



# THE VOICE OF WOMEN OF AFGHANISTAN

What Women of Afghanistan Think of the Collaboration  
between Finland and Afghanistan

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN OF FINLAND  
HELSINKI 2023



PHOTO: KAISA RAUTAHEIMO

### **The Voice of Women of Afghanistan**

Report produced by the National Council of Women of Finland

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The National Council of  
Women of Finland

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KATRI MERIKALLIO



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# ABBREVIATIONS

**AIHRC** Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission

**ANP** Afghan National Police

**ARTF** Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, World Bank

**AWJU** Afghan Women Journalist Union

**AWN** Afghan Women's Network

**CMI** Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation

**EUPOL** European Union Police Mission

**EVAW** Law on Elimination of Violence against Women

**ISAF** NATO-led International Security Assistance Force

**ISIS-K** Islamic State Khorasan Province

**MSIA** MSI Reproductive Choices, Afghanistan

**NAP** National Action Plan

**NATO** North Atlantic Treaty Organization

**NAWA** New Afghanistan Women Association

**SIGAR** United States' Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

**TTP** Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan, Pakistani Taliban

**OECD** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**UNICEF** United Nations Children's Fund (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund)

**UNAMA** United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

**UNHCR** UN Refugee Agency (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)

**UN Women** United Nations Development Programme for Equality

**WPSO** Women & Peace Studies Organization

# SPECIAL THANKS

**THE TALIBAN'S** takeover of Afghanistan in autumn 2021 shocked women's rights defenders around the world. For 20 years, Finland was supporting gender equality and women's rights in Afghanistan. The National Council of Women of Finland was among the first to investigate how the women of Afghanistan cooperating with Finland feel about the partnership. This report, *The Voice of Women of Afghanistan* by the National Council of Women of Finland, is part of the Feminist Foreign Policy recommendations of the Advisory Board for International Human Rights (IONK).

Highlighting the voices of the women from Afghanistan interviewed for this report was particularly important. Many thanks to those interviewed for sharing your lives in such a serious and difficult situation. We also want to thank the Finnish and international experts who agreed to be interviewed.

The report was written by journalist and non-fiction writer **Katri Merikallio**. Journalist **Shakiba Adil** played a key role in reaching out to the interviewees, interpreting the interviews, and providing important information on the current situation of women in Afghanistan. A huge Thank You to you both for all your excellent expertise and tremendous commitment to this project. We believe your work is truly meaningful.

The project's Steering Group in 2022–2023 included, apart from ourselves, **Eva Biaudet**, MP and Chair of IONK; **Bahar Mozaffari**, Vice Chair of the National Council of Women of Finland; Katri Merikallio; Shakiba Adil; **Merja Kähkönen**, Specialist for Advocacy and International Affairs at the National Council of Women of Finland; and **Annika Hinkkanen**, Advocacy Specialist at the National Council. In addition, the Steering Group has consulted some experts. The Steering Group played a key role in composing the project – special thanks to Eva Biaudet – and designing objectives and drafting recommendations. We had the opportunity to include some excellent photographs by photographer **Kaisa Rautaheimo** of Helsingin Sanomat and **Kirsi Mattila** of Women Journalists in Finland. Merja Kähkönen and Annika Hinkkanen were closely involved in the production of the report and publication. Many thanks to all the above!

We would like to extend special thanks to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Foreign Affairs **Pekka Haavisto** for their support in producing the report and for all that they do for the women in Afghanistan in their demanding situation. Without financial support from the international peace mediation work at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the National Council of Women of Finland would not have been able to complete the

project. Many thanks to the Afghanistan team of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and **Katri Viinikka**, Ambassador for Equality Issues, for their expertise and cooperation.

Several studies and surveys have been carried out on Finland's activities in Afghanistan. In December 2022, the Finnish Institute of International Affairs published a report commissioned by the Foreign Affairs Committee, *Suomi Afganistanissa 2001–2021: Vakauttamisesta ulko- ja turvallisuuspoliittisten suhteiden vaalimiseen (Finland in Afghanistan 2001–2021: From stabilisation to fostering relations regarding foreign and security policies*, available only in Finnish), and in August 2022, the Ministry of Defence published their Afghanistan review. In 2023, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs will continue examining Finland's participation in crisis management in Afghanistan. This report by the National Council of Women of Finland contributes women's important perspective to these studies. Many thanks to the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, especially to Leading Researcher **Katariina Mustasilta** for her excellent cooperation in the production of our report. Confidential cooperation with the Finnish Institute of International Affairs in assignment and preparation of reports, as well as the opportunity to review study results, have all been invaluable to our work. The media has also played an important part in highlighting the difficult situation of women in Afghanistan and the themes and recommendations of our report.

