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# Six Months Later

Writings and research on Afghanistan six months after the Taliban's return to power, from twenty-one young women in Melbourne, Kabul and Herat

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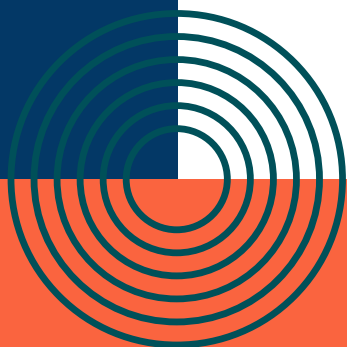
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# Welcome to 'Six Months Later'

The pieces you are about to read have been the product of a cross-cultural collaboration between young women in Australia and Afghanistan. From December 2021 to February 2022, young women in the cities of Kabul and Herat would meet online with female Monash University students to discuss the most pressing issues in Afghanistan and write undergraduate-level research papers, which we are very proud to share with you here.

First, a note on research. This is the first time many of these writers have done research in English and been introduced to plagiarism and referencing. These groups were encouraged to safely collect their own qualitative data and where possible reference peer-reviewed academic resources in English. However, due to the niche content of the research, the time restrictions of the program and the fact that these topics are about the issues of a country where English is a minority language, you will find news articles or non-English references.

Secondly, for the security of our writers, we have not provided their details beyond their name. The writers in this program are informed of their situation, and we have left the choice to each individual woman as to how they attach their name to their writing. Some have picked a pen name, some have chosen to use only their first name, and some have left their full name attached to their work. We hope you respect the individual decisions of every writer.

While women are often the subject of discussions about Afghanistan, unfortunately they are rarely the ones doing the talking. As you will soon learn, Afghan women have incredible insights to share. We ask that you read, and pay attention to what these young women have to say.

**Georgia Potter & Zahra Karimi**  
Editors & Peer Mentoring Officers

# A Message From the Monash Gender, Peace & Security Centre

I am delighted to present to you 'Six Months Later: Writings and Research on Afghanistan', which is the culmination of the Monash Gender Peace and Security Centre's Peer Mentoring for Afghan Young Women, 2021-22.

With the support of the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Education's Office and our friends from Afghanistan, Monash GPS have been able to engage with women in Afghanistan in a whole new manner. Now, Monash students can talk and meet virtually with their peers in Afghanistan, and young Afghan women can share their wealth of knowledge and political opinions with eager listeners in Australia.

Monash GPS is dedicated to engaging with the political situation in Afghanistan, supporting and empowering Afghan women, and standing up for the human rights of all Afghans. We have re-launched our debate series with Afghans for Progressive Thinking and the Monash International Affairs Society.post-August 2021, and a website repository titled "Toward global responsibility for Afghanistan." Since 2020, these debates have been an excellent opportunity for young Afghan leaders to collaborate with Monash students through online, formal debates. We've explored the potential of music education with the Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music and Performance and the Afghan National Institute of Music. We're also pursuing research projects from Afghan migrants in Australia. You can learn more about these initiatives [here](#).

I hope that you will enjoy these pieces of writing produced by Afghan and Monash students in collaboration; and in a practically first-hand way, you will learn something new about the current situation for women in Afghanistan. I encourage you to support this GPS' and others' Monash initiatives to demonstrate our solidarity with the people of Afghanistan.

**Professor Jacqui True, FASSA, FAIA**  
Director of the Monash Gender, Peace and Security Centre

# About the Program

The Monash Peer Mentoring for Afghan Young Women program connects Monash students with university-age Afghan women to get them to continue thinking and writing about important issues while they are unable to attend university during Taliban occupation of Afghanistan. The program has two primary aims. First, the program aims to improve the wellbeing and motivation of Afghan young women by providing peer networks for emotional support and access to useful resources. Second, the program aims to enhance the skills of participants by providing educational resources on academic writing and researching as well as providing a platform to publish discussion pieces on important political topics. The pilot for this program ran for over 8 weeks from December to February with 14 young women in Afghanistan and 7 Australian Monash students. Mentor groups met weekly to develop their skills and work on pieces of collaborative writing. You can find out more about the Monash Centre for Gender, Peace & Security's initiatives in Afghanistan [here](#).



This program has been made possible by the enthusiastic collaboration between the **Monash Gender, Peace & Security Centre**, **Afghans for Progressive Thinking** and the **Monash International Affairs Society**.

# How has Afghanistan's relationship with the WTO changed following Taliban occupation? How will Afghanistan's trade opportunities be affected by its government's politics?

**Nilofar Jamal, Shaiysta Rahmani & Malintha Mallawa**

## **Introduction**

Afghanistan formally acceded to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2016, becoming the ninth least-developed country to do so (World Trade Organisation 2016). This was done to improve worldwide trading prospects and increase integration into the world economy which are considered vital steps in economic growth (Mobariz 2016). Economic growth is vital for the country which has faced a history of conflict and poverty. However, the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban presents a fresh set of challenges to both its relationship with the WTO and its trade opportunities. This paper will examine these challenges in two stages. Firstly, it will examine the historical relationship between Afghanistan and the WTO over the years of its membership, along with any economic advancements made by the nation as a result. Following this, the article will determine how this relationship may change due to Taliban occupation with a specific focus on how the perceived legitimacy of a Taliban government and practices may affect its prospects. This legitimacy will be reconsidered in the second stage of the article as an avenue to determine how other states may re-evaluate their trade relationship with Afghanistan. In turn, states' reactions to the Taliban will help foresee how the nation's trade opportunities could be affected in the short and long-term future. Due to the lack of academic research surrounding the new situation in Afghanistan and the implications it may have on the WTO and trade opportunities, this article will use a mixture of academic articles and media articles to demonstrate these perspectives.

### **Historical Context**

Afghanistan is one of the least developed countries (LDC) and is a land locked country which means that the country's development comes with a unique set of challenges (Rahim 2018). The country has historically exported numerous products such as saffron and dried fruits largely to countries such as Pakistan and India. In turn, it has relied on imports such as food, industrial products and energy (Rahimi and Artukoglu 2019).

In an effort to accelerate its prospects in international trade, Afghanistan applied for WTO membership in November 2004. It became an observer member in July 2016 (Mobariz 2016; World Trade Organisation 2016). Following its application to be part of the WTO, Afghanistan made other commitments which showed its eagerness to engage further in international trade. For example, in the year 2007, Afghanistan joined the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Moreover, Afghanistan is an observer member to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) since 2012. In addition to this Afghanistan has signed a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with India, according to which it has agreed to reduce its tariffs for some necessary goods such as tea, medicine, sugar, and cement imported from India (Mobariz 2016). This shows an increased engagement with international trade which mirrored its commitment to the WTO.

### **How has Afghanistan's relationship with the WTO changed following Taliban occupation?**

As a body, the WTO is focused on lowering barriers to trade and (World Trade Organisation 2021), especially considering Afghanistan's position as a least developed nation (World Trade Organisation 2022), it is likely to encourage trade, regardless of any change in government. As an international organisation it has a vision to encourage non-discriminatory trade between its members based on the fundamental principle of Most Favourite Nations Treatment (MFNT) (Matsushita 2004).

Being the 164th member of the WTO, Afghanistan has some obligatory objectives and

strategies to complete by the year 2030. Afghanistan's Post Accession Strategy were drafted by the Ministry of Commerce, approved by Parliament on 18 June 2016, and officially signed by Mohammad Ashraf Ghani. This included a goal to modernise the national market and therefore, move away from the opium trade. (Mobariz 2016).

During its membership to WTO, Afghanistan has undertaken many actions to meet its obligations. This was recognised through the World Bank's Doing Business Index where Afghanistan was recognised as the best performer among 190 countries in 2019 (World Bank Group 2019). Moreover, based on the WTO report, Afghanistan had completed 60% of its objectives by its 5th anniversary which was held on 29 July 2021 (World Trade Organisation 2021). Although the Taliban's officials announced that they are supporting trade relationships with all countries and calling upon all countries to invest in Afghanistan as they guarantee a secure investment management in Afghanistan, most of the countries still do not want to invest in Afghanistan or conduct trade deals (The Express Tribune 2022).

In addition, despite the commitments mentioned above, the incoming Taliban may signal a different relationship between the nation and the WTO. In particular, the Taliban's previous reliance on the opium trade may be a point that sours the relationship. The opium trade increased in the first Taliban occupation in Afghanistan and following the takeover, opium production increased in the areas which were controlled by Taliban (Peters 2009). Although the Taliban banned the opium production through an official command in the year 1997, based on the Department of State's International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, on March 2001, the majority of opium in Afghanistan was produced in the Taliban territory (Perl 2001). During their time in power, the drug trade was a major source of income for the Taliban as they collected tax - *Ushr* - from the drug refineries located near the Pakistan and Iran borders (Peters 2009). This drug trafficking does not meet the requirement to liberalise and modernise trade as promoted by the WTO. Indeed, drug trafficking is not seen as a legal and legitimate trade and therefore, will not aid Afghanistan in forming a positive relationship with the WTO and modernising its trade if it continues (Hamid 2008).



Currently, there is no official statement from the WTO on how it will react to and deal with a Taliban government and in turn, the Taliban has not made it clear whether they will uphold their obligations. However, there is currently no Afghan representative to the General Assembly. As a prominent international organisation, the United Nations' support is important for the legitimacy of the Taliban government to be accepted. Additionally, in August 2021, the spokesperson for the IMF declared that the Taliban was not officially accepted in the international community as a legitimate government. This declaration is supported by the fact that Special Drawing Rights, an international reserve asset, has been blocked from Afghanistan since the Taliban's takeover (Reuters 2021).

Therefore, while the WTO is largely silent on the issue and tends to have a liberal approach to trade, the legitimacy of the Taliban government has been questioned by other international bodies. This may signal a more difficult and less productive relationship for the developing nation with the WTO. Additionally, its previous reliance on the opium trade is likely to further diminish its relationship and further delegitimise its new economy.

### **How will Afghanistan's trade opportunities be affected by its government's politics?**

#### Nations that are not supporting the Taliban

Following the September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, the Taliban became a target of Western states for harbouring and cooperating with the Osama Bin-Laden, the prime suspect of the terror attacks (Saikal 2002). Following this, the US built a coalition to target the terror organisation responsible for the attacks and any of its allies, such as the Taliban. Along with other nations, Australia joined the War on Terror, invoking Article 4 of the ANZUS treaty (Saikal 2002). As a result, the Taliban were seen as an enemy of the West. Indeed, following the take-down of Osama Bin-Laden, the focus turned to the Taliban through Operation Enduring Freedom which ran from 2001 to 2014 in Afghanistan (Wani 2021).

In turn, the Taliban refused to compromise with the West and other international organisations such as the UN, especially on the issue of women's rights, as it banned girls from going to school and women from working (Wani 2021; Rashid 2001). Even recently, the Taliban recommended drivers refuse rides for women not wearing the Islamic face covering which hinders women from leaving their house (BBC News 2021). Beyond only women's rights, human rights in general have been violated by the Taliban. For instance, Since 15 August 2021 per UNAMA reports, the UN is concerned by the Taliban's violence against the former members of the Afghan security services, government and civil society and human rights defenders (Ranjan 2022). This refusal to moderate its extremist interpretation of Islam has and will continue to make it a global pariah in the international community (Wani 2021).

The Taliban used messaging during the initial takeover which appeared to show a changed organisation. For instance, it suggested that it would form a more inclusive government (Yousaf and Jabarkhail 2021). However, it quickly became evident that the Taliban was using this as a stunt to improve its image, rather than as a legitimate commitment. The list of cabinet members announced only included three members from ethnically diverse groups and no women among top positions. In addition, it included Taliban loyalists including Sirajuddin Haqqani who was sanctioned by the US (Yousaf and Jabarkhail 2021). This clearly presents a Taliban that remains stuck in its exclusion of women and disregard for human rights and liberties.

Therefore, since the Taliban seems to have shown little change in its approach, Western states have not yet responded positively to a government run by the Taliban. This can be seen through the reluctance of Western states in removing sanctions against the Taliban. Under United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1988, states shall freeze financial assets, prevent the entry of individuals or sale of arms to individuals in or associated with the Taliban. While the Australian government recognises that the Taliban is no longer a terrorist organisation, it continues to uphold the sanctions administered by the UNSC (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade n.d.). Moreover, Afghanistan is a

country which is relied on the international funds. (Lutz & Desai 2014). Based on the World Bank's Report, following the Taliban's take over, the sudden reduction in international funds in Afghanistan has pushed the trade opportunities into crisis as the firms and other domestic businesses are not able to have access to their assets which are stuck in the central and commercial banks to avoid the high level of cash withdrawals from commercial and central banks (The World Bank 2021). \_

Hence, this human rights policy taken up by the Taliban divides other nations into two opposite sides. As will be discussed below, the countries with close trade relationships remain as supporting partners regardless of the human rights restrictions while some countries have banned trade. Therefore, while no official changes have been mentioned on trade by the Taliban itself, it is likely Western nations will not accept the Taliban as a legitimate government while it continues to disregard the human rights, especially those of women and girls. This will dramatically hinder the ability of the nation to establish strong trade opportunities and it will likely continue to face sanctions.

Similarly, Afghanistan has also had issues with trade in other countries like India for reasons beyond human rights abuses since the new Taliban government came to power. It has been reported that the Taliban shut the trade route worth \$1.5 billion in bilateral trade (Ranjan 2021). Previously to this the two nations were close trade partners and members to the SSARC organisation.

As a result of this closure, India is seeking to hold the Taliban legally accountable through the PTA agreement, the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) and the GATT (Ranjan 2021). Therefore, while the two countries had a close relationship, the closure of the trade routes stems from the Taliban's close relationship with Pakistan which has continually been in conflict with India (Kiran 2009; Javaid and Javaid 2016; Price 2013). Therefore, the Taliban's trade opportunities may also be hindered by its historical negative relationship with certain nations, as well as human rights.

### Nations that are supporting the Taliban

Other states have chosen to embrace the Taliban, and this suggests that despite some opponents, the new government will have some trade opportunities. One example of this is China which has assisted with Afghanistan's redevelopment since 2001. China provided USD\$240 million between the years 2001 to 2013 (Tahiri 2017). Moreover, the Sino-Afghan Economic Committee was established in 2006 to promote bilateral trade between China and Afghanistan. Moreover, China's biggest investment in Afghanistan is in the natural resource sector in Amu Darya Oil. This project was awarded to China National Petroleum Corporation in December 2011 to be completed in 25 years (Tahiri 2017; Saud and Azhar 2018). When the Taliban took over Afghanistan, China was the first country to announce their support to the new government (Ng 2021). China's interest in supporting the Taliban does not only relate to the trade relationship between China and Afghanistan but rather it depends on two main reasons.

