



Women living under muslim laws  
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين  
Femmes sous lois musulmanes  
Transnational Feminist Solidarity Network

## The Women of Afghanistan Will Not Give Up and We Stand by Them

Homa Hoodfar and Dana Kamour

### Preface

The following article was finalized in July 2021, when, despite set-backs and stalling, there was still the possibility of reinitiating the intra-Afghan peace process. At that time we still held hope, like Afghanistan's female negotiators, that peace could be achieved and that, despite the Taliban's obvious lack of commitment to the process, some sort of agreement with the Taliban would be possible.

However, within only 10 days during August 2021, the Taliban captured the country by force. The Taliban claim to have moderated their ways, yet they announced that women will no longer be allowed to hold ministerial positions, they have closed down the Ministry of Women replacing it with their oppressive Ministry of Vice and Virtue, and it appears that girls are no longer able to attend [secondary education](#), making access later to the now segregated higher education impossible. The women of Afghanistan have faced 40 years of war and, still today, they have not given up their struggle for rights and freedoms. Currently women are at the forefront of protests against the Taliban's rules, [on the streets](#) and [online](#). We salute their courage and recognize their enduring resistance.

Under these grime conditions and the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11, the article now reads almost as a eulogy to women's achievements in Afghanistan, it is a reflection on missed opportunities, as well as a reiteration of hope for Afghanistan's future and a just peace.



Image: Reuters

“Men Make War and Women Make Peace”:  
Conversations with Afghanistan’s Women Striving for a Lasting Peace

In 2000, we interviewed a woman from Kabul who lost everything under the Taliban regime and was no longer allowed to work to feed her three children. Reflecting on the misfortune of the Afghan people, she said:

***“Men make war and women make peace. They love their guns and we love our children. As long as they lock us out and silence us, the war will continue.”***

Over 20 years later her words ring loudly, they are echoed in our recent conversations and interviews with Afghanistan’s women leaders. They are a clear warning to all those invested in Afghanistan’s future.

In February 2020, the Taliban were courted by a Trump Administration effectively suing for peace. The Taliban’s regime 1996-2001 was the darkest period in Afghanistan’s history where women were stripped of their basic freedoms, denied work and education, and forced to cover from head to toe. Yet, the subsequent US-Taliban agreement offered no guarantees or protections for women’s rights.

As the ensuing peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghanistan government are set to enter their third round this month, it is important to recognize that women hold a strong position in Afghanistan’s political and civil life. Notably, Afghanistan’s Ambassador to the US is a woman and women hold a significantly [greater percentage of Parliamentary seats](#) (28%) than in the US Congress (17%). Despite this, their number at the peace talks is pitiful. The Taliban have no female negotiators, leaving women to represent only 4 of the 21 negotiators for the government. It is unsurprising that Afghan women are fearful, they can see their rights being compromised and traded away by men at a table. Women are being locked out and silenced once again.

So far on this road to peace, it has been women who have suffered the most. In June 2020, [Fatima Khalil](#), a young women’s rights activist and member of Afghanistan’s Human Rights Commission was killed. Fawzia Koofi, one of the female negotiators, survived an [assassination attempt](#) in August 2020. Two female supreme court judges were killed by gunmen in January 2021. Three women working for Afghanistan’s media were killed in March. And, a [horrific attack on a girls school](#) in May killed over 90 people, mostly young school girls.

The women of Afghanistan have fought hard for their rights and hold a significant place in Afghanistan’s society, and it is their freedoms and their lives that are most at risk by the Taliban’s return. This is why we must listen to their concerns, their warnings, if we ignore them there can be no peace in Afghanistan for years to come.

**Women have already fought for an effective peace – they will do so again**

Unsurprising after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, following US and international intervention, women emerged as community leaders who actively participated in the making of the new, post-Taliban, constitution.

