

Afghan women at the forefront 2021

Soraya Rodríguez Ramos



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WOMEN

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Preamble

by Soraya Rodríguez

The withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban's seizure of Kabul, which led to the fall of the Afghan government, shocked the international community in August 2021 and left us with one of the largest humanitarian rescue operations in history. After six months, the social, humanitarian and political dimensions of the Afghan crisis, and its serious gender implications can be better understood. This year should be the year when we really support and fight for the rights and freedoms of Afghan women both outside and inside the country.

Women are undoubtedly the main victims of the Taliban regime's seizure of power and the restoration of institutional violence against women. They have played a leading role in the progress in Afghanistan over the past 20 years. **Hundreds of Afghan women activists, human rights defenders and professionals are now in exile, dispersed across Europe and other continents, following the Taliban takeover.** Meanwhile, millions of women and girls remain in Afghan territory, forced to hide or maintain a low profile for fear of reprisals, suffering continuous violations of their fundamental rights and freedoms. These women have been targeted by the Taliban regime because of their strategic role in democracy. The international community cannot leave them behind.

Throughout this year, thanks to my work as an MEP, I have had the opportunity to speak to a number of Afghan women who are seeking asylum in Europe. All of them have warned us of the **need for the European Union and the international community not to leave Afghan women behind.** Help them to strengthen their links both with women in exile and with those who are still in the country.

For this reason, last November I sent a letter to the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to the High Representative for Foreign Policy, Josep Borrell, and to European Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli, which was co-signed by 70 other MEPs. In this letter, I asked them to convene the first International Conference of Afghan Women and for the European Union to play a more active role at

international level in amplifying the voices of Afghan women. The President of the European Commission, **Ursula von der Leyen, replied to my letter on 18 January, assuring me that she is considering my proposal to convene this Conference** and thus lead a supportive response to these women subjugated by the Taliban after their return to power. I believe that this Conference would be a crucial first step in enabling Afghan women to regain the social and political networks that have contributed to peace, political stability and democratisation in Afghanistan over the past two decades.

The situation of Afghan women must remain among the priorities of the agenda of the European Parliament and all EU institutions. **Last December**, the European Parliament recognised the courage of **Afghan women** by placing them as **finalists for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Expression**. It is them who have been, at the forefront of rights and freedoms, and the construction of a democratic institution in the country, despite the risks, and despite the structural inequalities of the former Taliban regime.

In this way, a group of Afghan women was recognised, as the representatives of so many women who, often anonymously, have armed themselves with courage to fight for equality and human rights in the country. This group is made up of diverse women united by common goals: Shaharзад Akbar (Director of the Independent Human Rights Commission), Mary Akrami (Director of the Afghan Women's Network), Zarifa Ghafari (Mayor of Maidan Shahr since 2018), Palwasha Hassan (activist and director of the Afghan Women's Education Centre), Freshta Karim (founder of one of the mobile libraries and advocate for education and learning), Sahraa Karimi (first woman to lead state film agency Afghan Film), Metra Mehran (women's empowerment and education advocate and co-founder of the Women's Perspective Movement), Horia Mosadiq (human and women's rights activist), Sima Samar (human rights defender, former Minister of Women's Affairs and former chief Independent Commission for Human Rights in Afghanistan), Habiba Sarabi (who was part of the negotiating team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) and Anisa Shaheed (political reporter).

The Sakharov Prize cannot be just a symbol. It must translate into a commitment of our institution to those who become part of the Sakharov family and network. For this reason, the European Parliament has organised the Afghan Women's Days from 1-2 February 2022, with a series of conferences dedicated entirely to listening to women activists, defenders and, after all, protagonists in the analysis and search for solutions to the human rights situation in their country. Thus recognising the fundamental role that they will also play in the future of Afghanistan, and valuing the role they have played in the defence of the human rights of the entire population.

It has often been women who have raised their voices most clearly in the face of injustice, and also in the face of the needs of the population. The situation in Afghanistan is a real humanitarian emergency. Education and social services are on the verge of collapse. About 22 million people - more than half of the population - face extreme levels of hunger. The worst drought in two decades is whipping the country and pushing nine million people closer to famine.



Time is essential to address the humanitarian situation. However, this cannot be done at any cost: talks between the Taliban and representatives of some Western countries in Oslo cannot send the wrong signal. We cannot allow this emergency to be used as a covert blackmail of the Taliban criminal regime to gain covert recognition by the international community.

Afghan women have returned to the hell from which they emerged twenty years ago. So far, none of the promises made by the Taliban to protect their rights and freedoms have been fulfilled. Afghan women cannot work, access higher education or have the freedom to take public transport without having a male companion. These are the facts and they show us that all the promises have been lies.

The Women at the Forefront project was born to highlight the leading role of women in building peace, democracy, justice and progress, women at the forefront of human rights, freedom and care for our planet. This publication aims to be a humble contribution that sheds light into this important issue and sketch shared horizons. This is why we wanted to give a voice to women. **Massouda Kohistani, Khadija Amin and Rahela Sidiqi** are three exceptional women, whose biographies and interviews attest to their enormous involvement and the sacrifices and risks they face for their work in defending women's rights in Afghanistan. Although they are now in exile, **from Europe they want to continue fighting for the future of their country.**

We must place women at the centre of the response to this serious crisis. We cannot look the other way. We have a responsibility towards the hundreds of thousands of women who have been key to the democratic construction of the country over the past twenty years and those who are still within, with no prospect of regaining their rights. It is in situations and crises such as the one facing Afghanistan that the international community needs to turn its words into action and promote initiatives with impact.



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europe.**

Soraya Rodríguez Ramos

Since 2019, she has been a **Member of the European Parliament in the delegation of the Citizens' Party**. From her seat as a MEP, she has worked intensively as a **Human Rights Spokesperson for the Renew Europe Group**, as well as for defending women's equality and rights as a member of the Equality Committee, and as a member of the Environment Committee, for her commitment to caring for the planet and climate justice.

Map of Afghanistan by provinces



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When everything collapses: from the fall of Kabul to the promises of the Taliban regime

The Taliban launched their final offensive on 1 May 2021, the same day the US and NATO withdrew their forces. Joe Biden's announcement in April was perceived as a victory by the Taliban. The intra-Afghan peace negotiations in Doha between the Afghan government and the Taliban, which had begun a few months earlier, were at a standstill, which contributed to discouraging the extremists from reaching a negotiated solution. The most heinous incident occurred on 8 May when a car bomb and two more explosive devices exploded in front of Sayed al-Shuhada high school in Kabul at the time the children were getting out, killing more than 300 civilians, mostly girls and young women.

The U.S. intelligence services wrongly estimated that the Afghan government and the army could collapse in between 3 and 6 months' time. During the summer months, the Taliban took control of several districts and provinces, and, in July, British diplomats warned of the Taliban's imminent progress towards the capital. In early August, the Taliban took control of Kandahar, the second largest city in the country and, recently after, arrived to the capital, Kabul, which led to the fall of the government. On 15 August, **President Ashraf Ghani** fled the country, while the National Security and Defence Forces (ANDSF) ceded their posts to the Taliban forces. A day after, the Taliban entered the presidential palace and declared on the media that the war was over. On 19 August, Zabiullah Mujahid, official spokesperson for the Taliban, declared the creation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

In this black week for the history of Afghanistan, and of world geopolitics, which culminated in the capture of Kabul on 15 August, we witnessed a veritable avalanche of statements, communiqués, and rhetoric.

The Pentagon was surprised by a situation that it had not anticipated. After such a long presence in Afghanistan, it is difficult to imagine how it could not have predicted the consequences of leaving the country.

During his administration, Donald Trump had agreed with the Taliban - and not with the Afghan government - to leave the US conditioned to the vow that the terrorists did not use Afghan territory to attack the US and its allies. The Biden administration continued this dynamic and these talks, despite the fact that, as a result of this

agreement, violence in the country had reached its highest levels in the last two decades. While the Taliban had agreed to sit at the negotiating table with the Afghan government in Doha, they continued arming themselves and obtaining control of large swathes of the country. With these actions, they were showing that they did not have the slightest interest in the peace process which, from its inception, was born as a utopia vitiated by the prospect of an agreed and imminent withdrawal of troops.

Meanwhile, civil society, and Afghan women, who are now returning to the focus of Western concern, warned of the increase in violence as a result of the peace talks. Activists like Sima Samar – one of the Afghan women finalists for the European Parliament's 2021 Sakharov Prize – warned of the dangers of releasing more than 5,000 Taliban as part of the pact with the US.

On 22 July, British diplomats warned their government of the imminent advance of the Taliban criticizing they could have predicted it. On 23 July, Biden had a telephone conversation with Ashraf Ghani, then Afghan president, in which he reassured him about the superiority of his troops compared to those of the Taliban, knowing that it was based only on U.S. air coverage. It seems twenty years were not enough to understand that controlling a territory depends not only on material or weapons superiority.

This whole scenario does not remove responsibility from the Afghan government, but rather shows that its incapacity was a reflection of our failure. Corruption, which affected all levels of the administration, was the primary cause for the Government's incapacity to fight back. There were also shared mistakes such as the diversion of funds, the over-militarised strategy and the lack of a greater social focus, and the massive influx of arms into the country. The latter left an opportunity that extremists are exploiting. Today the Taliban are using the price of war in their favour.

All this reflects the lack of success in building a functioning democratic country. Despite Biden's statements, the international community was in the country to contribute to the building of a democratic and legal state. This failure is the bitterest one of liberal democracies, and constitutes the failure of millions of Afghans who committed to freedom to the education of their children, and to a different future.

The institutional response of the European Union was awaited for. In September 2021, the [European Council conclusions](#) on Afghanistan were adopted. In the document, the situation in the country is considered a major challenge for the entire international community and highlights the importance of coordination among international partners - in particular with the United Nations - in responding to the crisis. The conclusions specified five principles on which the European Union would base its cooperation with the country. The guiding principles outlined are:

- Allow the safe, protected and orderly departure of all foreigners and Afghans who wish to leave the country.