**We want to keep hearing the voice of women of Afghanistan – we cannot forget about them.** It is important that Finland continues supporting women in Afghanistan. Women should be able to work, study, participate in NGOs, and have control over their own bodies. Women's organisations in Finland want to continue working together with the women of Afghanistan.

Helsinki, 21 February 2023

### **National Council of Women of Finland**

Saara-Sofia Sirén, President  
Terhi Heinilä, Secretary General, Chair of the Steering Group

# ABSTRACT

**SINCE 2002**, Finland has been supporting gender equality and women's rights in Afghanistan. For years, the country was the biggest receiver of Finnish development aid. In 20 years, Finland has spent over 430 million Euros on development cooperation and civilian crisis management.

The National Council of Women of Finland wanted to find out how the Afghan women cooperating with Finland feel about the partnership. What were the aims and what was achieved? Furthermore, how do Afghan women feel about the current situation and what kind of cooperation do they want with Finland?

For this report, interviews were carried out with 30 Afghans (28 women, 2 men) and 16 Finnish and international experts and government officials. The interviewed Afghan women include police officers, ministers, politicians, journalists, doctors, students, women's rights activists, organisation leaders, and former government officials. A considerable number of the interviewees can be called human rights defenders.

A little over half of the interviewees still live within Afghanistan, the rest have left the country – most of them after the Taliban took over. The interviewees are of different age groups and come from different ethnic groups.

The National Council of Women of Finland selected a number of different projects of various sizes financed by Finland to review. The common goal of these projects was to strengthen the status of Afghan women. For some partners, the collaboration with Finland has been active for over 20 years and is still ongoing.

For 20 years, the reproductive health of Afghan women and girls has been promoted through MSI Reproductive Choices. Finland's support over this period has been €14 million. The organisation's services have benefited hundreds of thousands of Afghan women and girls in particularly vulnerable positions and reduced the number of women losing their lives to maternal death. Their work continues in an increasingly demanding situation; women doctors are leaving the country, and the positions they leave cannot be filled.

Finland also provided significant long-term support (10.8 million Euros) to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). AIHRC reported on the state of human rights in the country, significantly impacted legislation, and supported women who have been victims of violence in taking their cases to court. The Commission also strived to root out harmful practices repressing the human rights of women and children.

Along with other EU countries, Finland participated in the EUPOL mission to train women police officers and prosecutors. Finland played a fundamental role in producing the crucial Police-Prosecutor Cooperation Manual.

The NGO project Learning Together which focused on training women journalists in Afghanistan was low-cost but widely known in the country. The project improved the professional knowledge of over 500 women journalists and the visibility of women's rights in Afghan media.

Finland also had a strong impact in preparing Afghanistan's 1325 National Action Plan. The project was challenging due to lack of competence and commitment. However, the process brought women's status to consideration for decision-makers, increased public awareness of women's rights, and influenced the people's attitudes.

To understand how Afghan women ended up back under the Taliban's yoke, the report includes interviews with women peace negotiators who participated in the Doha talks. They reveal the reality behind the scenes at the negotiating table. They received some support from Finland, but not in a significant way.

Finally, the report includes the voices of women who defy the Taliban, demonstrate in the streets, and demand the restoration of women's rights, as well as those who are now starting their own small self-help groups and organisations to survive together in a new, even more demanding situation. These groups need support and encouragement from the international community.

The interviewed partners appreciated Finland's long-term support and action for Afghan women. They considered Finland a listening and dependable partner who was genuinely committed to advancing gender equality and human rights.

Finland's profile as a contributor to equality also creates expectations. Since their takeover in 2021, the Taliban have severely reduced the fundamental human rights of Afghan women, and many human rights advocates who have collaborated with Finland are in great danger. Helping them to safely leave the country is also Finland's responsibility.

The interviewees consider it particularly important to enhance human rights monitoring in the entire country. Only through reliable documentation can the ruling Taliban be made accountable for their actions.

The partners expect Finland to be even more active on behalf of Afghan women on international forums, particularly in the EU and the United Nations Human Rights Council. They also ask that Finland, among others,

will continue pressuring the Taliban to open schools and universities for girls and open the workforce for women.