Firstly, China is seeking to secure its borders and national security as it wants the Taliban to cut off all its relations with a Uyghur group called the East Turkestan Islamic. Moreover, Beijing wants the Taliban to defend China's shared border with Afghanistan against the terrorist groups (Gan and George 2021). Secondly, as Afghanistan plays an important role in connecting the central Asian countries (Rahimi and Artukoglu 2019), China wants to secure its Belt and Road projects in Central Asia and Pakistan which makes the Taliban a strong ally because of its geographic position (Gan and George 2021).

In return, the Taliban developed strong trade relationships with China. For instance, its first trade deal was to provide China with 45 tonnes of pine nuts on 2 November 2021. Moreover, China's Rising Sun Trading Company is interested in investment in Afghanistan and it is further eager to enhance the platforms to establish a joint commercial chamber of Afghanistan and China (ACCI n.d.). This signals a future where the Taliban and China will have a strong trade relationship.

In addition, Pakistan is the largest trading partner to Afghanistan while Afghanistan is the

second trade partner to Pakistan. (Ahmed 2018). Since the passing of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) in 1965, freedom of transit was allowed between the countries. (Husain and Elahi 2015). Following the Taliban takeover, Pakistan has become one of its biggest supporters with the trade between the two countries increasing by 50% (Lalzoy 2021). Furthermore, there have been indications that trade routes will be opened to increase ease of trade between the countries in the future (TOLOnews 2021). Therefore, Pakistan is another country which remains on good terms with the Taliban and has indicated that it will maintain a good trade and working relationship.

Moreover, Iran is one of the largest trade partners to Afghanistan as well. The Taliban foreign minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Mutaqi had a visit to Tehran on 8 January 2022 to maintain the trade relationships with Tehran. Amir Khan Mutaqi announced that commercial and economic agreements are going to be conducted in the areas of banking cooperation, border markets, mining, trade and support cooperation. Similarly, the office of the ministry of foreign affairs of Iran emphasised the need to maintain an economic relationship between the countries (Nader, Scotten, Rahmani, Stewart and Mahnad 2014). Therefore, this signals another strong continuing trade opportunity for Afghanistan.

Generally, the Islamic Countries are also supporting the Taliban through the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The OIC launched a meeting on 18 December 2021 in Pakistan with the backdrop of the emerging humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. The delegating country members agreed to restore the banking system in Afghanistan (Webby 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, this article has shown that the Taliban takeover may signal a new era of trade for Afghanistan. In particular, its new relationship with the WTO is yet to be seen. However, it is likely to be affected by the Taliban's previous reliance on drug trafficking which goes against the modern and legitimate economy. Additionally, the Taliban itself

has not been given legitimacy by several important international institutions. As the WTO is itself such an institution, it remains to be seen whether it will assist the Taliban government or not.

Furthermore, the Taliban's entry will change the nation's opportunities regarding trade with other nations. This article has split up other nations according to those that support the Taliban and those that don't. Western nations are unlikely to have a positive trade relationship with the nation as they seek to diplomatically isolate it and not recognise its legitimacy. Similarly, other nations like India may be affected by historical tensions that will hinder any positive bilateral trade agreements. On the other hand, there are nations that have historically supported the Taliban such as Pakistan, which will continue to have a positive trade relationship. Other nations such as China, while not openly supporting all the Taliban's policies, may seek to ensure the trade relationship is protected.

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# What factors led to the collapse of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan? How influential were each of these factors?

**Nilab Ahmadi, Nooda Nikan & Imogen Kane**

## **Abstract**

Multiple factors led to the collapse of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021. This paper identifies three categories of factors that all influenced this outcome, and arranges them from most influential (most effective factors), somewhat influential (effective factors), to least influential (underlying factors). Within these categories multiple factors have been allocated and analysed as to their influence, to ultimately determine why the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed, and how the Taliban was able to take over Afghanistan.

## **Introduction**

Over the past four decades, Lack of security and ongoing wars have been the major challenges in Afghanistan. Afghanistan emerged as a significant US foreign policy concern in 2001, when the United States, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led a military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban government that harboured and supported it. For the past 19 years, the US has suffered over 22,000 military casualties in Afghanistan and congress has approximately allocated \$143 billion for reconstruction and security forces. On February 29, 2021, the Taliban reached an agreement with the US, to bring the Afghan war to an end. The agreement was signed in Doha, Qatar and its core resolutions were the withdrawal of all NATO forces from Afghanistan and the commencement of intra-Afghan talks with the

Afghanistan government. When the US announced a total withdrawal, that sent a signal to Afghan soldiers and police that the end was near. This converted chronically poor motivation into acute collapse as nobody wanted to be the last man standing after the others gave up. When the Taliban began capturing cities, many Afghan forces gave in to them, convinced that the government in Kabul would not support them anymore.

There have been many factors for the fall of the Afghan government, from the lack of a clear plan and strategy of the Afghan army, to the escape of Ashraf Ghani from Afghanistan. The Afghan government didn't lose the fight because most US military forces withdrew from the country. Instead, the government's troops were outmanoeuvred by a more adaptive military organization. The Taliban delineated specific objectives and lines of effort to hollow out the Afghan security forces and conduct a strategic encirclement of Kabul designed to force the government to capitulate. The collapse of the Afghan security forces was a result of operational-level isolation. In US Army doctrine, isolation involves sealing off an enemy both physically and psychologically from its base of support—denying them freedom of movement and preventing reinforcement. The Taliban took a deliberate approach to isolate its foe at the operational level for more than eighteen months by taking advantage of fundamental weaknesses in the posture of Afghan security forces. Meanwhile, the Afghan forces have not been adequately supported to fight, and in some cases, were often without food, water, and equipment. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said, “we have a strong spirit to defend our people and country”, while there had been a shocking lack of resistance put up by many army units, demonstrating a clear disconnect between the government and army. Some left their posts while others reached agreements with the Taliban to cease fighting and hand over weapons and equipment, letting Afghanistan fall to the Taliban.

There were multiple factors that contributed to the government's collapse, each having their own level of influence in the outcome. In this paper, factors are divided into three categories depending on their level of influence in the collapse. Factors with the highest influence are deemed the 'most effective', those with some influence are titled 'effective

factors', and those factors that provided fertile ground for other influential factors to establish are designated 'underlying factors'. Within these three categories multiple factors have been assigned and analysed for their role in the collapse of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, leading to a holistic analysis as to how this outcome was reached in August 2021. It is also the aim of this paper to provide lessons for future interventions and withdrawals, as well as future interaction and collaboration with Afghanistan and its people.

### **The most effective factors**

Among the various factors declared by scholars, researchers, and surveys about the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the following factors have been deemed the most influential: a) lack of army self-confidence and reliance on the US, b) corruption in the army and Afghan administration, and c) lack of a sense of belonging to Ashraf Ghani's government.

a. In April 2021, Afghanistan had a military force of about 300,000 soldiers. 60% of them were in the army and the rest were cops who were unable to play an effective role in combat with the Taliban (Dolatabadi, 2021). About 180,000 of them, contrary to America's claim, were not trained properly and few of them had the experience of fighting the Taliban without support of US forces (Boot, 2021). Instead, they were strictly dependent on the air support, intelligence services, equipment, and leadership of the US forces. Thus, starting the withdrawal process of the US and its allies, Afghanistan's army started losing its forces to those escaping, injuries being sustained on the battlefield, constantly failing and overall loss of confidence (Sanger and Cooper, 2021). General Sadat, military commander of Helmand province stated: "Political divisions in Kabul and Washington strangled the army and limited our ability to do our jobs. Losing combat logistical support that the United States had provided for years crippled us, as did a lack of clear guidance from US and Afghan leadership... The truth is that many of us fought bravely and honourably, but the leadership methods of the USA and Afghanistan disappointed us" (Sadat, 2021). In fact, the US, based on what Biden called 'Trump's

heritage', left Afghanistan before confirming the ability of the Afghan army in the battlefield (Samuels, 2021).

b. According to the international transparency organization, Afghanistan is among the most corrupt countries in the world (Transparency International, 2020). Even some reports inside the US called the US intervention responsible for the widespread corruption in Afghanistan with its lack of foresight in allocating large sums to corrupt and incompetent people, essentially throwing money away (Whitlock, 2019). Michael Mullen, former president of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, admits ignoring this corruption as the reason for failure: "All of us, myself included, underestimated the impact of what a corrupt government does. That was with President Karzai and it sustains President Ghani to this day" (CNN agency, 2021). Sanger and Cooper talk about this: "The commanders knew that the problems of Afghan forces would never end; deep corruption, failure to pay several months' salary to many soldiers and police, asylum for soldiers, soldiers who are sent to the front without enough food and water, and the abandonment of the armed forces in the field (Sanger and Cooper, 2021).

c. If Afghan soldiers resisted, it was only to defend their wealth, honour and dignity, not the corrupt government of Ashraf Ghani. Many soldiers explicitly declared in their interviews that they do not have any commitment to the government of Ghani: "It does not deserve one to jeopardize their lives for Ghani's government" (Gibbons-Neff, Abed and Hassan, 2021). In Afghanistan, kinship and tribal relationships often outweigh official and political loyalty, sometimes creating a neutral space in which people can talk to the opposite side. This dense network of relationships and negotiations is often ambiguous for foreigners. Over the past twenty years, the US intelligence services have not generally understood or perhaps decided to ignore this dynamic because they were trying to draw an optimistic image of US efforts to create a strong and loyal army in Afghanistan (Lieven, 2021).

### **The effective factors**

The type of factors identified in this category are secondary and influential factors that could not have changed the fate of the military forces; however, their placement along with the main factors have caused the fall of the Afghan government. These factors are: a) the Taliban's strategy and fight tactics, b) lack of adequate government support for the army, and c) loss of resistance spirit in soldiers.

a. The Taliban fought for power in two different political and military directions. In the political arena, they sought to travel to China, Russia, and meet with the US and other officials. Convince the countries of the region that in the future they do not intend to rule in the same way as before (O'Donnell, 2021). They explicitly refused to turn Afghanistan into a base for al-Qaeda and ISIS. Meanwhile, they accepted intra-Afghan talks with the Afghanistan government, where they made sure the United States was withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan, while simultaneously intensifying their military. However, their victory was not because of increasing military equipment, air support, intelligence warfare, or other combat methods. Their strategy was what secured their victory, as it was based on the geography of Afghanistan and cutting off the communication and logistic lines of Afghan military forces (Shinkman, 2021). The Taliban have shown their bargaining power and political agreement skills rather than showing their courage and fighting power on the battlefield. Firstly, they started negotiations with the US and reached a favourable agreement. Inside Afghanistan, they also entered into negotiations with political leaders and tribes in rural areas, forcing them to lay down their arms and resistance. The Taliban received money, supplies, and enough support from Pakistan, Russia, and Iran to support military endeavours. Mr. Giustozzi, a London-based analyst who has written several books about Afghanistan, said that between 10,000 to 20,000 Afghan volunteers were sent from Pakistan, and thousands more Afghan villagers joined the Taliban militants when it became clear they were winning. The key to victory was the Taliban's plan to threaten and cajole security forces and government officials into surrendering, first at the checkpoint and outpost level, then the district and provincial level as they swept through the countryside. They contacted everyone and offered the chance



to surrender or switch sides, with incentives, including money and rewarding people with appointments afterward (Grauer, 2017: 22). The Taliban exploited Afghans' resentments toward a corrupt and ineffective government that was unable to resupply its forces or mount an effective media campaign to rally the public to its side. They capitalized on intertribal, ethnic, religious, and ideological differences to win over people, and they made the most of peoples' frustrations with the government.

b. Various reports of lack of supplies and support for the military before and after the fall of Kabul were documented in the media. 80 percent of the Afghan government's budget was actually funnelled from foreign aid, however, the situation had been so difficult for the Afghan government that in some cases they exported drugs. Concurrently the Taliban had been using the minimum income they earned from selling drugs, selling minerals, and foreign aid to achieve their goals and increase their military weapons (Boot, 2021). Meanwhile, Ashraf Ghani's government had wasted its resources due to corruption; therefore, the army has been deprived of salaries, financial support, equipment, and even food. Since the US began withdrawing its troops from the country at the start of May 2021, the Taliban has swept through about half of Afghanistan's 400 districts. In reality, they were plagued by corruption, poor leadership, lack of training, and plummeting morale for years, making them easy targets for takeover. Desertions were common and US government inspectors had long warned that the force was unsustainable. The Afghan National Army has been comprised of multiple units that were systemically corrupt. They had no effective command or control, often did not know how many people were in their units, equipment had been taken apart, stolen, and sold off, creating a completely dysfunctional force. The soldiers in many cases had not been fed very well, were rarely paid and had been on duty for a long time away from home (Johnston, 2012:47-79). Many army units sold their equipment to the Taliban for cash, and there were frequent desertions that went unaccounted for, leaving inflated troop numbers on the books. Within the Afghan army, soldiers complained of substandard equipment, even shoddy basic items like army boots that fell apart within weeks due to corrupt contractors using inferior material. The Associated Press witnessed boots with gaping holes being

worn, insufficient helmets available, and weapons that often jammed. Afghanistan's National Defense and Security Forces, meant to be the bulwark against advancing Taliban insurgents, were rife with corruption, demoralized soldiers, and struggled to keep territory. The government said that the army could hold its own, but military experts warned of a tough fight ahead for poorly trained, ill-equipped troops whose loyalties wavered between their country and local warlords.

c. The seeds for the collapse were sown in 2021 when the US signed a deal with the insurgents to withdraw its troops completely. For the Taliban, it was the beginning of their victory after nearly two decades of war. For many demoralized Afghans, it was betrayal and abandonment (Sanger and Cooper, 2021: 2). They continued to attack government forces but started to combine those with targeted killings of journalists and rights activists, ramping up an environment of fear. They also pushed a narrative of inevitable Taliban victory in their propaganda and psychological operations. Soldiers and local officials were reportedly bombarded with text messages in some areas, urging them to surrender or cooperate with the Taliban to avoid a worse fate. Many were offered safe passage if they did not put up a fight, while others were reached through tribal and village elders. When the US announced a total withdrawal, that sent a signal to Afghan soldiers and police that the end was near, and converted chronically poor motivation into acute collapse as nobody wanted to be the last man standing. The more areas the Taliban took control of, the more difficult it became for special forces units to repel and retake the retreated areas, especially as the Taliban were threatening special forces and their families (Samuels, 2021).