- Promote, protect and respect all human rights, in particular the full enjoyment of the rights of women and girls, as well as children and persons belonging to minorities, and respect the rule of law and freedom of expression and the media, with particular attention to human rights defenders.
- Allow humanitarian operations in Afghanistan in line with humanitarian principles and in full respect of international humanitarian law.
- Prevent Afghanistan from serving as a basis for hosting, financing or exporting terrorism to other countries.
- Establish an inclusive and representative government through negotiations. This refers to continuing to advocate for the creation of a balanced and inclusive government, while including all ethnic and religious minorities and ensuring the meaningful participation of women in decision-making positions. This is a fundamental condition for lasting peace and for the stabilisation of the country and the region. The participation in the cabinet of persons sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council raises serious concerns.

These conclusions made clear that no legitimacy is given to the new regime by the European Union and the need for a balanced and representative government. The document underlines that there is increasing concern regarding the holding of government positions by individuals sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council.

Liberal democracies represent everything the Taliban hate and want to destroy.

We must make clear the following: we are not interested in promises but in actions, we will not renounce our values and we will demand respect for the human rights of Afghans. We should also emphasize that we will not allow their Emirate to be a paradise for jihadist terrorism that threatens our societies and that we are prepared not to give up on the political battlefield. This is, words and speeches, within this framework, will not be enough. We need commitment and strong action.

The image we show is the message we throw, and this is something that the Taliban have understood very well. It was shown from the beginning. In an exercise of geopolitical cosmetics, the Taliban appeared at their first press conference declaring their respect for women's rights under Islamic law or an amnesty for former government collaborators, thus, showing the sophistication of their message from their previous period in power. The Taliban will now say what Western democracies want to hear, irrespective of their actions. Nevertheless, the Afghan civilian population is well aware of the horrors of a Taliban regime.

The cosmetics exercise continues before what seems to be an erratic position of the West in this regard. On 24 January 2022, a delegation of the Taliban regime, headed by its Foreign Affairs Officer, Amir Khan Mutaqqi, visited Oslo for the first formal talks with the West, sponsored by Norway. The meeting was attended by representatives from the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and the European Union.



The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs insisted that such talks did not imply any formal recognition of the regime. The talks would allegedly be aimed at finding solutions to the humanitarian crisis in the country, including discussions on the human rights situation and exchanges with human rights activists. However, as Amir Khan Mutaqqi noted, the visit to Norway was an opportunity and a success in itself for the Taliban regime, as they managed to sit at the table with key players on the international stage and thus pave the way for their possible future recognition.

In the face of any dilemma of a potential recognition of the Taliban regime, and the establishment of relations with it, it is indispensable to listen to the voices of all Afghans. Demonstrations and voices of Afghan women activists rose up in Oslo against the meeting. The situation in Afghanistan is a political defeat that cannot end with recognition. Otherwise, this would imply leaving Afghan women alone and with no hope.



Evacuation of people at risk from Afghanistan: an announced failure

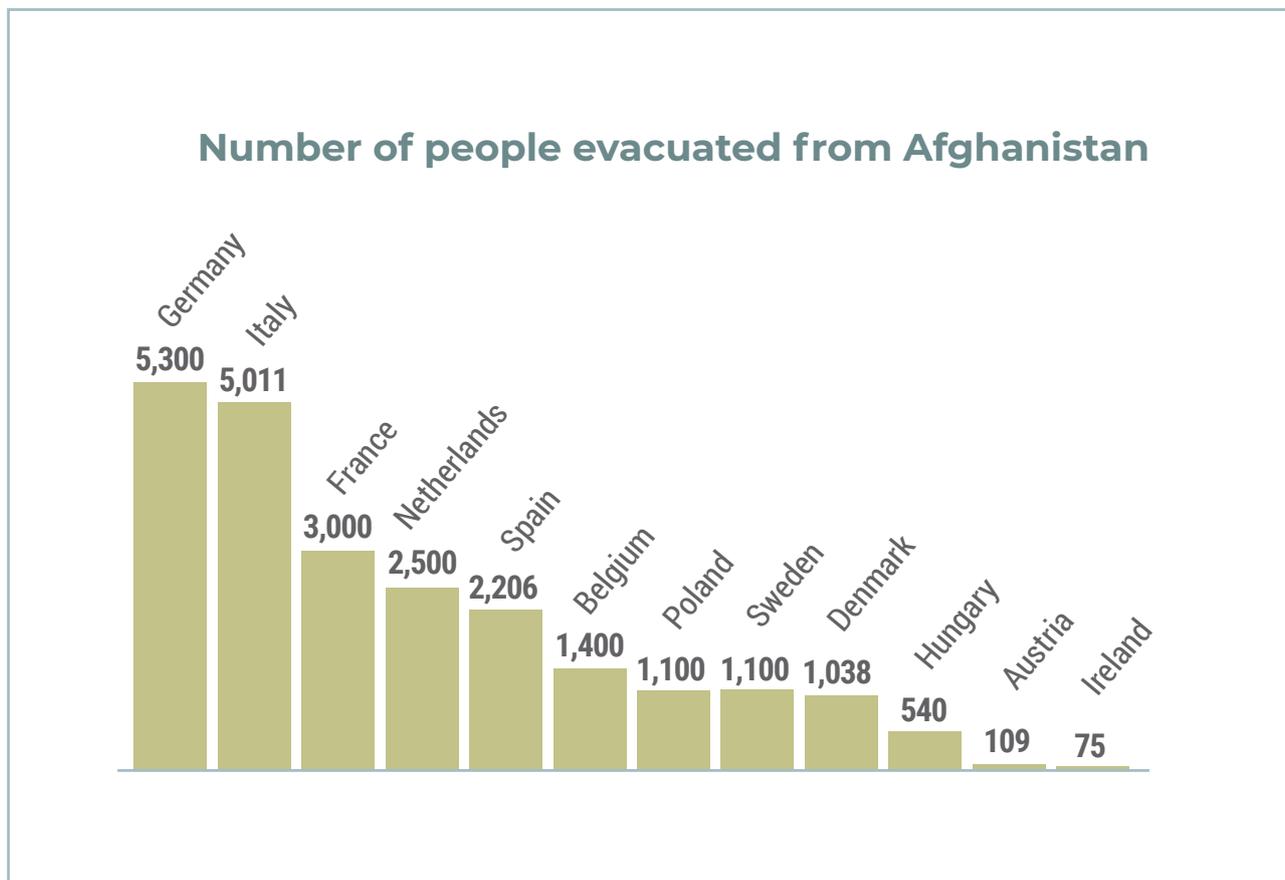
In a joint statement issued by the U.S. Department of State, more than 100 countries pledged to respect “the safe and orderly departure of foreign and Afghan citizens” and to welcome Afghan citizens who wish to leave the country. Although the evacuation in Afghanistan during the last two weeks of August 2021 was the largest in history, this **evacuation should have been planned earlier**. In June, the European Parliament already adopted a resolution calling for the immediate exit of those at risk.

Hundreds of thousands of people, including foreigners and Afghan collaborators, were able to flee the Taliban regime that had quickly seized control of the country in an operation that U.S. President **Joseph Biden** called “extraordinary success.” Joseph Biden, described the operation as an “extraordinary success.” This was rather, the success of an announced failure. The Taliban’s seizure of Kabul was a defeat of the Western community and our intelligence capabilities.

Following the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul, the European Union created a **crisis cell** dedicated to the evacuation of collaborators and people at risk. According to a report by the European Parliament’s research service, the EU evacuated **17,500 people from Kabul**, including all Afghan staff, 4,100 EU citizens and 13,400 Afghan nationals, between 15 and 30 August 2021.

Additionally, a total of **22,000 people were evacuated by EU Member States** including EU and Afghan citizens, military personnel, diplomatic personnel and local staff employed by EU embassies and military missions. This number comprised also their families, and close to 520 employees and contractors. However, the risks still faced by a large number of Afghan women who have been involved in building the democratic institutions of Afghanistan and who were not on the priority lists of any country is enormous. European asylum and migration policy should focus on resettling the most vulnerable and at risk groups, creating a special visa programme for Afghan women seeking protection from the Taliban regime as called for by the European Parliament in its resolution.

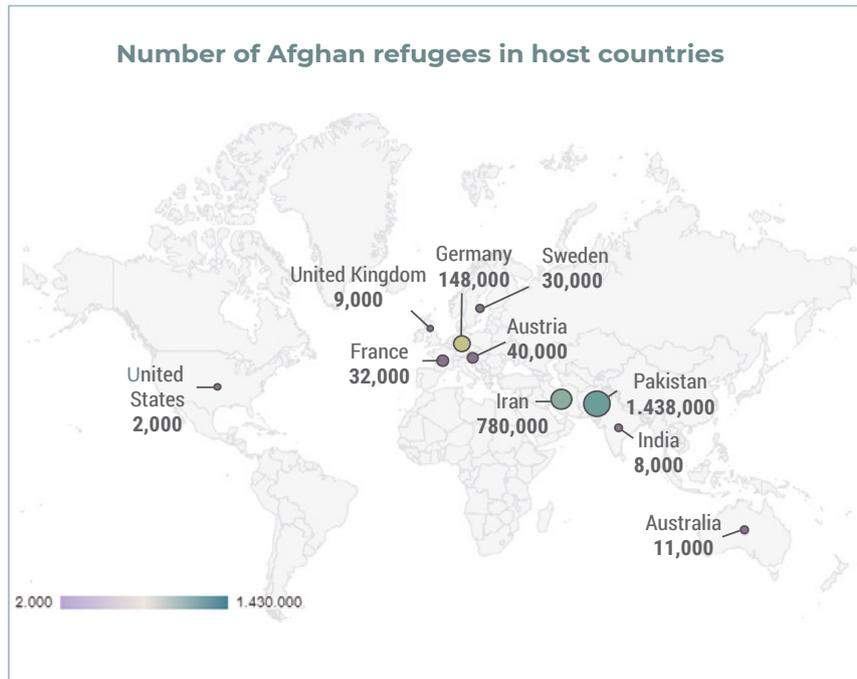
How many people has the European Union evacuated?



