

## Afghan Women's Rights Series, Session Two: Field Studies and Reports

25th October 2021

# SUMMARY DOCUMENT

## EVENT DETAILS

**On Monday the 25th October 2:15-3:30, the Humanitarian Action Study Group of DSAI held an online webinar to discuss strategies and experiences of engaging with issues relating to women's rights in contemporary Afghanistan.**

The discussion brought together an international panel of speakers with a rich diverse background including academia, grassroots activism and policy analysis for a facilitated online webinar sharing recent evidence, insights and reflections in an effort to better understand how to better promote and protect Women's rights in Afghanistan.

We are grateful to all participants, in particular to those who kindly presented, including:

- Wazhma Frogh, Peace and Conflict Practitioner and Mediator
- Kevin Schumacher, Deputy Executive Director, Women For Afghan Women (WAW)
- Jelena Bjelica, Co-director & Senior Analyst, Afghanistan Analysts Network
- Dr. Ludwika Wlodek, Lecturer, University of Warsaw

*\*Participants expressed that their views are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of the organisation they work for.*

## BACKGROUND

**The recent transfer of power from the former Afghan government has caused immense uncertainty across Afghanistan, specifically in relation to gender equality.**

Participants on the day highlighted that whilst the Taliban didn't meet all conditions of peace deal, the United States continued with their withdrawal in March. This ignited great unrest across the country; in spaces of conflict often the rights of minorities, including women, come under threat. In relation to humanitarian action, in mid-2020 before the Taliban takeover, half the population required humanitarian assistance. Critical services for women and girls must continue to be delivered, which requires female aid workers working with communities and creating safe spaces for women and girls.

An article by The Guardian in September '21 documents the critical situation relating to women and girl's rights in Afghanistan: A Taliban spokesman says the group will respect the rights of women and minorities "as per Afghan norms and Islamic values". The Taliban leadership, eager for international recognition and funds, have claimed to have shifted their position on women's rights, yet journalists document how women in Afghanistan fear to go to work and to resume their studies. Reports explain that women will now be expected to study and work in spaces almost – if not – completely detached from those of men, who are in places of power (running the country and its economy) so women's lives are expected to be severely curtailed. Institutions, such as schools and Universities, explain don't have the resources to manage two parallel spaces segregated by gender, which as described in The Guardian, is a gender apartheid.

Many women have been ordered to stay home indefinitely for "security" reasons. In the 1990s the Taliban used the same reasoning to prevent women from working. While there are many promises of forms of inclusion from Taliban leadership, women's experience is of restrictions. Many women lost husbands in recent conflicts resulting in the only option for a household income being for women to work – "how else will we feed our children?"

This webinar sought to offer a platform for researchers and activists who are working to promote and protect women's rights in Afghanistan to share their experiences and strategies in the current developing situation in Afghanistan.

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## OVERVIEW OF KEY CHALLENGES

Wazmah Frogh, Peace and Conflict Practitioner and Mediator, opened their talk with a reflection on the past twenty years in Afghanistan and the many consistencies and changes. In the past twenty years 'While Afghanistan was changing, learning and relearning' ... what has been achieved?

*"Working for AfghanAid in Pakistan at a time when Afghanistan was under the Taliban, I would beg my father to grow his beard, so that I could travel to Afghanistan. Right now in Afghanistan, it reminds me of those days"*

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”

**Wazmah Frogh talks  
of Changes and  
Consistencies in  
Contemporary  
Afghanistan**

When Wazmah returned to Afghanistan twenty years ago, they recalled how homes were ruined, markets were ruined, everything was ruined but there was so much hope. During this 20-year journey, what is so heart-breaking for many of us, they explained, is that we travelled the country to try and build a new country 'what do you want for your children', this was the front and centre question of how Afghan's created the 2004 constitution. International Human Rights was central to this, including establishing women's equality in law. This, she explained, was revolutionary in a traditional, Islamic society. While acknowledging that the past 20 years cannot be viewed through rose tinted glasses, given the many challenges including frequent terrorist attacks and corrupt leadership, there were gains as five million more girls were going to school. Wazmah Frogh argued that the Taliban don't seem to have a sense of responsibility to the Afghan population. Approximately forty million Afghans are now on the brink of a political, economic, security and humanitarian crisis. The Taliban, who were expelled by Americans twenty years ago, received great leverage from the United States this year. Many Taliban fighters were released from prison and the morality of Afghan soldiers began to decline. What is different in this Taliban leadership compared to the prior, Wazmah explained, is that social media has become a tool for the Taliban to recruit soldiers.

Drawing on their experiences of working with everyday women of Afghanistan who work to protect and promote women's rights, they explain that all of women who they work with remain in Afghanistan to provide safety in shelters to 'thousands of women who you never hear about in the media but stood up to the violence that they were being subject to in their everyday lives'.

