‘reform and unification of the Islamic community’. Generally, the movement has emphasized non-compromise with Western values, advocating that the West should respect the Islamic value system (similar to Taliban claims). Deobandism assigned limited role to women and did not accept Shia Islam. The Taliban’s affiliation with the Deobandi school has a long and deep history spanning time, financing, ideology, and manpower (Rana and Ganguly 2021) and has been confirmed by various sources, including the Taliban themselves. The alignment between the Taliban’s ideology and the Deobandi school remains undeniable.

Overall, when analyzing and matching the Taliban’s ideological and doctrinal principles, it becomes evident that they are not exclusively influenced by a single school of Islamic jurisprudence or a specific intellectual tradition. Instead, similarities and overlaps can be observed between the Taliban’s ideological foundations and various fundamentalist movements, such as Salafism, Deobandism, and Wahhabism. Their ideological underpinnings thus reflect a blend of elements from different Islamic schools of thought, featuring a distinct and multifaceted doctrinal approach.

The Taliban’s bans on women’s education, employment, and social and political participation are firmly rooted in their religious and ideological foundations that feature a narrow interpretation of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, a strong influence from Deobandism, infusions of Wahhabi-like rigidity, and reinforcement by Pashtunwali (the traditional Pashtun ethnic tribal code). While the broader Hanafi tradition is one of the more flexible schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam, the Taliban adopt an ultra-restrictive, ‘Hadith-oriented’ approach shaped by the Deobandi doctrine. Whereas Hanafi thought endorses rational thought and reasoning, Deobandism emphasizes literalism and discourages rational reinterpretation, creating an environment hostile to female autonomy and modern civil rights.

The Taliban’s anti-innovation and anti-modernity stances overlap with the

Wahhabi and Salafi ideologies, which justify limiting women's public roles, echoing Hanbali-inspired rigidity but enforced under a Hanafi or Deobandi guise. Additionally, Pashtunwali enshrines patriarchal norms and notions of family, female seclusion, and collective honor. The Taliban (most of whom are ethnic Pashtuns, with some hailing from other ethnic groups) frequently fuse Pashtunwali cultural practices with religious decrees derived from selective readings of Islamic principles to proclaim restrictions on women as being both religiously mandated and culturally authentic.

Achievements of Afghan Women's Civil Activism Against the Taliban Regime

After the Taliban recaptured power in August 2021, women immediately came out strongly and in large numbers in street protests and other civil movements and campaigns inside Afghanistan. Since then, Afghan women have been at the forefront of activism, with more women than men organizing non-violent push backs against the Taliban's oppressive regime. Afghan women have also persisted against all odds including the fact that occasionally, even UN-supported initiatives—like the 2024 Doha conference between the Taliban and representatives of the UN and various governments—have excluded Afghan women representatives from the discussions, at the behest of the Taliban. These efforts have borne certain crucial and substantive results.

Preventing Formal International Recognition of the Taliban's Interim Government

Through varied activities like public protest marches, media campaigns, artistic expressions, scholarly research and legal efforts, Afghan women have managed to draw and sustain the international community's attention to the situation of women in Afghanistan and have helped prevent the formal recognition of the Taliban regime by all countries (except Russia, which recognized it in 2025) and the UN. In this regard, the active role of Afghan women based overseas should not be overlooked. They have been a key part

of the civil struggle and advocacy for Afghan women's rights. The protests they organize in foreign countries in front of parliaments and the meetings they continue to hold with high level officials, including foreign ministers and parliamentarians, have been crucial for raising awareness and drawing global attention through localized action across diverse geographies. The steadfastness and civil activism of women both inside Afghanistan and in foreign countries has contributed substantially towards the lack of/limited political engagement between the Taliban and the international community.