Source: Evacuation of Afghan nationals to EU Member States | EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service

Since 2014, Afghans have been among the three **largest groups of asylum seekers and refugees in EU countries, Norway and Switzerland**. Since August, Afghans constitute the largest group of new applicants for the third consecutive month.

At the global level, 85 % of Afghan refugees are hosted by neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Member States welcomed nearly 300,000 Afghan citizens before the crisis. In Europe, the Afghan population is not evenly distributed: Germany tops the list, with 5.5 % of the total number of Afghan refugees at the end of 2020, followed by Austria and France.



Source: UNHCR

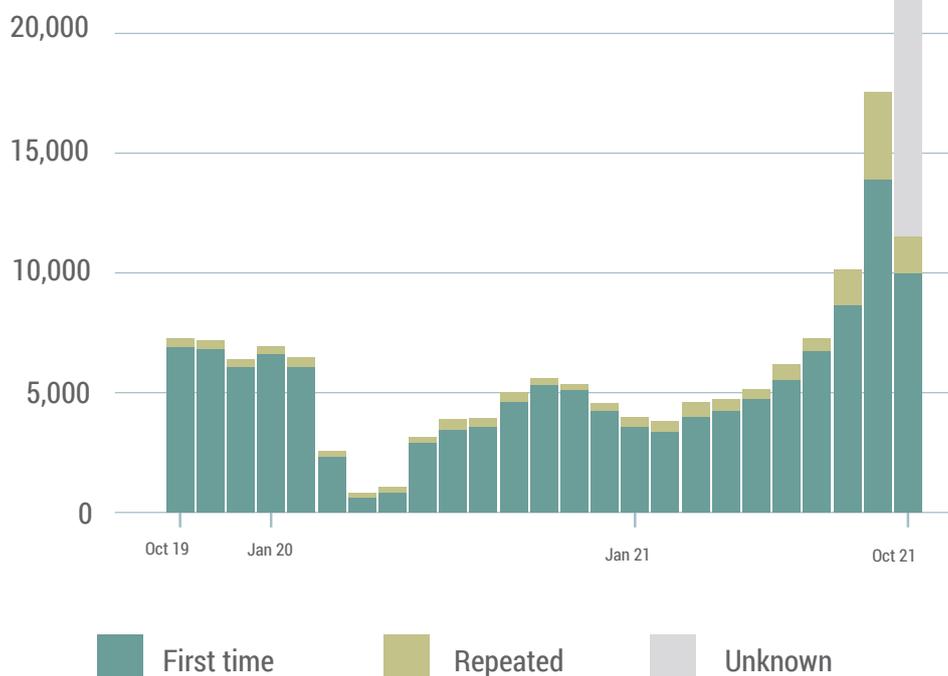
Since August 2021, European Member States have received 32,000 new applications in first instance from Afghans. Despite the fact that European countries have suspended Afghan deportations in the light of developments in the country and that Afghan asylum seekers have the highest recognition rate (91 %), 61,784 cases were still pending at the end of October 2021. This constitutes the largest number since October 2017.

Also in October, **1,600 unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan applied for asylum in Europe**, accounting for almost half of the total number of minor applicants, according to the European Asylum Support Office (EASO).

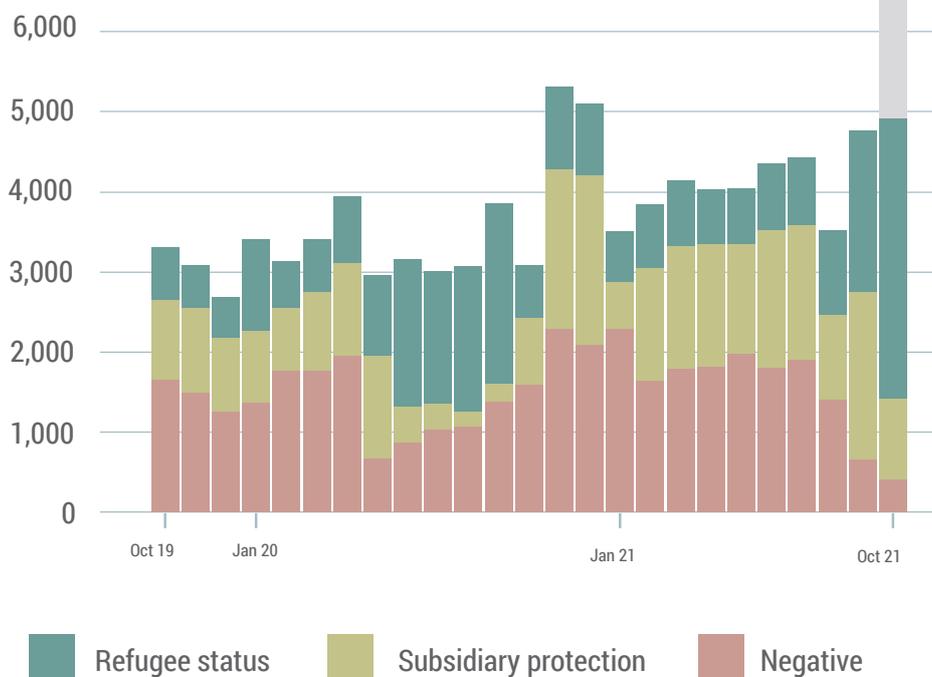
No gender-disaggregated data is available.



Asylum applications, Afghanistan



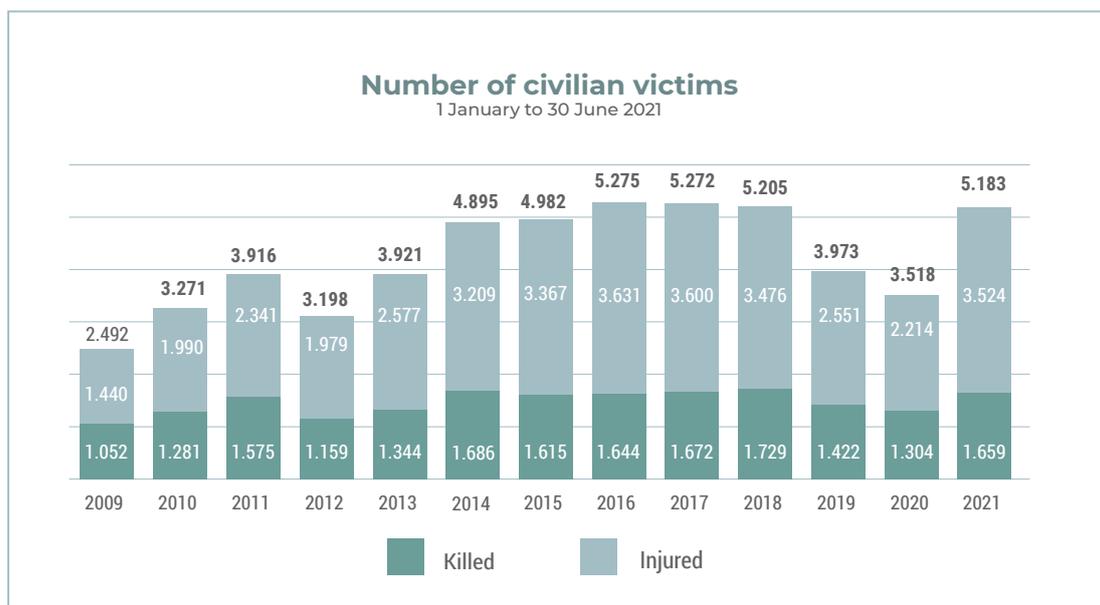
First instance decisions, Afghanistan



Source: EASO.

Before the Taliban came to power in August, the Afghan population was already living under violence on a daily basis. In fact, a UN report, issued **before the Taliban's takeover of Kabul**, shows, 5,183 civilian casualties had been documented in the first six months of the year, which translates into a 47 % increase over the same period last year. On 26 July 2021, UNAMA – the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan – warned that, unless urgent action was taken to curb the violence, civilian casualties would reach record highs in 2021.

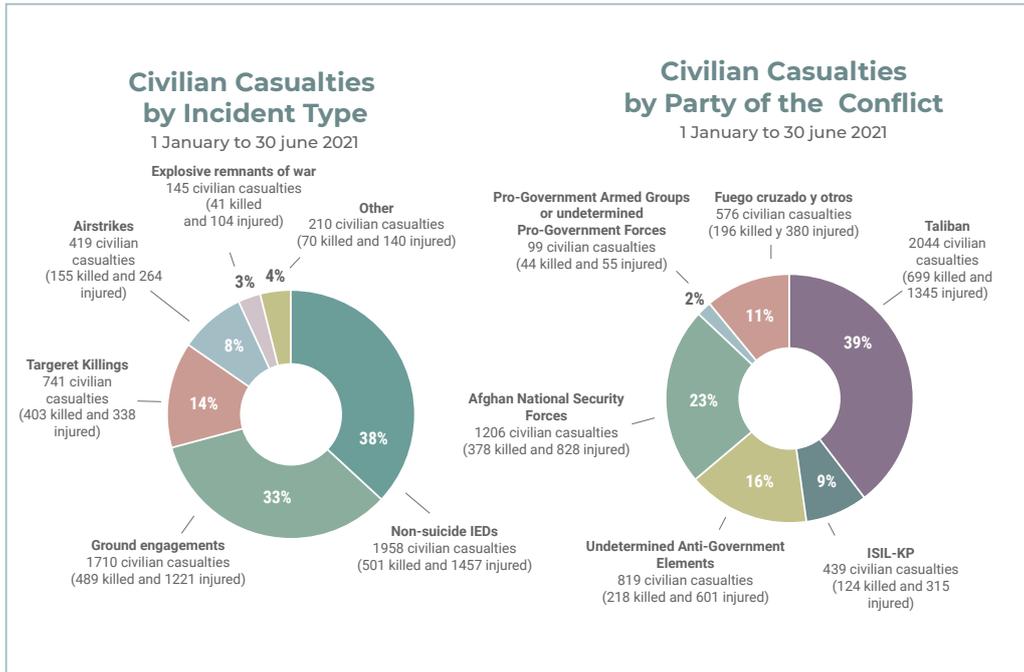
Pending the overall data for 2021, some existing figures are particularly unsatisfactory. **32 per cent of the victims were children** (1,682), among which 20 % of boys and 12 % of girls. The rate of adult female civilian victims was 14 %. All things taken into account, **women and children comprise 46 % of all victims**. The number of girls and women killed and injured has doubled compared to the previous period. In the graph below we can see the historical trend since 2009, taking into account, that the 2021 data reflects the records only until 30 June.