Almost all of the interviewed women also appeal directly to Finland: “Don’t forget about us; stand by us now when we need it the most.”

## Action and recommendations

When Finland decided in 2001 to participate in the mission in Afghanistan as part of the international coalition, the promotion of the status of women and girls as well as gender equality became a key reason for intervention.

After 20 years of efforts, the situation of women in Afghanistan spiraled in August 2021 when the Taliban returned to power. Afghanistan is the only country in the world that prohibits education from girls and women. Women’s human rights are violently trampled on.

The proposals for action are based on the report by the National Council of Women of Finland. The National Council of Women of Finland will continue to work to support women in Afghanistan.

### **The National Council of Women of Finland requires Finland to take the following measures:**

1. Finland takes a more active role and initiative in the UN and its agencies, the UN Human Rights Council and the EU to restore Afghan women’s rights and human rights. Finland together with the international community
  - continues to exert pressure on the Taliban to restore respect for women and girls’ rights and human rights in accordance with international human rights instruments such as CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action
  - ensures that the Taliban regime is not recognised internationally until it has restored the rights of women and girls
  - establishes a permanent body for the voice of Afghan women in diaspora to be heard in the UN human rights architecture
  - seeks ways to support Afghan women’s economic empowerment and capacity building
  - seek ways to support the opening of schools to girls and women at all levels of education and in all subjects, including in universities, and using alternative means such as radio and remote access

- continues and increases its efforts to safeguard the sexual and reproductive health and rights of Afghan women in a context of dramatically declining numbers of women doctors
  - continues its efforts to prevent both physical and psychological violence against Afghan women and to ensure that there are women doctors in every province
  - prepares to increase its support for Afghan women dramatically as the political situation in Afghanistan changes.
2. Finland takes the initiative in the UN Human Rights Council to establish a permanent human rights monitoring mechanism for the whole of Afghanistan.
    - The monitoring mechanism is guaranteed the resources to extend the monitoring to the whole country and pays particular attention to women's human rights.
  3. Finland, together with the international community, encourages the UN to facilitate dialogue between the Taliban and Afghan women, and
    - requests the UN to establish a channel of rapid communication between the Taliban and Afghan women.
  4. Finland develops its funding mechanisms for Afghanistan so that small NGOs working to strengthen women's status, livelihoods and mental well-being can apply for funding for their projects more easily.
    - The funding enables women's organisations to network internationally. Women's organisations are systematically supported at national and international level to allow them to provide peer support to each other.
    - Finland does not channel funding through the Taliban and influences the international community to follow up that money does not go to the Taliban.
  5. Finland introduces a humanitarian visa for human rights defenders without delay, so that it enables protection to be offered to women human rights defenders – activists in women's organisations and women journalists.
    - Finland builds a mechanism that is flexible, quick and sensitive to people's individual and family situations.
    - Finland actively supports the opportunity for Afghan women human rights defenders to apply for humanitarian visas.
    - Finland offers protection to Afghan women human rights defenders also through the refugee quota and develops new tools to help those whose human rights are violated on the basis of gender or sexual orientation.

6. Finland, together with the international community, takes the history, culture, women's status and rights as well as economic structures of the host country as a basis for planning new crisis management operations.
  - Before embarking on new crisis management operations, Finland, together with the international community, conducts a comprehensive and thorough study of the host country and uses it as a basis for planning and decision-making throughout the operation.
  - The participation of local women, for example in police work, is planned in such a way that women do not come into significant conflict or even danger between their own culture and traditions, and professional requirements.
  - Before taking up a new civilian crisis management operation, Finland undertakes to ensure the safety of the people involved in the projects, even after the operation has ended.
  
7. Finland commits to a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) that promotes gender equality and women's rights in a human rights-based and intersectional manner, so that the above recommendations are part of this policy.
  - Finland ensures that its security policy is not gender-blind but explicitly takes into account the human rights and participation of women and girls.
  - Finland integrates the UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security as an integral part of its feminist foreign and security policy.
  - Finland continues to monitor the situation of women in Afghanistan from the women's own perspective.



از سال 2002 فنلند برای برابری جنسیتی و حقوق زنان در افغانستان حمایت خویش را آغاز کرده است. برای سال ها، این کشور بزرگترین دریافت کننده کمک های توسعه ی فنلند بود. فنلند در 20 سال بیش از 430 میلیون یورو برای همکاری های توسعه ی و مدیریت بحران غیرنظامی هزینه کرده است.