Facilitating Accountability and Reform(s) in International Law

In 2023, women's rights activists, academics, other experts and legal professionals from Afghanistan and Iran conceived and launched a campaign demanding the recognition of gender apartheid as a crime against humanity (Sadr 2025). Since then, relentless advocacy by Afghan women has catalyzed moves by several countries and multilateral bodies like the UN to explore pathways to recognize gender apartheid as a crime under international law. Similar efforts by Afghan women have raised the profile of this critical issue, paving the way for legal proceedings like the International Criminal Court issuing arrest warrants against Taliban leaders, and UN agencies' call for recognizing gender apartheid, directly tying activists' pressure, advocacy, and documentation to concrete international action and discourse (Sadr 2025).

Keeping Opportunities for Women's Employment and Education Alive

The Taliban's opposition to women's right to education and employment is not due to religious reasons, but rather because they view women as a commodity meant to be used solely to fulfil male desires. According to the Taliban's worldview, if women are educated, employed, and empowered with rights, it would undermine the masculinity of men and men would lose their 'honor' and 'reputation' within their own villages and regions. Under the guise of religion, their primitive cultural views, and extreme beliefs, the Taliban have sought to eliminate opportunities for women's education and employment.

The Taliban have continued to ban women from studying beyond primary school and have even barred women from medical training as of December 2024. However, had women not launched their civil resistance, the Taliban would have completely banned women's education and employment outright from the beginning, and would have totally opposed any progress in these areas. Additionally, inside Afghanistan, women have organized clandestine schools, home-based learning, and mutual aid networks, ensuring hundreds of girls and women continue to access education and support despite the bans (Newton 2025; Sirat and Hakimi 2021). Their organizing preserves vital skills, fosters solidarity, and keeps the hope for future empowerment alive.

Boosting Women's Morale Inside Afghanistan

Afghan women's civil activism and relentless campaigning have become a formidable thorn for the Taliban. Through their protests and diverse modes of activism—including digital campaigns like #BreadWorkFreedom and #LetAfghanGirlsLearn (Haidari 2024); data gathering and documentation work like the BISHNAW-WAWRA initiative; women-run news media like *Zan Times* etc.—Afghan women successfully continue to highlight several key issues to both domestic and international communities. Despite the Taliban's brutal treatment of female protestors—including arrests, aerial firing, closure of girls' dormitories, beatings, insults, humiliation, and other threats—Afghan women have remained defiant, refusing to accept any curtailing of their rights and liberties, continuing to advocate for their rights both inside and outside the country. The persistence and continuation of such civil activities by women strengthens the morale of other women throughout Afghanistan in their fight against the oppression and authoritarian rule of the Taliban's male-dominated government.

Ensuring Preparedness to Guarantee Women's Future Participation in Society and Politics

Afghan women's activism has kept global attention on Taliban human rights abuses through evidence-based campaigns, reporting, and digital documentation. Their collective voices have shaped media narratives, academic research, and political debates globally, driving sustained coverage and diplomatic condemnation that would otherwise have faded. Without women's participation in social and political spheres, it is impossible to achieve social and political balance, and just outcomes in a society. During the IRA era, numerous women were actively participating in various roles, including leadership roles, as members of parliament, ministers, civil servants, doctors, educators, and law enforcement and armed forces personnel to name a few. However, there are no women in the Taliban *de facto* authorities' (DFA) cabinet, and women's social and political activities face numerous restrictions. Nevertheless, the very act of women's civil activism keeps alive the prospects of women's active participation in society and politics. Without sustained protests and advocacy, Afghan women will be completely excluded from society and politics under such a discriminatory government.

In this regard, Afghan women are also critically examining and harnessing Islamic theological interpretations to contest the Taliban's patriarchal claims, asserting rights within an Islamic framework (Shahir, Ren, and Noor 2025). This strategy helps legitimize resistance culturally and religiously, countering Taliban justifications of gender apartheid. Cumulatively, by ensuring multi-dimensional resistance and legal argumentation, women's efforts are also systematically strengthening the prospects of future restitution by laying strong foundations across the legal, social, economic, and political spectra. Their work ensures that even under repression, international and local frameworks remain ready for progress in a post-Taliban reality.