### **Underlying factors**

These factors contained in this category are the elements which created the background for the collapse of Afghanistan, and they alone were not able to cause the governments collapse. This section will be divided into three parts: a) bankruptcy and inefficient government, b) lack of international support, and c) early and irresponsible US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

a. There is almost no doubt that the Afghan government failed to carry out a proper state-building process after the initial US invasion. In spite of its development in some social, political, and civil aspects, Afghanistan was unable to form a comprehensive, efficient, accountable, transparent, and law-abiding state. Ashraf Ghani's victory in an election with low turnout (which was accused of fraud in 2019) determined the division of power stayed between him and Abdullah Abdullah. It was the final iteration of institutional corruption following dozens of previous failures to reform structures, fight against corruption, and maximize participation of ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities in the government. As a result, in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, what stood out beyond the central government was a set of crises of legitimacy, identity, distribution, participation, influence, and efficiency (Dolatabadi, 2021). No foreign country can help a bankrupt country which cannot help itself (Cordwsman, 2021). Therefore, Failure to create a stable nation for years created the perfect background for its own collapse.

b. The Doha agreement stranded the army and the Afghan government and gave the sense that, in the near future, the Taliban would gain power (Sadat, 2021). As General Sadat explains, "The Trump-Taliban agreement shaped the circumstances of the current situation by essentially curtailing offensive combat operations for U.S. and allied troops. The U.S. air-support rules of engagement for Afghan security forces effectively changed overnight, and the Taliban were emboldened. They could sense victory and knew it was just a matter of waiting out the Americans. Before that deal, the Taliban had not won any significant battles against the Afghan Army. After the agreement? We were losing dozens of soldiers a day" (*supra*). Some other analysts believe that the NATO mission in Afghanistan ended in failure and far ahead of schedule. NATO's optimism that Afghan forces alone would be able to withstand the Taliban's advance, and that the training and equipment provided would be sufficient, led to the collapse of the Afghan government.

c. The lack of serious negotiations between the United States and its allies to decide on 1.the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, 2. the release of Taliban prisoners, 3. the lack of a clear peace plan, and 4. the political, economic, and social structure to be

achieved as a result of a peace agreement with the Taliban, combined together to send a message to Afghan officials and military that the United States had lost everything in Afghanistan (Cordesman, 2021). Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell criticized the withdrawal, saying that it “leaves our Afghan partners alone to confront threats that Biden’s own top advisors acknowledge are grave and growing worse.” McConnell added that he hoped the administration would “delay the withdrawal, address these concerns, and reconsider its misguided retreat” (McConnell, 2021). Senate and House Armed Services Committee ranking members Jim Inhofe and Mike Rogers condemned the plan as a “political, calendar-based approach,” calling it “irresponsible to leave when conditions on the ground would lead to a civil war in Afghanistan and allow the country to become a safe haven for terrorists once again (House armed service, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

The multiple factors outlined in this paper all had influence and impact in creating the perfect storm that led to the collapse of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021. The most effective factors that were deemed highly influential to the collapse were 1(a) Lack of Afghan army self-confidence and dependency on the US, 1(b) Corruption in the Afghan army and administration and 1(c) a general lack of belonging of the Afghan army to Ashraf Ghani’s government. These factors had a direct impact in weakening the Afghan army and governments ability to defend itself militarily from Taliban attack and takeover. Secondary influential factors included 2(a) The Taliban’s skilled strategy and tactics, 2(b) lack of government support, infrastructure and equipment for the army and 2(c) loss of resistance spirit in soldiers. Although these factors could not solely change the outcome of the government, they are critical pieces that ensured its collapse. Finally, underlying factors created an environment and background for the other factors to be established, however these factors in isolation were not able to influence the outcome. These underlying factors were 3(a) a bankrupt and inefficient government, 3(b) Lack of international support and 3(c) early and irresponsible US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Only upon looking at all of the above factors can the cause of the collapse of the government of Islamic Republic of

Afghanistan in August 2021 be fully understood. It took a combination of underlying and directly impacting factors for the collapse of the government that will now change the future direction of Afghanistan and its people, forever. It is hoped understanding these factors can assist in future military withdrawals being safe and sustainable, and perhaps assist in future interactions, support and assistance of Afghanistan.

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# How has Afghanistan's sustainable development been affected by the 2021 Taliban takeover? Use the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to measure the impact of the crisis.

**Aziza, Arezo & Isabelle Zhu-Maguire**

## **Abstract**

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been used internationally as a benchmark for economic, social and environmental development. Since their inception, the goals have been actively used in Afghanistan which, prior to 2021, had been making strides towards achieving sustainable development. However, due to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, the sustainable development of the country has seen severe setbacks. This report explores three of these SDGs (Good health and wellbeing (3), gender equality (5) and decent work and economic growth (8)) and how their progress has been affected by the Taliban crisis. In doing so, this report highlights how these goals can be used to measure the decline in sustainable development as a result of economic and humanitarian crises.

## **Introduction**

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) launched a set of 17 'global goals' called the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals have been designed to be met by all countries by 2030 and achieving them would mean economic, physical and social wellbeing for all (UNDP 2016) As will be highlighted in this paper, the SDGs can also be used to assess the sustainable development of a country. In other words, as the goals apply to all societies they can be used as a benchmark of development to understand where a country's progress is in relation to others. Hence, the SDGs can also be used



when in a crisis situation, such as the 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, to assess the social, environmental and economic damages, consequences and the ways in which the development of that society has been stalled (UNDP 2016).

This research was conducted using both a descriptive literature review and primary interviews. Hence, the data sources used in this paper are secondary datasets and primary interviews data. Secondary datasets have been collected from various journal articles and from reputable news sites. Furthermore, much of the first-hand information came from primary interviews which were conducted with individuals living in Afghanistan regarding their current challenges since 15 August 2021 Taliban take-over. These included thirteen females and two males who disclosed the issues affecting them. In addition, for their safety, interviewed individuals have their names changed. Both of these methodologies' main purpose is to properly discover how much SDG 3, SDG 5, and SDG 8 have been violated since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban.

This report explores three of these SDGs and how their progress has been affected by the Taliban crisis. The first section focuses on good health and wellbeing (SDG 3) and discusses how the takeover has been detrimental to the development of Afghanistan's health care system and to the health of its citizens. Secondly, gender equality (SDG 5) is used to highlight how far behind Afghanistan has become in terms of women's rights due to the takeover. Lastly, the economic decline of Afghanistan is highlighted using SDG 8, economic growth and decent work. Consequently, this report highlights how these goals can be used to measure the decline in sustainable development as a result of economic and humanitarian crises.

### **SDG 3 (Good health and wellbeing)**

Prior to the 2021 Taliban takeover, gains had been made in Afghanistan with better medical facilities, and more accessible health care saving preventable deaths across the country. (World Health Organisation 2021) However, since the Taliban has taken power, the health and wellbeing of Afghans has been significantly threatened. This section will

outline three key ways SDG 3, good health and wellbeing has been compromised as a result of the takeover: nutrition, access to healthcare and women's safety. This section will also highlight how the SDGs can help quantify, compare and contextualise these health impacts for Afghans and the international community.

### a) **Malnutrition**

Currently, much of the death and illness happening in Afghanistan is directly linked to food insecurity and malnutrition. When the Taliban captured Kabul, there was a sudden, large-scale withdrawal of development assistance and overseas remittances which meant many Afghans lost access to cash. Additionally, food prices in Afghanistan have been soaring due to economic and environmental factors. This combination has had a detrimental effect on the health of Afghans with 95 percent of Afghan families now not having enough food to eat.(Mackenzie 2021). Hence, food insecurity and the risk of malnutrition pose a great threat to the good health and wellbeing of Afghans.

Economic crisis and environmental factors are at the root of much of the food insecurity experienced in Afghanistan. Firstly drought has meant that Afghanistan had a weak harvest in 2021 which has caused food shortages. This in turn has led to high food prices that the millions of Afghans who have had family members lose their jobs during the Taliban takeover are no longer able to afford. Hence, a significant portion of Afghans are now at risk of food deprivation with over half of the country's 40 million people now in need of humanitarian assistance to be able to afford enough nutritious food (United Nations Afghanistan 2021) .

Concerningly, this food crisis has had a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of children. Globally, it is being recognised that a lot more work needs to be done to eliminate malnutrition and achieve the 2030 goals. This is particularly evident in Afghanistan where progress towards securing the health of children is going backwards. An estimated 3.2 million Afghan children who are 5 years and under are "expected to suffer from acute malnutrition" in 2022 (United Nations Afghanistan 2021). Consequently,

nearly half of all deaths in children under 5 will be due to undernutrition as malnutrition causes greater risks of dying from common infections and delays recovery from illness and injury (UNICEF 2021). Therefore, one of the greatest risks to the good health and wellbeing of Afghans is malnutrition and therefore is one of the most evident ways the sustainable development situation of Afghanistan is worsening.

It should be noted that whilst malnutrition is one of the greatest risks to the health and wellbeing of Afghans, food-related death and illness is not a target within SDG 3. This makes SDG 3 an inaccurate judge of the overall picture of the health and wellbeing of Afghans.

#### **b) Access to health care**

Afghanistan's health care system has made significant gains over the last 20 years. Now that progress is at risk as millions of people have lost access to basic health services as a result of the Taliban's new governance. The catastrophic impact of the takeover on health care is directly impacting Afghanistan's ability to achieve SDG target 3.8, universal healthcare. As will be discussed, this deprivation is a key indicator of how significantly sustainable development gains have been set back in Afghanistan.

Firstly, cuts in donations to Afghanistan's healthcare facilities has left the system "on the brink of collapse". (United Nations 2021) As explained by one of the Afghan women interviewed, the breakdown of this system is the "greatest threat" to the physical wellbeing of Afghans. In particular, Afghanistan's largest health provider, Sehat Mandi has seen a significant decrease in funding. This has left thousands of health facilities across the country without any money for supplies or salaries for their health staff. (World Health Organisation 2021) According to the World Health Organization (WHO) Only 17% of Sehat Mandi healthcare sites are fully functional with some healthcare workers and doctors still working even though they have not been paid in months. (WHO 2021) This has been detrimental to the health of Afghans as health providers are not able to care for everyone and now have to "make hard decisions on who to save and who to let die"

(WHO 2021). Hence, the breakdown of Afghanistan's health care system is a clear indicator of how much this crisis is impacting the sustainable development of the state. Furthermore, the compounding impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased levels of violence and conflict, it is becoming less possible that Afghanistan will achieve good health and wellbeing for its citizens by 2030.

### **c) The health and wellbeing of women**

As will be discussed later in this report, the impact of the crisis on Afghanistan's women has been catastrophic. Especially in comparison to the development of better conditions for women prior to 2021, the post-takeover condition of healthcare for women in Afghanistan is a clear way the SDG's can be used to spotlight the detrimental effects of the Taliban's takeover.

Firstly, as described by one of the Afghan women interviewed, "mothers and children are faced with the greatest physical threat in Afghanistan" as access to healthcare has been severely limited for them. As highlighted in SDG 3, target 3.1, an indicator of sustainable development is maternal mortality. A UNICEF Afghanistan report found that thousands of Afghan women will die this year due to preventable pregnancy-related causes. (UNICEF 2021) Furthermore, domestic and sexual violence against women has also decreased the state of health and wellbeing of Afghan women. One report claims that almost 90 percent of Afghan women have experienced gender-based violence which affects the physical and mental health of the victims. (Borgen Project 2021) Consequently, the dire conditions affecting the health and wellbeing of Afghan women should be a key indicator of the severe impacts of the Taliban's takeover on sustainable development.

Furthermore, with the restrictions placed on women by the Taliban, there has been a further decrease of health workers as female practitioners are no longer feeling safe to go to work. Not only is this affecting the whole health care system but is having a particularly detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of women who are now more hesitant to seek care when there are no female practitioners. (WHO 2021) This should be a

consideration when addressing SDG 3, target 3.8 as 'universal healthcare' is far from achieved in Afghanistan as women's health needs are not being looked after.

### **SDG 5 (Gender equality)**

According to a 2020 World Bank report, 48.68% of Afghanistan's population is female. However, this half of Afghan society is suffering from extensive discrimination, inequality, and violence, due to the Taliban takeover which makes Afghanistan one of the most dangerous places for women in the world and the top of the world according to the gender inequality index (Afghan Aid n.d.). This problem has been exacerbated by the takeover of Afghanistan's government by the Taliban as many of the sustainable development and women's liberation strides that Afghanistan has been experiencing had now been overturned (Global Citizen 2021). A number of women and girls around Afghanistan were interviewed for this report on the challenges they face under the Taliban's government and their responses give an insight into how far Afghanistan is from achieving SDG 5, Gender Equality.

#### **a) Education Barriers of women**

The first major barrier for Afghan women created by the Taliban government is education. On 18 September 2021, Taliban announced reopening of schools, but only male students and male teachers were allowed to go to school (Gandhara RFE/RL 2021). As one Afghan female high school student interviewed said "I was in class 11 and my small sister was in class 8 when the Taliban announced the closing of girls' schools. We both feel extremely disappointed and uncertain about our future... From how many Afghan women and girls the right of education will be taken. One, one hundred, or one million girls? This is totally nonsense to me."

Although some private universities are open for female students, they can only study in gender-divided classes and should observe the Taliban dictated Islamic code for dressing (Huaxia, 2021). These rules create clear gender inequalities and problems for female students who are now only a very small portion of students. One female private university

student interviewed said that “after the Taliban announcement, our university divided our class from male students, changed female students from evening classes to morning classes, and assigned new code of dressing (Burqa) for all female students. I have a job and participating in morning classes is very difficult for me.” Furthermore, some universities are not providing educational documents of female students and some students believe that these discriminatory rules will create negative effects like further gender inequality in the future. A male student interviewed from the Herat province said that “because of Taliban’s gender-divide roles, the young generation will be placed in a cultural and political isolation which can be one of the most destructive decisions for the educational system of Afghanistan.” Moreover, even receiving educational documents is extremely challenging for female students, as a female student of Kabul University complained “I have requested my educational document from university; but even the universities are not allowed to provide educational documents of female students. They said to me that I am women and a men should come with me than we might provide your documents.”

### **b) New Job Restrictions and Unemployment Challenges for Working Women**

The second major problem is unemployment and jobs for Afghan women. Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, the head of the Taliban Political Office, has promised women would be paid for work but they should sit at home until their next announcement which has been indefinitely put off. (India Today 2021) Similarly, Zabiullah Mujahid, another Taliban spokesperson, announced that working women should stay at home except for some necessary jobs. He also added that excluding women from the workforce “is a very temporary procedure” (BBC 2021). Even though the Taliban have not officially fired female employees yet, some female employees, especially in private sectors, were fired from their jobs during the last four months. For women who were their family's only breadwinners, losing their jobs in the worst economic situation Afghanistan has experienced in decades, has created many challenges. An Afghan female employee interviewed said “I got fired from my job after the Taliban announced a stay at home for working women“. She also added” I was the only supporter of my whole family (four

sisters). Living in this bad economic situation without any income made life very difficult for my family and me.” Meanwhile, many other businesswomen like Parween (name changed) lost their small businesses. She had a shop in Women Garden (a garden only for women in Kabul City) and the following is a quote from her explaining how this situation has affected her: “Our shops have been closed by the Taliban and they also changed the name of Women Garden to the office Ministry of Propagation of Virtue. They even do not allow us inside the garden.”

