

# WPS in Afghanistan: Betrayal and Renewal

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## Introduction

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan on 15 August 2021 unraveled significant achievements of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in Afghanistan over the last two decades.<sup>1</sup> Every western donor present in the country pushed the WPS agenda over the past two decades of their engagement in Afghanistan. The previous Government of Afghanistan adopted a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security in 2015. They made concerted efforts to implement the NAP by promoting women's participation in the peace process, the parliament, in government and the security sector, and to protect women and girls from gender-based violence and other violations of their human rights.

The western forces' withdrawal not only destabilised these achievements, but it also erased the public space of struggle for gender equality. The collapse of the Afghan Government and exit of international forces laid bare the reality of the "projectification"<sup>2</sup> of the WPS agenda and its impacts in Afghanistan. The return of the Taliban through force was inevitable with the signing of the Doha deal on 29 February 2020.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the evacuation process revealed the lack of commitment to protecting women's rights and women activists in the face of the Taliban takeover and attacks.

Afghan women and girls are now facing a serious crisis based on their gender.<sup>4</sup> Future strategy and engagement to support the rights and security of women and girls in Afghanistan must be based on a frank assessment of the meaningfulness of policies and initiatives supporting the WPS agenda. Feminist foreign policy can support this objective by providing a

framework towards a more explicitly feminist and transformative approach.

This paper has two aims: 1) to provide a post-mortem analysis of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan as a reality check for the international community and through the lens of feminist foreign policy; 2) to assess what can be done to renew the commitment and efforts to support women's security and human rights.

## 20 Years of WPS in Afghanistan

The WPS agenda established with Security Council Resolution 1325 in October 2000 is a wide-ranging agenda that seeks to promote women's equal participation in peace and security processes and decisions, and enable gender-sensitive protection of human rights, prevention of conflict, and relief and recovery. The feminist foreign policy (FFP) movement which has developed more recently since 2014 builds on the global vision and achievements of this agenda and aims to expand a gender equality and women's human rights perspective to all foreign policy actors and domains – including diplomacy, trade, development aid, humanitarian responses as well as security and peacebuilding. FFP promises a more explicitly feminist and transformational approach to gender justice, which has implications for rethinking foreign policy toward post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Women's freedom was instrumentalised by the US and its allies following the events of 9/11 and the complex security threats to the western world presented by regimes harbouring violent non-state groups. Upholding women's rights and the WPS agenda enabled western states to promote liberal values and influence via soft power while creating

alliances that showcased their status and rank in the hierarchy of international politics.

Importantly, however, the intervention also enabled Afghan women to make fundamental gains<sup>5</sup> in their status and rights, notably the codification of gender equality in the 2004 Afghan constitution and institutionalisation of women's representation in the parliament through a quota system. The Afghan Government began reporting on implementation of CEDAW in 2009, bringing greater transparency and accountability.<sup>6</sup> Women's access to education advanced significantly. There were more than 3.8 million girls enrolled in schools, and women's enrollment in tertiary education increased three times more between 2006 and 2020. Women's access to sexual and reproductive health increased, as the fertility rate decreased from 6.64 to 4.6 children per adult female. This progress enabled better outcomes for girl's education and women's economic participation.

***However, the implementation of women's rights and security were fragile. In particular, the decline of women's civil society participation between 2012 and 2019 as a result of the worsening security situation made it even more difficult to secure these rights and women's full political and economic participation.***

The Taliban targeted women civilians and politically active women, as well as maternity hospitals and schools. Violence against women and girls remained widespread across Afghanistan, including killings, with the home the most insecure place of all according to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).<sup>7</sup> But as the former Chair of the AIHRC, Dr Sima Samar stated: "the fact that every Afghan household has heard about women's rights or discussed human rights is an achievement."<sup>8</sup> Modest but meaningful achievements are reflected in everyday stories and scenes, such as that of an elderly man in Daikundi province who sold his only asset, a cow, to fund his daughter's higher education in Kabul, or captured in the picture of Mia Khan taking his daughters to schools with motorbikes in the conservative villages of Paktia province.

A large sum of money was spent on gender-related themes in the state and peacebuilding efforts. Almost every program and organisation had gender equality units and projects, often to "tick the gender box" to meet the criteria for funding, whether from international organisations funded by state donors or local organisations funded by the government. The criticism of the gender approach began to emerge as the war carried on, and the security situation deteriorated. Corruption played a crucial role in feeding the "un-meaningfulness" of women's equality and the tokenism of women's voices in the local and rural communities. Promoting women's rights became another pocket for building assets and "making easy money."