Risks and Reprisals Afghan Women Face due to Their Anti-Taliban Civil Activism

The Taliban's return immediately sparked several months of non-violent protests by women and girls demanding the right to work, education, and social welfare, where they consistently raised their voices, calling for the protection of their human and civil rights by the Taliban. Each of these protests led to confrontations between women and the Taliban, who have reacted repeatedly and brutally to prevent gatherings, demonstrations, and any form of advocacy for women's rights. Consequently, while the positive outcomes of Afghan women's civil activism inside and outside the country have delivered country-wide and society-wide net benefits, the negative consequences have been borne primarily and almost exclusively by women, as these consequences arise mainly from the Taliban's backlash.

Physical Violence, Abductions, and Arbitrary Detentions

To crush the women's movement, the Taliban have routinely resorted to threats, arrests, and abductions. For example, in response to the advocacy and protests of women in Kabul and several other provinces, the Taliban abducted several women (such as Parwana Ibrahimkhil, Tamana Zaryab Pariani, Zahra Mohammadi, Parisa Mubariz, Zarifa Yaqoubi, and several other girls) and subjected them to torture (Human Rights Watch 2022). According to Parwana Ibrahimkhil, one of those detained, during the arrests of women and girls, the Taliban had no female police officers; instead, men arrested, tortured, and interrogated women. The Taliban have used unethical, un-Islamic, and inhuman methods to suppress women, including threatening them and their family members with violence. The Taliban forces have also resorted to beating women and subjecting them to various forms of violence both at protest marches and in detention. Problematically, the Taliban not only (threaten to) extort money from families of detained women and girls (Barr and Fetrat 2023) but also use detained women as leverage to extract political and other concessions from the international community in exchange for

their release. In many instances, as a precondition of release from detention, female protesters detained by the Taliban have also been coerced into signing statements committing that neither they nor their family members would protest or publicly discuss their detention experience (Amnesty International 2022).

Sexual Assault and Murder

Afghan women are also facing a grave risk of sexual assault and extrajudicial killings as consequences of their activism for women's rights. For example, at a women's protest march in Mazar-e-Sharif in September 2021, the Taliban abducted over 60 protestors, including at least 40 women. Corpses of eight detainees were discovered in city streets a week later (Clark, Joyner, and Patidar 2021). The Taliban released most of the remaining detainees after over 45 days of tireless efforts by the detainees' families, but the fates of nine detained girls remain unclear. The risks women face come not just from the Taliban but sometimes also from their own families or communities. For example, five girls who had been detained were later killed by their families after being freed from the Taliban's grasp (Bahar News 2023). There have also been reports about the Taliban's abduction of girls, forced marriages to Taliban soldiers, and sexual assaults for months, but due to concerns regarding family and personal security, and even conservative mores, these violations seldom receive media coverage, or are discussed publicly by the survivors. This "silence" was eventually broken by Elaha Delawarzai, a female medical student who took to social media and shared that Saeed Khosti, a former spokesperson of the Taliban-run Ministry of Interior, had sexually assaulted her at the Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence, filmed the act and threatened to share the footage, and had forced her into marriage with him (Zan Times 2022). Protesters also reported that the abduction of girls and women, sexual violence, and forced marriages to Taliban fighters had become common and everyday occurrences (Langar 2022).

The issue of sexual violence and 'honor' killings of Afghan girls and women by the Taliban, both in the past and present, remains largely underreported. This is because, due to Afghanistan's traditional culture, there is an unwillingness to report the conditions of sexual violence victims and survivors. When women and girls engage in civil activities to assert their rights, the Taliban arrest them without female police officers, detain them in prisons where no women are present, and subject them to sexual assault (Joya et al. 2024). Survivors have stated that the Taliban not only sexually assaulted them but also filmed the act and blackmailed them with releasing the footage if they continued to speak out against the Taliban regime (Joya et al. 2024).