Some other women are still uncertain whether they will be allowed to go to their jobs again or not, even those women who are working online from their home are concerned about the future of their job, career building, internet issues, electricity issues and the value of their work experience without going to the office. Mehrya (name changed) is one of the thousand female workers of a private company that complains: “In case of online duty, problems with electricity and internet prolong the workflow. In addition, those experiences, and activities a person can learn in the workplace are not gained at home, and it will negatively affect my career.” All of this leading to vast gender inequality in the workforce and an evident disintegration of sustainable development.

### **c) Political Participation and Social Activities of Women in New Afghan Government**

The third major problem for women under the Taliban’s rule is their political participation and the social activity of the women in the society. Right now for instance, no women are a part of the current Taliban government and almost all women have been fired from high government positions. This has been specifically designed by the Taliban having eliminated the Ministry of Women's Affairs in the new government structure and clearly eroding the sustainable development of Afghans political system. (Hakimi 2021) Although many of the women previously employed in the government sector are highly educated, they are all now unemployed, unrepresented and living in fear and uncertainty.

In addition, the social activities of women are also strictly banned by the Taliban, and those women who demanded their rights have been tortured and beaten (Limaye and Thapar 2021). Some women’s activists also complain about their exclusion from society and the

silence of international human rights and women's rights organisations about the ongoing situation of Afghanistan. One Afghan women's activist interviewed from the Badakhshan province said "it has been nearly four months that I could not do my activities, our organization has been closed by the Taliban, and all international human's rights and women's rights organisations are watching us silently."

### **d) Increasing of Day-to-Day Hardships and Restriction in Women Life**

While Afghan women have seen many signs of progress in the past two decades, gender inequality is still a major issue across Afghan society as men are still dominant in Afghan society, holding the majority of jobs, wealth, social status, and power (Global Citizen 2021). One Afghan woman in Kabul complains: "if I want to sit in the back seat, I should pay for three people's seats. It is so unfair that currently most of the women do not have jobs and money, but also they should pay two and three times more than men for transportation services." Day-by-day, new restrictions and difficulties are added to women's life like recent announcements of transportation and travel restrictions for women such as not allowing women to sit in the front seat of the cars.

In conclusion, even small other restrictions of the Taliban like banning women from TV dramas, removing women's images from all the posters and advertisement brochures, even banning women from female bathhouses, cutting heads of female clothes mannequins, and so on are slowly causing exclusion of women from the society. This women manipulation will create a huge gender inequality in the future where women will be again treated as housekeepers and entertainment objects for men. Hence, using SDG 5, gender inequality, is an evident way to portray the erosion of sustainable development in Afghanistan.

### **SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth)**

Economic growth is the process of increasing the total production of goods and services in a country over a period of time (Farzam 2017). According to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) decent work is providing the opportunity of a productive and



secure work with fair income for every person with prospects for personal development and social integration (United Nation 2015). For Afghanistan, its fragile economy had an economic growth rate of -5% due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. However, at the beginning of 2021, the Asian Development Bank anticipated that the economic growth rate of Afghanistan would bounce back and be about one percent (ADB 2021). However, after the Taliban took over the country, it became evident that the Afghan economy would not reach that anticipated figure and has instead experienced severe and detrimental economic consequences. For years, the Afghanistan economy has been reliant on agriculture, but since extreme drought has spread across the country and the incessant civil wars, Afghanistan has had to rely on aid funding from other countries (BBC 2021). However, due to the illegitimacy of the Taliban regime, \$9.5 billion of aid has been frozen and the economic crisis is getting worse. This section of the paper evaluates economic growth into two parts; small businesses and manufacturing.

#### a) **Small businesses after the Taliban takeover**

Though Afghanistan has been known as a bad country for investments due to many years of insecurity and its unsustainable political situation, there were some entrepreneurs who ignored these issues and invested in many areas all over the country. After the Taliban takeover, lots of these small businesses were bankrupted or experienced downtrend. These investments involved microfinance in many areas including; women hand-crafts, small restaurants, online businesses and educational centres which directly and indirectly lots of people were employed. However, due to the Taliban takeover and its consequences, about 400 small businesses have gone bankrupt and almost 350,000 employees have lost their jobs (Tolo News 2021).

In an interview with one small business entrepreneur Samira (name changed), she claims that after the Taliban takeover she lost her business and the 30 women who were working with her are now jobless. She was leading a group of women who each earned 12,000 Afghani per month before the collapse, which left these women and their families at risk of food and housing insecurity.

However, it should be mentioned that this is not the whole picture of this new crisis. There are some entrepreneurs who are optimistic about their investment future in Afghanistan because of the recent security and sustainable development experienced before the takeover. For example, Jamila Hanan, an online shop businesswoman who started her business after the republic debacle. She says “it’s ok that our country is in a severe economic crisis, but that it’s our duty to make our country better than previously”. She warns that “if I don’t stand now and take a step forward, no one will come and make Afghanistan a better place for living. I will stay here and make my country”.

### **b) Manufacturing companies’ fluctuations within new regime**

The contemporary manufacturing companies in Afghanistan have also become vulnerable after the Taliban takeover. As is similar for small businesses, many manufacturing firms have collapsed or have transferred their assets to other countries. The high prices of raw material, banking problems, lack of electricity and drop in market demand are the main reasons for halting operation of about 50% of factories in Afghanistan (Tolo News, 2022). Furthermore, if this situation proceeds further, lots of people will lose their jobs and the economic crisis will also stay at a severe point. Therefore, Afghanistan will be farther away from achieving SDG 8.

In an interview with one of the industrial factories they accepted the current problems and added that if the situation continues like this, lots of business people will have to transfer their assets to other countries. He added that after the Taliban took power due to drop in demand in the market, they had faced about a 20% decrease in their incomes and because of the unsustainable situation of Afghanistan, they transferred about 40% of their assets into another country.

Compared to the early stages of the Taliban takeover, the situation now is not as critical and there are still opportunities to control the situation. The world and Afghanistan need to take some steps to bring sustainable economic growth back to Afghanistan. If not, famine, hunger, unemployment and illegal migrations out of the country will be waiting for

Afghanistan. According to the World Food Program, 23 million people are in urgent need of food aid (WFP 2021). If the situation continues like this, not only Afghanistan will suffer from it, but also the world will struggle with its economic outcomes.

### Conclusion

After the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan is facing a significant erosion of its sustainable development in many different aspects of daily life. As was shown in this report, measuring this erosion can be better done by using the SDGs as a guide to what should be done to advance a society. The findings of this report show that while Afghanistan was moving towards a more sustainably developed society with gains in health care, gender equality and economics, the Taliban takeover has significantly damaged these prospects.

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# Prospects for peace: Why is women and girls' education imperative for peace and security in Afghanistan? How can the international community can support Afghan women under the Taliban regime?

**Almira, Madina & Meena Amiry**

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## **Abstract**

The emergence of the Taliban threatens future peace and security in Afghanistan across the spectrum of social, political, and economic progression. In the past the Taliban regime were particularly known for their restriction and abuse of women's rights (Skaine 2010). With the Taliban in power there are genuine fears for peace and security in Afghanistan and urgency exists to support women and girls who are prevented from

studying, working, and participating in civil society. Afghanistan's future peace and security prospects are intertwined with gender equality (True et al. 2017). Specifically, achieving gender equality through education means both boys and girls will have equal opportunities to contribute to the social, cultural, political development of Afghanistan. Other than improving work opportunities and improving the economy, achieving socio economic justice will remove barriers to education, harmful customs will be challenged, education will also empower women to develop the skills and knowledge to participate meaningfully towards peace discussions (Wilson 2004). Therefore, education should be focussed on by the international community as a pivotal tool in achieving peace and security in Afghanistan to resolve issues in terms of violence, poverty, and social justice.

### **Introduction**

Afghanistan has a long history of education that was highly regarded, Kabul University's oldest institution was established in 1932 and was a hub for intellectual thinking (Afghanistan's GDP Is Likely To Drop 20% Within A Year, Says UNDP" 2022). However, Afghanistan's education status began to decline when the Soviet Union took power in 1979 initiating war and conflict (Skaine 2010). War has devastated Afghanistan's education system with devastating effects including low literacy rates, poverty, and gender-based violence particularly impacting girls (Skaine 2010). Between 1996 and 2001, under the Taliban regime, the education status of women and girls worsened, Afghan girls over the age of primary school were banned from attending school which had severe ramifications on women and girls who continued to face barriers to education for decades to come (Skaine 2010). According to the most recent data available on the United Nations Global SDG database, 45 percent of the girls in Afghanistan are unable to read nor write (Wang, 2021).

Afghanistan's future peace and security prospects is intertwined with gender equality being achieved. According to Grown and Gupta Education the education of women and girls is crucial to achieving gender equality and promoting national development (Shayan 2015). Ensuring girls have access to education is crucial and relevant to the international

community to support Afghanistan in post conflict recovery to achieve sustainable peace. Since the Taliban swept back into power on 15 August 2021, strict laws as well as discriminatory attitudes, poverty and uncertainties in international aid are disproportionately driving many girls out of school adding further complications to the already fragile education system (Skaine 2010).

I don't see any future for me under this regime. I am fully seized by dread. I see myself in a state of uncertainty with lost dreams; Although, I believe that we Afghan girls can achieve peace and justice if we continue to preserve." - Fakhria, school graduate.

This research paper will focus on the importance of education for Afghan women and girls in achieving sustainable peace and security in Afghanistan. Lastly this research paper will aim to provide recommendations for the international community to support Afghan women under the Taliban regime as well as addressing barriers that continue to prevent Afghan women and girls from attaining education.

## LITERACY GAINS (15YRS+)

**17.6% (2011) 29.8% (2018)**



Source: The World Bank

Percentage of girls in Afghanistan unable to read nor write



Source: United Nations Global SDG database, 2021

Children enrolled in primary school



Source: World Bank

Girls enrolled in all schools

2012/13





### **Why should the international community consider feminist perspectives to support peace and security in Afghanistan?**

According to UNSCR 1325 the international community has a responsibility to ensure that women are protected, especially in times of conflict (UNSC 2000). After the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001 the international community made strong promises to restore the rights of Afghan women (Herzer 2001). Years of conflict in Afghanistan has disproportionately affected women in Afghanistan, necessitating feminist perspectives. The continued conflict has contributed towards women being subjected to gender-based violence, inequality and barriers to education preventing post conflict recovery (Herzer 2001). With the Taliban regime reinstated in power and threatening girls and women's education urgency exists to ensure Afghan women and their rights are protected.

According to feminist research nations with greater gender equality are more economically stable and peaceful (Krook and True 2012). Peace and security in Afghanistan are not possible without gender equality and gender perspectives in the design and implementation of programs to support peace and security.

### **Literature review**

Existing research acknowledges the importance of gender equality being crucial towards achieving sustainable peace and security. Unterhalter's research acknowledges education provides opportunities for individuals to contribute to the economic, social, cultural, and political development of a nation (Unterhalter 2010). Feminist research also acknowledges education as a crucial tool towards achieving gender equality and peace and security in any nation (Krook and True 2012). According to Krook and True (2012) nations with greater gender equality are more economically stable and peaceful. True et al.'s (2017) research expands on this and maintains inequalities easily feed into creating further conflicts and achieving economic justice and gender justice is crucial to preventing future conflict. Feminist political economy analysis puts spotlight on inequalities as root causes of war (True et al. 2017). True et al.'s research is important in understanding that equality cannot be built without socio economic justice

However, this research assumes a post conflict context to achieve economic and gender justice. Existing literature does not consider the current events of the Taliban regime regaining political power and lack gender-based approaches to prepare International bodies including Governments and UN bodies to guide policy advisors on how to ensure women's rights are protected under the Taliban government and support peacebuilding initiatives under a sanctioned group. Moreover, existing research does not address how the international community can protect women and girls' education under the Taliban regime and the importance of education in future sustainable peace and security with the International community currently focusing on aid, legitimacy, and famine.

This research paper will build on True et al.'s research to discuss why socio-economic justice-education is imperative for peace and security in the context of Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been afflicted by over forty years of war and violence and this research paper hopes to expand the parameter of research in a conflict zone to analyse the benefits on women's education towards sustainable peace and security.

### **Methodology**

This research design will primarily rely on qualitative data, specifically interviews and previous research conducted to gain a deeper analysis to provide validity to the findings of this research design. Participants will encompass Afghan women in Kabul, Afghanistan to answer the research question: 'Why women's education are imperative for peace and security in Afghanistan; and how the international community can support Afghan women under the Taliban regime'. Individual semi-structured interviews will be conducted with fifteen Afghan women specifically selected to ensure representation across Afghan society including: NGO workers, human rights advocates, educators, students, and local women to ensure responses can be stratified. The interviews will be centred on ten semi-structured questions about the international community's support for the continued education of women and girls in Afghanistan and how the views of the Taliban will affect these efforts.

Due to the sensitive political situation and threat to women on the ground in Afghanistan, the research design ensured to protect participants and ensure their welfare was considered throughout the research process. Ethical considerations will diligently upheld: prior to interviewing, the participants provided informed consent and were given the opportunity to withdraw from the interview or skip a question they felt uncomfortable with after the interviews participants were debriefed. Participant confidentiality has been protected by not associating names with comments in any of our communication.

Interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted twenty minutes with notes being taken from responses. The interviews were then transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted to identify common ideas on why women's education is imperative for peace and security in Afghanistan; and how the international community can support Afghan women under the Taliban regime. The research design also relied on secondary source information to validate and augment findings.

### **Results & Analysis**

Social economic justice, addressing harmful cultural views and political inclusion were themes noted from the responses as reasons as to why education was imperative for peace and security in Afghanistan these themes also corresponded to solutions as to how for International community could support Afghan women under the Taliban regime, below is a discussion of these responses:

#### **Meaningful and Inclusive participation**

Education is important for Afghan women's meaningful participation and involvement in society and peace discussions and crucial in achieving and sustaining peace and stability within Afghanistan (Shepherd and True 2014). Simply giving women a seat at the table does not guarantee meaningful participation, Afghan women need to be at the discussion table and need to be empowered to do so. Education removes the structural barriers and empowers Afghan women by providing them with the knowledge and skills to lead discussions and meaningfully participative in all aspects of society including the political

sphere, peace discussions and in conflict resolution (Shepherd and True 2014). When Afghan women are educated, they are informed of their rights, and are prepared to address issues of gender-based violence and inequality that directly affect them and their society's. Statistics show that women are more likely to engage in nonviolent ways to resolve conflict. According to the United Nations report there is a 20% increase of peace deals being achieved when women are at the discussion table. Peace and security are less likely to be achieved unless women are involved in peace decisions (O'Reilly et al. 2015).

