

## **Women's Issues Remained Only Women's: Afghanistan's Women Empowerment Agenda and the Failure to Achieve a Political Settlement**

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### **Introduction**

As Afghanistan stands at another turning point in its history, it can be tempting to resort to the common expression that “*history has been repeated*”, but this is not quite the case. The Taliban in the 1990s took over the wreckage of a devastating civil war. This time, the Taliban's rule faces a country that flourished despite all the odds and challenges. The group’s return could not weigh heavier than it does on the women of Afghanistan, who, in the past year, have systematically been erased, subdued, and stripped of their fundamental rights.

Women's issues were controversial and probably one of the most debated in the pre-Taliban era. However, the inherent connection between the advancement of women's issues and the greater well-being of the country was never understood or acknowledged in practice. There has been a general acknowledgement that the failure to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan has upended women's lives; however, little attention has been paid to the ways in which the negligence of women's issues and the silencing of their voices has led to the current debacle. Instead, women make the headlines merely as victims and recipients.

How did the lack of female agency in decision-making - most notably in the negotiations and the peace process - contribute to failure in Afghanistan? The answer lies not merely in women's underrepresentation or non-participation in the peace talks with the Taliban, but it is also about how women and their issues were regarded as secluded, clichéd, non-impactful, and non-pragmatic over the past 20 years. Therefore, as we reflect on what went wrong in Afghanistan and why we stand in the midst of a worsening catastrophe, it is imperative to look at the situation from an inclusive and critical lens and to analyze what went wrong with Afghanistan's women's empowerment agenda after 2001.

In the post-2001 era, Afghan women and girls re-emerged in the public sphere; girls went back to schools, women joined the workforce – [forming 30 per cent of the civil service](#) - young women excelled at education, sports, and arts. Women, albeit slowly, exerted their presence in politics not just by voting but also by aspiring to political office, running in local and national elections. [Women formed 27 per cent of the former Afghan parliament and 20–25 per cent of provincial councils](#). Afghan women were in the police and army and worked as lawyers and

judges. Dozens of women's rights organizations mushroomed, and Afghan women were the driving forces behind the nascent civil society and free media. The list of Afghan women's successes is long enough to convince us that they over-achieved given the opportunities they were given. However, their achievements should not lead us to turn a blind eye to the shortcomings and policy failures that contributed - along with other factors - to the collapse.

### **Seclusion of Women's Issues**

The international community invested [more than \\$780 million](#) to empower women and girls in Afghanistan. One landmark decision that emerged was the establishment of a women's affairs ministry. However, the ministry struggled to mainstream gender issues at the ministerial, provincial and local levels over the years. While a dedicated ministry was welcomed as women attempted to heal the wounds caused by the Taliban's systematic patriarchy, the structure and the ways by which the ministry operated contributed to the seclusion of women's affairs from wider society. Women's issues remained only women's.

Efforts more generally aimed at female empowerment made after 2001 failed to convey and institutionalize the basic fact that women's issues were not alien to the rest of the society. Segregating women's rights meant a failure to integrate these issues into the fabric of Afghan society. For instance, women's rights to education, work, and political participation were not addressed and realized in the larger society as an integral part of its functioning and health but rather they were pushed aside to "a women's department."

This trend could easily be diagnosed when the peace process with the Taliban took place, and women's rights activists and politicians longed for a place at the negotiating table. If women's issues and their perspectives had been synchronized with the rhythms of the republic's governance and politics, there would be no need for separate demands of inclusion to be made. How could one imagine making a political settlement with a group that has been notoriously misogynistic and harshly violated women's rights in the past without involving women in the process? Because women's issues were deemed as separate - as a fancy bullet point to be ticked off a list.

The same trend could be recognized after the Taliban took over and women-led movements swiftly emerged. Women with placards in hand stood against the Taliban on their own. Afghan men refrained from supporting campaigners and offering solidarity to their movements, perhaps due to fear of reprisal and persecution. However, this lack of support from men and the wider Afghan society stems from the fact that women's movements are deemed as women's alone, as are their achievements and failures. [The motto](#) of Afghan women protesters - "Bread, Work, and Freedom" – did not reflect what women alone wanted; men too faced poverty, joblessness, and restrictions under Taliban rule.

### **The Top-Down Approach**

Women's challenges were deemed homogenous, and governmental and non-governmental initiatives and projects applied a top-down approach to address them. Policies were shaped at the higher echelons of the government, behind closed doors, before rolling them out for implementation on the ground. Though government and NGO leaders ticked boxes by including one or two women in the room, they failed to do the real work, which required the amalgamation of various approaches to ensure comprehensiveness and inclusivity. Women's perspectives, voices, challenges and aspirations are diverse and heterogeneous given the socio-cultural, economic and political factors involved. The top-down approach failed to include the full spectrum in the design of projects and policies at the outset.

Furthermore, as the name signifies, the top-down approach promoted a perspective that women's affairs included three to four general themes, and issues outside the default women's affairs were not as important. For instance, [USAID Promote](#) – the largest women's empowerment program supported by USAID anywhere in the world – consisted of four parts: women in government, women's leadership development, women in the economy and women's activism and role in civil society. The above-mentioned areas were important, but no project and initiatives of the past 20 years focused on mainstreaming and integrating women's needs and aspirations into policy and decision-making — for instance, women employees' access to affordable and reliable childcare. Women's essential needs and demands were regarded as unimportant or private matters and remained unaddressed.