Source: UNAMA

Within the first half of 2021, most of the victims were documented as of April, coinciding with the announcement of the withdrawal of international military forces and the progressive control of administrative centres by the Taliban. After September 2020, when peace negotiations began in Afghanistan, UNAMA warned of an increase in civilian casualties. This showed the failure of the peace process to protect civilians by both the Taliban and the Afghan National Army. The number of murders, ill-treatment, persecution and discrimination has been increasing ever since.

The **deliberate targeting of civilians is one of the most abominable practices**. Attacks on human rights defenders, media workers, civil servants as well as on ethnic and religious minorities have been documented. These attacks together with the use of tactics that cause more harm to the civilian population and improvised explosive devices of an indiscriminate nature violate international humanitarian law.



Source: UNAMA



A humanitarian, health and climate crisis

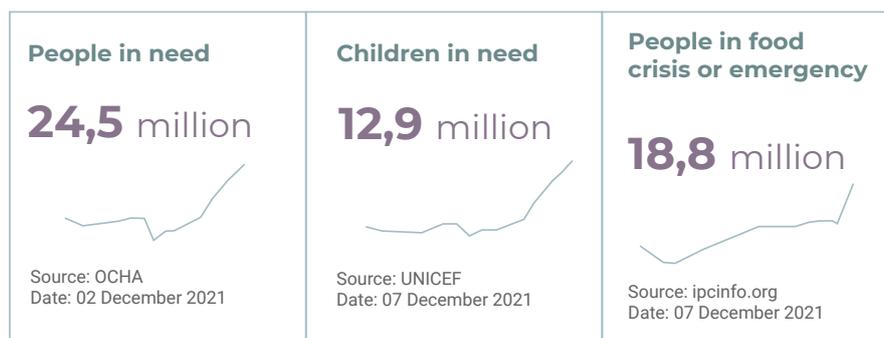
According to OCHA, **the total number of new internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan in 2021 was 690,200 people which extends the total number of IDPs to more than five and a half million**, 60 per cent of whom are children. Moreover, more than 100,000 additional families today depend on humanitarian aid with the risk of winter temperatures increasing this number.

Internal Displacements



Source: IOM (data of 28 November 2021) and OCHA – Humanitarian Data Exchange

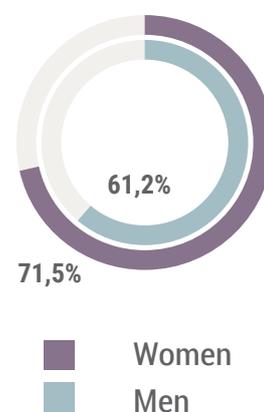
The escalation of conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened the situation in a country devastated by decades of conflict, chronic droughts and structural inequality. Prior to the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, according to OCHA, **almost half of the population required humanitarian assistance** (18.4 million people). In January 2022, OCHA already considered that more than half of the Afghan population (24.4 million people) is in need of humanitarian aid. This number has increased almost four times compared to just three years ago. The safety and security risks to civilians are aggravated for women, children and persons with disabilities.



Sources: Several sources.

Afghanistan is experiencing its second severe drought in four years, affecting one third of the country and is expected to continue throughout this year. Poor harvests, livestock losses and the collapse of rural incomes have led to a significant increase in levels of food insecurity throughout 2021. Afghanistan now holds the largest number of people in emergency food insecurity in the world. More than half of the population - specifically 22.8 million people - suffer from food insecurity, and one in three Afghans - some 18.8 million people - faces **critical or emergency food insecurity**. Severe food insecurity among the adult population, which has grown in recent years, is higher among women (71.5 %) than among men (61.2 %). More than half of children under five years of age suffer from acute malnutrition and is still expected to increase in the coming months.

Prevalence of severe food insecurity in the adult population



Source: UN Women

Increased violence and insecurity have also affected **infrastructure and health personnel**. More than 70 % of the country ' s non-military budget depended on international funding and was mainly devoted to basic health and education. With the Taliban coming to power, a large part of the international community – including the European Union and its Member States – decided to freeze development aid and government assistance in the country.

On 22 December 2021, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2615 (2021), establishing an exemption for humanitarian assistance and other activities that support basic human needs with regard to sanctions imposed on individuals and entities associated with the Taliban, who constitute a threat, pursuant to Resolutions 2255 (2015) and 1988 (2011). The central provisions of the resolution allow for the processing and payment of funds, other financial assets or economic resources, and the supply of the goods and services necessary to ensure the timely furnishing of assistance. In this way, the United Nations has cleared the way to ensure that aid reaches the Afghans. .

The European Union has also decided to relax its humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan with a new type of support: the so called "humanitarian +" funds. At the extraordinary meeting on Afghanistan of the G20 leaders in October 2021, the Commission's President Ursula von der Leyen announced a EUR 1 billion aid package for the Afghan people. Out of this number, EUR 300 million would be earmarked for humanitarian purposes and EUR 250 million for "humanitarian +" support, especially for the health sector. This new type of funding seeks to directly support the population, channelled through international organisations and, in particular, the United Nations. There is no doubt that Afghanistan's figures are the ones of a humanitarian emergency. As the UN Secretary General pointed out earlier in October "If we do not act and help Afghans weather this storm, and do it soon, not only they but all the world will pay a heavy price". It is clear that the

European Union cannot look the other way and we must assist the Afghan people through European aid to overcome the humanitarian emergency they are facing. But the European Union must have specific control over 1) who are the actors through whom we are going to channel European aid of any kind, 2) how it will be guaranteed and through what measures and mechanisms this aid is impartially distributed and, 3) how we are going to ensure that the structure of deployment of this aid does not prolong the emergency situation, also including the gender, and discrimination ones, that the Taliban regime has imposed in the country.

The pandemic has increased the vulnerability of a population who was already in a critical situation. By mid-January 2022, some 158,670 people **had been infected with COVID-19 and 7,377 had died**. Nevertheless the number of actual cases is much higher, as the country lacks a national death register, the ability to diagnose variants such as Omicron or mass testing since the onset of the pandemic.

It is estimated that about **5 million people have been fully vaccinated against the virus**, but only 13% of the population is fully vaccinated. Vaccination among women remains even lower. International organisations, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), have stressed the need to urgently continue the COVID-19 vaccination campaign to protect the population, as well as to ensure assistance to health centres and treatment hospitals for COVID-19, especially with regard to rapid response teams and surveillance systems.

COVID-19

Cases and deaths

<p>Total confirmed cases</p> <p>157,998</p> <p>Source: WHO Date: 29 December 2021</p>	<p>Total confirmed deaths</p> <p>7,355</p> <p>Source: WHO Date: 29 December 2021</p>
<p>New weekly cases</p> <p>157</p> <p>Fuente: WHO Datos: 29/12/2021</p>	<p>Weekly deaths</p> <p>19</p> <p>Fuente: WHO Datos: 29/12/2021</p>

Source: World Health Organisation

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Women in Afghanistan

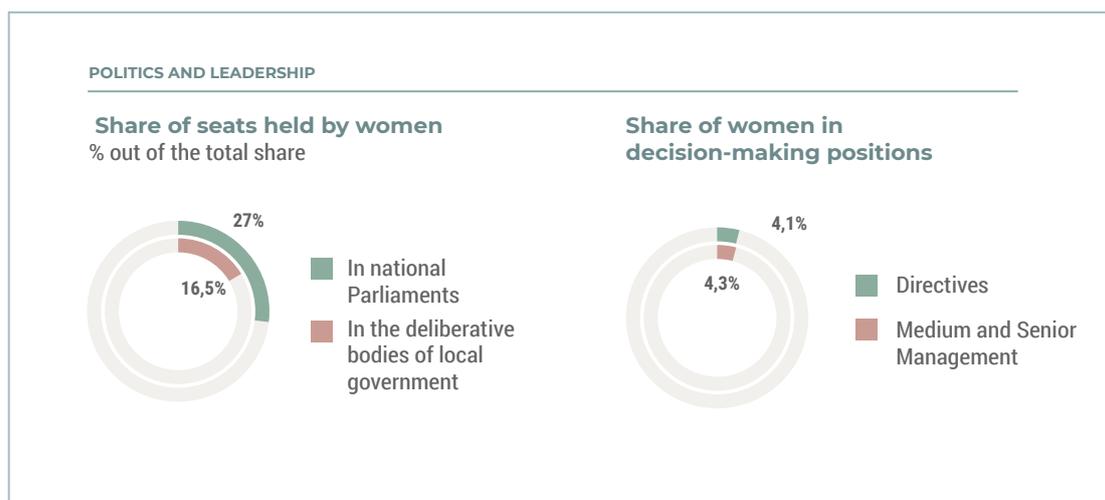
Afghan women and girls had won a lot in recent years, but never more of what they lost with the arrival of the Taliban. The **1964 Constitution already established universal suffrage**, and especially in the last decades of the twentieth century, Afghan women in urban settings enjoyed high levels of freedom and rights. Before the Taliban came to power in 1994, women represented half of the civil service, 70% of teachers and 40% of doctors.

Throughout the 20th century, Afghan women mobilised to achieve more freedom and equal rights, which came with the cost of conflicts and divisions between the most progressive and traditionalist sectors. Between 1919 and 1929, the reign of Amanullah Khan and his wife, Queen Soraya, introduced reforms and modernisations that guaranteed greater rights for women, such as the prohibition of forced marriages and the raising of the minimum age for marriage and the prohibition of strict dress rules. They also opened schools for girls. Between 1933 and 1973, before the Soviet invasion of 1979, widespread literacy programs for both sexes were established and access to university education was allowed. In 1964, Afghan women were granted the right to vote.