The Afghan rural-urban criticism was widest when it came to the issues of women's empowerment and

representation. It was often criticised that women's rights are only upheld and promoted in urban areas, and that Afghan women representatives did not portray the rural gendered dynamics and dimensions.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, the criticism did not come from rural Afghan women themselves, but rather from the competition among Afghan nationals and international elites' over resources, and their dismissal of each other's work as a result.

In contrast, the limited insight from documentaries or research from rural Afghanistan shows that Afghan women in rural Afghanistan supported the basic rights that their sisters enjoyed in the urban areas.<sup>10</sup> They were prevented from participating politically in the rural areas both for cultural and security reasons. Hence, the politicisation of gender equality as in the urban-rural divide was used as an instrument to weaken the WPS agenda. The agenda lacked a political strategy to achieve meaningful and robust affirmation from local communities as well as Kabul in order to enhance and embed gender equality and protect fundamental rights.

## **Women's Rights and Negotiations with the Taliban**

During the official diplomatic engagement with the Taliban from October 2018, the Taliban's stand on women's rights was the most popular, if not fundamental, question posed to them by journalists and officials. The Taliban consistently lacked clarity in their answers and remained ambiguous with regard to respecting the fundamental rights of women, although these rights were denied and violated during their government 1996-2001, and the insurgency. Despite the optimism of many western commentators and diplomats, Afghan women were first to show concerns about the continuation of the Taliban's discriminatory views and policies toward women.<sup>11</sup> They flagged that the statements of the extremist movement could not be trusted. Afghan women's precautions aside, it was clear from the districts under Taliban control that women were prohibited from participation in public life.

***Despite this on the ground evidence and the grave concerns of Afghan women, the western allies willingly took steps that led to a renewed "war on women" by the Taliban, once again, in 2021.***

In the US-Taliban negotiations between 2018-2020 that led to the Doha Agreement which enabled the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban to power, no Afghan women were present. The Doha Agreement was made public only after the signing ceremony on 29 February 2020, disclosing the absence of obligation or accountability of the Taliban for women's rights.<sup>12</sup> The US's lack of interest in protecting or even supporting the WPS agenda in Afghanistan directly threatened the lives of all women and girls but especially women leaders and women's rights advocates who would be direct targets of the Taliban.

The critical question is, how meaningful is the WPS

agenda when those who have endorsed the principles are prepared to trade them away to the Taliban after geopolitical shift to withdraw forces from Afghanistan? In a closed meeting in May 2022, an Afghan woman leader and former government official told western ambassadors: "You lost your credibility and legitimacy on women's rights when you signed a deal with the Taliban. I lost mine when I boarded the plane to be evacuated."<sup>1</sup> This summarises the collapse of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan – which has implications for its moral authority and relevance internationally.

## Withdrawal and Evacuation Process

The announcement of the Biden Administration to implement the Doha Agreement and withdraw troops despite the Taliban's failure to comply with their obligation, such as cutting ties with Al-Qaeda, triggered the collapse of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.<sup>13</sup> From April to August, districts fell one after another into the hands of the Taliban without any fighting. The domino effect is common in Afghanistan wars as political changes and shifting alliances are the dominant factors for the collapse of military and territory.

From February 2020 to August 2021, the western allies and supporters of WPS agendas in Afghanistan had one and half years to formulate a plan to prevent violation and protect the gains of the fundamental women's rights issues in Afghanistan. The evacuation process was unplanned and messy, and its images and stories remain to haunt the world. To the authors' understanding through their networks in Afghanistan, the embassies had no lists of Afghan women leaders from the grassroots organisations, figures from the civil society groups, and women professionals from governmental and non-governmental sectors to prepare for their evacuation. Instead, the evacuation list was hasty and influenced by people with networks and contacts during the evacuation itself.

