

# **Fawzia Koofi's Journey: From Conflict to Championing Women's Rights in Afghanistan**

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**By Diana Reno,**



Women living under muslim laws  
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين  
Femmes sous lois musulmanes  
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Growing up, the War on Terror shaped my understanding of U.S. foreign policy. I knew that the United States occupied Afghanistan for the first 20 years of my life and that in 2021, the Americans withdrew abruptly, leaving behind a whirlwind of chaos and uncertainty. It was not until I began working for the Alliance for Afghan Women's Economic Resilience that I truly realized the disastrous impact of the withdrawal. I learned that Afghanistan is currently the only country in the world where girls are barred from accessing education beyond the sixth grade. I also became aware of the disorder and humanitarian crises unfolding under the poor leadership of the Taliban. Most importantly, I met activists who, despite living under constant threat of violence, continued to fight bravely for the rights of women and girls. I was amazed by their hope for the future despite the loss of 20 years of progress towards a kinder world, a world in which women could pursue their dreams and ambitions, virtually overnight.

During my senior year at Boston University, I was introduced to Dr. Homa Hoodfar and began interning with the feminist movement Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). She directed my attention to the memoirs of several women leaders and activists from Afghanistan, suggesting I read and write reflections on them. I chose to start with *The Favored Daughter* by Fawzia Koofi after learning that, in 2020, she survived her second assassination attempt, likely due to her outspoken criticism of the Taliban and her involvement in the peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government. This level of violence committed against such a public figure set the tone for what I would learn about political violence and security in Afghanistan while reading Koofi's memoir.



[The New Arab](#)

## **Shaped by Conflict: Koofi's Early Life**

Fawzia Koofi's life shows how political instability and conflict threaten the security of women and children. When Koofi was a young child, her father, a local politician, was killed by the mujahideen. They then sought to destroy her family, threatening to kill the sons and beating the young women. Koofi's mother, her co-wives, and the children were forced to flee their home and start their lives over. As widows, their options were limited. Koofi and her mother moved in with her brothers; the other women either sought refuge with family or remarried. This story is all too familiar in Afghanistan, where decades of war left an estimated 2 million women widowed by 2020. Within Afghan culture, which considers men the main breadwinners, recent widows are expected to move into another male-led household to avoid food and housing insecurity. The Taliban, who first came to power in 1996, would eventually prohibit women from leaving their homes without a male blood relative, which granted men complete control over women's lives. Under this mandate, women are deprived of the dignity of making decisions for themselves and their children, on occasion leaving them vulnerable to abuse within the home.

After fleeing from the mujahideen, Koofi's brother arranged for them to live in Faizabad, where, at seven years old, Koofi convinced her family to allow her to attend school. She excelled and regularly placed at the top of her class. At 11, they moved again to Kabul, where she continued to thrive in her education and gain new experiences. She describes her youth in Kabul as "free and light and fun." This freedom, however, was taken from her when the mujahideen took over the government in 1992.

The women of Afghanistan faced rampant physical violence at the hands of the mujahideen. Young women began wearing burqas, garments that fully cover the body and face, to protect themselves from sexual violence and forced marriage.

Koofi describes the first time she was forced to wear a burqa, writing, “In that moment, I felt something less than human. My confidence evaporated. I became tiny, insignificant, and helpless, as if the simple act of donning the burqa had shut all the doors in my life I had worked so hard to open.”

Despite the escalating violence in Kabul, Koofi insisted on resuming her English lessons, which involved an extremely dangerous commute across the city by taxi when she could find one and by foot when she could not. Her mother, though plenty fearful of the risks her daughter was taking, advocated for



The Guardian

Koofi to her brothers. Koofi writes, “But my mother would probably have thrown herself headfirst into machine gun fire if it meant I could still go to school.” Koofi continued her lessons until the fighting made it absolutely impossible to continue.