Increase in Domestic and Psychological Violence

Given the harsh reactions of the Taliban to women's civil protests and considering Afghanistan's traditional culture with its harmful customs and practices, women are consistently subjected to various forms of violence, particularly domestic and psychological violence. Women protestors who are detained are subjected to violence and interrogated for days or months in Taliban prisons, resulting in them developing psychological issues. Once released, these women face further challenges, as their families, concerned about their honor and reputation, often place them in difficult situations and, in some cases, have even killed them. Thus, one of the negative consequences of women's civil activism is the psychological trauma and domestic violence that they suffer from the resulting backlash.

Forced Displacement

Gender inequality and safety concerns are strong motivators that inform women's desire to migrate. As the Taliban have responded to Afghan women's civil resistance with violence, threats, kidnappings, arrests, sexual assault, and harassment, this has led many women to emigrate and leave their homeland. Nevertheless, although this is reducing the numbers of women inside the country who can organize and resist the Taliban's anti-women policies, those

Afghan women who have had to emigrate overseas to safety have continued to play a leading role in the ongoing struggle against the Taliban's male-dominated regime from abroad.

How Do the Taliban's Ideology and Policy Measures Intersect in Their Suppression of Women's Rights and Women's Civil Resistance?

A juxtaposition of the Taliban's actions, rhetoric, and policies in relation to each other reveals that the group is leveraging selective readings of religious principles in combination with conservative cultural mores in Afghanistan that traditionally subordinate women and emphasize family honor linked to female modesty and seclusion. The Taliban combine a rigid, selective application of Islamic doctrine with patriarchal cultural values to enforce a gender system that denies women political and social agency. Their methods are not (merely) about enforcing religious norms but maintaining a power structure that hinges on female invisibility and male control in governance. This toxic fusion enables systematic, brutal repression of women's activism, aimed at ensuring a complete elimination of any public challenge to their ideological and political monopoly. While the Taliban repeatedly claim that their rule and policies are legitimate on religious grounds, many Islamic scholars across the world and Afghan citizens, including women activists, have rejected the Taliban's (mis)interpretations of Islamic principles and jurisprudence as being distorted, selective, and politicized for personal (political) gain.

The Taliban's approach to punishing women activists is not (merely) about enforcement of religious codes but a calculated use of ideology and culture to preserve an authoritarian gender order. This system criminalizes activism as heresy and cultural betrayal. The methods combine physical coercion, psychological intimidation, social isolation, and economic deprivation, forming a comprehensive machinery aimed at eliminating women's agency and public presence. By using arbitrary detentions, sexual assault, collective punishment (by targeting families of activists) and other forms of violence,

the Taliban are thus deploying a multi-pronged strategy to coerce women into submissive compliance. Their measures weaponize social norms, increase pressure, raise the risks involved in protesting, and stand to suppress long-term activism.

The intersection of religion and culture in the Taliban's punitive strategy against women and Afghan women's activism creates (and reflects) a highly gendered system of repression that targets not just individuals but entire female social networks, leveraging family and community pressure to enforce compliance. This multi-dimensional repression is aimed at preventing any challenge to the Taliban's authority and to maintain the gender apartheid fundamental to their governance model. The punitive measures inflicted on women activists reflect the political nature of Taliban repression disguised as piety and tradition.

Conclusion

After the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, many women and girls became the leaders of street protests and civil opposition against the Taliban in the streets of Kabul and various other provinces of Afghanistan. Additionally, several Afghan women in foreign countries (those who grew up overseas as well as those who had to relocate overseas after the Taliban returned) have actively campaigned and lobbied the governments of those countries to support Afghan women's rights and efforts. Women's rights activists have fought non-violently for their fundamental rights and freedoms since the Taliban's takeover. However, the Taliban have not responded rationally to their protests. On the contrary, the Taliban have escalated their restrictions against women, and have countered female protestors, activists, and dissidents with harsh and brutal measures including torture, beatings, violence, sexual assault, blackmail, arbitrary detentions, imprisonments, torturing for days and months, and even extra-judicial killings.