"Men and women in the world are like two bright eyes and the eyes of women have been deprived of the right to education and progress. Naturally, the world will go dark if women are barred from studying."  
- A.F, Human rights advocate

It is not possible to prosper nor achieve peace and security when half of a nation's society is unable to participate in society meaningfully (Daly and Sarkin 2011). Promoting peace through women's inclusion and meaningful participation through education in the long term will contribute to the long-term goals of achieving sustainable peace and security in

Afghanistan, Through education, women will develop the skills and knowledge to challenge barriers that prevent them from participating meaningfully in society. Education is the tool to not only empower women but to provide women with the resources and skills to actively seek out participation and challenge notions of gender inequality (Mandal 2013). Currently women protesting the Taliban regime demanding peace in nonviolent ways and are educated women who are aware of their rights. Education will ensure women and girls in the future are informed of their rights and able to participate in an equitable and prosperous future Afghanistan. Women will be able to participate meaningfully across political, civil, and international discussion tables to direct international bodies on solutions to achieve sustainable peace in Afghanistan and overcome conflict.

### **Achieving socio-economic justice**

Afghanistan has been afflicted with forty years of conflict and violence which has

contributed to gender inequality and barriers for women to participate in Afghanistan's society, addressing inequality within Afghanistan's society will be a key to achieving sustainable peace and security in the future to prevent future conflict (Bastick 2008). The International community is currently concerned with determining if the Taliban can be given International recognition however, failure to address the pressing socio-economic constraints will create further conflict. With International aid halted and Afghanistan's assets frozen women and girls are disproportionately being impacted: families are being driven to poverty and are forced to remove their daughters from school to work, child marriages are likely to increase and so will conflict which threatens to reverse the progress for women's rights achieved in the past twenty years ("Girls Increasingly At Risk Of Child Marriage In Afghanistan" 2022).

The Taliban regime and policies restriction on women's' participation in society will negatively impact Afghanistan's economy; According to a socio-economic report by UNDP in 2022, Afghanistan's nominal GDPs likely to reduce by 20 percent within a year. According to UNDP administrator, Achim Steiner, the Taliban's ban on women in the workforce could result in an immediate economic loss of up US\$1 billion of the country's GDP ("Afghanistan's GDP Is Likely To Drop 20% Within A Year, Says UNDP" 2022). According to True et al.'s gender equality is a root cause of conflict, by addressing inequalities and restoring socio-economic justice in Afghanistan through women's education barriers are removed for women and men to work towards sustainable peace ("Afghanistan's GDP Is Likely To Drop 20% Within A Year, Says UNDP" 2022).

"When women thrive, a country thrives. When women and girls hold equitable and active roles in societies, communities and countries thrive, as well as economically women like men can contribute to the economic development of their country." - Hashmat, human rights defender

According to Mehria, a politics student, women's education and growth has long been held up as a shining example of country's reconstruction, and girls who receive an education will build better futures for themselves and their children: "An educated woman builds a society free of violence with security and peace."

Commitment towards education for women and girls will provide women with the opportunities to contribute to the workforce and thus, contribute positively to economic growth breaking cycles of poverty for sustainable economic growth (Bastick 2008). Education has significant socio- economic benefits which directly assist families and communities, including bringing positive changes in performance and reduction of negative social behaviours such as violence and gender inequality (Bastick 2008). Women's education must be upheld as a long-term commitment to support and work towards peace and security in Afghanistan by the International community.

### **Challenging harmful customs**

Education will challenge negative stereotypes and harmful customs of women to contribute towards future peace and security. In Afghanistan barriers to girls' education are both structural and cultural; there is a wide range of studies both scientific and social with findings supporting that harmful customs and practices act as root causes for discrimination and violence against women preventing future progress (Shayan 2015).

"There are cultural barriers to girls' education including beliefs that a women's role is confined to domestic duties, women are not capable of leadership roles nor able to contribute meaningfully towards Afghanistan's society." - Afghan women's right advocate

Education will challenge cultural-based discriminative attitudes and contribute towards greater equality (Shayan 2015). Gender gaps persist despite the importance of literacy being known and expressed in Afghanistan (Shayan 2015).

"Rural areas in Afghanistan have lacked adequate education, when children and young boys do not have access to quality education, they are more susceptible to extremism under the Taliban, education is important for children to gain the ability to think for themselves and to respect girls within the community." - Afghan community leader

Education will challenge these negative stereotypes by providing women the opportunity to gain the skills and knowledge to participate in meaningfully in society and access positions of leadership to achieve to be recognised as members of society who are equal and fully capable of contributing meaningfully towards society (Bastick 2008). Furthermore, education also equips young boys with opportunity and critical thinking to

prevent radicalisation and misogyny under the teachings passed on by the Taliban.

Years of war in Afghanistan have led to an internalisation of violence which has contributed towards misogyny, violence against women, child marriages and discrimination (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). The Taliban's policy, treatment and laws restricting women from the public sphere will, consequently, leave a rational to the normalisation of violence against women within an already fragile Afghan society (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). The International community's commitment towards advancing women, girls and boys' education will challenge harmful customs and negative stereotypes and is a long-term solution to not only achieving gender equality but also work towards sustainable peace.

A lack of education contributes to a culture that disproportionately harms women. Unless the International community commits to advancing and protecting women's educational rights, the Taliban's treatment of Afghan women will pass on to future male generations preventing peace and security ever being attainable (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). Therefore, a commitment toward the education of women and girls in Afghanistan challenges negative stereotypes within Afghan society and resolves social barriers to ultimately achieve peace.

### **Limitations**

This research attempted to ensure data responses were representative, and interviews were gained through informed consent while upholding ethics. However, limitations do exist and must be acknowledged. Safety concerns on the ground in Kabul limited the sample size and demographic representation of participants, the sample could only conveniently be sampled from within urban areas of Kabul. Furthermore, the sample size may not truly be representative of Afghanistan's society, this research design gained interviewees in urban areas therefore, the data collected may not be reflective throughout the whole region or of different ethnicities. It must be acknowledged that some participants may have given responses that they thought the interviewer wanted to hear.

To overcome this, we utilised local interviewers who the participants were comfortable with who spoke the participants language to minimize the interviewer effect. Further research should consider gaining more participants across the spectrum of Afghan society and to increase the number of participants across different provinces so the findings of this research paper can be stratified.

### **Recommendations**

Protecting women's education is important in preventing conflict and for future peace building therefore we recommend the following to continue the efforts for peace and security in Afghanistan the international community must:

- 1.Utilise gender responsive and sensitive tools to ultimately be able to significantly support Afghan women to lead peacebuilding efforts to achieve peace and security
- 2.Emphasis on intersectionality: Ensure women are given a platform and actively involve Afghan women in the discussion, design and implementation of all programs concerning Afghanistan, Afghan women must be seen as crucial stakeholders in achieving peace and security in Afghanistan.
- 3.Ensure women's rights and access to education are unconditional towards the recognition of the Taliban government and women.
- 4.Focus on socio-economic justice to address inequality in Afghanistan: Continue with the design and implementation of education programs in Afghanistan, continue funding education programs in Afghanistan and financially supporting educators and building schools in Afghanistan, continue to provide training and resources for educators, women, boys, and girls to access quality education.
- 5.Ensure peacekeepers are on the ground to monitor women's rights and ensure breaches are investigated and the Taliban regime are held accountable for human right breaches.



## **Conclusion**

Education will ensure peace and security is achieved in the long term with transformative changes in Afghan society. Achieving gender equality in education means both boys and girls will have equal opportunities to realise their rights and contribute to the social, cultural, political, and economic development of Afghanistan. Education will empower women to develop the skills and knowledge to participate meaningfully in society, women will be able to participate meaningfully across political, civil, and international discussion tables to be active agents to direct International bodies on solutions to achieve sustainable peace in Afghanistan to overcome conflict. Furthermore, education will also allow women to contribute to the workforce and thus, contribute positively to economic growth breaking cycles of poverty for sustainable economic growth. As well as investing in girls' education, education has significant socio-economic benefits which directly assist families and communities, including bringing positive changes in performance and reduction of negative social behaviours such as violence and gender inequality. Lastly, education will also challenge negative stereotypes of Afghan women and harmful customs; challenging notions of gender inequality and in the long run will be deemed as crucial members of society. Education will also address violent extremism and prevent the radicalisation of boys and challenge dogmatic stereotypes of women to view them as equal counterparts who are crucial members to Afghan society and thus, remove social barriers to encourage Afghan girls to gain education in generations to come. Therefore, education should be focussed on by the international community as a pivotal tool in achieving peace and security in Afghanistan to resolve issues in terms of violence, poverty, and social justice.

## **About the authors**

We are future lawyers, academics, policy makers, daughters and above all Afghan women with hopes and dreams to contribute meaningfully to the rights of Afghan women and are determined to work towards a future of peace in Afghanistan that is inclusive of our voices. Afghan women are fully capable of achieving their goals and sustainable peace and security in Afghanistan, they just need the resources and global solidarity to

ensure they can achieve their potential. We hope this research paper encourages further work and commitment to the cause of Afghan women's rights and future peace in Afghanistan.

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# Critically analyse the Peace Talks between Afghanistan and the Taliban. What should have been done differently?

**Boshra Moheb, Benazir & Meera Attrill**

## **Abstract**

The current state of Afghanistan is a disaster. The Taliban's military victory in 2021 has left many people jobless and therefore starving. Girls are not allowed to go to school and women don't have the right to work or leave their home without their *mahram* (male escort). Critically, women have been completely excluded from the ministry under the Taliban rule, and are thus unable to have a political impact of the decision making of their nation. The main questions that we explore in this paper are: *How did we get here? And how can such a disaster be avoided in the future?* We focus on the Peace talks that occurred prior to the Taliban's invasion, between the Afghan government and the Taliban that came out of the US-Taliban agreement in 2019, which included peace talks as a condition of their withdrawal.

The purpose of this investigation is to avoid yet another military overthrow in Afghanistan, as this is not the first time that the nation has been taken over by the Taliban. We hope that by offering clear assertions of what went wrong, these problems can finally be addressed and ultimately a peaceful, gender equal Afghanistan can be realised. Our research methodology included undertaking interviews with experts in the field of Afghan politics including scholars, journalists and researchers both in Afghanistan and internationally.

## Introduction

On the 15th of August 2021, the Taliban invaded Kabul and took over Afghanistan. This attack has reversed the nation's progressive achievements of the past 20 years; like a time-warp the Afghanistan finds its-self in a similar situation to the previous Taliban rule during the late 1990's (Panchapakesan 2022), where violence and starvation flourish and human rights, particularly women rights, are ignored. This paper analyses the peace talks that occurred between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, and asserts the key problems that caused these negotiations to fail.

In 2001, the USA, supported by its close allies, invaded Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban government. The invasion's public aim was to dismantle al e Qaeda, which had executed the September 11 attacks and to deny it a safe base of operations in Afghanistan by removing the Taliban government from power. Almost 20 years after the United States ousted the Taliban regime, on 25 February 2019, peace talks began between the Taliban and the United States in Qatar. On the 29th of February, the United States and the Taliban signed a conditional peace deal in Doha, that called for a prisoner exchange within ten days and was supposed to lead to US troops withdrawal from Afghanistan within 14 months. After this deal was closed, the Taliban promised to partake in intra-afghan peace talk with the Afghan government, (Sussana George 2020). However, rather than coming to a peaceful settlement, these talks led to the Taliban invasion of Kabul on the 15th of August 2021 where they took over the government as well as the media, forcing all people who were against the Taliban to flee the country out of fear for their lives (HRW, 2022). In this paper, we argue that the main causes for the failure of the peace talk were the pre-existing political issues within Afghanistan that were ignored during the talks, the exclusion of the Afghan team during the initial stages of the negotiations and the lack of inclusivity of the Afghan negotiating team.

### **What made the Afghan government weak in the Peace Negotiations?**

Pre-existing problems within the Afghan government played an important role in the

failure of the peace talks. Existing conflicts among governors and oppositions including political parties, critics and ethnic influencers are reasons why the Afghan government had lost its legitimacy to represent the Afghan nation in the eyes of Taliban (Bezhan 2021). Examples of this lack of legitimacy of government include widespread fraud in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, vulnerability of independent Election commissions to political pressures, the incumbent influence on appointing and dismissing a vast majority of commissioners, postponing election dates without explicit and detailed reasons and extremely small voter turnout. The dissatisfaction of Afghanistan residents is highlighted by Bezhan (2021), "slightly less than 20 percent of the entire population in Afghanistan was "very satisfied" with the performance of Ghani after he assumed office".

The above instances have left the Afghan government a weak government and the Taliban used this in their favour, refusing to negotiate with them directly. In turn, the Afghan government was not involved in the initial negotiations that led to this failed peace talk. Rather, the Taliban made the initial deal of cease-fire with the USA and it was only after this deal was confirmed that the Taliban agreed to meet with the Afghan government. The incompetence of the Afghan government was not only recognized by the Taliban but also by Afghan civilians, specially by ethnic influencers, regional leaders and even members of the government negotiating team. There was an idea to establish an interim government to appear powerfully in negotiations with the Taliban, "An interim government is an undeniable topic of discussion, because we want a cease-fire and the Taliban aren't ready to agree to one with the current government," said Hafiz Mansur, a member of the government negotiating team, on January 3. Meanwhile, Atta Mohammad Noor, a powerful regional leader, said on January 7 that "We should not oppose" the idea of an interim government but further develop it for the sake of national unity."

Another major issue that creates weakness in the Afghan government is the ethnic segregation. Ethnic influencers, regional leaders and other oppositions have never stood as a united team to heal the pain which Afghan people have been suffering for many years. They criticize each other and have never tried or desired to sacrifice their personal

interests for the better of the nation as a whole. This issue was highly criticized by the Biden government after months negotiations, that failed when Afghanistan was taken over by the Taliban. This becomes evident in Biden's statement for the media, "Raise your hand if you think anyone was going to be able to unify Afghanistan under one government" (CNBC Television, 21 January 2022). To conclude, the pre-existing problems from peace talks drooped Afghanistan in the pit of illegitimacy and weakness, which the Taliban have used that as a tool to implement their will. In turn, we assert that the Afghan government should have addressed the existing problems of illegitimacy and fraud within their government before and during the peace talks with the Taliban, for by ignoring these pre-existing issues, they disempowered their own negotiating team and left this power in the hands of the Taliban.

### **The role of the US in the Afghan Peace Talks**

One of the main issues with the Afghan peace talks was that the Afghan government representatives were not involved in the primary stages of the negotiations. Instead, this occurred between the USA and the Taliban. The Taliban refused to negotiate with the Afghan government until Khalizad, the representative of Afghanistan in the US made a deal with the spokesperson of the Taliban, Mulla Brother, to release 5000 Taliban fighters (George, 2020) in exchange for the US removing 1000 of their security forces. On top of this a cease-fire agreement was made between the US and the Taliban in order to reduce violence. The Taliban agreed and guaranteed that Afghanistan will not be used by any of its members, other individuals, or terrorist groups to threaten the security of the United States and its allies, a promise that was quickly broken when they invaded Kabul. In turn, the fact that the US negotiated with the Taliban before the Afghan government themselves were involved in the peace talks suggests that the Taliban were in a better position than the Afghan government. Thus, as asserted by a journalist from Etlatroz magazine in Kabul in an interview on the 5th of Jan 2022, "One of the main reasons for failure of the peace talks in Afghanistan was that the Afghan government was not involved in the primary stage of the peace talk after Khalilzad and Mulla Brother agreed to release 5000 prisoners."