Koofi acknowledges that gender-based violence existed in Afghanistan before the mujahideen or the Taliban, made worse by widespread polygamy and an overall lack of alternative options for women. This system made women dependent on men and often opened them up to violence within the very household that provided protection from the wider society. Koofi writes that her mother, though she was loved and respected by her husband, was still subjected to domestic violence. She writes, “as wrong as it seems now, it was normal for the time and in the village culture.” Many children, though they were loved as well, experienced physical punishments as a means of discipline. The hierarchical family structures, it seemed, tolerated some degree of violence alongside loving care and protection. That being said, Koofi writes that, “The Taliban had all and more of the violence toward women, but none of the respect.” Though the culture of

permissiveness towards abuse may have helped the Taliban secure support in some areas, their dehumanization of women brought their violence to horrifying new levels.

The Taliban gained influence with their conservative rhetoric that stood in contrast to the unchecked violence of the mujahideen. However, violence quickly became the primary way for the Taliban to keep hold of any power they achieved during their first period of rule (1996-2001). Under Taliban rule, women were publicly beaten or worse for not wearing a burqa or violating any other mandate. The Taliban used their gun-secured political power to strip away all of women's (and to a lesser degree men's) basic human rights, including freedom of movement, travel, employment, and education. Promising security, the Taliban attempted to erase women from public life entirely, as if their mere existence was responsible for the violence they endured.

Koofi received several marriage proposals as a teenager. She was attracted to a young man named Hamid, but her brother refused to accept the proposal due to his lower financial and social standing. Koofi could not speak openly with or spend time with Hamid, and the final decision on her marriage belonged solely to her brother, as per cultural standards. In 1996, when the Taliban took control of the government, Koofi and her family were forced to leave Kabul. Hamid, realizing Koofi's brother would be especially concerned about protecting his sister's honor among so many militants, finally convinced him to accept his proposal. The arrangements were made between the men, and at 21 years old, Koofi was engaged to a man she loved. Though she approved of the decision, the men in her family held the power to determine her future.

One week after their marriage, Hamid was arrested for the first time when the Taliban raided their home looking for Koofi's brother. He would be arrested twice more within the first year of their marriage, though he was

never charged with any crime. Hamid eventually contracted tuberculosis in prison, leading to his death and leaving Koofi a widowed mother of two little girls.



BBC

## **Rising Through Adversity: A Path to Leadership**

After Hamid was released from prison the first time, he and Koofi moved to Faizabad, where Koofi began teaching English classes after the birth of their first daughter. She taught hundreds of students while caring for her newborn. Following the birth of their second daughter, Koofi took part in a medical survey of the province for the Foundation for Children, using her knowledge from medical school to gather information on maternal healthcare, hygiene, and misinformation. Later, Koofi accepted a position as a Children's Protection Officer with UNICEF, gaining domestic and international attention as the only Afghan woman in the province working for an international organization. This broke tradition and paved the way for other women to follow.

The September 11, 2001 attacks by Al Qaeda on the United States set in motion the downfall of the Taliban regime. Once seen as a freedom fighter and trained by the CIA to counter the Russians, the Americans now demanded that the Taliban hand over Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden. The Taliban refused and, less than a month after the 9/11 attacks, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom. Within a few weeks, the



Taliban were ousted from power. The United States would continue to engage in “major combat” with Taliban and Al Qaeda forces until May 2003, and NATO members would justify occupying Afghanistan with reconstruction, peacekeeping, and capacity-building projects until 2020- 2021.

In 2005, when the president announced the first parliamentary elections since the fall of the Taliban government, Koofi’s family decided to revive their political history and support one member’s candidacy for a seat in parliament. After some contest with one of her brothers, Koofi gained their support to run. She had built networks over the years through her work with women’s groups, teaching English, visiting internally displaced people (IDP) camps, and setting up sanitation and school projects. Despite attempts to defraud the election at the polls, Koofi’s campaigning paid off, and she won her seat in parliament. She quickly earned a reputation for being outspoken, professional, and cooperative. She was elected by her peers to the role of Second Deputy Speaker, the highest parliamentary position ever held by a woman.



