

BEYOND THE BURQA: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF FEMINIST INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN

INTRODUCTION

Today, everyone is aware of women's condition in Afghanistan and the oppression they have been going through since the Taliban took control over the country in 2021. But there is more to the story of women in Afghanistan; their journey has been through many ups and downs over the last few decades.

This research paper will explore how the foreign policy of countries, including the United States, NATO members, regional powers like Pakistan, Iran, China, and others, has impacted the lives of women in Afghanistan since 2001. The analysis would be done from both Western and indigenous Afghan feminist lenses.

Afghanistan has become the focal point for competing foreign policy agendas since US US-led invasion in 2001, many of which claim to protect Afghan women. Early on, Women's rights were explicitly invoked as a justification for military intervention by Western countries. Former First Lady Laura Bush, in 2001 in her speech framed the war on terror as a "fight for women's rights and dignity." This narrative was later criticized for using Afghan women as a symbol in a "white savior" war narrative. Scholars term this "embedded feminism," noting that liberating Afghan women's narrative helped legitimize war.

RISE OF WOMEN

In the post-2001 era, Afghanistan's new constitution enshrined unprecedented legal rights for women, and international aid poured in to expand health, education, and political participation. By 2017, the percentage of Afghan girls enrolled in primary school had risen from 10% in 2003 to 33%, and secondary enrollment from 6% to 39%. Women's life expectancy rose by 10 years between 2001 and 2017, and maternal mortality roughly halved. By 2020, 27% of parliamentarians and 21% civil servants were women.

These gains were restricted to urban areas only because parents in rural areas still restricted women's mobility and work. The international presence played a major role in the rise of women as the US and its allies insisted on women's quotas in government, funded millions of scholarships for girls, and built thousands of schools and clinics for women.

In the early years, US policy foregrounded women's rights and then later included them in negotiations with the Taliban. Both the Bush and Obama administrations made women's rights a precondition for Taliban diplomacy. The NATO-led ISAF mission also adopted UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and integrated gender advisors and support for Afghan women's police training and justice programs. However, with time, Washington's focus waned. By 2020, women were excluded entirely from the US-Taliban

peace deal, and only a few women were included in the Afghan government's negotiating team, which sparked many criticisms by Afghan activists. Brookings expert insisted that even in withdrawal US should leverage aid and diplomacy to uphold women's rights. This view was also echoed by civilian leaders who argued that women's emancipation was reason to keep troops in Afghanistan in the first place, but there was no mention about women's rights and dignity during the Doha agreement with the Taliban, leaving the fate of Afghan women uncertain as foreign soldiers left.

EUROPEAN UNION AND OTHER WESTERN DONORS

European countries also played a major role in Afghanistan; they trained civil servants and police. Western NGOs ran programs for women entrepreneurs, human rights, and legal aid. A European parliament briefing notes that the EU "prioritized the advancement of Afghan women's rights" in its long engagement with Afghanistan. European Union and the United Nations maintained conditional help even after 2021 to help women. Humanitarian aids are targeted to women's education, health, and shelters. They publicly condemned Taliban's ban on women and, at times, suspended aid when the rights of women were curtailed, but it did more harm than benefit. Reducing aid without proper safeguards unintentionally did the worst for women who rely on that support.

Feminist critics argue that Western politics often treated Afghan women as "tokens" in peace processes and development narratives. When Afghan women repeatedly demanded genuine participation in talks, they were largely sidelined, and then the Taliban takeover made their exclusion excruciatingly apparent.

REGIONAL POWERS- INDIA AND PAKISTAN

India became a top bilateral donor to Afghanistan, investing over 2 billion dollars in infrastructure and in human capacity building. India's Self-Employed Women's Association trained over 3000 Afghan women in small-business skills, and scholarships brought Afghan women to Indian universities.

Currently, Indian foreign policy faces a dilemma. While it seeks to remain engaged for security and economic links, its moral stance on women's rights is constrained by realpolitik.

Pakistan policies have tended to worsen women's condition in Afghanistan. It secretly continued to support Taliban's faction via its ISI intelligence service despite joining the US coalition after 9/11. U.S. intelligence briefings revealed that while receiving billions in aid from Washington, the Pakistani army simultaneously trained Taliban suicide bombers. This double game fueled Taliban insurgency. Pakistan's covert backing indirectly undermined Afghan women's safety and freedoms.

FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY PERSPECTIVE

In recent years, many countries, including Sweden, Canada, France, etc, have adopted Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) framework. These policies support women's rights and participation globally. When the Taliban took over in 2021, women's condition attracted attention from these countries. Diplomatic protests to the Taliban have included demands to uphold women's rights under international treaties. Countries like Norway and Germany have allocated humanitarian aid for women and girls.