شورای ملی زنان فنلند می خواست باندن زنان افغانستان که با فنلند همکاری می کردند چه احساسی نسبت به این مشارکت دارند. اهداف چه بود و چه چیزی محقق شد؟ علاوه بر این، زنان افغانستان در مورد وضعیت کنونی چه احساسی دارند و چه نوع همکاری از فنلند می خواهند؟

برای این گزارش، با 30 تن از افغانان (28 زن، 2 مرد) و 16 کارشناس فنلندی و بین المللی و مقامات دولتی مصاحبه شده است. زنان افغان مصاحبه شده، شامل افسران پلیس، وزراء، سیاستمداران، روزنامه نگاران، پزشکان، دانشجویان، فعالان حقوق زنان، رهبران سازمان ها و مقامات دولتی سابق است. تعداد قابل توجهی از مصاحبه شوندگان را می توان مدافعان حقوق بشر نامید.

کمی بیش از نیمی از مصاحبه شوندگان هنوز در افغانستان زندگی می کنند. بقیه کشور را ترک کرده اند - اکثر آنها پس از تسلط طالبان. مصاحبه شوندگان از گروه های سنی مختلف و از اقوام مختلف هستند.

شورای ملی زنان فنلند تعدادی از پروژه های مختلف کوتاه مدت و دراز مدت را که توسط حکومت فنلند تامین مالی گردیده بود را برای بررسی انتخاب کرد. هدف مشترک این پروژه ها تقویت جایگاه زنان افغانستان است. برای برخی از شرکا، همکاری با فنلند بیش از 20 سال می باشد که فعال بوده و هنوز هم ادامه دارد.

20 سال است که سلامت باروری زنان و دختران افغانستان از طریق MSI، انتخاب های باروری ارتقا یافته است. حمایت فنلند در این مدت 14 میلیون یورو بوده است. صدها هزار زن و دختر افغان در موقعیت های آسیب پذیر از خدمات این سازمان بهره مند شده است و تعداد زنانی را که جان خود را در جریان بارداری از دست می دهند، کاهش داده است. کار آنها در شرایط دشوار ادامه دارد، پزشکان زن کشور را ترک می کنند و پست هایی را که می گذارند نمی توانند پر کنند.

فنلند همچنین حمایت دراز مدت قابل توجهی 10.8 میلیون یورو به کمیسیون مستقل حقوق بشر افغانستان (AIHRC) ارائه کرد است. کمیسیون مستقل حقوق بشر افغانستان در مورد وضعیت حقوق بشر در کشور گزارش داد، به طور قابل توجهی بر قوانین تأثیر گذاشت و از زنانی که قربانی خشونت شده بودند در ارائه پرونده های شان به دادگاه حمایت گردیدند. کمیسیون همچنین تلاش کرد تا عنعنات مضر سرکوب کننده حقوق بشر زنان و کودکان را ریشه کن کند.

فنلند همراه با سایر کشورهای اتحادیه اروپا در مأموریت EUPOL برای آموزش افسران پلیس و دادستان های زن شرکت کرد. فنلند نقش اساسی را در تولید کتابچه راهنمای همکاری پلیس و دادستان ایفا کرد.

پروژه سازمان غیردولتی NGO «آموزش با همی» که بر آموزش خبرنگاران زن در افغانستان متمرکز بود، کم هزینه بود اما به طور گسترده در کشور شناخته شده بود. این پروژه دانش حرفه ای بیش از 500 خبرنگار زن و دیده شدن حقوق زنان در رسانه های افغانستان را بهبود بخشید.

فنلند نیز در تهیه قطعنامه 1325 افغانستان تأثیر زیادی داشت. این پروژه به دلیل عدم صلاحیت و تعهد چالش برانگیز بود. با این حال، این روند وضعیت زنان را برای تصمیم گیرندگان مورد توجه قرار داد، آگاهی عمومی را از حقوق زنان افزایش داد و بر نگرش مردم تأثیر گذاشت.

برای درک چگونگی بازگشت زنان افغان به زیر یوغ طالبان، این گزارش شامل مصاحبه‌هایی با زنان مذاکره‌کننده صلح است که در مذاکرات دوحه شرکت کرده‌اند. آنها واقعیت های پشت صحنه سر میز مذاکره را آشکار می کنند. آنها حمایت هایی از فنلند دریافت کردند، اما نه به شکل قابل توجهی.

