Women, Peace and Security in Afghanistan

How to support women and girls?

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Executive Summary

One year on from the Taliban's takeover, a "gender apartheid" regime has been reinstituted in Afghanistan. That regime is remarkably similar to that which existed under the Taliban's 1996-2001 rule. It is central to the Taliban's consolidation of power internally and across the country. In this paper, we describe the current dire situation for women and girls in Afghanistan as a result and how international actors – not least champions of Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) – can protect and uphold women's rights and security. We suggest concrete actions that can be taken, cognisant of the power dynamics at work and the Taliban's desire for international recognition.

Introduction

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan on 15 August 2021 unravelled significant achievements of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in Afghanistan over the last two decades by reinstituting "gender apartheid" through policy guidance and restrictions. Every western donor present in the country since 2001 had pushed the WPS agenda, while the previous Government of Afghanistan adopted a National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security in 2015. However, despite the concerted efforts to implement the NAP by promoting women's participation in the parliament, in government and the security sectors, and to protect women and girls from gender-based violence and other violations of their human rights, meaningful adaptation and local implementation of WPS was limited in Afghanistan.

The nature of the withdrawal of western forces from Afghanistan under the guise of peace destabilised the modest achievements, erased the public space of struggle for gender equality and paved the way for the return of the Taliban. The swift collapse of the Afghan Government and chaotic exit of international forces laid bare the reality of the "projectification" of the WPS agenda and its impact in Afghanistan. The return of the Taliban through force became inevitable with the signing of the Doha Agreement on 29 February 2020. Moreover, the evacuation process revealed a lack of commitment to protecting women's rights and women activists in the face of the Taliban takeover and attacks.

Women and girls are facing the most serious crisis of survival based on their gender in Afghanistan. Any future strategy and engagement to support the rights and security of women and girls in Afghanistan must be based on a frank assessment of the meaningfulness of policies and initiatives supporting the WPS agenda. FFP can support this objective by providing an explicitly feminist and transformative framework for supporting women and girls in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime.

This brief provides a post-mortem analysis of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan as a reality check for the international community. It then assesses what can be done by diverse actors – not least champions of FFP – to renew the commitment and efforts to support women's security and human rights.

20 Years of WPS in Afghanistan

The WPS agenda established with Security Council Resolution 1325 in October 2000 is a wide-ranging agenda that seeks to promote women's equal participation in peace and security processes and decisions, and enable gender-sensitive protection of human rights, prevention of conflict, and relief and recovery. FFP promotes a logic of empowerment via diplomacy that supports people to deliver peace and prosperity through principles of human rights and gender equality. The FFP movement has developed more recently since 2014 and builds on the global vision and achievements of the WPS agenda. FFP promises a more explicitly feminist and transformational approach to gender justice, which has implications for rethinking foreign policy toward post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Women's freedom was instrumentalised by the U.S. and its allies following the events of 9/11 and the complex security threats to the western world presented by regimes harbouring violent non-state groups. Upholding women's rights and the WPS agenda enabled western states to promote liberal values and influence via soft power while creating alliances that showcased their status and rank in the hierarchy of international politics.

Importantly, however, the intervention also enabled Afghan women to make fundamental gains in their status and rights, notably the codification of gender equality in the 2004 Afghan constitution and institutionalisation of women's representation in the parliament through a quota system.[5] The Afghan Government began reporting on implementation of CEDAW in 2009, bringing greater transparency and accountability.[6] Women's access to education advanced

significantly. There were more than 3.8 million girls enrolled in schools by 2018, and women's enrolment in tertiary education increased three-fold between 2006 and 2020. Women's access to sexual and reproductive health increased, as the fertility rate decreased from 6.64 to 4.6 children per adult female. This progress enabled better outcomes for girls' education and women's economic participation. However, women's rights and security were fragile. In particular, the decline of women's civil society participation between 2012 and 2019 as a result of the worsening security situation made it even more difficult to secure these rights and women's full political and economic participation.

The Taliban targeted women civilians and politically active women, as well as maternity hospitals and schools. Violence against women and girls remained widespread across Afghanistan, including killings, with the home the most insecure place of all according to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).[7] But as the former Chair of the AIHRC, Dr Sima Samar, stated: "the fact that every Afghan household has heard about women's rights or discussed human rights is an achievement."[8] Modest but meaningful achievements are also reflected in everyday stories and scenes; such as that of an elderly man in Daikundi province who sold his only asset, a cow, to fund his daughter's higher education in Kabul; or captured in the picture of Mia Khan taking his daughters to schools by motorbike in the conservative villages of Paktia province.