They organized meetings, travelled across the country, and revised the '*Declaration of the Essential Rights of Afghan Women*' (Afghanistan's women's rights charter) written by Afghan women in exile in Tajikistan in 2000. The new charter formed the basis of their demands for the new constitution and was enthusiastically debated across the country.

Having suffered under restrictions imposed on them by the Taliban, women appreciated the enormous value of being lawmakers. They insisted on being part of the loya jirga (Grand Council) that finalized the constitution and enshrined their rights as equal citizens in the constitution. The 114 women out of a total 500 delegates ensured, not without struggle and hard-bargaining, a quota for the national parliament. Today, women make up 28% of the National Parliament, high for the region and higher than the [world average](#).

Zarqa Yaftali, Executive Director of the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation counted Afghan women's achievements and looked towards the future:

***"It is in the post-Taliban era that women have eagerly hugged every opportunity to advance and demonstrated their capability as teachers, journalists, businesswomen, civil servants, doctors, ministers, security workers and ambassadors. Women intend to guide their country toward peace and advancement."***

Women are deeply engaged in Afghanistan's civil society. They led the way in the repair of the country after 2001, and they are ready to do so again.

### **Afghan women are not fooled – the Taliban have not changed**

The Taliban have been elevated to worthy negotiating partners by the USA, presumably encouraged the Taliban's declarations of ideological change and their voluntary blindness to the record of today's Taliban-controlled areas. Field research by [Human Rights Watch](#) in these areas show the Taliban remain oppressive, women's freedoms disappear along with access to education after puberty.

Najia Hanfi, journalist and feminist activist who currently resided in Canada due to security concerns, sees through the Taliban's words. She explains:

***"I follow their development and their political discussions. I can tell you except for public relations and their savvy use of Twitter and social media in English directed at the western public, their gender ideology and understanding of citizens' right have not changed a bit."***

The Taliban continue to use fear and coercion to gain control. Despite their embrace of modern communication, they wrongly believe they can still control Afghanistan's youth and women through public flogging and corporal punishment justified by antiquated laws.

As Palwasha Hassen, Director of the Afghan Women's Educational Center, puts it:

***"The Taliban live in their 1990s universe and they refuse to see the reality of Afghanistan and, in particular, the young generation today that see themselves entitled to human rights, education, freedom of expression, and an open public sphere.***

***Afghanistan now has re-built its state institutions and recognition of women rights are the cornerstone of our constitution and the way we see ourselves. We are aware that there is a lot yet to be done, but our gains and achievements, albeit with the financial support of the international community, are considerable.***

***This is despite the Taliban's continuous terrorist attacks and killing that has cost 100,000 lives directly and several folds more as indirect consequences and not to mention all the destruction."***

This is why the US-Taliban agreement is so disappointing. The US agreed to release 5000 Taliban prisoners and withdrawal all troops. In return the Taliban has promised not to attack the USA and its allies. There were no guarantees for women, no ceasefire, and no consideration of Afghanistan's future. As many Afghans and other observers have already commented, this is an imbalanced if not totally misguided agreement that has given the Taliban the idea that they are victorious in the war.

As [Dr. Sima Samar](#), former Chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, wrote:

***"The agreement between the USA and the Taliban does not address the voices and demands of the Afghan people who are being targeted and killed more than ever before."***

She has also explained, of the Taliban, that because of this 'victory':

***"They feel entitled to dictate the terms of surrender regardless of demands and wishes of citizens."***

It is clear the people of Afghanistan want peace, the [Asia Foundation's 2019](#) survey indicated that many agreed with the peace talks and process of national reconciliation, 88.5% of Afghans indicated that they either strongly or somewhat supported efforts to negotiate peace with the Taliban. The survey also found that only 13.4% of the Afghan population have any sympathy for the Taliban. This may very well explain why the Taliban continue using military action and coercion to get their way, instead of pursuing popular election.