در نهایت، این گزارش شامل صدای زنانی است که در برابر طالبان مبارزه می کنند، در خیابان ها تظاهرات می کنند و خواستار احیای حقوق زنان هستند. و همچنین کسانی که اکنون گروه‌ها و سازمان‌های خودیاری کوچک خود را برای زنده ماندن در یک موقعیت جدید و حتی سخت‌تر راه اندازی می‌کنند. این گروه‌ها نیاز به حمایت و تشویق جامعه بین المللی دارند.

شرکای مصاحبه شونده از حمایت و اقدام طولانی مدت فنلند برای زنان افغان قدردانی کردند. آنها فنلند را شریکی شنوا و قابل اعتماد می دانستند که واقعاً متعهد به پیشبرد برابری جنسیتی و حقوق بشر است.

نمایه فنلند به عنوان یک مشارکت کننده در برابری نیز انتظاراتی را ایجاد می کند. طالبان از زمان تسلط خود در سال 2021 به شدت حقوق اساسی زنان افغان را کاهش داده اند و بسیاری از مدافعان حقوق بشر که با فنلند همکاری کرده اند در خطر بزرگی قرار دارند. کمک به آنها برای خروج ایمن از کشور نیز مسئولیت فنلند است.

مصاحبه شوندگان افزایش نظارت بر حقوق بشر در کل کشور را مهم می دانند. تنها از طریق اسناد قابل اعتماد طالبان حاکم را میتوان پاسخگوی به اعمال واقدامات شان ساخت.

شرکا از فنلند انتظار دارند که از طرف زنان افغانستان در مجامع بین المللی، به ویژه در اتحادیه اروپا و شورای حقوق بشر سازمان ملل، فعال تر باشد. آنها همچنین می خواهند که فنلند در میان دیگران، به فشار بر طالبان برای باز کردن مکاتب برای دختران و باز کردن نیروی کار برای زنان ادامه دهند.

تقریباً همه زنان مصاحبه شده مستقیماً از فنلند درخواست می کنند: «ما را فراموش نکنید. اکنون که بیشتر از همیشه به آن نیاز داریم، در کنار ما باشید.»

## پیشنهادات، اقدام و اجرا

هنگامی که فنلند در سال 2001 تصمیم گرفت به عنوان بخشی از ائتلاف بین المللی در این مأموریت در افغانستان شرکت کند، ترویج وضعیت زنان و دختران و همچنین برابری جنسیتی دلیل اصلی مداخله بود.

پس از 20 سال تلاش، وضعیت زنان در افغانستان در ماه اگست 2021 با بازگشت طالبان به قدرت، پیچیده شد. افغانستان تنها کشور در جهان است که تحصیل دختران و زنان را ممنوع کرده است. حقوق اساسی زنان با خشونت پایمال و نادیده گرفته می شود. که این خود نقص حقوق بشری است

پیشنهادات برای اقدام بر اساس گزارش شورای ملی زنان فنلند است. شورای ملی زنان فنلند به کار خود برای حمایت از زنان در افغانستان ادامه خواهد داد.

شورای ملی زنان فنلند از حکومت فنلند می خواهد که به توصیه های زیر که توسط خود زنان افغانستان پیشنهاد شده است، اقدام کند:

1. فنلند نقش فعال تر و ابتکار در سازمان ملل متحد و آژانس های آن، شورای حقوق بشر سازمان ملل متحد و اتحادیه اروپا برای احیای حقوق زنان و حقوق بشر افغانستان همراه با جامعه بین المللی به عهده گیرد.  
الف. به اعمال فشار بر طالبان برای بازگرداندن احترام به حقوق زنان و دختران و حقوق بشر مطابق با اسناد بین المللی حقوق بشر مانند CEDAW و پلتفرم پکن Beijing Platform for Action ادامه دهد.  
ب. تضمین کند که رژیم طالبان تا زمانی که حقوق زنان و دختران را احیا نکرده باشد در سطح بین المللی به رسمیت شناخته نشود.  
ج. یک نهاد دائمی برای شنیده شدن صدای زنان افغانستان در دیاسپورا در معماری حقوق بشر سازمان ملل ایجاد کند.  
چ. به دنبال راه هایی برای حمایت از توانمندی سازی اقتصادی و ظرفیت سازی زنان افغانستان باشد.  
د. جستجوی راه هایی برای حمایت از گشایش مکاتب به روی دختران و زنان در تمام سطوح تحصیلی و در همه موضوعات، از جمله در دانشگاه ها و استفاده از وسایل جایگزین مانند دسترسی از راه دور و رادیو.  
و. تلاش های خود را برای حفظ سلامت جنسی و باروری و حقوق زنان افغانستان در شرایطی که تعداد پزشکان زن به شدت کاهش یافته است ادامه داده و افزایش دهد.  
ه. به تلاش های خود برای جلوگیری از خشونت جسمی روانی علیه زنان افغانستان و اطمینان از وجود داکترهای زن در هر استان ادامه دهد.  
ی. با تغییر وضعیت سیاسی در افغانستان، حمایت خود را از زنان افغانستان به طور چشمگیری آماده و افزایش دهد.