A large sum of money was spent on gender-related themes in the state and peacebuilding efforts. Almost every program and organisation had gender equality units and projects, often to "tick the gender box" to meet the criteria for funding, whether from international organisations funded by state donors or local organisations funded by the government. Criticism of the gender approach began to emerge as the war carried on and the security situation deteriorated. Corruption played a crucial role in feeding the lack of perceived "meaningfulness" of women's equality and the tokenism of women's voices in local and rural communities. Promoting women's rights became another pocket for building assets and "making easy money."

The Afghan rural-urban tension was widest when it came to issues of women's empowerment and representation. A commom criticism was that women's rights were only upheld and promoted in urban areas, and that Afghan women leaders did not represent rural gendered dynamics and dimensions.[9] Ironically, these criticisms did not come from rural Afghan women themselves, but rather from the competition among Afghan nationals and international elites over resources, and their dismissal of each other's work as a result.

By contrast, the limited insight from documentaries or research from rural Afghanistan shows that Afghan women in rural Afghanistan supported the basic rights that their sisters enjoyed in urban areas.[10] They were prevented from participating politically in rural areas both for cultural and security reasons. Hence, the politicisation of gender equality across the rural-urban divide was used as an instrument to weaken the WPS agenda. WPS lacked a political strategy, informed by analysis of power dynamics, to achieve support from local communities as well as Kabul which would enhance and embed gender equality and protect fundamental rights.

Women's Rights and Negotiations with the Taliban

During the official diplomatic engagement with the Taliban after October 2018, the Taliban's stance on women's rights was the most popular question posed to them by journalists and officials. The Taliban consistently lacked clarity in their answers and remained ambiguous with regard to respecting the fundamental rights of women, despite these rights being denied and violated during their 1996-2001 government and the insurgency. Despite the optimism of many western commentators and diplomats, Afghan women were the first to show concerns about the continuation of the Taliban's discriminatory views and policies toward women.[11] They flagged that the statements of the extremist movement could not be trusted. Afghan women's precautions aside, it was clear from the districts under Taliban control that women were prohibited from participation in public life. Despite this on the ground evidence and the grave concerns of Afghan women, the western allies willingly took steps that led to a renewed "war on women" by the Taliban in 2021.

In the US-Taliban negotiations between 2018-2020 that led to the Doha Agreement, no Afghan women were present. This was made public only after the signing ceremony on 29 February 2020, disclosing the absence of obligation or accountability of the Taliban for women's rights.[12] The Doha Agreement enabled the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power. The U.S.'s lack of interest in protecting or even supporting the WPS agenda in Afghanistan directly threatened the lives of all women and girls, but especially women leaders and women's rights advocates who would be direct targets of the Taliban.

The critical question is, how meaningful is the WPS agenda when those who have endorsed the principles are prepared to trade them away to the Taliban as geopolitics shift? In a closed meeting in May 2022, an Afghan woman leader and former government official told western ambassadors:

"You lost your credibility and legitimacy on women's rights when you signed a deal with the Taliban. I lost mine when I boarded the plane to be evacuated." This summarises the collapse of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan – which has implications for the agenda's continued moral authority and relevance internationally.

Withdrawal and Evacuation Process

The announcement of the Biden Administration to implement the Doha Agreement and withdraw troops despite the Taliban's failure to comply with their obligations, such as cutting ties with Al-Qaeda, triggered the collapse of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.[13] From April to August, districts fell one after another into the hands of the Taliban without any fighting. The domino effect is common in Afghanistan wars as political changes and shifting international alliances are the dominant factors for the collapse of military and territory.

From February 2020 to August 2021, the western allies and supporters of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan had one and a half years to formulate a plan to prevent the violation of fundamental women's rights and protect the gains of gender equality in Afghanistan. The evacuation process was unplanned and messy, and its images and stories remain to haunt the world. Based on the authors' research through their networks in Afghanistan, the embassies had no lists of Afghan women leaders from grassroots organisations, figures from civil society groups or women professionals from governmental and non-governmental sectors to prepare for their evacuation. Instead, evacuations list were hastily drawn and influenced by people with networks and contacts during the two-week evacuation itself.