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“Experiences  
of  
protecting  
and  
promoting  
women's  
rights in  
Afghanistan:  
'for those  
who can't  
stay and for  
those who  
have to stay'”

Dr. Wlodek on  
researching with  
high-profile Afghan  
women working to  
promote and protect  
women's rights.

## OVERVIEW OF KEY CHALLENGES

In contrast to the everyday experiences of Afghan women, Dr. Wlodek, Lecturer at the University of Warsaw, shared their experiences of researching with high-profile Afghan women working to promote and protect women's rights.

Reflecting on twenty in-depth interviews with women rights activists Dr. Wlodek sought to understand what gave them courage in their struggles for protecting women's rights and what challenges they faced. When posing the question: 'Why are you so committed to changing Afghanistan?' interviewees spoke of the inspiration of proud Afghan icons and strong progressive families who inspire make Afghanistan a more 'modern' country. She shared how the participants told stories of loved ones being arrested and killed for wanting to 'progress' the country in past decades, like families paying to send boys and girls from the village to school, who in turn secure employment and pay for other village children to have the same opportunity. Dr. Wlodek recalled how Mahbooba Saraj was the only woman she interviewed that stayed in Afghanistan after the United States withdrew. Mahbooba Saraj described her love of her city of Kabul and of Afghanistan itself and that she chose to stay to sacrifice her life for those who can't stay and for those who have to stay, by running women's shelters.

Dr. Wlodek's research findings resonated with Wazmah Frogh experiences. The path of women's rights in Afghanistan has not been linear, the 1923 Afghan constitution enshrined women's rights which has been followed by both progressions and regressions, 'for every bit of progress the rights are then lost for ten, twenty or even more years'. This is what we are seeing now, Dr. Wlodek's explains, we are losing everything that has been achieved in the past twenty years. In the 90s, when negotiations were almost concluded, the Soviet Union fell and interviewees recalled how state services collapsed "When I listen back to this, the similarities are striking, it's as if [the interviewee] was explaining the situation on August 15th". Dr. Wlodek concluded by sharing how all women interviewed in this study had ancestors who shared their same path, as both research and experiences suggests that Afghanistan history is repeating itself.

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**‘We are  
sending the  
wrong  
message’**  
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**Jelana Bjelica  
speaking about  
Monitoring,  
Understanding and  
Misconceptions**

## OVERVIEW OF KEY CHALLENGES

Jelana Bjelica, Co-director & Senior Analyst, Afghanistan Analysts Network, drew from their years of experience in Afghanistan and reflected on what the international community can do to protect the achievements secured relating to the protection of women, educational advances and their right to work. When assessing the current context, Jelena debated how the unknowns in Afghanistan, in a great and complex country currently undergoing a power transfer, can lead to misinterpretations and create further tensions and misunderstandings.

One recommendation that Jelena proposed when reflecting on the work of Heather Barr of Human Rights Watch, was that as the international community we must include women ourselves in international negotiations with the Taliban. We must stop sending ‘only’ white men and make more efforts to include women to demonstrate we practice the values of gender equity and equality that we claim to have. Finding the fact in Afghanistan is so difficult; there are many things we don’t know about Afghanistan due to the complex and difficult environment to do research and collect written evidence. Jelena sparked an animated debate, reflecting on their research experience in Afghanistan when proposing that,

*‘I don’t know if everything is lost.... I think it’s that we know very little.’*

This proposition was based off observations that the space for dialogue and research has shrunk dramatically, meaning that former methods of investigating to understand women’s daily experiences in Afghanistan are no longer available. Jelena summarised that we are guessing, as those who know Afghanistan know things function on rumours. Jelena pointed to Dr. Ludwika’s research methods of oral history interviews as a way to develop understanding about Afghanistan’s past and present due to an absence of written records held in the state. Jelena concluded by recognising that ‘the good news is, we have something to work with’, yet the retention of these gains must come from within, adding that as ‘outsiders’ we can only support financially, morally and through leading by example in our interactions with the Taliban government.



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The  
Importance  
of a Future  
Afghan-Led  
Women's  
Rights  
Movement:  
An agenda  
cocreated  
'by Afghans  
living in  
Afghanistan'  
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Kevin Schumacher  
responds to Jelana  
Bjelica speaking  
about Monitoring,  
Understanding and  
Misconceptions

## OVERVIEW OF KEY CHALLENGES

Wazhma contrasted this argument with the assertion that the situation in Afghanistan has clarity; they identified World Bank records estimating the population in Afghanistan, and that the women we are talking about today are not 1000 activists or a few 100 women leaders, it's 15million Afghan women. Moreover, how in Afghanistan 50% of the population are under 24years, of which the majority is also female. Wazhma stated that we do know that the vast majority of Afghans are living in poverty, illustrating through the focus of their work shifting from peacebuilding and negotiations to helping people buying bread.