The Taliban's repression of women is an ideology-driven campaign that leverages religious symbolism and cultural traditions to repress dissent,

control society, and entrench authoritarian governance by eliminating women's visibility and participation in public life (Sahill 2023). The Taliban exploit deeply rooted Afghan cultural norms that emphasize female modesty, male honor, and social control of women's behavior. The Taliban frame women activists as threats not only to religious law but also to cultural traditions and family honor. The DFA's punitive tactics extend to targeting activists' families to amplify social pressure and discourage resistance. This interplay between ideology and culture enables the Taliban to frame punitive actions against non-violent women activists as collective defense of Afghan cultural identity, punishing women activists with violence, isolation, social ostracism, and economic deprivation designed to break their will.

Despite these brutalities, Afghan women have remained strong, continuing their efforts to restore their rights, refusing to surrender the field to an extremist, misogynistic group like the Taliban without a fight. Through these protests, both in Afghanistan and abroad, they continue to challenge the Taliban, expose their flaws to the world. Their efforts are also facilitating accountability, propelling reforms in international law, keeping opportunities for women's education and employment inside Afghanistan alive, and boosting the morale of women inside the country. Crucially, women have thus far successfully prevented the Taliban's formal recognition by the international community (barring Russia) and are also laying strong foundations to revive and protect women's rights in a post-Taliban world.

Policy Recommendations

- **Apply Diplomatic Pressure on the Taliban:** The UN and the international community must use all tools at its disposal to apply and/or increase diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to ensure that the group upholds all of women's rights and freedoms. This pressure could include cancellation of visas and refusal of travel exemptions for (sanctioned) Taliban leaders and members,

making economic aid subject to conditions, and limiting of political engagement with Taliban leaders and representatives.

- **Conduct Regular and Broad-based Documentation:** International human rights bodies, lawyers, legal collectives and the broader civil society must conduct and expand broad-based documentation of cases of violence against Afghan women. This effort must be based on exclusive interviews with women victims, and the findings must be published in the form of periodic and one-off reports.
- **Support Women's Civil Resistance Inside Afghanistan:** The UN, including (permanent and non-permanent) members, must actively support civil activities by Afghan women living under Taliban rule.

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BOOK REVIEW

‘Gender, Memory, Resilience: Sima Samar’s *Outspoken as Écriture Feminine*’

By Akashleena Chakrabarti¹

Title: *Outspoken: My Fight for Freedom and Human Rights in Afghanistan*

Author: Sima Samar (with Sally Armstrong)

Year: 2024

Publisher: Random House Canada, Toronto

Pages: 322

*One day I ll smash this cage, its very solitude
I ll drink the wine of joy, sing the way a bird should in springtime.
Though a delicate-limbed tree, I won’t shudder with every breeze
I am a daughter of Afghan — I ll sound my faghan, weave it to eternity*

– Nadia Anjuman, *Daughters of Afghanistan*. Translated by Adeeba Talukder and Aria Fani

“I have three strikes against me. I m a woman, I speak for women and I m Hazara - the most persecuted ethnic group in Afghanistan” (Samar 2024, 1).

As global attention remains fixated on the wars in Gaza, Ukraine, and political upheavals throughout South Asia, the enduring conflict in Afghanistan has

1. **Akashleena Chakrabarti** is Senior Program Manager at WISCOMP, where she coordinates and supports programs on Youth and Dialogue, Mediation, Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding.

slipped to the margins of international concern and collective memory. While sporadic headlines report on new Taliban edicts and laws restricting women's public presence and rights, memoirs and written works play a crucial role in reclaiming the stories of Afghan women, their traditions, human rights struggles, and pursuit of justice.

Écriture féminine, the act of writing by women, embodies subversion, defiance, and resilience, providing a vital medium for documenting lived realities, challenging dominant histories, and offering alternative narratives and historiographies (Cixous, Cohen and Cohen 1976). In Afghanistan, while writers like Khaled Hosseini portray the emotional depth of Afghan life, it is through women's narratives that the complex negotiations of identity and survival by women are most vividly captured.