Currently, there are thousands of women's rights activists from civil society organisations, women security sector professionals and government officials in hiding. Many women activists, journalists and officials were murdered, and some disappeared with no information, like the head of Herat's women's prison, Alia Azizi.[14] One of the authors is in close contact with a dozen Afghan girls who served in the security sector, including in intelligence, and who are now being chased by the Taliban through their relatives and neighbours. Due to their known identity, they cannot cross the border either by air or by road. Many have had their passports held in the office, they cannot apply for new passports, and their biometric data is now in the possession of the Taliban. A 25-year-old who was the secretary of a National Directorate of Intelligence deputy said to the author: "Suicide is my only escape from my gender vulnerability in Afghanistan and my identity under the Taliban regime." Thousands of Afghan women and girls are trapped and facing threats to their lives, while millions are imprisoned in their homes because of their gender identity.

Consequences of the Taliban takeover for WPS in Afghanistan

In the nine months since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the erasure gender equality and reinstituting of gender apartheid has not only destroyed all the gains of the last two decades but it continues to threaten the lives and livelihoods of women and girls. In the early hours of the Taliban's arrival in Kabul on 15 August 2021, panicked shopkeepers broke female mannequins and wiped posters of women from their walls with white or black paint.[1] The price of Chadari or the blue Burqa tripled within a day. Afghan businessmen knew exactly what the Taliban's return meant to their women customers. Afghan women also recognised their diminished status as they rushed to remove their photos from social media or deactivate their accounts, and burned their educational documents and modern clothes. In a matter of hours, these women adjusted to the brutal reality that they were left on their own as the western allies' aircrafts left Kabul airport, mostly prioritising nationals and staff for evacuation and leaving little hope for Afghan women. Now, with few international advocates for women's rights left, there is little western leverage to influence the Taliban's policies directly.

The ground on women's rights has effectively been ceded to the Taliban

The way in which the Taliban came to power through military force has emboldened hardliners within the rank and file who are uncompromising in their ideological stance on women's rights. The Taliban see themselves as the "victor" who has defeated the "superpower" and "western-oriented" concepts such as women's rights.[16] Making compromises over women's rights, as such, crosses the Taliban's ideological line. In the past nine months, the Taliban's discriminatory policies institutionalising gender apartheid show that their stance on women's rights is one of the most visible factors that can cause fragmentation among a wide spectrum of hardliners. For example, the Taliban's promises to reopen girls' secondary schools were abandoned by its supreme leader after consulting with Taliban groups in Kandahar, despite consequences to their prospects of international recognition and legitimacy.[17]

Flexibility over women's rights – even on something as fundamental as girls' access to education – is seen to divide and offend members of the Taliban.[18] Members were fed with propaganda during the war that they were fighting and, in some cases, sacrificing their lives to restore the Islamic Emirate and install a "pure Islamic" government – which by default meant the return of the Taliban from the 1990s. Therefore, the Taliban remain unresponsive to international pressure to open girls' secondary schools due to fear of the backlash from hardliners. The status of women is a thus source of cohesion cementing disparate Taliban members as an extreme ideological movement. This has revealed both the Taliban's ideological intransigence towards women's rights and the limited conventional leverage of international actors vis-a-vis the Taliban.

Furthermore, there is a common misconception among western diplomats and officials in their engagement with the Taliban that the treatment of women is somehow part of "Afghan culture". This is the result of international actors accepting the Taliban's own framing of their policies as "pure", "Islamic", and "Afghan" to delegitimise the pro-women's rights policies and practices of the last two decades as an "alien" and "outsider" entity.[19] Such narratives make those actors involved in Afghanistan step back and indirectly legitimise the Taliban's discriminatory policies.

There is not a single gain towards women's rights through diplomatic engagement with the Taliban to date. Events such as hosting Taliban in foreign capitals, sending private jets, and adopting certain dress codes and language effectively endorse the Taliban's extremist views on women.[20]

What Should the International Community Do?

Through a transformative FFP approach, fundamental human rights – including women's rights – are non-negotiable, a red line, and not able to be traded off. Standing up for women's human rights and reducing gender inequality worldwide are core foreign policy goals in their own right. However, the situation of women and girls under the Taliban regime requires the international community, especially FFP countries, to devise proactive policies to support and enhance the rights of women and girls.