Furthermore, according to an Afghan journalist and researcher whom we interviewed on the 9th of Jan 2022, the “Peace talk 2020 was a very expensive and complicated process for Afghan government because the US behaved like an improvement country while there was not even an inclusive council.” The US was in a hurry to end the long war in Afghanistan and therefore ignored the existing problems within Afghanistan including economic, human rights and women’s rights protection. What’s more, the 20 years of sacrifice of forces and massive financial expenses and the achievements that the Afghan government had gained during this time was not included in the negotiations sufficiently.

### **The US, justice and women’s rights**

During the peace talks with the Taliban, US, officials also stressed protecting human rights and women’s rights. Prior to the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban, the group shut girls’ schools and prevented women from working, among other abuses (Ahmadi & Aall 2021). This is happening again after the Taliban has again been given power. During the peace talks, the Taliban was already exemplifying their position in regard to the role of women as becomes evident in the wave of killings that occurred in the first week of March 2021, targeting activists, judges and journalists (Ahmadi & Aall 2021). It thus becomes apparent that even during the peace negotiations, the Taliban was not hiding their will to suppress women and deprive them of their human rights such as the freedom of movement and the freedom to work in a dignified manner (UNDHR 1947). In turn, we argue that there was a lack of international support for human rights and women rights in Afghanistan during the Peace Talks. While states such as the US asserted their concern for women in Afghanistan, there was very little concrete action taken to protect these rights. Instead, they were in a hurry to leave Afghanistan and thus made compromises with the Taliban that finally gave them the authority and opportunity to invade and take over the Afghan government, destroying the progress in gender equality that was achieved over past 20 years. The US and UN women which there are committed to protect everyone’s dignity and freedom and still stay silent.



### **Did the Afghan government have an inclusive representation?**

The final point that we will explore is the lack of inclusive representation of the Afghan government. The Afghan team were expected to deal with some of the already existing challenges of the country in the peace talks. However, in reality, the team itself tightened the knot of problems in the peace talks and have been an obstacle. Dissatisfaction of political movements and political parties in terms of their inclusion, dissatisfaction of Afghan youth and women, and lack of unity in the team were their biggest weaknesses. The team lacked in people who could bargain on behalf of **all** Afghan people and who could argue for the struggles that have been fought for years in the field of science and culture, and finally creating civil society in Afghanistan. It lacked the strong team of republic, political parties of Afghanistan, civil society organizations and active women organizations. University students and culturist would have also added to the strength of the Afghan team. The lack of inclusive representation of the Afghan negotiating team led to a failure in addressing the current problems within Afghanistan, which need critical support, as stated by Jamshid Nikjo Azizi an expert lecturer from Herat University in an interview that we under took on 3 January 2022, 'Only few people from presidential palace and few people from Taliban's side cannot negotiate on behalf of Afghan people. And no one can say that the negotiations were rational. I want to emphasize that one Stanikzai negotiate with another Stanikzai and both are cousins; they cannot take decisions on such a big national issues.'

In the establishment of the negotiating team, the government did not consult with all political parties. As Fazl Hadi Wazeen, a powerful member of Hezb-e-Islami ( political party) stated, political parties have not been consulted in appointing this board (Ariana News, 2021). This was another factor leading to the failure of the peace talks; there should have been extensive consultation in order to the establish a competent authority to lead and manage the intra-Afghan negotiation process. Another problem with the Afghan negotiating team was their lack of organizational skills. For example, a number of the team members were not even aware of their inclusion in the list before its publication in the media. Ghulam Farooq Majrooh a member of the government negotiating team said,

'So far, I have not received any calls from the central officials of both governments, and I did not know personally' Ariana News, 2021). While in such important negotiations it is essential that the appropriate people are chosen to participate, it is also critical that efficient organization of the team occurs. If team members are unable to communicate with one another effectively or manage their time, how will they unite their ideas in accordance the needs of all Afghan people?

Finally, the inclusivity of women in the process was not sufficient in the negotiations. Women around Afghanistan believe that they did not see any vivid role of women in the peace effort, rather that the women who participated in the peace negotiations were only symbolic. Even women who had important titles did not have the decision-making power, as in the case of Habiba Sarabi who, in her role as deputy chairperson of High peace council (2016-17), held an important position, but nonetheless learnt about decisions after they had already been made by her male peers (Azadmanesh and Ghafoori 2020). To conclude, the structure of Afghan negotiating team was good but not good enough to heal the pain of Afghanistan and gain national legitimacy as it was not inclusive, failing to represent certain political parties, youth and Afghan women.

### **Conclusion**

Having explored the problems within the Afghan government and their representing team as well as the issues caused by the involvement of the USA that led to the invasion of the Taliban; the final message of this paper is that the responsibility of the failure of the peace talks lays on the shoulders of all three parties and most importantly, we have to learn from our failure.

We have to consider that in order for peace talks to be successful, it is essential to have a legitimate inclusive and expert negotiating team. The agenda should be changed; the focus must be on the quality rather than the quantity of figures on the negotiating team. Women's rights, women's futures, and women's vulnerability should be key topics of discussion in Afghan peace talks.

We have to learn that an illegitimate and disunited government does not have the power and ability to face and deal with their opposition in an effective manner with a strong stand. As explored in this paper, the Afghan government did not have the support of their nation due to the existing corruption within the government. We have to learn that totalitarianism doesn't work and if a government doesn't have the support of its nation it won't survive. We have to learn that national decisions cannot be made by individuals who are hidden away in their offices. Rather, we need our nations decision-makers to be connected with our diversity, including the powerful political parties and movements, active and strong women and the talented, hardworking youth.

It is worth reiterating that the failure of the negotiations is not one-sided; we all failed. The Afghan government failed and lost the authority to govern and protect their nation, the Taliban failed for despite being in power, they are not recognized by the United Nations and other countries and are rejected by many Afghan women, youths and educated human rights activists. The United States also failed their mission to protect Afghanistan from terrorism, which began in 2001. Their actions and negotiations with the Taliban led Afghanistan back into misery and disasters by putting us in the hands of Taliban who they fought against for 20 years. We all failed because we could not negotiate correctly and the real victim of this failure is the oppressed people of Afghan and the last 20 years of progressive achievements that have been lost with the invasion of the Taliban.

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Bills

United Nations 1948, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

# What is the impact of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan on maternal and reproductive healthcare?

**Mariam Homan, Maisara Lalzai & Zahra Karimi**

## **Abstract**

Since the Taliban's takeover on 15th August 2021, Afghans have experienced one of the worst humanitarian crises in their history, women have lost their right to political, cultural, and economic participation, many have lost their jobs, which leaves their families with no source of income for livelihood. This leaves many women's reproductive health in danger. The interviews conducted with three recently pregnant women, and the result of the questionnaire that collected medical professionals' observations show that maternal and reproductive health has been affected due to several reasons; lack of female medical staff, lack of medical equipment and power outages, lack of medicine, women's loss of jobs, high levels of stress due to political change, etc. These have resulted in an increase in maternal mortality witnessed in the hospitals, unattended pregnancies and family planning, malnutrition, increased violence in the households, and painful and dangerous deliveries. The humanitarian aid, on the other hand, provided by the United Nations undermines maternal health amongst other political, economic and humanitarian crises in the country. This research ends with a policy recommendation on how the international community can safely engage in supporting maternal and reproductive health in the country.

## **Research Problem**

Maternal and reproductive health has always been a crisis for Afghan women. With

hundreds of medical personnel fleeing the country, lack of medical supplies, a crippled economy, humanitarian crisis and power shortage, maternal and reproductive health exacerbates. Unfortunately, with all the ongoing crises, Maternal and reproductive health care have not been receiving enough attention from the International Community and Associated organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO). The media has also obscured the issue and has not given it enough coverage. Additionally, since the Taliban's takeover, research organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations, and International Organizations are shut down. The progress the WHO had made in raising awareness, making better plans, and providing better access to health centres and healthcare facilities have been halted. Fewer women are working in the health sector with the recent evacuation, thousands of professionals have fled the country, and many more female health professionals have been banned from working or too scared to work. Afghan women on average give birth to up to six times and more during their lifetime, around two-thirds of which take place in mud-brick houses. Because of the lack of medical centres, professionals, medical resources, and the crushing economy women avoid going to medical centres for check-ups during pregnancy or to give birth. In some cases, it will take hours to take a woman to a hospital because of a lack of access to transportation in remote areas. It has become hard to determine what the women are going through, whether the Taliban's takeover has had a reverse impact on the progress, and what factors are affecting women's health and wellbeing.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to first and foremost to bring attention to women's reproductive health and needs and to answer fundamental questions affecting their health. The research will further unravel some of the new struggles on the way of women to get access to health facilities after the Taliban's takeover. In addition, this paper will take a comparative look at how circumstances have changed for women before August 15th 2021, and after. While research has been conducted before on the impact of armed conflict and war on Maternal health, Afghanistan with its peculiar history, political, cultural and gender sensitivities provide a context like no other that has been researched before.

The previous literature in Afghanistan, in the meanwhile, is utterly based on the context of an after-Taliban, post-US led military intervention, which created an atmosphere where progress was open and mainly dependent on the generosity of the donor community and scandal-free management on the government's side. The Taliban "2.0" has been rather strategically restrictive with their treatment of women and their rights, and their status has changed in the past 20 years from terrorists to government opposition to the government. This provides a data gap in Afghanistan and an outlook for the international community and international organizations like World Health Organization (WHO) to further base their policies on.

### **Research Questions**

This research intends on answering three basic questions:

1. What are the effects of the Taliban's takeover on maternal reproductive health in Afghanistan?
2. How different is the experience of pregnancy and deliveries in the cities and villages of Afghanistan since the Taliban's takeover?
3. Why and how the International Community can improve the conditions.

### **Background and review of literature**

As reported by the World Health Organization (WHO), the comparison of maternal mortality is higher in economically developing countries (240 per 100000 births in opposition to 16 per 100000 in developed countries). According to WHO, the risk of maternal death is surpassing that of developed countries (1 in 3800) against developing countries (1 in 150). Approximately 3 million new born babies die every year, and 2.6 million babies are stillborn.

Maternal mortality in Afghanistan decreased between (2000-2010) and the number of maternal mortalities decreased from about 1000 to 460 per 10000 births live. According to the report of Children's World's Mothers' Afghanistan is an unfavourable country to be a mom and "one out of five children die before their fifth birthday."

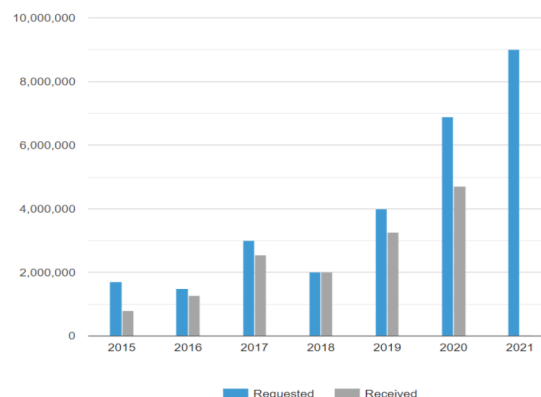


In consonance with the WHO, In Afghanistan, almost 34% of births are attended in personnel health, and almost 60% the pregnant women attend partially one antenatal visit. A survey in 2006 showed that more than half of women in Kabul had access to midwifery care, compared to less than 2% of women in rural areas.

A recent report on BBC by Jung and Maroof (September 2021) tells the story of a woman named Rabia who barely survived difficult childbirth in Nangarhar province. In this report, Rabia is quoted saying: ‘we’re sweating like we were taking a shower ... It was one of the worst experiences I’ve ever had in my job. It was too painful. But this is our story every night and every day in the hospital since the Taliban took over.’ As Jung and Maroof put it there were no medications, pain killers, or power in the hospital where she gave birth.

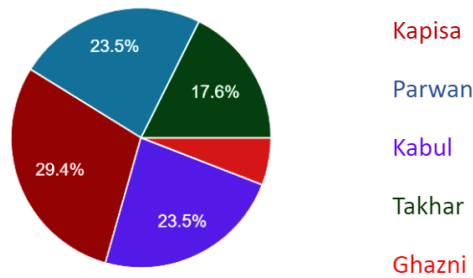
UNFPA as reported by Jung and Maroof (2021) argues that if maternal healthcare does not receive support, over fifty-one thousand more mothers will die and 4.8 million women will not receive any medical care during their pregnancies. "Primary health facilities across Afghanistan are collapsing... maternal mortality rates, child mortality rates, will increase, unfortunately," (Dr Wahid Majrooh, chief of public health as quoted by Jung and Maroof 2021).

According to UNFPA’s 2021 report, there are 720,000 pregnant women, 4.3 million women who are of reproductive age, and 6.4 million young people. At the same time, the graphs of humanitarian funding reception have increased exponentially which leaves millions of women in danger.



## Methodology

To gather information to answer the questions asked, 2 tools were used. The first tool was designing a questionnaire, the questionnaire was designed and distributed to doctors in the following 8 provinces (Kapisa, Parwan, Kabul, Takhar, Ghazni). The questionnaire was given out to 17 doctors. 5 doctors from Kapisa, 4 doctors from Parwan, 4 doctors from Kabul, 3 doctors from Takhar, 1 doctor from Ghazni filled the questionnaire.



To understand and record how women felt about giving birth under the Taliban's regime, and what the adverse condition means for them, we interviewed three women. These three women came from different backgrounds. The aim was to find women who are in 3 conditions:

1. A woman in the city who has already given birth, and is awaiting her next delivery very soon.
2. A woman in the city who has given birth in the past 5 months.
3. A woman from a small village who had just given birth to find out what her experience of her pregnancy was and how the delivery was different this time as compared to the previous deliveries before the Taliban's takeover.

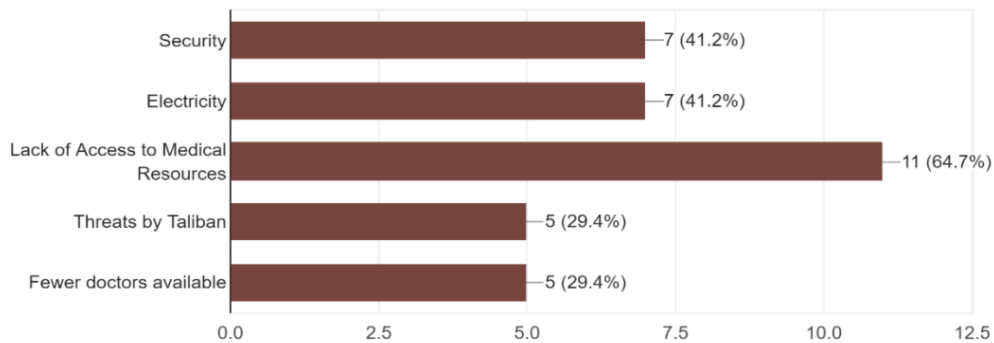
To ensure that women feel comfortable speaking, the interviewers visited them at their homes, and to ensure their safety in this paper, they will be identified by alias. The first subject will be identified as Sadiqa, the second will be identified as Wazhma, and the third will be identified as Nooria.