I know the inside story of my country.... I know the players in this chess game called Afghanistan (Samar 2024, 23–24).

Dr. Sima Samar's *Outspoken: My Fight for Freedom and Human Rights in Afghanistan* offers a powerful narrative of defiance, resilience, and hope amid widespread despair (Gannon 2021). It is a testament to the myriad ways in which women navigate and resist systemic violence, oppression, 'gender apartheid,' and war in Afghanistan. Samar's memoir is divided into eight chapters that explore different periods of her life, with a particular focus on post-2001 Afghanistan and leading up to the 2021 takeover of power by the Taliban.

What distinguishes Samar's work is her unique vantage point both as an engaged actor at the peace table and a central architect shaping the nation's post-2001 transition. She draws on her experiences as an eminent Afghan women's rights and human rights advocate, former Minister of Women's Affairs (one of only two women in the transitional government at the time), and former Chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. She also served as Special Envoy of the President of Afghanistan and State Minister for Human Rights and International Affairs.

The book places a significant emphasis on gender as both a critical lens and focal point, and is directed at an international, predominantly Western audience. Its purpose extends beyond mere documentation to advocacy and awareness raising, particularly about the complex trajectory of the Taliban's rise, the multiplicity of narratives involved, and the socio-political landscape in the years preceding the Taliban's return to power in 2021.

Samar traces the everyday life of Afghans from the highlands of her hometown, Jaghori, through her extended family and the complex societal family structures shaped by polygamy. Her early childhood was marked by 'multiple marginalizations' as a Hazara woman; influenced by ethnicity, gender norms, pervasive stereotypes, and social divisions. Her narration of these experiences raises questions about what it means to publicly practice and uphold one's faith as someone from the minority community. It also invites deeper reflections on the complexities of coexistence in divided societies (Gopinath and Shabdita 2023).

She challenges reductive stereotypes portraying Afghanistan as a barren desert inhabited solely by veiled women and warring tribes, situating the objectification of women at the core of the country's political and social decline. This also confronts mainstream narratives by analyzing the sociopolitical vacuums that facilitated the Taliban's rise. Samar illustrates how the politicization of Islam was used to curtail women's mobility and autonomy under the guise of "protection." Emerging from the lawlessness of the mujahideen, the Taliban era marked a time when, as Samar notes, "the lives of women became high-wire acts between life and death" (Samar 2024, 102).

The Taliban's return, termed the '*Ides of August*' for Afghanistan (Samar 2024, 266) further entrenched codified gender apartheid, exemplified by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.² However,

2. The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice is the Taliban's governmental body responsible for enforcing their interpretation of Islamic law by regulating public behavior, dress codes, and social conduct in Afghanistan.

Samar's descriptions of individual Taliban members complicate the monolithic portrayal of these men, revealing many as products of structural violence rooted in Cold War geopolitics and the broader "Talibanization" of the region.

Resilience is a common theme throughout her work, woven through personal anecdotes from her student years during the Cold War, from debating democracy to practicing medicine, intersecting with her activism in the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan and, later, her founding of the Shuhada Organization. The '*Saur Revolution*'-Soviet occupation of Afghanistan brought deep personal loss, including the forced disappearance of her husband, reflecting on the sufferings of families of political prisoners.

While practicing medicine, Samar witnessed firsthand the collapse of essential health and education infrastructure in Afghanistan. The health clinics where she worked reflected the profound physical and psychological toll of oppression from illnesses caused by confinement and mandatory burqa use to rising rates of depression, self-immolation, and suicide. (Samar 2024) Meanwhile, the political economy of Afghanistan continued to face the challenges of fratricidal violence, narcotics trafficking, and youth unemployment, fueling instability, poverty, and exploitation all of which also negatively impacted women (Gopinath and Shabdita 2022).