Currently, there are thousands of women's rights activists from civil society organisations, security sectors, and government officials in hiding. Many women activists, journalists and officials were murdered, and some disappeared with no information, like the head of Herat's women's prison, Alia Azizi.<sup>14</sup> One of the authors is in close contact with a dozen Afghan girls who served in security sectors, including the intelligence, and are chased by the Taliban through their relatives and neighbours. Due to their identity, they cannot cross the border either by air or by road. Many had their passports held in the office, they could not apply for a new passport, and the biometric data were now in possession of the Taliban. A 25-year-old who was the secretary of one of the deputies of the National Directorate of Intelligence said to the author, "suicide is my only escape from my gender vulnerability in Afghanistan and my identity under the Taliban regime."<sup>2</sup> Thousands of Afghan women and girls are trapped and facing threats to their lives, while millions are imprisoned in their homes for

their gender identity.

## Consequences of the Taliban takeover for WPS in Afghanistan

In the nine months since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the erasure of gender equality has not only destroyed all the gains of the last two decades but continues to threaten the lives and livelihoods of women and girls. In the early hours of the Taliban forces arrival in Kabul on 15 August 2021, panicked shopkeepers broke female mannequins and wiped women posters from the wall with white or black paints.<sup>15</sup> The price of Chadari or the blue veils increased more than tripled within a day. Afghan businessmen knew exactly what the Taliban's return meant to their women customers. Afghan women also recognised their diminished status as they rushed to remove their photos from social media and deactivated their accounts, burned their educational documents and modern clothes. In a matter of hours, these women adjusted to the brutal reality that they were left on their own as the western allies' aircrafts left Kabul airport, mostly prioritising their nationals and staff for evacuation, and leaving little hope for Afghan women.

***Now, with few international advocates for women's rights left, there is little western leverage to influence the Taliban's policies.***

***The ground on women's rights has effectively been ceded to the Taliban.***

Furthermore, the way in which the Taliban came to power through military force emboldened hardliners within the Taliban rank and file who are uncompromising in their ideological stand over women's rights. The Taliban see themselves as the "victor" that has defeated the "superpower"<sup>16</sup> and "western-oriented" concepts such as women's rights.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, making compromise over women rights are often seen as crossing the Taliban's ideological line. In the past nine months, seeing the Taliban's discriminatory policies institutionalising gender apartheid, shows that their stand on women's rights is one of the most visible factors that can cause fragmentation among the wide spectrum of the Taliban hardliners. For example, Taliban's promises to reopen girls' secondary schools was abandoned by the Taliban supreme leader after consulting with Taliban groups in Kandahar, while aware of the consequences that cost them their international recognition and legitimacy.<sup>17</sup> Flexibility over women rights - something as fundamental as girls' access to education - is seen to divide<sup>18</sup> and offend members of the Taliban, who were fed with the propaganda during the war that they are fighting to restore Islamic Emirate and install "pure Islamic" government – which by default mean the return of the Taliban from the 1990s. Therefore, the Taliban remain unresponsive to the international pressure to open girls' secondary education to not

<sup>1</sup> Anonymised to maintain confidentiality and privacy of participants

<sup>2</sup> Based on first author's firsthand encounter

<sup>3</sup> Observed by first author's encounters on social media among Taliban representatives and followers.



offend the hardliners and face backlash. The status of women is a source of cohesion cementing disparate Taliban as an extreme ideological movement. This has revealed the Taliban's ideological intransigence towards women's rights, and the limited leverage of international actors vis a vis the Taliban.

Furthermore, there is a common misconception among western diplomats and officials in their engagement with the Taliban that the treatment of women is somehow part of "Afghan culture". This is the result of the Taliban's own framing of their policies as "pure", "Islamic", and "Afghan" to delegitimise the pro-women rights policies and practices of the last two decades as an "alien" and "outsider" entity.<sup>19</sup> Such narratives make actors involved in Afghanistan step back and indirectly legitimise the Taliban's discriminatory policies. One cannot observe a single gain towards women rights from diplomatic engagement with the Taliban so far.

Events such as hosting Taliban in foreign capitals, sending private jets, and adopting certain dress codes and language effectively endorses the Taliban's extremist views on women.<sup>20</sup> A feminist foreign policy approach challenges such engagement. FFP takes its cue instead from Afghan women activists on the ground and in exile who have been loud and clear on the need to protect women's fundamental rights and not progressively chipped away at them with cultural and religious reservations which accommodate an extremist regime. A FFP approach demands that, western diplomats and officials adopt concrete and unambiguous language and communication strategies to avoid sending the wrong signals to the Taliban.