The arrival of the Taliban in 1996 led to the imposition of discriminatory policies against women, which then led to their exclusion from public life. Between 1996 and 2001, women were **denied their right to education, health and freedom**. They could only be accompanied by a close male relative, had to wear burka, and faced severe and disproportionate punishments even for deviating from the rules, including public corporal punishment or execution. In 1996, the Taliban regime restricted education for girls and women while the madrassa or Koranic schools became the only source of basic education.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2011, Afghan women could finally access opportunities for education, employment and political participation. Their presence in more highly qualified professions was also increased.

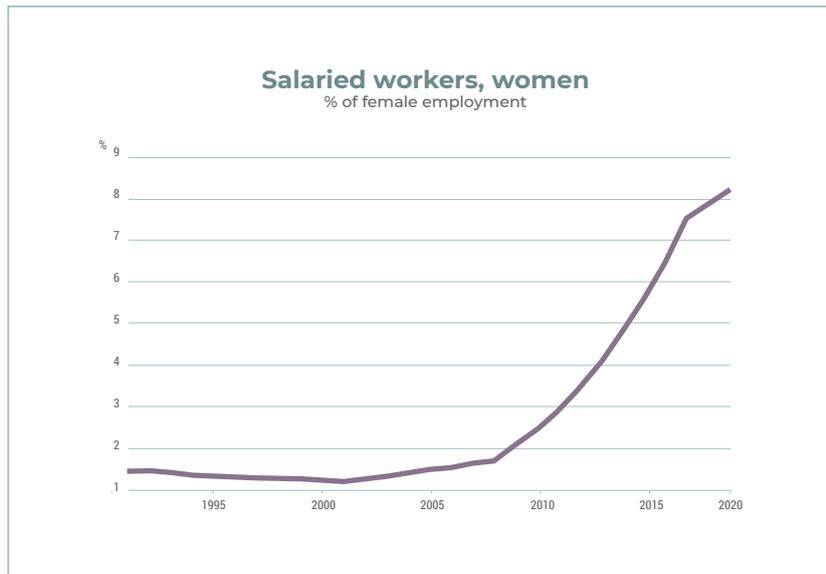
Since 2001, the political representation of women had increased and a quota of women has been introduced. According to the 2004 Afghan Constitution, **27% of seats had to be held by women**. In addition, a Ministry of Women Affairs was established. This reform allowed women to reach positions of responsibility in ministries and mayors' offices. The quota was met at the national level, but was unevenly distributed among the provinces: while in Kabul women constituted 43% of all deputies, 25 provinces did not reach the target. In February 2021, women accounted for 27% of the seats in the national parliament, but only 16.5% of the deliberative bodies of local government were occupied by women.



Source: data.unwomen.org/country/afghanistan

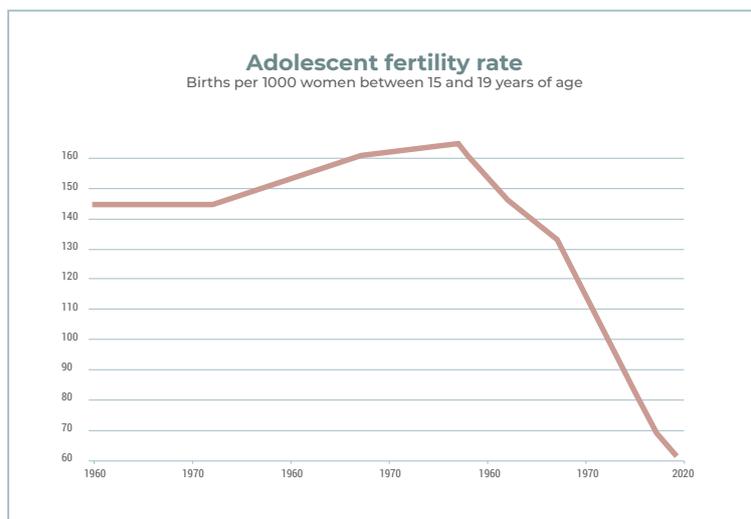
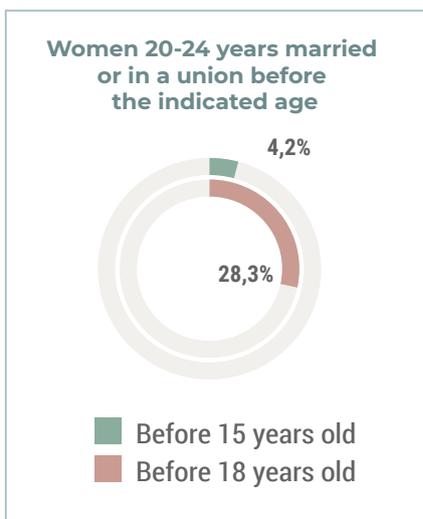
Only 4 out of 21 negotiators on the part of the Afghan government in the Doha negotiating teams were women, while on the Taliban side there were none. Following the return of the Taliban fundamentalist regime, all these parliamentarians and politicians, as well as women's and human rights activists, have been exposed to threats because of their fundamental role in the democratisation of the country. As various human rights organisations, they have also been persecuted.

Women also played a significant role in **business and professional fields**. According to the Index of Entrepreneurs and Legal Women, the score of women was above 38/100 between 2016 and 2020. In 2019, more than 1,000 women started a business. However, only 4.1% of managerial positions and 4.3% of middle and senior management positions, are held by women. This demonstrates a huge gender gap in the professional world. Over the last twenty years, **the number of female wage earners also increased**, accounting for a modest but growing 9% of employment. Since the Taliban came to power, all this progress has been frozen. The Taliban regime has prohibited women to work in most jobs in the public sector among others. For example, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) mapped the agreements between aid agencies and the Taliban in each of the 34 Afghan provinces, showing where women were allowed to work. As of October 2021, Taliban officials from only three provinces had provided a written agreement to unconditionally allow women humanitarian workers to carry out their work. A measure that has a direct impact on access to primary care and humanitarian aid for Afghan women.



Source: World Bank

1 in 3 women aged 20-24 got married before the age of 18. While 4.2% of all women in this age group got married before they were 15 years old. According to World Bank data, only 22.5% of women between 15 and 49 used contraceptive methods (data from 2015). **Adolescent fertility rate** (15-19 years), which affects the rights of girls and young women, decreased to 62 births per 1000 women in 2017. However, 28.3% of women aged 20-24 were married or engaged before the age of 18. Access to health and sexual and reproductive rights and freedoms remain structural deficits in the country.



Source: World Bank

According to UN Women, in 2018, **46.1% of women aged 15-49 reported having been victims of physical or sexual violence by their partner**. The rate of domestic violence is 35% at the national level, although in some provinces, such as Ghor, Herat and Wardak, it exceeds 84%. Gender-based violence, as well as the number of suicides and attempted suicides by women have increased during the pandemic. As Human Rights Watch denounces, the Taliban have shut down shelters created for women fleeing violence after their arrival to government, and some of the women living in them have been transferred to women's prisons.

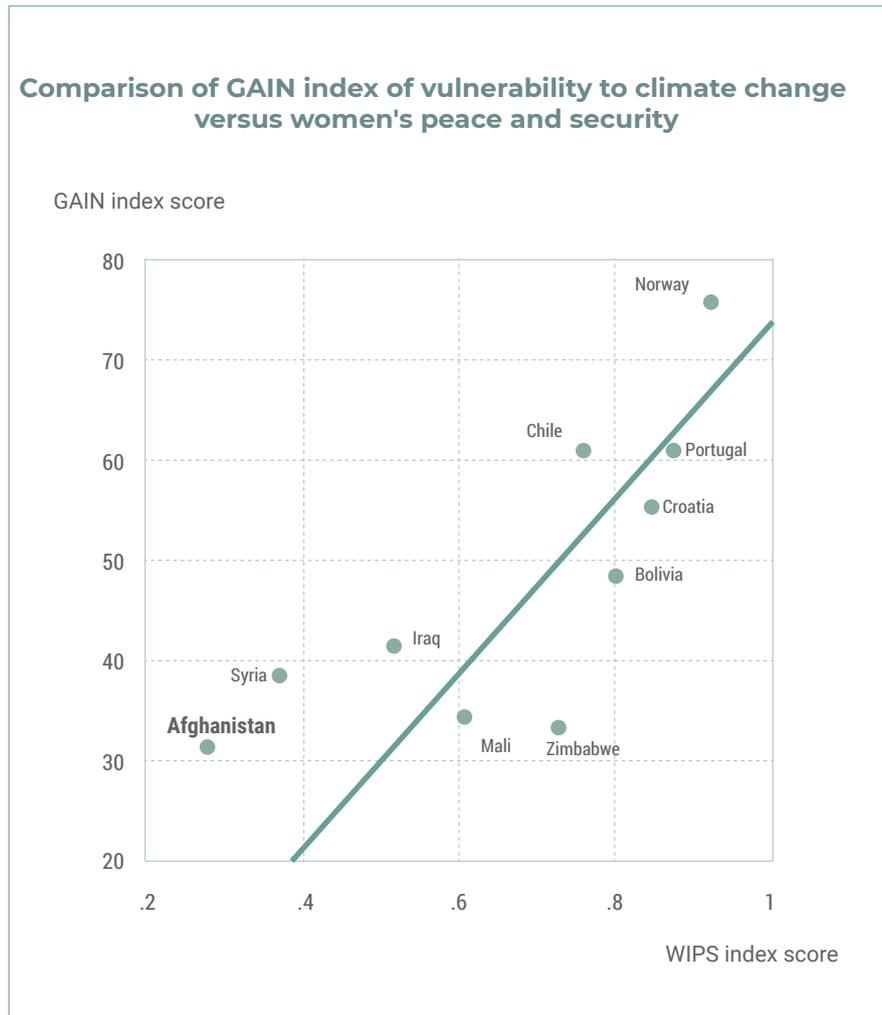
In terms of education, although **83% of girls were enrolled in primary school in 2018**, there was a significant absenteeism rate. The country's **literacy rate** remains low in general, but numbers are even lower among women, with a 29.8% rate, compared to a 43% rate for men.