However, these efforts could not bring any fundamental changes in the lives of Afghan women. Critics argue that the Western-driven "white-savior" narrative oversimplified experiences of Afghan women. Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns that Global North feminism can erase local agency, and Afghan women are framed as passive victims in need of rescue. In 2023-24, western countries adopted symbolic measures like granting visas to women activists and funding underground schools, but long-term empowerment requires engaging with Afghan women's experiences and leadership.

KEY IMPACT ON WOMEN

Since 2001, the impact of foreign policy has been diverse on women in Afghanistan. Due to international intervention, there has been significant improvement in legal status and services for many urban women. Healthcare access expanded, and millions of girls went to school. For some women, the war temporarily opened new roles. While men were at war, they became teachers, lawyers, police officers, entrepreneurs, and NGO workers. They played all the roles that are unimaginable under the Taliban.

However, there is another side to the picture. Many of these gains were fragile or uneven. In rural and conservative communities, women remained under strict family control despite legal equality. The relative peace and aid that enabled women's progress began to collapse in the 2010s as the Taliban resurged; in rural areas, schools became unsafe, and urban women constantly felt under threat. By 2021, with the Taliban's return, many of the reforms were undone. Girls in most provinces were barred from going to school. In parliament, women's participation plummeted from 28% to 0% under the new regime, and all the gains of the past two decades were wiped out overnight.

ONGOING CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the feminist lens, the core issue is that foreign intervention treated women's rights as a side objective rather than a foundation. Women's demands were often sidestepped, the US-Taliban deal ignored them, and inter-Afghan talks continued with a token female presence. There is a need for a "bottom-up" approach where Afghan women's network is supported and women-led media and schools are funded.

Finally, the poorest and isolated women of Afghanistan suffer while international debates and sanctions continue. Many are locked at home, unable to access what foreign policy might offer. Feminists argue that rather than militarization, there is a need to listen to women's priorities.

The past two decades taught that without sustained international attention and genuinely inclusive vision, foreign policy alone will not secure permanent empowerment. The battle for Afghan women's rights will continue to reflect the tug of war between realpolitik and idealism, but at its heart it should be the voices of Afghan women themselves.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). (2022). *Human rights in Afghanistan under the Taliban*. <https://unama.unmissions.org/human-rights>

Felbab-Brown, V. (2021, September 14). *The fate of women's rights in Afghanistan*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-fate-of-womens-rights-in-afghanistan/>

Paikan, P. (2022). Feminist foreign policy and Afghan women: A case study. *Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP)*. <https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/afghanistan/>

Mohanty, C. T. (2003). "Under Western Eyes" revisited: Feminist solidarity through anticapitalist struggles. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(2), 499–535. <https://doi.org/10.1086/342914>

Kandiyoti, D. (2007). Between the hammer and the anvil: Post-conflict reconstruction, Islam and women's rights. *Third World Quarterly*, 28(3), 503–517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590701192603>

Gopal, A. (2021, September 13). The other Afghan women. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/09/13/the-other-afghan-women>

Ferris-Rotman, A. (2021, August 18). *How the U.S. abandoned women in Afghanistan*. Vanity Fair. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/08/how-the-us-abandoned-women-in-afghanistan>

Shepherd, L. J. (2006). Veiled references: Constructions of gender in the Bush administration discourse on the attacks on Afghanistan post-9/11. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8(1), 19–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740500415425>

Shobair, T. (2021, August 30). *Afghan women and the struggle for transnational feminist solidarity*. Gender Policy Report – University of Minnesota. <https://genderpolicyreport.umn.edu/afghan-women-and-the-struggle-for-transnational-feminist-solidarity/>

Human Rights Watch. (2024, February 6). *Taliban and global backlash against women's rights.* <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/06/taliban-and-global-backlash-against-womens-rights>

Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy. (2023, August 15). *Beyond tokenism: What if we meaningfully involved Afghan women?* Retrieved from <https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/2023/08/15/beyond-tokenism-what-if-we-meaningfully-involve-afghan-women/>

Leclerc, G., & Shreeves, R. (2024, September 16). *Women's rights in Afghanistan: An ongoing battle* (Briefing No. EPRS_BRI(2023)747084). European Parliamentary Research Service. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)747084](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2023)747084)

Nadery, N. (2023, September 26). *Unraveling deception: Pakistan's dilemma after decades of promoting militancy in Afghanistan and beyond.* Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/unraveling-deception-pakistans-dilemma-after-decades-promoting-militancy-afghanistan-and>

IRIS (Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques). (2024, November). *Programme Human Development en Afghanistan: Avancées et nouveaux défis.* IRIS. https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/11_ProgHumaDev_Afghanistan.pdf