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After the fall of the Taliban, the interim government faced the monumental task of rebuilding Afghanistan’s infrastructure, enhancing security, and restoring faith in the democratic process. This government had the backing of the Americans and the international community, who touted their

dedication to improving conditions for the women of Afghanistan as a key justification for their involvement in Afghanistan. As an MP, Koofi spoke out about many issues facing Afghans, particularly the challenges facing women and children. However, she struggled to gain support from male MPs and received little backing from the international community, which

soon forgot the women of Afghanistan. The initial surge of funding from abroad quickly dried up, and governments and NGOs began directing their attention to humanitarian crises elsewhere. The United States especially completely shifted their focus to their war in Iraq, which involved “major combat operations” from 2003 to 2005. Their concern for the women of Afghanistan seemed to be a thing of the past as they no longer needed justification for their presence and involvement in the country. Despite these challenges, Koofi continued to be a force for change, demonstrating the importance of substantive representation of women in government. This is particularly the case in pivotal transitional periods, when the seeds of future corruption may be planted as international concern wanes.

Even after achieving one of the highest positions in the Afghan Parliament, Koofi faced constant threats to her safety, including several assassination attempts, in large part because of her role in the peace negotiations with the Taliban. She was shot in the arm during an attack in 2020, coinciding with the start of peace negotiations between American forces and the Taliban. Koofi was one of the few women representing the Afghan government, which would end up being effectively excluded from the process. Her safety was constantly threatened by those who opposed women’s involvement in politics.

The women of Afghanistan have always had to be acutely aware of shifts in power, as their basic rights could be stripped away depending on the



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agendas of those controlling the government at the time. They have had to fight and negotiate for their rights for generations. This is not to say that every female politician will take up the feminist cause and advocate for women’s rights. However, it is true that women more fully understand the consequences of



misogynistic or indifferent policymaking. One shocking example is when Koofi describes how the Parliament was considering granting rebel groups, including the Taliban, some political representation. She said, “It is hard to see how the Taliban will ever sit in a parliament alongside female politicians like me... So much has been done in recent years to support and enhance the overall progress of Afghan women; bringing the Taliban back into the government will undo all of that.” Of course, she was right.

## **The Ongoing Struggle for Women’s Freedom**

Since 2021, with the Taliban back in power, women have had very little opportunity to participate in any form of public life, let alone in government or planning for the nation’s future. Many women’s rights activists, including Koofi, have been forced to flee abroad. Though the international community long used the protection of women’s rights to justify their 20- year occupation of Afghanistan, the women of Afghanistan continue to be excluded from UN negotiations and the Taliban continues to escalate their brutal gender apartheid. Women’s rights movements and civil society must continue to hold nations and institutions accountable for normalizing relations with the Taliban.



It is vital that we each make a conscious effort to uplift the voices of the women of Afghanistan. The Taliban's gender apartheid policies create a screen to hide the individual stories of women asserting their right to live as equal citizens through acts of resistance. Under an oppressive regime determined to erase women from public life, sharing one's story becomes a radical form of protest. It is the responsibility of feminists across the globe to listen and open ourselves up to empathy. We have a responsibility to promote their voices far and wide, demonstrating that the women of Afghanistan, like all other women across the world, are looking for peace, security, dignity, and human rights. They are driven to bring about change and create a world where they can fulfill their full potential. Without their stories, we risk losing sight of the depth of the negative impacts these oppressive mandates have on women and girls. Memoirs like Fawzia Koofi's *The Favored Daughter* force readers into intimate contact with the everyday realities of living under gender apartheid, realities the rest of the world often overlooks. Koofi's life should inspire everyone, especially feminists who enjoy freedom of expression and have a platform to leverage, to challenge themselves to learn more about the oppression the women of Afghanistan face, uplift their voices, and find ways to support them in their acts of resistance.



UN Women

Based on *The Favored Daughter: One Woman's Fight to Lead Afghanistan into the Future* by  
Fawzia Koofi



Diana Reno graduated from Boston University in 2024 with a Bachelor's degree with honors in International Relations. During her time there, she worked with the Alliance for Afghan Women's Economic Resilience for two years, helping to develop a strategic partnership between BU and the U.S. State Department. She also interned with the Boston Mayor's Office for Immigrant Advancement, BU's Center on Forced Displacement, and co- founded the student organization ARISE to create a space for students to learn about forced displacement-related issues through discussion and service. Diana began this project with Women Living Under Muslim Laws in the Spring of 2024. She currently works at a law firm in Boston and plans to pursue a Master's in Social Work in the near future.