In the last two decades, women's school enrolment has remarkably increased. According to Amnesty International, more than **3 million girls were enrolled in schools** until August 2021. However, although the Taliban publicly stated that they supported the education of Afghan girls and women, only those schools destined for boys were open in September 2021. According to sources from the new Ministry of Education, girls' secondary schools will remain closed only until a new education law will be passed this year.

According to the Higher Education Development Project (HEDP), female students enrolled in priority disciplines rose from 5,558 in 2019 to 6,746 in 2020, resulting in a 21% increase. In 2020, 21,159 women were enrolled in one of the Afghan universities, compared with 67,465 men. In 2021, before the Taliban took power, **women accounted for 26.4% of all university students and 14% of university professors**. The new Taliban regime announced at the end of August 2021 that women could participate in higher education but could not study with men. The lack of female teachers, especially in higher education, means that these measures de facto deny access to education for women. In addition, many university and school female teachers have been dismissed in some areas because they are no longer allowed to teach boys.

The University of Notre Dame developed the Global Adaptation Initiative (GAIN) to estimate countries' vulnerability to climate change based on 45 indicators (water, energy, health infrastructure, governance, economy...). Although it does not directly assess the status of women, by cross-checking the data with the Women's Peace and Security Index – which we analysed more closely in the following heading – we can conclude that the status of women and the resilience of countries to climate change have many parallels. **Afghanistan is among the countries most unprotected from climate change**. Protecting inclusion, justice and security can also contribute to tackling the threats of climate change.

The Status of Women and the Resilience of Countries to Climate Change

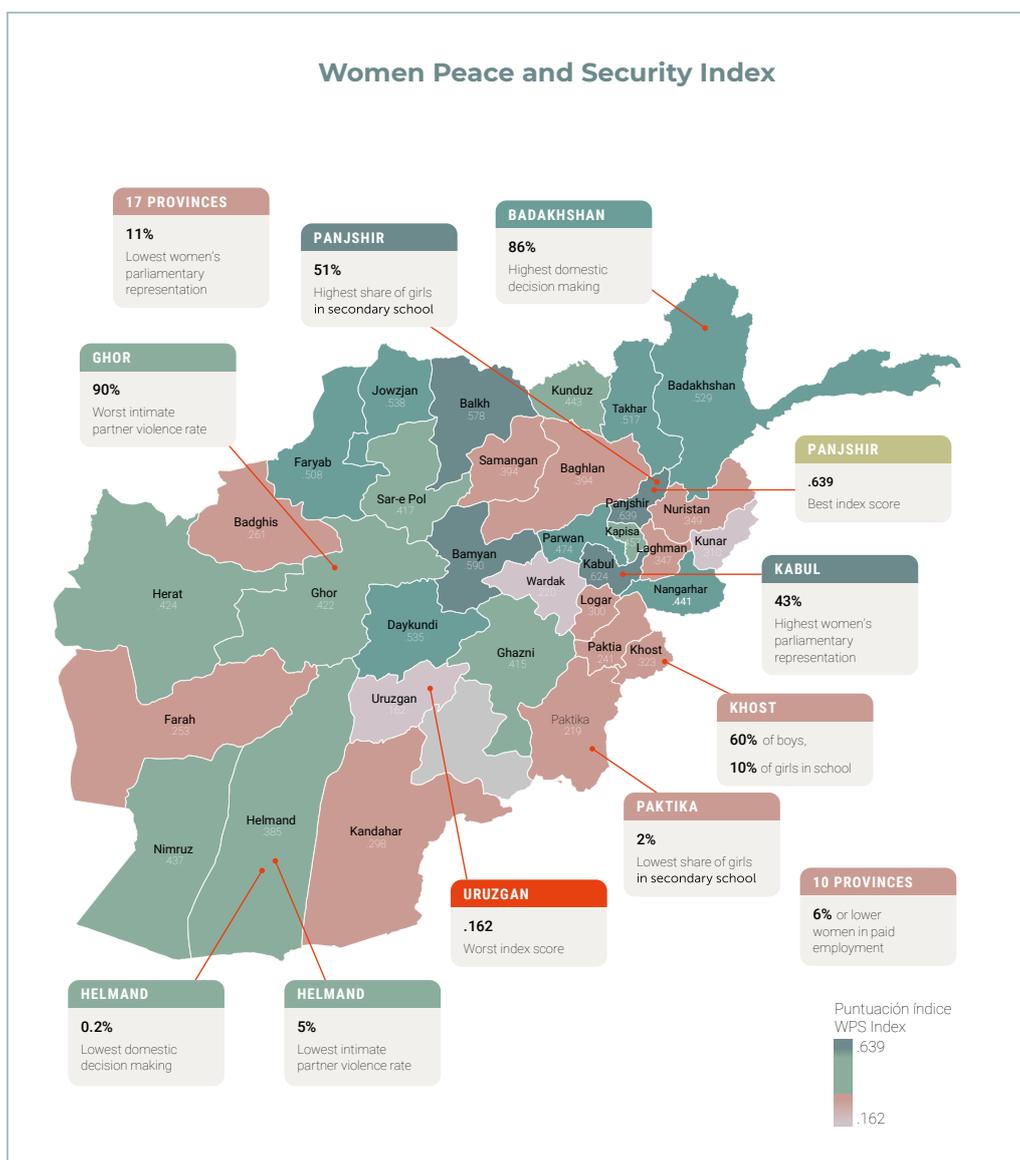


Source: [WPS-Index-2021](#), p. 18.

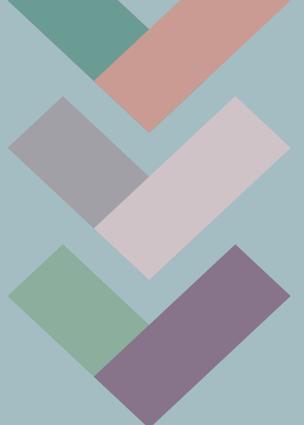
Afghanistan is a large and uneven country where large gaps and differences between rural and urban regions remain. Ethnic and religious origin often also determines the future of women. Between 2001 and 2021, progress was often modest and neither linear nor homogeneous across the country. But, the last year has worsened all indicators and **has placed Afghanistan last in the world on the Women, Peace and Security Index 2021-2022**. The collapse of the Afghan government and the seizure of power by the new Taliban regime has not only paralysed the progress of Afghan women, but has also led to a huge setback in women’s rights. It should not be forgotten that the Ministry of Women Affairs was closed down. Instead, the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice was opened. This institution is responsible for enforcing the standards of behaviour of citizens, including for women in relation to their clothing and the rules they must follow in order to interact in society.



We cannot forget these women. We already have enough evidence of how, since the Taliban's seizure of power, Afghan women have returned to the hell from which they came out twenty years ago. As noted above, the vast majority of women are prevented from working, in addition to having prohibited their access to higher education and required to be accompanied by a male companion on long journeys. These measures are gradually reducing their autonomy. The international community must be aware that we cannot believe the Taliban's promises about their respect for women's human rights. They are nothing but a fake make-up strategy for the international community. We are no longer talking about the expectation of realisation or not of these promises: we know they are not true. They proved it more than 20 years ago, they proved it in the territories they dominated prior to the seizure of Kabul in August 2021, and they have continued to prove it since then. The EU and the international community must therefore stand alongside the most vulnerable people in Afghanistan, but cannot do so at the expense of normalising violence against women. Any recognition, both formal and de facto, of the Taliban regime would be a betrayal to all those who worked and still work – in many cases, risking their lives – to build a democratic institutionalism in the country.



Women Peace and Security Index 2021-2022



Afghan women at the forefront in 2021

Massouda Kohistani
Khadija Amin
Rahela Sidiqi





Massouda Kohistani



Massouda Kohistani is a women's rights defender and Afghan political and social activist. At the age of 17, in 1998, her family was forced to flee the Taliban regime on foot to neighbouring Pakistan. Later, upon her return to Afghanistan, she studied a bachelor in Business Administration at Maiwand University of Higher Education in Afghanistan.

She has more than 18 years of experience in project management, consulting, and social and political research both independently and with different Afghan organisations. From a young age she joined different women's rights movements. More recently, she participated as a facilitator in the National Consulting Peace Jirga, a project devised by the Afghan government to put forward proposals for national reconciliation and national reintegration prior to the Doha peace process. In December 2018, she became an active member of the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), which works on women's participation in the peace process at the national and international levels in 2019.

Especially since then, Massouda Kohistani is best known for defending women's rights, not only through her academic work but also as a woman at the forefront of mobilisations and appearances on various television programmes to contribute to the role of women in the peace process. This made her a target in the eyes of the Taliban with their arrival to power in August 2021.

During August 2021, she played an important role in supporting the networks of women who wanted to be evacuated. She also participated in organising the first university protests following the Taliban's seizure of power. Thanks to a contact, she was able to enter the evacuation lists of Spain and arrive in the country. She currently resides in Salamanca, with the support of the organisation Cepaim.

WOMEN
AT THE FOREFRONT



Khadija Amin



Khadija Amin is a young Afghan journalist. Born in Kabul in 1993, she grew up in the midst of the Taliban regime, which was in power between 1996 and 2001.

Between 2008 and 2012, she studied journalism at the Fanoos Institute of Higher Education in Kabul. She has worked on various radio and television stations in the country, as well as for the well-known Logar Youth Social and Civil Institution.

More recently, she has worked as a journalist on state public television, presenting news reports, while continuing her journalism studies.

Following the Taliban's seizure of power in August 2021, she confronted the Taliban by disobeying the order to stay at home and went to her job. At a press conference, the Taliban, who had taken control of the media a few days ago, had reported that women could be allowed to work. Once there, she was ordered to return home. Both by her profession and her courage made her a target of persecution by the Taliban. Through contacts in the world of journalism, she managed to flee the country, despite being obliged to leave behind her husband and three children due to security reasons. She is now a refugee in Spain, and currently lives alongside Massouda Kohistani in Salamanca, with the organisation Cepaim.

WOMEN
AT THE FOREFRONT

The Afghanistan crisis of August 2021

A conversation with Massouda Kohistani and Khadija Amin

This interview took place on October 13 at Casa América in Madrid. The text has been edited to unify the style. The full interview can be consulted on [Youtube](#), the website mujeresalfrente.org or by scanning the following QR code.