Similarly, women's participation in a peace process or political settlement is never solely about the number of high-level women officials at the negotiation table. It goes deep down to the fact that women are primary victims of war and the political compromises to end it. At the same time, victory in a peace process and a country's future stability are intertwined with women's meaningful and equal participation in society. In practice, however, in the 23 officially-recorded peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban [between 2005 and 2013](#), only two meetings - in the Maldives and France - included women representatives. No women were included in any [discussions between international negotiators and the Taliban](#) until 2013.

The top-down approach neglected the fact that women do not hold one or two default perspectives around peace and the reaching of political settlements. The lack of grass-roots and local-level initiatives and deliberations that could dissect and understand what the peace process meant for women in Afghanistan, how they could play a role in it, and what the outcome of the process would bring to their lives remained a gaping hole throughout the years - and one that has been painfully widened by the Taliban's return.

### **The Donor Checklist**

Given that donors within the intentional community funded most of the women's empowerment projects and initiatives after the Taliban were toppled, it is important to look at their shortcomings and mistakes as well.

The donor community funded projects that suited their agendas, strategic goals and requirements. Women's empowerment and gender equality projects and initiatives were no exception. For civil society and NGOs to meet the requirements, it was commonplace for them to adjust, comply, and tailor their proposals and activities. This trend confined the women's empowerment agenda to short-term and mid-term projects and diminished the possibility of asserting a more strategic and long-term vision. In tandem with this, the short-term projects, non-strategic viewpoint, and over-dependence on foreign funding undermined the institutionalization of civil society and its values.

The design of these projects by a few individuals without a comprehensive and inclusive needs assessment was ubiquitous. "Empowering women" had turned into a bullet point to be ticked off donors' lists. Such a superficial approach to the women's empowerment agenda resulted in millions of dollars being spent, and yet, Afghanistan remained one of the [worst places in the world for women](#).

In tandem with the challenges discussed, knowing the donor "language" came first in the list of requirements to obtain grants. Crafting good-looking proposals with impeccable English hampered the ability of local, grass-roots and community-based groups - who could better understand what women in their communities needed and how those needs should be met - to access funding. As a result, a network of several women's rights organizations that had learned the donor language and could easily circumvent their requirements received funds and implemented projects without bringing profound changes into women's lives. For instance, when the work was underway to draft Afghanistan's National Action Plan (NAP) for United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security in 2015, [grass-root women's rights organizations and groups felt excluded and uninvolved](#).

### **The Implications for Political Settlement**

The failure to achieve a political settlement did not happen overnight, nor did it happen when provinces started to fall to the Taliban. The failure was gradual, perhaps starting at the very outset of international involvement in Afghanistan. One major contributor was the failure to acknowledge women's roles in bringing peace and stability to the country. Women were sidelined or given a handful of symbolic roles within patriarchal settings designed and run by men. This trend undermined women's efforts in the past 20 years, especially in the last two years when the peace talks between the Taliban and the US were taking place. Women and civil society continuously voiced their concerns over their exclusion in the process but went unheeded.

A political settlement is a long-term and gradual process; it requires political will, planning, and work from all the parties involved. The settlement could not be achieved overnight, nor could it be achieved by excluding women, who have paid the highest cost of the decades of conflict in Afghanistan. Afghan women were sidelined in the peace process, while research and evidence suggest [women's participation in the process increases the probability of a peace agreement](#)

lasting at least two years by 20 percent, and the likelihood of a peace agreement lasting 15 years by 35 percent.

In February 2020, the US signed a hasty peace agreement with the Taliban, excluding voices from Afghanistan, especially women. The agreement, which was, in fact, a deal to merely pull-out US troops in Afghanistan with the Taliban guaranteeing their safe departure, is now proving utterly flawed. When the Doha Agreement negotiations were underway, women's rights activists and groups were concerned that there were no guarantees from both sides that if a political settlement was achieved, the Taliban would respect the rights of women and girls. Two years later, the Taliban have re-launched a gender apartheid regime and dismantled the prospect of a truly peaceful Afghanistan. The international community, on the other side, have given huge concessions to the Taliban and is failing to stick to its moral responsibility to at least stand by the women and girls in Afghanistan.

## **Conclusion**

Women in Afghanistan strived and over-achieved over the last 20 years. Nevertheless, the women empowerment agenda was met with challenges, shortcomings and failures that hampered the possibility of a profound shift in the lives of Afghan women. The overall viewpoint that sees women's issues as secluded, cliché, symbolic and not-so-important contributed - among other areas - to the failure of previous peace processes and initiatives and, ultimately, the failure to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan. And yet, there is a lack of acknowledgement, research and debate to address this profound deficit.

Meanwhile, the Taliban has embarked on gender apartheid against women in Afghanistan by restricting women and girls' rights to education and work and limiting their freedom of movement. The regime has confined women's lives to domestic roles and diminished all their support systems against domestic violence. As Afghanistan faces the Taliban's return and the group's crackdown on women's rights, there is no more room to repeat past mistakes. Women's rights groups, organizations, activists and the international community need to consider the lessons learned as the fight to redeem women's rights continues. Women's voices should be seen as diverse, impactful and pragmatic in decision-making, negotiations, and deliberations of all kinds. Diverse approaches should be taken to reach out to women from various backgrounds, ethnicities, classes and communities. And finally, interventions to promote women's rights and improve their lives should be co-designed by diverse groups of women.