

AT THE CENTRE

Afghan Women Experts' Policy Demands





IMPRESSUM

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Suggested Citation: Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, 2022. *At the centre. Afghan Women Experts' Policy Demands.* Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy. Berlin

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Introduction



"20 years of commitments and resolutions by this Council have not changed the reality for women in Afghanistan. We are not the only ones demanding action. Women in Yemen, Syria, DRC, Sudan – in fact, in every country on the Security Council's agenda – will view your actions in Afghanistan as the true test of this Council's commitment to Resolution 1325 and an indication of what they too can expect as they encounter similar challenges to equality and inclusion in their own countries.

Although Afghan women have for too long suffered from war, we are not victims – we have fought back for decades for our rights, and we will not sit by and watch our achievements be thrown away. It is your responsibility as the international community to ensure that you do not either."

Statement by Ms Zarqa Yaftali, Director of Women & Children Legal Research Foundation, at the U.N. Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace & Security, 29 October 2020

With the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Afghanistan and the consequential insurgence of the Taliban in August 2021, gendered injustice and rights violations in Afghanistan have significantly increased. Women and girls are once again deprived of their basic human rights, including their right to freedom of movement and expression, access to lifesaving services, information, protection, and education. The Taliban increasingly impose strict social norms to erase women's public presence. In 2022, a U.N. report by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan stated that "in no other country have women and girls so rapidly disappeared from all spheres of public life, nor are they as disadvantaged in every aspect of their lives" (A/HRC/51/6, U.N., 2022). With the Taliban seizing control, all national and international legal frameworks, policies, strategies, and programs have been invalidated and nullified, including the National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), adopted by the Afghan government in 2015.

The current situation in Afghanistan is perhaps the most recent and starkest example of the failed implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 (WPS), which was adopted to promote meaningful change in women's involvement in peace and security. The adoption of resolution 1325 itself took place only weeks before the military intervention started in Afghanistan in 2000. However, more than twenty years later, Afghan women and women's rights activists are still continuously excluded from political processes in Afghanistan. The international community did not lobby for the meaningful inclusion of Afghan women and women's rights in the negotiations or withdrawal agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban in February 2020 (Rahmaty, 2021; U.S. Policy Advocates for Afghan Women and Girls Working Group, 2022) nor were women's rights prioritised in the Intra-Afghan peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban afterwards.

Over recent years, Afghan women leaders and activists repeatedly raised concerns about the threat a Taliban takeover would pose to women's rights, which were side-lined, diminished, or ignored – along with their demands to be included in various peace processes (Yaftali, 2020). In several U.N. Security Council Briefings on Afghanistan and campaigns from 2009 until the present, Afghan women activists, politicians, peacebuilders, and researchers, repeatedly highlighted the importance of widespread and meaningful participation of women in any peace process for peace and the fate of Afghan women (Yaftali, 2020; Afghani, 2019; Safi, 2018; Frogh, 2017). As Afghan journalist Zahra Nader said on 20 October 2022, during her briefing at the U.N. Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security:

"What I can say from what happened in Afghanistan is that the voices of Afghan women, the real voices of Afghan women, were never heard, were never part of the negotiation, and were never part of any peace deal. What happened was all behind closed doors. A decision was made for Afghan women and they were not part of making that decision. And what we are seeing right now in Afghanistan is the result of a peace deal that didn't include women."

Now, internationally, national governments and international organisations are evaluating and realigning their policies on Afghanistan, while Afghan women's rights activists are organising in various countries across the globe to shape the future of their country. To ensure that these efforts promote women's rights and gender equality in Afghanistan, they must comply with the WPS Agenda. This means, first and foremost, ensuring the inclusion of Afghan women in leading the way forward. Afghan women are not passive recipients of WPS-related programmes. They are experts who are in a position to contribute the necessary know-how to any engagement towards Afghanistan.

For these reasons, for the last 18 months, the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP), supported by the Open Society Foundation, has facilitated a structured exchange between Afghan women experts/human rights activists and policymakers in Germany, the E.U., the U.S., as well as the U.N., international organisations active in Afghanistan, civil society actors, and the Afghan diaspora, to ensure that their insights, recommendations, and perspectives are meaningfully guiding international agenda setting and policy development on Afghanistan. The project was guided by a Steering Committee comprised of leading Afghan women experts and human rights activists.