While collaborations with international aid organizations led to the creation of hospitals, clinics, and schools, especially post-1980s and 90s. Yet, Samar notes that women's specific needs rarely stood at the center of aid, recovery, and relief efforts. In the 1990s, "Even the UN turned its back on women" (Samar 2024, 124). "Ordinary people became fuel for superpowers' ambitions" (Samar 2024, 142). Samar highlighted sharp disparities in the nature and focus of aid, with male-only NGOs often receiving priority before 9/11 (Samar 2024, 99). After 9/11, the 'war on terror' transformed these dynamics. Interventions were justified on the grounds of "the periwinkle-blue Barkha" (Samar 2024, 142), once seen internationally as a sign of respect

for “culturally diverse traditions”, now recast as a symbol of oppression sparking widespread calls for action to save Afghan/Muslim women from the oppressive Taliban.

The absence of women from decision-making and key accords such as the Geneva Accords (1988) and the recent Doha Talks (2019-2020)³ underscores a profound representation gap. Although Samar held formal roles, including Minister for Women’s Affairs and Chair of the Independent Human Rights Commission, she faced financial and political pressures, intimidation, death threats, and a lack of sufficient protection and political will to document abuses and enforce justice effectively.

Nonetheless, her tenure achieved important positive reforms: integrating human rights into education, instituting a 25% parliamentary quota for women, establishing a permanent Human Rights Commission, and launching initiatives on juvenile justice, trafficking, sexual abuse, and war casualties. She also championed women’s inclusion in combat roles in the armed forces and criminalized domestic violence and honor killings.

While Samar expresses profound anguish and a sense of abandonment regarding the roles played by international organizations, the persistent efforts of women’s networks and solidarity groups highlight a crucial dynamic often overlooked: the indispensable and sustained advocacy that these networks provide amidst institutional shortcomings. Organizations such as Amnesty International, the Women’s Alliance for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan, Médecins Sans Frontières, and diplomatic missions have continued to champion the rights and well-being of Afghan women and girls, exemplifying how transnational feminist solidarity may have the potential to counterbalance the limitations of formal state-led interventions (Gopinath and Shabdita 2023).

3. The 1988 Geneva Accords, signed by Afghanistan and Pakistan with the US and the Soviet Union as guarantors, facilitated the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and included mutual commitments to non-intervention. The 2020 Doha Agreement, a bilateral accord between the US and the Taliban, established a conditional timeline for the withdrawal of US forces and frameworks for subsequent intra-Afghan dialogue.

Having closely collaborated with the United Nations, Sima Samar's lens is firmly grounded in its commitment to internationalism, multilateralism and resonates with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The book robustly advocates adherence to UN conventions addressing violence against women and the rights of children, while advancing significant developments such as the 2019 National Action Plans and the National Inquiry on Women, Peace, and Security.

Emphasis on the Women, Peace, and Security framework and the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine by Samar presents a slippery slope, as these Western-centric paradigms often overlook the localized, culturally embedded experiences of Afghan women shaped by distinct social and patriarchal dynamics. While Samar foregrounds the specificities of her community and ethnic identity, she does so through the discourse of humanitarian intervention and Western frameworks. This reliance reproduces the very limitations it critiques, obscuring rather than illuminating intersectionality and indigeneity. Thus, while learning from diverse conflict contexts remains essential, applying the Women, Peace, and Security framework demands contextualization grounded in the intersectional realities of women across different settings.

Samar envisions the establishment of a democratic regime that prioritizes women's rights and enforces accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Her tenure as a UN Rapporteur in Sudan, alongside experiences in Tunisia, Jordan, and Bangladesh, reinforced the importance of such governance models as global exemplars for sustainable democracy. She emphasizes that countries embracing human rights witness improved health outcomes and more productive citizens, encapsulated in her assertion: "*No Peace Without Justice*" (Samar 2024, 173). Samar argues that without credible justice and accountability mechanisms, the foundation for lasting peace remains inherently fragile. Her work in transitional justice, manifested through truth and reconciliation initiatives and extensive documentation of lived realities, marks significant initial steps toward accountability. However,

questions remain about the institutional capacity of human rights bodies to effectively implement mandates, especially when the state acts as perpetrator or is complicit in violations (Gopinath and Shabdita 2023).

