

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

## AFGHANISTAN'S FOREVER CRISIS?

*How Afghan women hold the key  
to a problem with no quick fix*

---

*A POLICY PAPER BY NARGIS NEHAN  
Afghan women's rights activist in exile*

Policy Paper N°10, August 2023



### THE POLICY CONTEXT.

*The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan on 15 August 2021 plunged the country into a perpetual state of crisis. The new regime swiftly curbed the rights of women as well as ethnic and religious minorities. Beyond this, the Taliban set out to suppress anyone who questioned or challenged their policies. A lack of political will to form an inclusive, representative, and legitimate government has turned Afghanistan into an apartheid state that is governed along gender and ethnic lines. With Afghans left to their own devices, many have opted for the path of resistance. The international community's withdrawal following their failed Peace Deal with the Taliban has left the Afghan people feeling betrayed and abandoned. The people of Afghanistan are now on their own in having to deal with the very reign of terror that their allies facilitated. This situation is rooted in the collective failure of all actors, ranging from the leaders of the former republic who ran away, to the US and its allies who abandoned the country. Above all others, however, the Taliban are to blame.*



### THE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

*This Policy Paper proposes that following two futile years of engagement with the Taliban, the international community, Islamic countries, regional and neighbouring countries, and all actors who are interested and expect to be engaged and consulted about Afghanistan-related affairs should adopt the following two policy streams:*

- 1. The world must recognise Afghan women and youth as their long-term partners. They need to **engage with Afghan women and civil society** more seriously, and to support them with platforms to self-organise, convene dialogues with other actors, and develop a women and youth centric political pathway for sustainable peace in Afghanistan.*
- 2. The international community must also address the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Afghan people who are being pushed into poverty in a collapsing economy need **a commitment to emergency support** in lieu of empty promises and statements.*

## TALIBAN-WESTERN FAILINGS AND TERRORIST RESURGENCE

In the wake of the Taliban takeover two years ago, the new regime swiftly cemented its unpopular rule. The list of governance failings and missed opportunities has grown ever since. Since the summer of 2021, the Taliban has hindered the formation of an inclusive and representative government, undermined access to education and work for women and girls, and revoked any amnesty for pre-Taliban era activists, journalists, and members of the security forces. Instead of pursuing widespread purges, the Taliban would have done well to protect its citizens, respect and uphold women’s rights, and embrace civil servants who previously had been running ministries and public institutions to provide critical basic services to its population.

Two years of Western inaction and poor Taliban governance have had a disastrous effect on Afghanistan and its people. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that Afghanistan humanitarian response is facing substantial ‘critical funding gaps’, amounting to an estimated \$1.3 billion.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the United Nations Security Council’s Sanctions Monitoring Team reports that around twenty international terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), are establishing a strong presence in Afghanistan. Links between the Taliban and al-Qaeda are said to be ‘strong and symbiotic,’ with al-

“ *Two years of Western inaction and poor Taliban governance have had a disastrous effect on Afghanistan and its people* ”

<sup>1</sup> UN Women, ‘Out of jobs, into poverty - the impact of the ban on Afghan women working in NGOs’ (Gender Alert no. 3, UN Women publication, 13 January 2023), pp.8, see: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/Gender-alert-3-Out-of-jobs-into-poverty-Afghanistan-en.pdf>

Qaeda now 'rebuilding operational capability' from its base in Afghanistan. The UN deems it a grave long-term threat to Central Asia.<sup>2</sup>

The West has spent two years waiting for the Taliban to change, ignoring the suffering of the Afghan people. They are looking on as their local allies are being hunted and persecuted. The time has come for the international community to listen to Afghan women who are amplifying the voices of otherwise voiceless communities across Afghanistan. Before the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates to the extent that incidents on the scale of the 9/11 attacks could become conceivable once again, the international community must provide critical life-saving assistance to poor people across Afghanistan, doing so without politicising humanitarian assistance. They must also engage the diverse range of Afghan groups, including women, youth, civil society, the media, and divergent political factions. Representatives from these groups must receive support through a series of intra-Afghan dialogues to build consensus for a sensitised and inclusive political pathway for sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

“ *The time has come for the international community to listen to Afghan women who are amplifying the voices of otherwise voiceless communities* ”

## ■ MOUNTING ETHNIC AND GENDER APARTHEID

In the light of Afghanistan's multiple crises, it is even more concerning that there exists no legitimate and representative government with the

---

<sup>2</sup> UN Security Council, 'Fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2665 (2022) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan' (Sanctions Monitoring report, June 2023), p.16, pp.27, see: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/125/36/PDF/N2312536.pdf>

capacity or political will to respond. Instead, the Taliban are focused on controlling people’s lives, imposing severe restrictions on women, ethnic, and religious minorities. Last month, they issued another edict banning the operation of women beauty salons, making another 7,000 women jobless. They even interfered with the Hazara community’s commemoration of their most religious day: 10th Muharram. Many people, including children, were injured, and some killed, when the Taliban opened fire on crowds who were gathering for the event. Afghanistan’s Hindu and Sikh communities have already left Afghanistan and resettled in India.