There are concrete, pragmatic actions that diverse international actors can take to uphold women and girls' fundamental rights in Afghanistan with the support of FFP transformative approaches. We suggest recommendations for (1) FFP countries, (2) countries that support WPS and have adopted NAPs, (3) regional countries neighbouring Afghanistan, and (4) civil society actors who play a significant role in promoting women's rights in the transnational public realm and responding to women's insecurity in local contexts. However, all recommendations – especially recommendation 3 and 4 below – can be realised and enhanced through the political and diplomatic support and advocacy of countries taking a FFP approach.

Alongside FFP countries, governments that have adopted UNSCR 1325 NAPs on WPS have an obligation to support women and girls in Afghanistan and their struggle for protection of their fundamental human rights. NATO and non-NATO allies who were part of the 20-year intervention in Afghanistan bear the most responsibility and their policies and strategies must be enhanced to meaningfully support women and girls in the current political and security context. Moreover, regional countries who are most affected by the insecurities in Afghanistan spilling over borders must adopt policies to protect and promote human rights in Afghanistan. The insecurity of

women in Afghanistan will impact the security of the entire South Asia region and, by extension, global geopolitical security.

It is essential to recognise countries with long-standing contributions to advancing the WPS agenda in Afghanistan including by supporting women's inclusion in the so-called peace process, prioritising the protection of women's rights activists during evacuation and calling on the Taliban to protect women's rights. However, the words and commitments of these states need to be backed with practical, tangible, and achievable actions.

The following recommendations for Afghanistan are guided by the WPS agenda, which is supported by many states and by emerging FFP approaches that seek transformative remedies for gender injustice. All four recommendations and the initiatives suggested can be further enhanced through consultation and collaboration with scholars and experts working on Afghanistan and within Afghan diaspora communities to underpin the international community's strategy. Government, academic and civil society partnerships can coordinate efforts to mobilise support for women and girls in Afghanistan. Addressing women's and girls' insecurity is important in its own right but it will also contribute to greater regional and international peace and security.

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Recommendation 1.

Support an inclusive peace settlement in Afghanistan

For FFP countries, the United Nations, UN member states, international human rights organisations and civil society actors

A cohesive and consistent call for an inclusive peace settlement based on equality, meaningful representation and women's full participation is required to negotiate and establish a legitimate government in Afghanistan that is accepted by the people of Afghanistan across all ethnic groups and abides by international standards of human rights.[21]

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan through force has restored another cycle of instability and conflict in Afghanistan. While observing the Taliban as a reality, international actors must stand firm and cohesive in making calls for an inclusive peace settlement as the only pathway to break the cycle of four decades of conflict in Afghanistan.

International human rights organisations can play a fundamental role in shaping the narrative for an inclusive peace settlement in Afghanistan and call on the UN and member states – including NATO and non-NATO allied countries involved in Afghanistan over the last two decades and regional countries impacted by the instability in Afghanistan – to join their call for an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led peace settlement.

Recommendation 2.

Deliver innovative educational initiatives for Afghan women and girls

For the UN, regional organisations and neighbouring countries supported by FFP countries

In the context of human rights catastrophes in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, the UN, regional organisations and neighbouring countries must adopt practical initiatives to support Afghan women and girls in the immediate term that can have a long-lasting impact.

Support Afghan women's education in the region: There are 1.2 million girls who cannot attend secondary school and 21,000 female university students in Afghanistan who are no longer able to access higher education. International organisations can support regional countries to host female Afghan students by offering scholarships and exchange opportunities. Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all forms the basis of SDG 4.

Digital learning programs: Similar to the first Taliban rule, Afghan parents are seeking underground initiatives to educate their daughters. Civil society organisations must work on a comprehensive plan to initiate systematic digital learning for Afghan women and girls in a digitally connected and globalised world. The experiences of digital learning from the Covid-19 pandemic exemplify efficiency and effectiveness that can be adopted for Afghanistan. While acknowledging that

Afghanistan is a low-tech country with limited internet and electricity access, digital programs are feasible in most urban areas. UN Women and United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) can play a leading role in facilitating a digital learning program for women and girls in Afghanistan as they have a physical presence in the country with technology and infrastructure. Private sector tech companies can play a role in supporting online e-learning and app development.

Twinning Universities: Universities worldwide should collaborate with Afghan educational institutions to support and stimulate learning for Afghan students on the ground.[22] Many university professors and academics have left the country and are exiled in regional and western countries. Universities can collaborate with Afghan academics abroad to twin with educational institutions in Afghanistan to resume programs. This is already happening in Ukraine, for example.