## Research Findings

The result of the questionnaire and the interviews conducted shows that the Taliban's takeover has had a significant impact on the maternal and reproductive health of Afghan

women. The result of the questionnaire was based on 17 professional maternal health professionals 16 of which have delivered a baby since the Taliban's takeover.

One of the questions asked was about whether fewer women have been attending the hospital to do medical check-ups and deliveries since the Taliban's takeover. The results show that 52.9% of these professionals (9 answers) have confirmed it by answering "yes", 11.8% of them (2 answers) said "maybe", and 35.3% of them (6 answers) said "no". Moreover, 88.2% of these medical staff confirmed that women's attendance for regular medical check-ups and deliveries at the hospital has been negatively impacted by the lack of female medical staff. In addition, 41.2% confirmed that the rate of Maternal mortality has increased at their hospital, and 41.2% of them suggested this might apply to the hospital they work at. The number of case deformities reported by 58.8% or 10 out of 17 doctors has also increased in the past 5 months. Furthermore, 64.7% of the doctors pointed out that their service has been affected by the lack of medical resources. The graph below shows the different responses received.



When asked to compare their experience as maternal healthcare providers, one doctor responded "During the previous government, there were extensive facilities in health centres like adequate medicine, regular electricity, equipped birth rooms, quiet environment... but now there is nothing, not enough facilities, delivery in unsafe and non-standard environments. In addition to all the restrictions on having a Mahram, which is a big problem for patients and doctors.". Another doctor wrote, "In this situation, there are no facilities at all: oxygen, medicine, electricity, laboratory materials, X-ray examinations, etc. which have made our work more difficult than before." They also commented on

problems such as premature births “It is different, we have more premature births, more birth defects and more maternal mortality.”

The interviews conducted with three women who came from different backgrounds revealed a very dire condition for these mothers. The first woman interviewed was expecting her third child and was 9 months pregnant. She suggested that even though the physician she had visited had told her to visit them every month, she had hardly been able to visit the physician 4/5 times due to challenges like financial problems. She narrated how she and her husband who were equally contributing to the finances at home had both lost their jobs after the Taliban’s takeover. “When I had a job, I had a nice meal which was very helpful for my upcoming baby but now, I even miss my meals because I don’t have any source of income ... with the other kids, I had a normal delivery but due to the stress and anxiety, fruits and other healthy food so, I am worried to be asked for a C-section or surgery.” She said.

The second subject identified as Wazhma in this paper who lives in a better house and is the wife of a former soldier from the Afghan National Army gave birth on 21st November 2021. Her husband is currently unemployed, and they are economically struggling. Comparing her delivery, she said, “As my financial conditions were well set but this time as I told you that I didn’t visit the doctor frequently, that was one of the reasons that I had C- section again, but it was at a public hospital and the other reason was due to the stress level that I had during my delivery days.”

The third subject who was too young to have a fourth child is identified as Nooria brought a particular unexpected twist to what had been expected of this interview. She is the wife of a current member of the Taliban. She was interviewed at a hospital in a village in Parwan province, and she is probably the most negatively impacted by the Taliban’s takeover, pregnant women. She was interviewed at a hospital where she had attended with her father and mothers-in-law. She said “He has become a member of the Taliban. Since joining the Taliban, he has become very violent and immoral, always screaming at

home, we dare not talk to him. He has a bad relationship with my family especially with my mom, every time they meet each other they fight. You know, he has not allowed me to go to my mom's house for 5 months, even my mom does not know that I have delivered a baby; I have come to the hospital with my father and mother-in-law for delivering my baby, my husband did not come with me." She continues to explain how her pregnancy and childbirth was different this time "so many things have changed, our economic situation, my husband behaviour, the food we eat, .... this [delivery] was so painful and hard. I mean I had never experienced this much pain in my other deliveries. My baby was born with so much difficulty. I gave birth to my other children very easily, but this was different. It was very difficult both when I was pregnant and when I was giving birth. Since my husband joined to Taliban, he has had no salary, nothing. We don't have enough food to eat at home, can you believe that we were hungry for 20 days and there was nothing to eat. Not even a piece of bread. When someone is pregnant how much she desires to eat somethings like fruit vegetables, etc. but if there is nothing to eat it is too hard." Her case had indications of domestic violence which had increased since the Taliban's takeover because her husband had joined the Taliban.

### **Discussion**

The result of the interviews and questionnaire suggests that Maternal and Reproductive Health has been adversely affected by the Taliban's takeover. It has been affected in a variety of ways. First, since the Taliban's takeover, the female medical staff presence has decreased in the hospitals, which contributes to women preferring to go to midwives than to go to the hospital to professionals. Like Nooria mentioned, she would have preferred going to a midwife, a woman who understood where she was coming from.

Second, the result of the questionnaire also shows that women have had more difficult deliveries because of a lack of medical equipment, medications, and lack of funding for the medical centres. Many believed that with the ongoing crisis the international community must focus on women's health by providing funding for the medical centres. One doctor commented "Pay salary of health staff, supplies of health centres, especially

child and mother support health centres, provide adequate health resources, medications, combustible materials etc. otherwise the risk of maternal and infant mortality due to cold and lack of facilities is conceivable. In addition, the international community should encourage the Taliban to refrain from imposing any work restrictions on women and to support and encourage women health workers.”

Third, maternal and Reproductive health has also been exacerbating for women due to the high levels of stress they are going through due to the political and structural violence in the country and their households. An issue that should be explored and focused on is how war, violence and political change has impacted domestic violence and how the international community can provide support for these women. The women interviewed have not only been deeply affected psychologically because of the ongoing violence but have also become the target of more domestic violence due to reasons such as moving to their in-law's house because they were not able to afford their livelihood which made them a subject to more abuse, or because their husbands had lost their jobs and had lower incomes, they had become subjected to intimate partner violence like in the case of Nooria. This high level of stress has made these women suffer during their pregnancy and go through much more painful deliveries.

Fourth, since the Taliban's takeover, most of the working women lost their jobs, and what adds to their struggles is their husbands being affected by the economic crisis, losing their jobs, or joining the Taliban with no compensation as demonstrated in the results of the interviews.

### **Research Restrictions**

Considering the level of education and access to electronic devices and the fact that it wouldn't have been safe for our researchers in Kabul to travel to all the 34 provinces to meet the patients (women) in person, explain the research, and record their answers. Therefore, the questionnaires were designed for doctors rather than patients. To include Afghan women's actual experience, however, interviews were conducted.

The researchers faced many obstacles when asking medical professionals to fill out the questionnaires. First, after hearing that the research is investigating any changes after the Taliban's takeover, the doctors are reported to have visibly panicked and avoided being a part of the research, and some even reportedly scolded the researchers for having to do anything with this research. As for the doctors in Kabul, they were much more afraid of filling out the questionnaire and answering any question that had any indication of Taliban. The result of the questionnaire shows that when asked to elaborate on how the Taliban's takeover has affected, some refused to comment and left it blank, and some went against their previous answer and denied any changes in maternal healthcare after the Taliban's takeover.

### **Policy Recommendation**

One of the goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been to reduce preventable maternal deaths to Seventy per a hundred thousand women by the end of 2030. This goal, unfortunately, is far from being achievable any time soon with the lack of the International Community's attention to the women currently living in war zones or under oppressive regimes like the Taliban's. The International Community spent millions of dollars improving maternal health, decreasing maternal mortality rates, and raising awareness on reproductive health in the past 20 years.

Since the Taliban's takeover, the country has been isolated and disconnected from the rest of the world. Women's health and mortality rates have increased, and the country is on the verge of reaching the worst humanitarian crisis in its history. Afghan women have been deprived of their basic rights to education, political, social and economic participation already, and despite attempting to support Afghanistan through a gendered lens, the international community has yet to help women regain any of those rights. The priority for the International Community must be women's health because while the rights can be regained, the lost lives of mothers becoming a victim of insufficient reproductive healthcare cannot be revived.

According to the United Nations report on 11th Jan 2022, the United Nations and its partners have launched an over 5-billion-dollar fund, which is the highest in the history of UN humanitarian aid to one country. They have also been called to support Afghan refugees currently residing in neighbouring countries by providing a \$623 million fund. They are expecting Afghanistan to need double the recent fund in 2023. This fund is mainly provided to support children in danger of malnutrition and starvation around the country, prevent further refugee crisis, and wide-spread disease in the middle of a pandemic. The issue of maternal health has received very little attention. Organizations such as UNFPA who are investing in reproductive health for young women, however, are still active in a few provinces. Their reach to all the people in need, which is estimated to be 18.4 million people on their website, however, is very low. They have been able to help 171 families during these crises.

Considering the political, and security sensitivities, and the fact that embassies are closed, health workers will not be able to travel to the country. The following policy recommendations for the International Community and organizations like WHO and UN can provide a practical way to support Maternal Health in Afghanistan considering the political and security sensitivities in the country.

1. Providing a fund allocation for organizations such as UNFPA to reach out and support more families and pregnant women through local health centres and agents. UNFPA has been active in the country for years and can be a good source of monitoring for the funding provided. During 1996-2000, the Taliban's first takeover, organizations such as Christian aid, were active around Afghanistan. With a small team present in Herat province near Iran's border to monitor the funding, the organization was able to provide medical services to thousands of women through local medical centres.

Risks: It does not pose a serious security threat since UNFPA is already active in the country. They can provide free service to women who want to attend the hospitals to keep the achievements of the 20 years. However, there are 2 flaws in the



recommendation. First, there will still remain a lack of female medical staff which might dissuade women from attending these medical centres which will contribute to unattended pregnancies and unprofessional deliveries in the houses. Second, the portion of women who were not able to have access to medical centres due to cultural, social and security constraints, will still remain in danger which will require further funding for awareness-raising programs.

2.Undertaking a humanitarian intervention. This will not only help improve maternal health through medical service but will also facilitate more female staff to be present and protected in the medical centres.

Risk: Foreign troops' presence even for the sake of humanitarian assistance can cause more political unrest and adverse reaction by the Taliban.

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# What is the struggle for girl's education and justice in Afghan society?

**Khujasta Danishjo, Hadia Ibrahimkhel & Georgia Potter**

## **Abstract**

Less than a year since the Taliban took Kabul, the future of Afghan women and girls' education is uncertain. While Afghan citizens and the international community can expect some of the same restrictions and tactics from the Taliban from their first regime, there are noticeable differences between Taliban regimes and new approaches can be taken in challenging these restrictions. Using in-depth interviews conducted with women, girls, students and educators in Kabul, this paper explores how the struggle for Afghan women and girls' education intertwines with the struggle for justice in Afghanistan. Specifically, this paper explores the consequences of denying women and girls access to education and the benefits of including them both in the classroom and in workplaces, while also interrogating the Taliban's manipulation of Sharia law and their semi-acceptance of women's attendance at some private universities. We propose that education be made available to women and girls under new structures supported by the international community that would survive any future political upheaval.

## **Introduction**

Throughout Afghanistan's history, Afghan women have always protested for their rights and struggled to create a just society for future generations. There are thousands of women who have fought against the inequalities of their time, including famous figures such as Malika Soraya, Malala of the Maiwands, Noor Jahan Begum and Makhfi

Badakhshi. One of the greatest figures of women and girls' rights advocacy in Afghanistan is the famous Gawhar Shad Begam, who was the daughter of Amir Ghiasuddin (the head of the Tarkhanian Tribe) and the wife of King Sharukh Mirza Teymouri. Gawhar Shad was also one of the rulers of the Teymouri Era as she was not only a wife, but also one of Shahrukh Mirza's close advisors and was responsible for many architectural masterpieces built in this time.

Evidence of the strength of Afghan women can be seen in recent decades as Afghan women have stood up for their rights, especially the right to education, in the face of the Taliban's discriminatory restrictions during both their initial and current occupations of Afghanistan. When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, women and girls were banned from school and universities. They were instructed to stay home from school and were banned from working outside, studying, or engaging in any activities. This era is known as "the dark era" for girls' education in Afghanistan (Alamyar, 2018). While all schools were shut, some women put themselves in danger by educating others. When the Taliban found out about these schools, the schools were not only closed but the Taliban also punished those who opened and attended them. Female nurses and doctors were only permitted to work in hospitals if they wore burqas and were accompanied to work by a male family member.

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban once again took control of Kabul and the entire nation of Afghanistan. The successive fall of some key Afghan provinces and the untimely escape of former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani led to the surrender of Kabul to the Taliban and made the lives of Afghan women even more endangered. In the previous Afghan government, there were many educational and employment opportunities for women in most parts of the country. UN Women had granted large-scale projects to the private sector to help improve the economic and social status of women in Kabul and other provinces (UN Women Afghanistan, 2022). The Ministry of Women's Affairs, while not perfect, were active in addressing rape, domestic and office violence cases, and to some extent advocating for women's rights (Amnesty 2021). But with the fall of the Afghan

government to the Taliban, many of these basic rights and opportunities were once again taken away.

Among the first government organisations to be taken over by the Taliban were the Presidential Palace, the governmental ministries, and Kabul University. The interim government formed by the Taliban announced a group of interim ministers who were all male and mostly former Taliban Soldiers (Maizland 2021). The Taliban changed the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Afghanistan to the Ministry of Propagation of Islamic Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Berger 2021). This Ministry has been solely returned in order to replace the Ministry of Women's Affairs. In Kabul, some have expressed fears that the return of the Ministry meant that the Taliban would not seek to change. While the Taliban were in power from 1996 until 2001, the ministry enforced a very strict misjudgment of Islamic law, which included forcing women to wear *chadari* (full body coverage with only a veiled gap over the eyes to see out of) and forcing men to grow their beards long and cut their moustaches.

As seen in the Taliban's previous regime, discriminatory restrictions against women in particular are once again present in the current regime. All female schools have been closed to women over the age of 14 and women have been denied the right to work. Not only have women been deprived of their education, work and livelihood, but they have been deprived of the right to wear clothes of their choice, perfume or make-up, just as in the first regime. Women have been told not to leave their house without a male chaperone (*Mahram*) and taxi drivers have been told not to allow single women to get in taxis without a *Mahram* (Human Rights Watch 2022). The Taliban seem either ignorant or apathetic to the families with no *Mahram* to provide for them. These families have no source of income as women are not allowed to work. While in one press conference in late October of 2021, Zabihullah Mujahid (Deputy Minister of Information and Culture) announced a plan to tackle the ongoing issue of poverty in the nation by giving wheat in exchange for labour (Economic Times 2021), this program does not address the desperate need of a woman's right to be financially independent, especially when there is

no man to provide in a family, as women still do not have the right to work under this program.