While Samar also critiques the current 'protectionist interventionist' framework of the international actors, her advocacy hints towards a language of 'accompaniment' and allyship by international actors. Samar's approach raises pressing questions about the accountability and responsibility of international stakeholders in ensuring inclusive peace processes. But what remains beyond the pages is the question of how to ensure dialogue and inclusion within Afghanistan's complex social fabric, marked by deep divisions and historical conflicts (Sinha and Kakran 2008). While institutions such as human rights commissions may focus on documenting atrocities and securing justice, the challenge lies in creating spaces for meaningful dialogue that foster coexistence. This process necessitates community-based engagement that nurtures trust, empathy, and a shared commitment to peaceful coexistence despite profound differences (Lederach 2005).

Amidst the brutal realities of conflict ravaging her homeland, she brings the book to a close with a glimmer of hope, that "the road ahead may be difficult, it is not an impossible one" (Samar 2024, 301). The advocacy for human rights, the commitment to non-violence, and the pursuit of leadership and governance grounded in democratic processes and genuine people's participation, she insists, must continue.

Outspoken transcends conventional frames of a memoir by integrating personal experience with rigorous political analysis, offering vital insights into the resilience of Afghan women and the complex socio-political dynamics of contemporary Afghanistan. This work is a 'must-read' for scholars of gender studies, peacebuilding, security, and international relations, as it elucidates the nuanced realities of Afghanistan's post-2001 governance. *Outspoken* sits within a rich corpus of political memoirs by Afghan women leaders, including those of Fawzia Koofi, Rangina Hamidi, Fariba Nawa, Nilofer Rahmani and Malalai Joya, each providing diverse perspectives on Afghanistan's

challenges and prospects. What sets Samar's memoir apart is her unique vantage point with extensive international experience to frame the country's ongoing struggles within both local and global political contexts. This blend offers a distinct, particularly nuanced and multifaceted approach and a vital contribution to understanding the complex conundrum of Afghanistan.

*I m the woman who has awoken
 I ve arisen and become a tempest through the ashes of my burnt children
 I ve arisen from the rivulets of my brother` s blood
 My nation` s wrath has empowered me
 My ruined and burnt villages fill me with hatred against the enemy
 Oh compatriot, no longer regard me weak and incapable,
 My voice has mingled with thousands of arisen women
 My fists are clenched with fists of thousands of compatriots
 To break all these sufferings all these fetters of slavery.
 I m the woman who has awoken,
 I ve found my path and will never return.
 I will never return -*

Meena, *I m the Woman Who Has Awakened* (n.d.)

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ABOUT DROPS

The Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS) is an independent, not-for-profit, policy-oriented research institution committed to strengthening the values and experiences of inclusivity, pluralism, and good governance in Afghanistan, through knowledge creation and knowledge application. We firmly believe that strong, contextually grounded, (policy) research institutions are crucial for fostering environments conducive for conflict-affected states' sustainable transition from war to peace. This principle informed DROPS' birth in Kabul in 2014 and has been our North Star ever since. It also guides our Toronto chapter, which was established in 2021. In line with this principle, we believe public interest policy dialogue, healthy state-citizen engagement, public-private partnerships, and good governance can only be achieved by nourishing intellectual spaces and indigenous research that are bottom-up, locally rooted, and representative of all voices in the society—especially those of women and girls. DROPS' work is thus two-pronged: evidence-based research that provides policymakers with alternative, actionable solutions for national and sub-national issues; and intellectual and operational reinforcement for translating insights to context-responsive policies and implementation. Through gender-disaggregated and gender-sensitive data, policy relevant analyses, and tailored trainings on critical thinking and research methodologies, DROPS serves to ensure that people remain at the center of all developmental efforts in Afghanistan, while simultaneously empowering them to become agents of the change they seek.



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