## The exclusion of women – a dangerous missed opportunity

Further opportunities to protect women's rights have been wasted or conceded to the Taliban.

### Representation

Women are poorly represented at the peace talks. Only 4 out of the 21 delegates are women, the Taliban choosing to send no women at all. Only [one woman was present](#) at the supplementary Moscow talks. This is unjustifiable, especially where women's rights are at stake. Concerningly although unsurprisingly, requests to meet the women of the Taliban's side by Fawzia Koofi, one of the female negotiators for the Afghan government, have been flatly refused.

The inclusion of women is not only key to ensuring women's rights, but also a durable peace. Studies of other peace negotiations indicate that where women have substantively been involved, the chance of a long-lasting peace increases significantly. [Studies tracking peace negotiations](#), after the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, show a direct link between women's participation in negotiations and the durability of the peace.

As [Roya Rahmani](#), Afghanistan's Ambassador to the US, wrote:

***“The question is whether women's contributions to peace processes are valuable. The answer is yes. This has been proved in the Philippines, Liberia, Northern Ireland and many other regions where women have had a substantive voice in the peace process. Women's inclusion in Afghanistan would be similarly impactful... This makes woman's participation a national security issue.”***

### Procedures

Many civil society leaders expected that the question of women's rights, and the preservation of their constitutional gains over the last twenty years, would be a core topic of negotiation at the peace talks. On this issue the Taliban are at odds with the international community, including many Muslim societies, and the [people of Afghanistan](#) itself, 97% of whom believe the protection of women's rights in the peace negotiations is important. It was also hoped that female negotiators would have a [veto right](#) for questions directly impacting women, to make sure that the men in the room are unable to repeat history and compromise on women's rights.

These technical and procedural decisions are also dangerous missed opportunities. Women's rights campaigners felt such policies would have addressed some of the shortcomings of the US-Taliban agreement. They would also have brought greater legitimacy to the government of Ashraf Ghani, increasingly perceived both inside Afghanistan and internationally as ineffectual.

### Ministry of Human Rights Affairs

To add to the disappointments, in December 2020 the government unexpectedly dissolved the [State Ministry for Human Rights Affairs](#). The Ministry was led by Dr. Sima Samar, a prominent female public figure with a deep understanding of the diverse of needs of the nation, and the first Chairwoman of Afghanistan's independent Human Rights Commission. The ministry could have played an instrumental role in the negotiation process and the protection of human rights. The key question is whether the government did this to appease the Taliban, who have publicly stated they reject all international conventions except those signed before the 1980s? That would include almost all human rights conventions, especially those related to the rights of women.

### **We will not give up – even if the rest of the world has**

In addition to procedural barriers, Afghan women also face daily intimidation and very real threats to their personal security. As Roya Rahmani has aptly put it, rather than placing women's rights at the center of the peace talks, the Taliban are trying to [marginalize and silence](#) participating woman through targeted killings and continuous threats directed at women leaders and their families.

Among them, Fawzia Koofi, has been subject to numerous threats and several assassination attempts. She survived the latest assassination attack, although severely injured, in August 2020. She courageously left the hospital to attend the peace talks. These attacks and threats directed at women and their families have, however, failed to deter Afghan women from their path.

In an interview with UN Women, [Dr Habiba Sarabi](#), another female negotiator, politician, and peace activist, explained:

***“We are facing a crucial moment in our fight, both for women’s rights and a lasting peace. At the same time, we are seeing an upswing of violence against women in Afghanistan by those who understand that by attacking women you can also attack and undermine the peace process itself... We must not falter in our determination to keep going until we realize our vision of an Afghanistan where every woman can live in peace and recognize her rights.”***

As the world watches on, Afghanistan's provincial towns and cities fall to the Taliban. The peace negotiations are set to continue in the backdrop of this death and devastation. Yet, [Fawzia Koofi](#) is not alone in her determination, she speaks for many Afghan women when she says:

***“I will not give up”***