*“Our voice is strong,
higher and clearer than
the high mountains of the Hindukush.
Fly high and far like an eagle in the sky.”*

How did the Taliban take over Kabul on 15 August?

Massouda Kohistani: We could not believe that the Taliban would take control of Kabul so quickly. At the time, we were discussing the defence of women’s rights. We were writing a manifesto and some requests addressed to the government asking that they really deal with what was happening in areas under Taliban control. The events that took place on August 15 were striking. We couldn’t expect anything like that to happen.

With regard to the evacuation of persons, the United Nations, UNAMA and other actors of the international community somehow knew this and had certain evacuation plans for those working directly with them. They then evacuated other people and themselves, in the last few seconds. It was very quick.

As the world saw through the media, many people rushed to Kabul airport without identification cards, official letters or safe conduct. Most people rushed to the airport wanting to save their lives because they knew what to expect from the Taliban. They do not know the rule of law, they do not respect the most basic rules of the human being. They do not accept international law or human rights. As a result of all this, everyone was afraid and tried to escape from Afghanistan. It was a good opportunity for many. The door was somehow open and most of the people who arrived on the planes were taken out of Afghanistan.

Following the evacuations of the international community and international organisations, USAID and UNAMA, the UN, the European Union... most of them took the decision to rescue these women activists and journalists who were not in the first positions but who were in the real image. I was part of them.

When the Taliban took control of the country, we were thinking about how we should work, how we should defend ourselves, but we weren't thinking they would come and stop us all of a sudden. They automatically stopped us. We were forbidden to work physically or defend those who had had their rights striped. In this sense, social networks, like WhatsApp helped us connect with each other.

What is the current situation of journalists in Afghanistan?

Khadija Amin: The situation in Afghanistan right now in general terms is very bad; there is no freedom. The press in Afghanistan has become the propaganda centre for the Taliban, who want to control the image of what is happening in Afghanistan, want to prevent journalists from showing the world that the Taliban are the same terrorists they were 20 years ago. There is no freedom of press at this point, especially journalists working with state television. Moreover, their lives are in danger because in the last 20 years they have been working for democracy, for people's rights and progress.

When journalists want to make a report, they now have to ask the Taliban for permission. If there is something negative about them, they prevent that from being broadcasted. The Taliban are always thinking about what is being shared, what information is beneficial to them, and what is negative.

The Taliban think that the world should leave them, that they are not the same Taliban as 20 years ago. But, if they have changed, then, why was there no women involved in the peace negotiations?

When they took control of Afghanistan by force, why did they stop girls from going to school? Why did they prevent women journalists from working on television?

There are several women who are still working in the private sector, but none in the public one. The Taliban have decided this and even say "we don't want any woman to speak on the radio" (which belongs to state television). They don't want to have there women voices. They have always been like this. They do not respect women, nor believe in their rights, or their views. For them, women only serve the purpose of having children and being at home, nothing else. This is not being a woman. Women have many rights: studying, having a job, being ministers, deputies... There have been many women visible during the past 20 years which wasn't easy to achieve. We made many sacrifices for conquering women's rights. But right now everything has stopped and we think we've lost everything we've built in these past 20 years.

The European Union said it will help Afghanistan. Under the current circumstances, we want to ask for the help of Afghan journalists who are still in the country hiding in their homes. They can't write anything nor speak up because it's not safe. They have produced many negative reports criticizing the Taliban during these years, while fighting for democracy. Some fellow journalists have told me: "I'm afraid: If my son goes to school, the Taliban will kill him because his father was working as a journalist." Their families aren't safe either. And these journalists were the sustenance of their homes, their families. Who's going to support them now? Also, they're not receiving any income. Journalists in Afghanistan are facing many problems and it is the responsibility of the European Union to decide to help them in this very important situation, so that they can escape the country and be safe.

What are you waiting for? Are you waiting for more journalists to be killed before taking a decision? No. During the past two months we have already witnessed the beating of journalists. Two days ago, a journalist was killed in Ningarha and no one has taken responsibility for it. Why is everybody so quiet about this? Many journalists left Afghanistan but not all of them. Those who have remained in Afghanistan are still in danger. For the sake of human rights and their specific rights as journalists, we must help them.

Taliban regime 20 years later

Massouda Kohistani: Based on my experience in the last 20 years, the policies, ideology and behaviour of the Taliban have not changed. What has changed is social media. 20 years ago, there were no active social networks. The Taliban blocked everything at the time: national television and radio. People had no right at that time to talk about anything that was happening. But fortunately, today people inside Afghanistan have access to social media. Many people are working with anonymous names which allows them to express themselves and talk about what is happening and how they feel in the current situation. This is something that all generations- including men, women, youngster, and oldsters - are doing as well. 20 years ago, women couldn't raise their voices. As seen through the media, they stopped the advancement of women's rights, silenced the woman.

Last week, a female University professor went out with her family showing a message: "We want education, we want to work, we want jobs". They wrote letters, messages, but showed them quietly without raising their voices since the Taliban did not allow them to speak up. Even under these circumstances, they were brutally beaten and arrested.

For me, there is a substantial change from 20 years ago, and this change is the instrumentalisation of madrasas women (Quranic schools) to serve their political messages, by showing that many women agree and like Taliban rules, Islamic laws. They have even said in the media the following: "those who are against us are very few people, but the rest of the people trust us". This is a lie, because most people raise are raising our voices to send out the message that the Taliban are forcing us to wear black, both to work and to get out on the streets, and ultimately force us to say that we trust the Taliban. The reality is that this is not true.

The other reality is that the first time women appeared with the niqab - with black niqabs- under those black fabrics most were men. Everyone knows they weren't women, even on social media they said this wasn't true. They try to show a positive image to the world to be recognised internationally. I am very happy that the world has not yet formally recognised them.

The situation of women was very repressive and dangerous because the Taliban did not accept them. Active women are in danger. They look for them and when they find them, they kill them straight away. Last week my brother called me saying that I was lucky enough to leave the country, because on two occasions the Taliban had come to my house asking for me, and that they had searched my house and asked my neighbours about my whereabouts.

I know that most women are hiding from the Taliban because they are searching their homes, and their relatives' and their friends' ones.

Khadija Amin: Why are schools closed? Even in Islamic law, it is very important for a woman or a girl to have an education. But right now they've closed the schools. Boys can go to school but girls can't. This is the difference between men and women. What they're doing is to eliminate the woman.

Men can work, they can continue their jobs, but this is not the case for women. It is very important to speak about this, now that attention has been brought into the country. However, I am concerned that media around the world will divert their attention away from Afghanistan. So, what will happen to the people of Afghanistan? This would be very dangerous, not only for Afghanistan, but for everyone, because the Taliban are terrorists.

If the Taliban wanted to be in Government, they should have opted for a democratic one. In their cabinets, there are only people from one party, and none of the rest are included. We have Tajiks, Pastunes, but none from other provinces. They're just from one party and this can be very dangerous for everyone. Besides, there are no women in their cabinets. They're on the list of terrorists from all over the world, so it can be very dangerous for everyone.

Consequences of forced exile

Khadija Amin: As a mother it is very hard for me to have had to leave my children. And I am not the only mother to have done that: there are many mothers who had to leave their children. The Taliban forced them to leave everything behind in their country and their families remain in danger. They left the house and went elsewhere because it was very dangerous for them. I can't stay quiet because I know what's going on in my country, if I,

and people outside Afghanistan shut up, no one will pay attention to the situation in Afghanistan. My family's not safe. The Taliban forced me to leave my children in Afghanistan, in my country, and it is very hard for me to be away from them. But I want to fight for press freedom, for women's rights, and I want to be your voice. I will never remain silent because it is our responsibility to raise our voice for freedom, for women's rights, to aspire to have a government where everyone fits.

I am in Spain because I have many dreams for my country and had high hopes in my country. But, after the arrival of the Taliban, it was very difficult to reach these dreams from there. I want to continue my work as a journalist here and show the world that, although the Taliban want to silence women, that it is impossible. Anywhere in the world where we are, we will continue to be Afghan women.

Massouda Kohistani: [Refugee women] have started from scratch. We are now faced with the need to learn the language although we don't have a job here. I feel like I'm like a little girl because I have to start from scratch. I have completed my education and have more than 19 years of work experience. I have been an academic researcher and I am also very active in my country. So I need to somehow have these opportunities here too, because I've lost everything. Here, I'm nothing. And what is happening to me, is also affecting so many other women.

Inside Afghanistan, there are many women who now have no income. Before, many had small businesses they were engaged in and formal jobs. Today, they've lost everything. We need to have some kind of connection with them, collaborate directly with them to help them on their way. They must continue, somehow, to be active, because they can't do anything right now.

One of them called me from one of the provinces and asked me the following: "You must raise your voice as our representative, but here we also need some kind of support, like financial support, or something we can actually do here. Empty-handed, we can't do anything because our stomach needs food". So we should act and drive some initiative. It is something really much needed for people outside Afghanistan and also inside Afghanistan.

The EU's role in supporting Afghan women

Massouda Kohistani: I would like to ask the European Union to organise an international conference for Afghan women. There should be some kind of presentation to the world or something similar to show what is happening. This is necessary for us. We have lost all the courage and achievements we had made. Right

now, there's nothing left for us. We are very grateful that they saved our lives, but we need opportunities and positions similar to those we had in our country. Personally, I feel like I'm not useful here because I don't have any formal activity. I don't have the kind of formal position here as the one I used to have in my country.

We want to ask the world to take care of those women who have been working actively for the past 20 years. Those who have somehow held positions within Afghanistan or in the Afghan government. We really want to position ourselves in the world. For example, we are going to start some protests or we want to do something for ourselves, for our country, for those within Afghanistan.

Khadija Amin: The European Union wants to help Afghanistan on humanitarian grounds. We need help in this situation for the rights of humanity, because people have nothing to eat, people face many economic problems, people in Afghanistan need help, they need support.

But it is very important in this situation that they require the Taliban to pay attention to women's rights. Women have a very important role in any country, without them no country can be a developed country. If they eliminate women, they will not be able to progress because women are a very important element of life.