### ***Feminist foreign policy treats fundamental women's rights as non-negotiable, a red line, and not able to be traded-off.***

Resuming sanctions on the Taliban leadership from international travelling can be one of the few practical measures to affect the Taliban directly rather than negatively impacting the people of Afghanistan. While there is a lack of appetite for engaging with Afghanistan, countries that adopt feminist foreign policies, need to be at the forefront of international advocacy to hold the Taliban accountable for their actions rather than merely their (misleading) words. The suffering of the Afghan people today, especially women and girls, is a direct consequence of the international community's engagement and disengagement. Moreover, meaningful progress in women rights in Afghanistan in the 21st century is a test case for all state obligations under the WPS agenda -- UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions.

## **What Should Australia do?**

Australia's second National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security, 2021-31<sup>21</sup> and its four core outcomes to *support women's meaningful participation in peace processes, reduce sexual and gender-based violence, support resilience, crisis, and security, law and justice efforts and demonstrate*

*leadership and accountability for WPS* an drive Australia's feminist foreign policy approach, both its commitment and its responsibility to specifically promote gender equality and protect the human rights of women and girls in Afghanistan.

It is essential to recognise that Australia has made longstanding contributions to advancing the WPS Agenda in Afghanistan and has supported women's inclusion in the so-called peace process, prioritising the protection of women's rights activists during evacuation. In addition to evacuating most Afghan partners who were directly engaged with Australia's mission in Afghanistan, Australia has also responded to civil society organisations' pressure and evacuated Afghanistan's girls' soccer team, women judges, lawyers, and other professional fields. This shows Australia's priorities are consistent with its 2016 whole of foreign policy gender strategy and setting the right precedent.<sup>22</sup> Australia's announcement of increasing refugee intake from Afghanistan to up to 31,500 in the next four years is a significant and welcome commitment. However, the 'women at risk' category must be enhanced and prioritised to reach out to the most vulnerable women leaders who need protection without international connections and networks.

The following five recommendations for Afghanistan are guided by a transformative feminist foreign policy approach and build on the four outcomes sought under Australia's second WPS NAP. All five recommendations and the initiatives they suggest can be further enhanced through consultation and collaboration with academics working on Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora communities to underpin Australia's FFP strategy that actively harnesses and mobilises its own civil society for the benefit of conflict-affected Afghanistan and greater regional and international peace and security.

***Recommendation 1: Call for an inclusive peace settlement in Afghanistan***

**Australia must support a cohesive and consistent international call for an inclusive peace settlement in Afghanistan.** This settlement should be achieved by legitimate means of elections to empower a government that respects human rights and protects the fundamental rights of women and girls.

The end of the war on terror in Afghanistan did not end the war for Afghan people, especially for Afghan women and girls. Afghanistan's history and a FFP approach both indicate that unless and until there is a legitimate and inclusive government, it is unlikely that durable peace will be achieved.<sup>23</sup> The international community, especially countries involved in Afghanistan post 2001, including Australia, have an obligation to support and peace and stability in the war-torn country by upholding women rights.

***Recommendation 2: Supporting innovative educational initiatives for women and girls and providing dedicated protection through resettlement for Afghan women most at risk***

**The Australian Government and private sector should support women and girls in Afghanistan by**

**offering scholarships through universities and other tertiary institutions, rescinding the rule that educational visas cannot be issued if there is the intention to seek asylum or immigrate.**

The current bureaucratic backlog for Afghans to apply for a visa and the substantial fees involved prohibits any chance of seeking educational opportunities in Australia. Many women and girls have missed out on education at home and abroad during this time. The US has now reinstated its Fulbright program but there is a far greater demand that it cannot address. Australia could develop its own program managed onshore, but akin to the Australian Awards program offering in other countries as part of development aid.<sup>24</sup>

***Recommendation 3: Building feminist civil society***

**Australia should commit to supporting feminist civil society in Afghanistan in the short and long term, given its critical role in challenging institutionalised gender discrimination.**

As a result of the Taliban's crackdown of civil society, rights-based organisations have either collapsed or operate under extremely limited resources. Supporting civil society organisations and leaders is more critical than ever before. They are the "eyes" and "ears" of Afghan people and the world's window to Afghanistan. Civil society organisations at the grassroots can monitor human rights violations and hold perpetrators accountable.<sup>25</sup>

***Recommendation 4: Dedicate visa for Afghan women at risk***

**Australia should have a dedicated visa category for women at risk in Afghanistan.** Even temporary visas are helpful that provide a safety parachute for women who are dedicated to working in their country but need an exit plan for emergency cases and when threats are high.