An outcome of the work over the last 18 months is the following policy demands formulated by the Steering Committee. These demands are targeted at national governments committed to the WPS Agenda and supporting Afghan women's activists in their struggle for equality and safety. They focus on four topics: centring Afghan women, prioritisation of human rights, economic support and assistance, and assistance of Afghan refugees.

Policy Demands

1 Centre Afghan women in national and international policy and implementation processes.

- Centre women's and human rights activists in all policy discussions, processes, and evaluation meetings - in line with Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) commitments and the WPS Agenda. Compensate all participants fairly for their expertise.
- Support the creation of an international platform of Afghan women experts from Afghanistan, including those that have had to leave Afghanistan, which amplifies their concerns and policy recommendations, and supports them to engage meaningfully with international policymakers.

2 Ground the international community's response within the international human rights framework.

- Ensure that the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) implements its mandate, prioritises human rights, and pressures the Taliban to respect the full spectrum of women and girls' rights and other marginalised groups, as mandated by the U.N. Security Council and in particular, Resolution 2626 of 17 March 2022.
- Develop and implement a joint international strategy for coordinated policy responses against restrictions imposed by the Taliban, stripping women of their fundamental rights.
- Ensure any further engagement and dialogue with the Taliban is conditional upon the regime meeting human rights standards, including by reversing recent decrees.
- End all travel ban exemptions permanently until the Taliban remove all restrictions on women and girls.

- Apply diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to lift restrictions on independent journalists and media outlets and not subject journalists to arbitrary detention, torture, beatings, or other forms of violence.
- Apply political pressure on countries that politically and financially support the Taliban.
- Refrain from sending all-male delegations to meetings with the Taliban. Ensure that at least 50 per cent of the delegations are women. Include gender advisors in all delegations.

3 Ensure that humanitarian aid reaches vulnerable groups and that human rights violations are independently documented.

- Strengthen gender-responsive human rights monitoring and reporting mechanisms in institutions such as UNAMA and the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Afghanistan and ensure core human rights principles and a commitment to gender equality guide them.
- Establish clear policies and coordination in any humanitarian assistance towards Afghanistan.
- Work with local civil society on the ground to create mechanisms that ensure that humanitarian aid is not being used by the Taliban to further their political agenda but reaches the most vulnerable. Ensure meaningful coordination and regular meetings among donor countries providing humanitarian aid and Afghan civil society, including those who have had to leave Afghanistan.
- Ensure that all humanitarian actions are grounded in gender-sensitive analysis to identify barriers to access and support and make recommendations on how to address them.
- Collaborate with appropriate agencies to extend humanitarian and technical assistance to journalists and human rights defenders in Afghanistan.

- Support primarily community-driven programs and give ownership to the targeted community.
- Ensure that women, particularly women-headed households, have safe, equal, and unrestricted access to humanitarian service delivery and provision.
- Protect and support Afghan citizens who provide information and data on Human Rights abuses through informal channels.

4 Provide economic support and assistance, in particular to women entrepreneurs and women-led civil society.

- Support Afghan women entrepreneurs to access markets outside of Afghanistan and to attend international business conferences and meetings.
- Support mechanisms for trade cooperation between women inside the country and migrant women outside Afghanistan.
- Set up business and skills training for women and include mentorship and coaching opportunities. Online education and skills training opportunities are an option if other avenues for support are not possible.
- Support digital economy opportunities for Afghan women, such as e-commerce and digital marketing.
- Provide flexible, long-term, and easy-to-administer funds to organisations in Afghanistan run by human rights defenders and people on the ground, in particular women's civil society organisations with a long track record of service.

5 Support people who had to flee Afghanistan.

- Provide adequate support to all Afghan refugees (beyond human rights activists), particularly concerning education and employment. This can take the form of setting up special scholarship programmes for Afghan girls and women or creating new jobs or requalification opportunities for women and other marginalised groups to stand on their feet in recipient countries.
- Support active Afghan civil society, human rights defenders, journalists, and women leaders evacuated in 2021 to organise, mobilise, strategise, and continue their work.
- Establish funding schemes at the E.U. level to support the work of diaspora and women's organisations.
- Support practitioners in exile to enable them to continue working in their field of expertise.
- Establish and facilitate unbureaucratic access to visa and asylum processes to support Afghans who fled or were evacuated.
- Ensure that refugees have access to gender-sensitive psycho-social support in their mother tongue.
- Continue evacuating people at risk from Afghanistan and provide adequate support in host countries.

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