Afghanistan needs to be supported for humanitarian reasons, but demanding that women have the right to work and open schools for girls. If we remain silent in this situation, it will become normal and no one will pay attention to women's rights. We already had this experience during the six years that the Taliban were in Afghanistan. So in this case, if you want to help Afghanistan, it's very important that you talk about women's rights and human rights.

Massouda Kohistani: I would kindly ask the world, the United Nations, the international community and other international organisations that they should not formally recognise the Taliban because they are terrorists. They are not a real government because they do not believe in human rights. They don't believe in women's rights. Please don't recognise the Taliban terrorists as a government.



Rahela Sidiqi



Born in 1966 in Afghanistan, Rahela Sidiqi has been **at the forefront of the fight for women's equality and greater progress of rural communities in Afghanistan for 35 years**. When she was 16 years old, her father, chief of police, was killed by the rebels during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Her mother raised her with her 6 brothers and 3 sisters. Educated in the importance of values and education, **she graduated from Kabul University with a degree in Agriculture**.

In 1992, the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the economic collapse of the country and the outbreak of **war between the mujahedinfactions**. As a result, **Sidiqi left Kabul and fled to a town in northern Afghanistan** with her husband and two children. She first worked for Oxfam, helping other displaced people like herself. She then collaborated on projects focused on women with UNHCR and United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN Habitat). **Sidiqi created and developed the Community Forums**, a tool to rebuild neighbourhoods and renew local government systems through participatory methodologies, which she developed for more than a decade. **The success and popularity of the program made it a target of the Taliban**. Rahela received threats and attacks on her family, leading her to leave the country and take refuge in Pakistan. There is where her third child was born.

After the restoration of democracy, Sidiqi returned to Afghanistan, where she **collaborated with the Afghan government by designing the National Solidarity Programme (NSP)**, based on the concept of Community Forums, and extending its reach to more than 20,000 Afghan villages. Between 2006 and 2011, she worked as a Senior Advisor to the Administrative Reform & Service Commission, improving recruitment and management systems and combating corruption. Sidiqi is a strong **advocate of the crucial role that women have played in the country's progress** and the need for their participation in political life. For Sidiqi, women's empowerment is not only an end in itself, but also an essential component of sustainable development.

Because of the **visibility of her work defending women's rights in rural Afghanistan** (still controlled by the Taliban), Sidiqi suffered the attempted abduction of one of



her sons, which led her to **seek asylum in the UK**, where she currently lives. From Europe, she still is at the forefront of the fight for the human rights of Afghan women and girls. In 2015, she founded **Rahela Trust**, an organisation aimed at helping disadvantaged and talented girls and young women from rural background to continue their education, through scholarships and accompaniment. Four years later, she also created **Governance and Reform Advisory (GRA)**, with the objective of improving the governance and performance of the public and private sectors while involving local people and communities in the decision-making of their own development processes.

To respond to the **situation in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021**, she has founded a new organisation, **Omid International**, which provides support to women's rights activists and young professional women within Afghanistan, as well as in other neighbouring countries.

Rahela has saved the lives of hundreds of people at risk, as well as their families, **guaranteeing a safe place** for them and coordinating their evacuation. She also offers them continued support to rebuild their lives in their host countries. She knows the **traumatic process experienced by refugees** first-hand. She knows the satisfaction of having managed to leave the country together with the suffering for the family and friends who remain behind. She knows the difficulty of leaving a whole life and having to start from scratch. Sidiqi is therefore developing a **pilot project in Istanbul and the United Kingdom** to improve the integration of refugees, train them and help them to find employment.

www.omidinternational.org

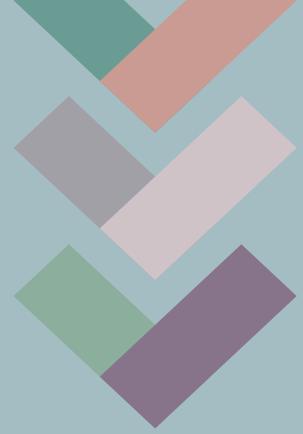
www.rahelatrust.org

www.globalgra.com

WOMEN
AT THE FOREFRONT

Afghan women at the forefront in 2021

Interview with Rahela Sidiqi



You have made an urgent appeal to the international community in the face of the humanitarian and political emergency that Afghanistan is experiencing and which is impacting especially on women and girls. For this reason, it created the NGO Omid International, to support and empower these displaced women in host countries and women's rights advocates and young professionals in Afghanistan. How has Omid International, since its founding last September, contributed to empowering and empowering women in its programmes? What have been the challenges your NGO has faced today and what forecasts do you have for the coming months?

We have provided evacuation support to seven journalists, out of which three are now in the United States, two in France, and the last two who are currently in Pakistan will soon leave for EU and Canada. From Omid International, we have also facilitated and collaborated in the evacuation of hundreds of women rights activists with a few other organisations. We have provided capacity development support to 100 women and youth in Afghanistan and eight women in Turkey, who have been recruited by our sister agency Global Reform Advisory (GRA). We have raised £9,721 and are in the process of distribution of emergency food 40 young women activists in Kabul, Kandahar and Helmand in Afghanistan.

Omid International has also provided humanitarian support in the form of food and shelter. We have supported the livelihood costs of 40 women activists and their families in Pakistan, and we are in the process of providing food and shelter support to another 150 women activists and vulnerable women in Afghanistan and Turkey.

We have also organised three advocacy meetings in partnership with the Danish Refugee Council and some Danish Parliamentary Members. Furthermore, with the support of Baroness Fiona Hodgson, Chair of the Afghan Women Support Forum, we have held meetings with British parliamentarians, in collaboration with the Afghan Women Network, GRA and over 80 women activists from Afghanistan and the diaspora community. These meetings have been a platform to highlight the issues of women rights and participation in peace negotiation in July 2021.

Regarding our main challenges, the main one was finding the necessary financial resources (\$350,000 dollars) for establishing our 5 capacity building hubs in Turkey Tajikistan, India, Uzbekistan and Pakistan. The second challenge is to transfer funds to Afghanistan.

Our plan in Omid International is to establish these hubs and provide capacity building, promote and create home-based and virtual jobs for women in Afghanistan, and in the 5 afore-mentioned countries. Also, we will look for possibilities of capacity building support for job creation to Afghan women refugees in the United Kingdom and European Union's countries.

You know first-hand what transit to host countries is and the difficulties in exile. Could you briefly tell us your experience as an asylum and the main challenges you had to face?

What I faced as asylum seeker was that the interviewer had no knowledge and no information about Afghanistan and the situation of Afghan women. She did not understand the trauma of violence's impacts and did not care about what I did for women in my country in the initial stage. That was the time that I thought asylum seekers treatment as criminal should be stopped. Training of police officers should be implemented so they are trained about the culture, the situation of the country in general and specifically on the different categories of asylum seekers. The impact of double criminalisation of asylum seekers will affect their health, work and will have an impact on the host country. However, perhaps their analysis and decisions were different and, in my case, I got my status within 3 or 4 months as my case was actually straight forward.

In the past 4 years, Rahela Trust, its organisation to ensure the education of Afghan women and girls, has supported 35 students, 15 of whom have graduated, opting for different master's programmes. What is the situation of girls and young people in terms of education following the Taliban's seizure of power?

First of all, the Taliban do not believe on women rights and human rights and neither on Afghanistan progress. Therefore, they continuously block the road of women in their journey towards education and working as well as their movement. Public universities are closed and women in private universities are not allowed to benefit from the co-education system. Therefore, they are not able to study the subject of their choice. For example, one of our scholars in Helmand was not able to study computer science and was forced to do medicine.

Girls school have been burnt and secondary schools are closed. A generation is suffering. Girls are shot death for going to university in Khost. They are abducted or taken to prison with simple excuses in Shamali Dand. Women striking for their right to education were taken to prison, sexually attacked and killed by Taliban groups. In the city of Balkh, some women were killed by their own families after their release from

prison to protect the family honour. These situations have been highlighted by the families of those victims, and confirmed by independent journalist in December.

When I am writing about and remembering so many of these incidents and the impunity around them, it traumatises me, as they have not been dealt with at any level. However, we are grateful to the European countries and, in particular, the women politicians and activists for their advocacy and support in these months.

What do you think is the role that the international community, and in particular the European Union, should play in supporting Afghan women and girls both inside and outside Afghanistan?

The collapse of economy in Afghanistan is a big worry of the citizens. We need educated people and education to get out of this situation. It is critical to pressure the Taliban to restart universities and secondary schools.

This regime and international terrorist groups need to be removed from the country by the international community. The European Union and European countries should make all efforts to not recognise the Taliban regime. Its recognition will be an historic responsibility.

Regarding the role that the international community, and in particular the European Union, should play in supporting Afghan women and girls, I believe they should support the majority of the population in Afghanistan with food distribution, health or cash support as the number of death and malnourished people is constantly increasing. Women and children are the two groups most vulnerable to starvation.

They should also provide funds for diaspora organisations with practical projects for women in Afghanistan. This commitment and efforts are highly critical in particular in the areas of education and creation of employment's opportunities.

The international community must push and give a hard time to the Taliban regime regarding the need to put citizens, women and children rights on top of their agenda. Citizens' rights, inputs and contributions are necessary to govern Afghanistan. The current culture of the Taliban regime is the punishment of citizens and the country's destruction. The government of Afghanistan needs known intellectual people and a majority of women in leadership positions. The European Union should continue to pressure the Taliban regime towards these objectives.

Another area for greater support from the international community is the provision of scholarships for Masters of Arts (MA) and Masters of Science (MSc) for female graduated students in neighbouring countries. These funds can be provided through NGOs and charities working in education. The provision of scholarships to Afghan women and girls residing in Turkey, India, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is critical to help those young

educated women in their trauma. The support and donations for scholarships, through diaspora organizations, for girls to fulfil bachelor degrees at private universities in the United Kingdom and the European Union is also another way the international community can support us. I want to underline the important role of diaspora organizations working on Afghanistan and I think donors should strengthen and use these organizations in the European Union and the United Kingdom.



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Women on the Job in Afghanistan. Photo credit: United Nations Photo



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