This is a meaningful FFP approach to ensure grassroots women leaders are supported by easing the pressure to have an exit plan in place in case of risk. This context-specific, tailored approach can help to achieve two main goals: access and impact at the grassroots to enhance gender equality and support and protection for women leaders in Afghanistan that operate under the Taliban regime.

***Recommendation 5: Establishing a Government-Civil Society taskforce to champion the rights of Afghan women and girls***

**Australia should host a forum on Afghan women's rights that brings together civil society leaders, scholars, practitioners, and advocates to provide constructive advice to the new Government.**

Such an initiative involving all actors will directly demonstrate Australia's FFP leadership and accountability for WPS in Afghanistan at this critical time.

## THE AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY COALITION

The Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition is a diverse network advancing feminist foreign policy in Australia. Convened by IWDA, its members work across various sectors, including foreign policy, defence, security, women's rights, climate change and migration.

Feminist foreign policy is an approach that places gender equality as the central goal of foreign policy, recognising that gender equality is a predictor of peaceful and flourishing societies. This Issues Paper Series aims to explore the opportunities and challenges for Australia in applying a feminist lens to a range of foreign policy issues and provide practical ways forward.

# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The institutionalisation of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan can be considered significant. However, it is important to note they remained incomplete practically. The last two decades lacked meaningful implementation of WPS in Afghanistan at local and national levels. There were many social and political barriers that did not allow meaningful participation and contribution of Afghan women.
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- <sup>7</sup> Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. "Summary of the Report on Violence against Women: The Causes, Contexts and Situation of Violence against Women in Afghanistan." Access May 2022. <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5ab132774.pdf>
- <sup>8</sup> Gender, Peace and Security Centre, Monash University and Castan Centre for Human Rights Law. 2021. "The Nature of Conflict: Is International Law Working?". *Afghanistan Series*. [The link to this webinar cannot be shared to protect the security of the speakers in Afghanistan.]
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- <sup>13</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. 2022. "Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors that Led to its Demise". Accessed May 30, 2022. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-22-22-IP.pdf>
- <sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2022. "Afghanistan: Herat Women's Prison Head Missing 6 Months". Accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/20/afghanistan-herat-womens-prison-head-missing-6-months>.
- <sup>15</sup> Sinead Baker. "Photo shows posters of women at Kabul beauty salon being painted over as the Taliban seized the city". 2021. *Business Insider*. Accessed May 26, 2022. <https://www.businessinsider.com/kabul-salon-posters-women-painted-over-taliban-arrival-2021-8>
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<sup>22</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2016. "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy". Accessed May 30, 2022. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment-strategy.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Farkhondeh Akbari. 2021. "International Consensus Needed for the Taliban's "Non-Return Through Force". Just Security. Accessed May 27, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/75240/international-consensus-needed-for-the-talibans-non-return-through-force/?fbclid=IwAR2OzKcjN2Ev3cfM4Lo8nXbwvfrQgygjYxXXQkrQUGAcA5im7UonPgY7C7M>

<sup>24</sup> Monash University's Gender, Peace and Security Centre (GPS) can be a model for creative and dedicated initiatives tailored to support Afghan women and girls. Monash GPS has developed a peer mentoring program to connect Monash students with university-age Afghan female students to get them to continue thinking and writing about important issues while they are unable to attend university under the Taliban rule.<sup>24</sup> On 8 March, the centre hosted international women's day event

to turn the spotlight on the plight of Afghan women and girls and paid tribute to their struggle for gender equality. Gender, Peace and Security Centre, Monash University. 2022. "A tribute to the fight of women and girls in Afghanistan". Accessed May 28, 2022.

<https://www.monash.edu/arts/gender-peace-security/geo-political-security-toward-global-responsibility-in-afghanistan/monash-peer-mentoring-for-afghan-young-women>

<sup>25</sup> Diaspora initiatives can aid an Australian FFP that supports and enhances gender equality and gender-justice in Afghanistan. One of the authors has co-founded a women's employment and empowerment centre through an Afghan-Australian youth initiative in Afghanistan, operating since the Taliban takeover and collapse of economic opportunities for women-led households. Organization for Development Solutions (ODS). 2021. "Women Employment and Empowerment Centre". Accessed May 29, 2022. <https://www.odsaf.org>