“ *The pace at which gender equality is being eroded is increasing Afghanistan’s lead as the worst country on earth for women* ”

The latest Taliban directives banning women from working in NGOs and UN agencies has increased the pace at which gender equality is being eroded. This has helped to increase Afghanistan’s lead as the worst country on earth for women to live. Today, Afghan women who had worked on the development of their country—once making up 20% of the workforce in Afghanistan—now fear appearing in public and social settings. Isolated and demoralised, many women have lost their confidence, self-worth, and pride. Since August 2021, over two million Afghans have migrated to different countries due to poverty, insecurity, but most importantly with the desire for their girls to receive an education. According to the Gender-Alert-3-of UN Women, 97% of the population are at risk of falling below the poverty line—in an economy that has contracted around 35% and where 11.6 million women and girls need humanitarian assistance.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> UN OCHA, ‘Afghanistan Critical Funding Gaps’ (information leaflet, 2023), pp.10, see: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-critical-funding-gaps>

Internal open opposition to the regime has been stifled by the persecution and extrajudicial detention of journalists and young girls who were peacefully advocating for education and freedom. Even Afghanistan's neighbours, Iran and Pakistan, who openly supported the Taliban and advocated for their recognition, now complain about the Taliban's lack of cooperation.

## AFGHANISTAN'S WOMEN: THE RESISTANCE FROM WITHIN

While the last two years have weighed heavy on Afghan women at home, they continue to risk their lives by raising their voices. Those who have been evacuated from Afghanistan have spent most of their time in temporary accommodations and refugee camps, with most still struggling to start a new life in new countries with completely different cultures and environments. Despite all these challenges, Afghan society is still highly vibrant and resilient. Young women and girls protest on the streets and on social media for their rights to be educated and to work. Some TV and radio channels are hosting programmes in which participants openly express their views about the current situation, despite the restrictions. In a land where poetry is revered, people meet for poetry evenings to voice their opposition to the de facto authorities through their writings.

*While the last two years have weighed heavy on Afghan women, they continue to risk their lives by raising their voices*

In today's Afghanistan, people have learned to express their opinion and make themselves heard. Today, no one can find solutions for Afghanistan except Afghans themselves, and no one can impose their political agenda on Afghans against their will. Women's reactions to the latest statement of the US Special Envoy for Afghan Women and Girls, Ms. Rina Amiri, who tweeted that she is engaging with the Taliban based on the

demand of Afghan women, demonstrates how active and responsive women groups are, and how they are using different mediums to raise their voices.

Afghan people, particularly women, have been successful in raising their voices, advocating for their rights, and pressuring the international community not to recognise the Taliban regime. Unlike in the 1990s when Afghan women were erased from society and had no voice, this time around Afghan women are using social media effectively and constructively to disseminate information and communicate their message to the world. They are using digital platforms to interact among themselves and the international community, advocating for their rights and demands.

## SUPPORTING AFGHAN WOMEN AS ALLIES FOR CHANGE

Afghan women were very clear from the outset that the Taliban have not and will not change. They continue unabated to urge the international community to engage with Afghan women, civil society, media, and different political factions beyond the Taliban. Even while the international community has refrained from recognising the Islamic Emirate, states are engaged bilaterally with the Taliban—competing to build good relations and to demonstrate an upper hand. All this has further boosted Taliban confidence and convinced them not to compromise on their ideology.

The international community's lack of consistent and strategic support has made the battle more challenging. For almost a year, women have been asking different countries

“ *Afghan women were clear from the outset that the Taliban have not and will not change; they continue tirelessly to raise awareness* ”

to support them with an Afghan Women’s International Summit that would convene Afghan women leaders, activists, journalists, and entrepreneurs. This summit would draw on women from within and outside of the country to strategise and develop their movement. Yet no country has stepped forward to support them. Unlike the pre-August 2021 era—when Afghan women’s rights defined the international community’s red line—Afghan women and their rights no longer find a place in the agenda of the international community when it comes to their Afghanistan policy.

“ *The time has come to give Afghans a chance—what we need is a platform and political support* ”

After twenty years of investing in Afghan politicians who did little to create stability in Afghanistan, investing in the Taliban who violated all terms of the Doha Peace Deal and turned Afghanistan into a

graveyard for Afghan women is not the answer. The time has come to give women and the young generation of Afghanistan a chance; to support them to develop an alternative path for their country. Today, there is no lack of leaders, strategists, mediators, and peace builders in Afghan society. What we lack is a platform and political support.

\* \* \*





*About the Author:*

*Nargis Nehan, whom Bloomberg once referred to as 'The Iron Woman of Kabul', is an Afghan women's rights activist. She migrated to Pakistan during civil war, graduated from a high school for refugees, and started working for an international organisation to support her family and pursue higher education. She has served in public office as Treasurer of Afghanistan, and as the country's Senior Advisor to the Ministers of Education and Higher Education. During her tenure, she initiated and implemented several reform projects. Ms Nehan also served in the National Unity Government as Senior Advisor to the President and as Acting Minister of Mines and Petroleum. She currently lives in exile and advocates for Afghan women's rights.*

*Suggested Citation: Nargis Nehan, 'Afghanistan's Forever Crisis? How Afghan women hold the key to a problem with no quick fix (Women without Borders, Policy Paper N°10, August 2023)*

*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.*