Recommendation 3.

Build Feminist Civil Society within and outside of Afghanistan through development assistance and diplomacy

For FFP Countries

 FFP countries must play a leading role in committing to support feminist civil society in Afghanistan in the short and medium term, given its critical role in challenging institutionalised gender discrimination.

Dedicating Grants: Providing support and space for evacuated Afghan civil society leaders to connect with remaining grassroots organisations in Afghanistan could be an effective method to monitor human rights violations and hold perpetrators accountable in Afghanistan. Furthermore, diverse groups of Afghan diaspora communities in FFP countries have the knowledge and connections on the ground to work on educational, cultural, socio-economic, political, and rights-based activities in collaboration with evacuated civil society leaders and with the support of FFP countries.[23]

Narrative & Tone: Countries must take their cue from Afghan women activists on the ground and in exile who have been loud and clear on the need to protect women's fundamental rights and not

progressively chip away at them with cultural and religious reservations that accommodate an extremist regime. FFP countries must demand that western diplomats and officials adopt concrete and unambiguous language and communication strategies to avoid sending the wrong signals to the Taliban. FFP treats fundamental women's rights as non-negotiable, a red line, and unable to be traded off.

Government-Civil Society Afghanistan Task Force: FFP countries should work on a single national and/or multilateral forum to create a government-civil society task force with the aim to support Afghan women's rights. The forum could bring together civil society leaders, scholars, practitioners and advocates to provide constructive advice to their respective host governments on supporting the people of Afghanistan, especially women and girls, under the Taliban regime. In addition, the platform can bring together all diverse actors to close the gap in differences in policies and unite in their support for women and girls in Afghanistan.

Recommendation 4.

Dedicate visas for Afghan women at risk and implement travel-ban sanctions for Taliban members

For FFP countries and countries with NAPs

The case of Afghanistan represents the world's worst women's rights crisis. Therefore, FFP countries and those with WPS NAPs have an obligation to support Afghan women at risk under Taliban rule, particularly women who served in democratic and state-building projects in Afghanistan funded by these countries.

Visas for Women at Risk: FFP countries and the 98 countries that have adopted WPS NAPs must dedicate visas for Afghan women at risk. This would save the lives and shore up morale of brave Afghan women who have fought for a better tomorrow and their rights and dignity. Even temporary visas are helpful to provide a safety parachute for women dedicated to working in their country but in need of an exit plan in emergency situations when threats are high. This is a meaningful approach that ensures grassroots women leaders are supported by easing the pressure on them to navigate risk alone. In addition, through diplomatic channels, FFP countries must negotiate with regional countries to support the transit of Afghan women from the region to safety.

Sanctioning the Taliban: Resuming travel-ban sanctions on the Taliban leadership is one of the few practical measures that impacts the Taliban directly without negatively impacting the people of Afghanistan. While there is a lack of appetite for engaging with Afghanistan, FFP countries and those with WPS NAPs need to be at the forefront of international advocacy to hold the Taliban accountable for their actions on women's rights, rather than their words. The suffering of the Afghan people today, especially of women and girls, is a direct consequence of the international community's lack of strategic engagement and disengagement with the Taliban. Meaningful progress on women's rights in Afghanistan in the 21st century is a test case for all state obligations under the WPS agenda and for FFP approaches.

Conclusion

These recommendations are strategic and practical approaches for different international actors devising policies that meaningfully support the people of Afghanistan, especially women and girls. One year of international engagement with the Taliban has had limited impact on reversing their discriminatory policies toward women and girls. The Taliban has resisted the international community's pressure and tightened their patriarchal power grip using ideological rhetoric internally and misleading messaging externally.

A wide spectrum of coordinated efforts with a long-term political strategy is required from FFP countries, WPS NAP countries, neighbouring countries in the South Asia region and international organisations to support grassroots civil society organisations, deliver quality education for women and girls and ensure the safety for Afghan women most at risk.

END NOTES

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22. See Monash University's Gender, Peace and Security Centre (GPS) as an example for creative and dedicated initiatives tailored to support Afghan women and girls. Monash GPS has developed a peer mentoring program to connect Monash students with university-age Afghan female students to get them to continue thinking and writing about important issues while they are unable to attend university under the Taliban rule.

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