This paper aims to examine the intersections between the struggle for justice in Afghanistan and the treatment of Afghan women under the Taliban. Using in-depth interviews from 65 Afghans, this paper discusses interpretations of Islam and the benefits of girls education in relation to the struggle for Afghan women's justice, and as a result, the struggle for justice as a whole in Afghanistan. These interviews were conducted both online and in-person, in Dari, Pashto and English, with a range of subjects. Many in the international community not only see the situation in Afghanistan and remain silent, but even allow this terrorist group to negotiate their legitimacy on the international stage. We hope this paper can provide accurate information and recommendations to the international community (including the Afghan diaspora) about education and female participation in bringing justice to Afghanistan.

### **The importance of women's education in bringing justice to the Afghan community**

Women's education is the best way to develop health and to improve cultural status. According to UNESCO, as of March 2020, only 43% of Afghanistan's population is literate, and this can be partially connected to Afghanistan's political disruption. This figure is one of the main reasons for Afghanistan's lack of progress in terms of urban, economic, cultural and political development. Even where there has been growth, women remain far behind men (UNESCO, 2020). The education of women not only increases their participation in political, social and cultural issues, but also leads to economic independence, and improves the quality of life of women and their families, which in turn increases health in the whole community. Hadia and Khujasta, women's rights activists in Kabul, have interviewed a number of Afghan women from a variety of educational backgrounds on the issue of women's education in Kabul. In their online survey conducted in early 2022, when asked whether women should receive an education, Subject A responded: "They should, this is their legal right to become educated, and as [for] my opinion I think for women it's more important than men to become educated

because they [raise] kids and when one woman is educated all her family members can become educated people.” We saw many similar responses that also argued for women’s education for the sake of society, including Subject B’s, which reinforced that “women should be educated not only for themselves, but to change society.” Similarly, Subject C suggested that women and men “together are important for the development of a country.” Higher education, especially university education, is one of the most important factors for the development of any country.

Providing education to women means to provide a comfortable life for a generation. As an old Afghan proverb says: “A mother rocks the cradle with one hand, and spins the world with the other.” The meaning of this proverb is that a woman has the ability to create change first in her child, then in her family, then in society, and finally in the country and the world. It is crucial to consider the important role women play in home management, the education of children, as well as the health and wellbeing of family members. Female education means the education of the next generation. Educating women leads to the increase in awareness of law, social, political and economic development. It also helps the community by enabling them to realise their potential, develop skills, find work, and improve their health and nutrition. Ensuring women are educated from a young age may allow them to apply their knowledge and talents sooner, allowing them to build a sustainable living and leave poverty at a much younger age. Not only does this serve the person but it also benefits her family, local community and larger society as a whole. By providing educational opportunities for women, we can make them aware of their basic rights as human beings and help them stand up and defend their rights under violence at home, in the community or in the workplace.

Unfortunately, beyond a basic education, access to full education in Afghanistan among both sections of society is very small. Access to education for both sexes is very low, but women, in particular, are barred from school for a variety of reasons. There are numerous factors preventing women from accessing education in Afghanistan, the primary reasons being due to culture, financial reasons and security. Cultural reasons for preventing

women accessing education dismiss women's right to study, work, and play an active role in society, which has been encouraged by the Taliban's regime. The financial factor is huge in restricting access to education. Afghanistan is a country where many families live in very difficult economic conditions and below the poverty line. Many families are not able to provide for the basic and educational needs of their children. Instead of encouraging children to continue their education, many parents force their children into labor to provide immediate financial support. The large number of children in many Afghan families means that often families cannot meet the needs of all their children. In these situations, due to gender discrimination, many parents prioritise the education of their sons over their daughters. Due to the lack of security in war zones, many parents do not allow their children to go to school out of safety.

Unemployment, hunger, and poverty in Afghanistan, especially during the Taliban era, have risen to the point where even school teachers have to work hard on the streets to earn a living. Hadia was fortunate to interview a former school teacher in her 40s who has been working on the streets of Kabul as a shoe shiner so that she can afford food for her five children:

“My sons are minors and my daughters are young, I can not let them out of the house for fear of the Taliban and Taliban regulations. My husband is disabled, and he can not work. ... I cry every night about my inability and poverty. In the previous government, I had a salary...now I have neither a salary nor a job...I do not have a house and my children are hungry, I owe money and I am very sad. As a mother, I do not allow my children to sleep hungry, I had to get up and do it myself. This job of mine only provides food for one of our meals and I have no one to take my hand and help me. I know this difficult period will not last long. And our times will be good, but it is very hard and difficult.”

There are hundreds of women like her in these terrible situations which take both a financial and psychological toll (as the school teacher told Hadia, “since our economy has weakened, my mental state has [also] become very weak”). Afghanistan has reached a point where it is not only discriminatory and biased to not allow women to work or be in the classroom, but it is contributing to poverty and the underdevelopment of the nation.



### Women and Sharia law

The other common theme from online survey results, other than the argument that women's education is beneficial for the development of Afghanistan, was the indisputable moral argument that women's education was important and necessary on the basis of equality. Subject D, for example, argued that "women in a society can engage in socio-economic and cultural activities alongside men", and that women should receive an education because "half of the population of a society is made up of women." This is true beyond doubt - there is no reason to discriminate against women, especially when it comes to access to education. Despite this, the Taliban continues to discriminate, often hiding their discrimination with claims that their actions are following Islam.

However, there is no reason that Muslims are required to disrespect and violate the rights of women according to Islamic texts. In fact, followers of Islam (including the authors of this text), would argue that according to Islamic texts, the violation of women's rights in the name of religion is a disrespect to God. In this section, some narrations of the Prophet Muhammad about women's rights are examined in order to explain the importance of women's freedom of work and mobility and how this coincides with Islam. The Taliban use extreme rules of Islam to impose impossible rules on women and girls, which are not true to our interpretation of these texts.

In Islam, the principle of gender equality is supported by the notion that neither sex is superior to the other. The Quran (5:2) states:

"O people! Fear the wrath of your Lord, who created you from a single soul; Who created another in its likeness as his mate, and from the pair scattered countless men and women across the face of the earth...revere the wombs that bore you, for it is by their sanctity too that you swear your oaths and conclude your contracts with others."

This verse of the Quran indicates that there is no supremacy for one sex over the other. On this authority, both genders are created from the single soul, with the same human and spiritual nature. Islam elevates the demeaned status of women and grants them rights equal to those of men. The equality of women in Islam is evident by the

unprecedented human rights given to them under Islam as defined in the Quran. The wording of the aforementioned Quranic verse indicates one specific sex is not necessarily favoured over the other which is a proof of gender non-bias and equality.

There have been occasions when Muslim women expressed their viewpoint on legislative matters of public interest and stood in opposition to the leaders of state. During the Caliphate of Omar Ibn al-Khattab, a woman argued with him in the mosque. She rebuked him while he was on the pulpit about a decree he wished to make and proved her point, and caused him to declare in the presence of people: "A woman is right and Omar is wrong". In this early Islamic history, women are not only seen to express their opinions and participate in various aspects of their society's public sphere, have the right to be elected to political offices. Omar Ibn al-Khattab appointed a woman to oversee the affairs of the marketplace. Education is not only a right but also a compulsory and obligatory duty upon every Muslim male and female. There is gender equality in the pursuit of education and knowledge in Islam. Islam makes no distinction between right of man and woman in seeking knowledge. The Prophet Muhammad said: "the pursuit of knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, male and female" (relayed by Ibn Majah). Concerning knowledge and education, it is stated in the Quran (39:10): "Say: Are those who possess wisdom the same as those who are devoid of it? Are they equal, those who know and those who know nothing? No - only those with understanding take heed."

Women's rights are registered in the verses and rules of Islam, which suggest that women deserve equal reward as men under the eyes of God. As God has instructed Muslim men in the Quran (33:36): "Indeed, those men and women who believe...God will forgive them, for He has prepared for them a great reward." According to Islam, until the Day of Judgement, women have received their place in individual and social life. The Islamic legal system, which has led the way for millions of people for more than four hundred years, recognizes the legal status of women. It is in the light of these rulings that the laws and other legislative documents of the previous fallen government have paid attention to this issue. There are no Islamic texts, either Quranic verse or Hadith, that

state that women will have to stay at home and will not be able to do anything outside. On the contrary, Allah has given the same basic responsibilities to women as well as men. In Islam, women are entitled to freedom of expression as much as men are. Women's opinions are to be taken into consideration and are not be disregarded just because she happens to belong to the female sex. With one hundred years of Afghan independence, the nation of Afghanistan has been able to recognise the legal status of women in various areas of life, and it is a manipulation of Islam for the Taliban to claim otherwise.

### **The case of private universities**

Interestingly, some private universities in Afghanistan have remained active after the fall, while all public universities currently remain closed to students. Khujasta interviewed a professor at a private university to find out the reasons and repercussions of this decision. When asked what they thought of the Taliban's reasoning for distinguishing between private and public universities, the professor stated:

"I think there are two main reasons why the Islamic Emirate allowed private universities to operate but did not allow public universities. One is the issue of budgets and finances, where private universities charge their own salaries and distribute the salaries of their professors and staff. That is, they are not dependent on the government...The second reason is that public universities, especially Kabul University, which is the mother of all universities [in Afghanistan]... is on the side of Kabul University. As you know, before the Islamic Emirate came to power during the Republic, the Taliban attacked Kabul University, warning them many times that the focus was on Kabul University and said that Kabul University was a center of corruption and that Kabul University is under their control for various reasons. For this reason, they are trying very hard to enforce the laws they want. For example, separating girls 'and boys' classes, even separate time of studying, girls should wear burqas or hijabs, or the issue that male teachers should not teach girls. The Taliban want to start with Kabul University and government universities, because the university is state-run and run by them, the Taliban wanted to prepare for it...they want to reopen the universities but under their own rules."

While there is potential for women to study at a university level in Afghanistan, there are rules and regulations they must follow. According to this professor, "the first change that took place in private universities after the Islamic Emirate came to power was the separation of the girls' and boys' classes", and despite at one point allowing men and

women in the same class as long as they were separated by a barrier and entered and exited at different times, “later, [the Taliban] did not accept the barrier and ordered that the boys’ and girls’ classes be separated.” In addition, both professors and students “are instructed to wear long hijabs with dark colours such as black and navy blue, which they have repeatedly ordered.” These rules pose significant restrictions on women’s education. Not to mention, the prices for students at private universities limits the number of students who are able to afford an education. The final significant impact of the Taliban’s arrival in Kabul is the decrease in participation levels. According to the professor:

“The number of students has dropped dramatically since the arrival of the Taliban, both male and female...because these students believed that even if they studied, it would not work and the universities could be closed at any time by the order of the Islamic Emirate...If girls are compared to boys, fortunately girls are very brave and girls are more interested. Perhaps it is because they think they should seize the opportunity, despite the rules imposed on girls by the Taliban, the nature of their dress is imposed on them, despite the fact that their classes are imposed on them.”

Ultimately, students who would otherwise be unable to receive an education have been able to due to the continuation of private universities in Kabul. Not all will be able to access these universities for financial reasons, and the Taliban’s regulations force a compromise in the equality in classrooms which has a significant negative impact on students’ learning, but the fact that the doors of these universities remain open to some women is a step in the right direction for women’s education in Afghanistan.

### **Recommendations**

The Taliban government aspires to be globally recognised and supported, so while we are bound to see some small, seemingly progressive steps taken (for example, allowing women at private universities, which is a welcome but token and financially-driven decision), radical Taliban members are certain to block any proposal for blended learning. As an alternative, the world community could lobby for the establishment of schools and colleges for women affiliated with mosques around the country. These may be run entirely by women and would be designed for teaching in modern disciplines (apart from

religious texts). It is unknown how long the current Taliban regime will last, and so the lasting impact on Afghan women is unknown. In such a case, the idea above could be effective in getting girls and women back into schools and universities. This proposal has four main advantages. First, such an education system is more likely to sustain regime changes, minimising disruption to women's education. Second, by being in a female-only environment, students and staff can escape the Taliban's draconian dress code, at least in teaching and learning spaces. Third, educated Afghan women, such as the shoe-shining former teacher we interviewed, could have the opportunity to get jobs in these women-only institutes. Fourth, seeing women in leadership positions builds confidence in a younger generation of girls. Having role models in the safe space is especially important for Afghan girls at this time.

Another potential alternative for Afghan women's education under the Taliban is online services provided by international universities. After the complete ban of education on Afghan women and after the ban of in-person classes in Kabul, many female students have rushed in recent weeks to register for remote learning programs that are geared specifically at women banished from their education by the Taliban, one such program being run by University of the People in the United States (Walt, 2021). One of the most reliable and effective ways to help Afghan women achieve their education is to provide free online education opportunities. Due to the very difficult political situation in Afghanistan, University of the People has provided scholarships specifically to support a Bachelor's degree for Afghan women. Such programs and scholarships should be encouraged, as long as they are private and secure, so that women can continue to safely pursue their education while living under the Taliban.

The other key action that can be made by the international community is to recognise the Taliban's strict laws regarding women and approach the Taliban with caution so that the Afghan government is dominated by less extremist forces. The United Nations, international donors and members of the international community have to put pressure on the Taliban government to increase girls' access to education by better protecting schools

and students. Priority should be given to all people to receive a basic education, but that should not mean the Taliban's failure to support tertiary education services for men and women, nor their discriminatory ban of women from tertiary education, is acceptable.

### **Conclusion**

Education has long been held up as a shining example of Afghanistan's reconstruction. Over the last two decades, Afghan women have had great opportunities to improve their lives in many areas, including education, which has been invested in greatly by the international community following the overthrow of the initial Taliban regime, and the nation cannot fall behind on the progress it has made. Education must immediately become accessible to all Afghan women, namely because women's education is one of the biggest factors in creating a prosperous and just society. Not only this, but education is a fundamental human right and making access to education at best difficult and at worse impossible for women in Afghanistan is discriminatory. This discrimination shown by the Taliban against women cannot be supported by Islam, despite many members of the Taliban's claims. There are alternatives that can be fought for so that Afghan women can still receive an education at this time. Education is the most powerful tool for Afghan women to realise their dreams of a better future. Time is running out and the international community must not let them down.

Educated women are like torches that burn brightly and save people from darkness and ignorance. In these dark days in Afghanistan's history, we see a number of our educated sisters take to the streets and demonstrate to claim their right to continue their education and work. This is an example of the fact that educated women have never been silent in oppression and are defending their rights and the rights of others. The Taliban need to start affording the right of education to Afghan women, and the rest of the world needs to start fighting for that right.

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