Kevin Schumacher, Deputy Executive Director, Women For Afghan Women (WAW) outlined that while perhaps we don't know the exact accuracy of the numbers of girls in school, we can get an accurate understanding of the situation on the ground through such estimates, proposing that,

*'If we're in the darkness, then let's light a candle'.*

Kevin concludes that Afghanistan's women's rights projects were pioneered by westerners, which he considers to be neo-colonialism in the form of international democratic programming.

Summarising his dialogues with Taliban leaders, Kevin described how they understood women's rights movements as a Western enterprise created to emasculate Afghan men, i.e. make Afghan men women and Afghan women men. Kevin requested that all take a moment to pause and think about why Afghanistan is the way it is today; he explained that of the approximately 20% of Afghans who voted in the last election, about 50% were suspected to have voted for the Taliban. While acknowledging the statistics are not representative of the entire population, he explained that these figures can aid an understanding of certain contexts. Kevin echoed Wazhma, when explaining that are many Afghans who did not participate, perhaps they were marginalised, during the democratisation process are returning to settle their scores. He identified that for two decades the Taliban was dismissed on accounts of terrorism, being propped by Pakistan, and while they did not have an interest in state Governance, they have returned and demonstrated great force.

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**Money  
cannot buy  
rights for  
people.**  
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**Kevin and Wazhma  
reiterate the  
importance of  
rejecting simplified  
narratives.**

## OVERVIEW OF KEY CHALLENGES

Kevin deliberated the significance of an Afghan-led movement in Afghanistan that embraces the rights of everyone, that has ownership by all Afghans; fundamentally an agenda cocreated 'by Afghans living in Afghanistan'.

Kevin acknowledges how previous international women's rights efforts were disconnected from Afghanistan and its natural environment and explains that a relevant feminist narrative must be shaped by local Afghans. Panellists shared ample examples of communications advertising women's services shared across Afghanistan, yet these were only written in English for a Western audience.

Both Kevin and Wazhma reiterated the importance of rejecting the simplified narrative of past successes which didn't exist. The international community must stay humble, listen and learn about how and why past efforts failed Kevin explained, as 'money cannot buy rights for people', he concluded with the take home message that we must learn from the history.

## QUESTIONS, GAPS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Wazhma argued that both the West and Afghans are equally responsible for the current situation as a vast proportion of funding was from the United States. If credit is taken for any progress, the responsibility for the strife and failures must be taken in equal measure. Wazhma proceeded to question the misrepresentation of Taliban support in the media by highlighting the thousands of families who are trying to flee but are stuck at. She outlined the dire situation facing families who cannot buy bread and whose children are missing, as sons are being taken by the Taliban to fight. Wazhma concluded by identifying that as there is no structural human rights monitoring and reporting at the provincial or national level to inform [I]NGO planning; this results in the misinformation and rumours identified by Jelena, as information can only be collated from first-hand accounts. In Wazhma's experience, resources have shifted to short-term immediate needs, like buying bread, rather than long-term strategic planning organisations could designate efforts to before.

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## QUESTIONS, GAPS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Dr. Wlodek called for prudence when dismissing and problematising modernisation and western values in Afghanistan as it can reinforce a profitable narrative used by Afghan's in power who profit from people not having access to formal education or basic rights. At the same time, INGOs who were pushing for a women's rights agenda also profited as such a narrative often guaranteed programme funding. Dr. Wlodek observed that Afghan women's rights activists secured their successes through bravery and hard work; she told of Homeira Qaderi who fought for her son and livelihoods in Afghanistan through Afghan courts, demonstrating how successes can be homegrown without foreign intervention.
- Dr. Ludwika and Kevin reiterated that the international community must recognise and support Afghanistan's own tradition of societal change embedded in centuries of tradition and development, as any other form of can be critiqued and resisted due to a lack of relevance, ownership and meaning. While the enterprise of the Western-led women's rights movement in the past two decades was inherently faulty, many achievements were made in this time, and – as summarised by Jelena Bjelica 'not everything is lost', highlighting that a great population of formally educated women remain

## FURTHER READING

- Afghanistan Analysis Network: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/>
- Afghanistan's shrinking horizons: 'Women feel everything is finished', September 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/12/afghanistans-shrinking-horizons-women-feel-everything-is-finished>
- DSAI HASG Webinar: Afghan Women's Rights Series, Session One Watchback 'Do Women in Afghanistan Need Saving?', October 2021, <https://www.dsairland.org/resources/watchback-do-women-in-afghanistan-need-saving/>
- Heather Barr, When Foreign Men Talk to the Taliban About Women's Rights: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/18/when-foreign-men-talk-taliban-about-womens-rights>
- Homeira Qaderi, Dancing in the Mosque: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeira\\_Qaderi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeira_Qaderi)
- Mahbouba Seraj, The 100 Most Influential People Of 2021, <https://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2021/6096014/mahbouba-seraj/>
- Rural Women's Access to Health: Poverty, insecurity and traditions are the main obstacles <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/rural-womens-access-to-health-poverty-insecurity-and-traditions-are-the-main-obstacles/>