

# W O M E N W I T H O U T B O R D E R S

POLICY PAPER

## THE WAR ON WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

*A brief reminder that  
their struggle is still our struggle*

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*A POLICY PAPER BY EDIT SCHLAFFER*

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## WHAT WENT WRONG, TWENTY YEARS ON

A year has gone by since the fall of Kabul, which at the time marked the most recent in a long line of significant turning points in Afghanistan's blood-stained history. How did we get here despite the billions that were poured into the military and humanitarian aid industries, leaving countless bodies in the wake? Death and destruction are present beyond the battlefields, affecting especially life in cities and villages across the country. What went wrong? The anniversary of the fall of Kabul has prompted long overdue reflection on the part of the media and the Western military elite alike. David Petraeus, former CIA director and commander of the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, noted that the fall of Kabul was not an inevitability. In hindsight, he put it down to a "lack of strategic patience". Petraeus identified the withdrawal of Western troops as a significant contributing factor to the ultimate defeat. It effectively quashed all hope and brought about a palpable sense of "psychological collapse".

The international troops had hoped to put an end to this endless war but did so unprepared and hastily. In the meantime, the frontlines have shifted. War is still ongoing. A war against women.

Twenty years ago, the allies overthrew the first Taliban regime. They were ousted--as the collective narrative went--for encroaching upon women's rights. Defending the human rights of women and guaranteeing girls' access to education were worth the sacrifices, as the narrative went.

Let us remember the turning point brought about by 9/11, which initiated the war on terror. Women indeed became a central tenant of the PR strategy. And women across Afghanistan went along with the momentum, embracing this opening moment: they went to school and

university, demanded women's inclusion in political assemblies. Women in Afghanistan fought hard to become visible and heard in public. Freedom of movement was a daily triumph and a rejection of the old order.

Afghanistan is a tribal society with a hierarchical and repressive social order that leaves little room to the individual—least of all a woman. The elder rule the young with an iron fist. They mobilise tradition and religious decrees to justify their intimidation tactics and ritualise violence. There is no space for discussion—least of all for women. When the social order was challenged following the first Taliban era, the structures that had upheld Afghan patriarchy and its rulers' reign of terror came into view. The glue had been domestic violence, gender discrimination, and violent misogyny that was most evident in the murder of girls and the selling off of daughters as brides. These are all expressions of enduring gender inequality, to put it lightly.

## WOMEN ARE THE FACE OF THE RESISTANCE

Afghanistan's women have always been the face of the resistance. During the first Taliban regime, they maintained the fabric of civil society by moving social life underground. Especially their under-the-radar networks of secret schools helped to ensure that the daughters of Afghanistan would not be entirely left behind. All this had worked to prepare Afghanistan for a world after the Taliban, which came and lasted some two decades. Women helped to shape a new sense of the future at all levels of society. In post-Taliban Afghanistan, a woman could and did compete for the highest office of the president. The many examples of role model courage and inclusion inspired a whole generation of young women to envision a life beyond the domestic sphere.

Massouda Jalal is one of these role models. She now lives in exile in The Hague with her daughter Husna, a staunch activist. Following the example of her mother, Husna is now building a digital network to give thousands of Afghan women in exile a platform and voice. In these desperate times, she wonders out loud, "Why aren't the international players our allies? After all, it's about peace for us all."

Fearless in the face of death, young women from Kabul to Herat and Kandahar took to the streets and demanded bread, education, and freedom. They were soon met by the Taliban's rifle butts. As their protests continued, the persecution spree began. The protest women's houses were searched, neighbours were questioned about their whereabouts, and many who did not manage to go into hiding in time were abducted and tortured.

Hoda Khamosh became a symbol of this courageous movement. She was flown to Oslo by the Norwegian government for a dialogue with the Taliban, where she confronted the Taliban's Foreign Minister Muttaqi with large signs bearing the faces and names of the street protest women who had been disappeared. She demanded that he immediately make the call for their release. What happened next? Hoda's house in Kabul was searched, her husband had to flee to Pakistan, and it has become too dangerous for her to return to Kabul.

## DO NOT NEGOTIATE WITH TERRORISTS

This new Afghanistan is sporting its old outfit. Gender apartheid is the pillar of the political fabric. The flood of new regulations include the veil decree, the ban on traveling without a male companion, and many more.

These also impact men. Not only must they see to it that their beards grow quickly and sufficiently long; they must also protect their female family members and face punishment if they fail to do so.

Women and girls, however, are disproportionately affected. The longer girls are banned from school, the more seamlessly the Taliban will cement its rule. The exclusion of women from education and their participation in shaping Afghan society are a founding principle of this regime. This is how they envision safeguarding their autonomy. In Afghanistan's Taliban 2.0 regime, there will never be a place for women at the decision-making table.

Women are between the frontlines every day. They've fought relentlessly for their rights, risked everything in the process, and have come too far to simply give it all up again. A gender conflict is now in full swing: the Taliban are superimposing social ideals stacked against women and creating a sense of panic that a 'gender disorder' threatens to corrupt society. Above all, it's women who are shouldering this battle. This is the issue of the day, because it is a life or death situation; it is about prospects, perspective, the right to self-determination. It is ultimately about freedom, and the fear thereof.

Many women in Afghanistan are now leading a life of solitude and secrecy. To avoid losing their mind, they hide their thoughts and suppress their feelings. They are the invisibles: the disenfranchised political prisoners of the Taliban system. As things stand, their solitary confinement will go on, and any prospect of freedom has moved beyond the horizon and out of view.

The global shakers and shapers directing peace and security are mostly men, as are their counterparts in Afghanistan. The Taliban are in charge

and the world leaders are listening—falling for cynical promises and turning a blind eye to inept political efforts. How much longer will the world be fooled by grotesque and staged Doha-style dialogues? This theater play has ended. The curtains have closed.

## THE WEST MUST ENGAGE WITH THE WOMEN OF AFGHANISTAN

We need a new cast of characters. The art of dialogue and compromise is not one that the Taliban leadership has mastered or honoured. The Allies' mantra of not negotiating with terrorists should become the order of the day. Is there no alternative? Perhaps there is. Now is the time to listen to the voices of enlightenment and the Afghan resistance in hiding within and in exile abroad. They are many, and they are educated, courageous, and experienced. In a sense, they are the antithesis of the Taliban in values and deeds.

By now, it is the women of Afghanistan who have nothing left to lose. A new security architecture could act as the foundation of an open and inclusive civil society. This vision and common effort is what may unite the Afghan and international communities at long last. Make no mistake: the struggle of Afghanistan's women is our struggle in equal measures. It is the fight for a safer and more gender equitable world. And it is time to listen. Thousands of women in exile are willing to use their know-how to support their country. These women are determined to build on all that they have accomplished so far, and they will do anything to give their children a brighter future in their homeland. The women of Afghanistan must be brought to the international negotiating tables in a unique historic attempt.

This is the West's chance at redemption. Our chance to learn from this monumental betrayal of women.

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*Women without Borders (WwB) is an international nonprofit organisation headquartered in Vienna. Since 2001, WwB has been building capacity through women leadership and empowered dialogue efforts to address gender-based violence and violent extremism, the world over.*