2. فنلند ابتکار عمل را در شورای حقوق بشر سازمان ملل برای ایجاد یک مکانیسم دائمی نظارت بر حقوق بشر برای کل افغانستان به عهده گیرد.

الف. مکانیسم نظارت، منابع لازم برای گسترش نظارت را به کل کشور تضمین کند و توجه ویژه ای به حقوق بشر زنان نماید.

**3.** فنلند، همراه با جامعه بین المللی، سازمان ملل را تشویق کند تا گفتگو بین طالبان و زنان افغانستان را تسهیل کند، و  
**الف.** از سازمان ملل درخواست کند که کانالی برای ارتباط سریع میان طالبان و زنان افغانستان ایجاد کند.

**4.** فنلند مکانیسم های تمویل خود را برای افغانستان توسعه دهد تا سازمان های غیردولتی NGOs کوچکی که برای تقویت وضعیت، معیشت و رفاه روانی زنان کار می کنند، بتوانند با سهولت بیشتری درخواست کمک مالی برای پروژه های خود کنند.  
**الف.** این بودجه، سازمان های زنان را قادر می سازد تا در سطح بین المللی شبکه سازی کنند. سازمان های زنان به طور سیستماتیک در سطح ملی و بین المللی مورد حمایت قرار گیرند تا به آنها اجازه دهند تا از همتایان خود حمایت کنند.  
**ب.** فنلند بودجه را از طریق طالبان هدایت نکند و جامعه بین المللی را تحت تأثیر قرار دهد تا این پول به دست طالبان نرسد.

**5.** فنلند بدون تأخیر ویزای بشردوستانه را برای مدافعان حقوق بشر معرفی کند، به طوری که حفاظت از زنان مدافع حقوق بشر - فعالان در سازمان های زنان و روزنامه نگاران زن را امکان پذیر نماید.

**الف.** فنلند مکانیسمی ایجاد کند که نسبت به موقعیت های فردی و خانوادگی افراد انعطاف پذیر، سریع و حساس باشد.  
**ب.** فنلند فعالانه از فرصت برای زنان مدافع حقوق بشر افغان برای درخواست ویزای بشردوستانه حمایت کند.  
**ج.** فنلند از مدافعان حقوق بشر بخصوص زنان نیز از طریق سهمیه پناهندگی حمایت کند و ابزارهای جدیدی را برای کمک به کسانی که حقوق بشر آنها بر اساس جنسیت یا گرایش جنسی نقض می شود، توسعه دهد.

**6.** فنلند، همراه با جامعه بین المللی، تاریخ، فرهنگ، موقعیت و حقوق زنان و همچنین ساختارهای اقتصادی کشور میزبان را مبنای برنامه ریزی عملیات جدید مدیریت بحران قرار دهد.  
**الف.** فنلند قبل از شروع عملیات جدید مدیریت بحران، همراه با جامعه بین المللی، مطالعه جامع و کاملی از کشور میزبان انجام دهد و از آن به عنوان مبنایی برای برنامه ریزی و تصمیم گیری در طول عملیات استفاده کند.  
**ب.** مشارکت زنان محلی، به عنوان مثال در کار پلیس، به گونه ای برنامه ریزی شود که زنان بین فرهنگ و سنت های خود و الزامات حرفه ای دچار تعارض یا حتی خطر جدی نشوند.  
**ج.** فنلند قبل از شروع یک عملیات جدید مدیریت بحران غیرنظامی، متعهد شود که از ایمنی افراد درگیر در پروژه ها حتی پس از پایان عملیات اطمینان حاصل کند.

**7.** فنلند متعهد به سیاست خارجی فمینیستی (FFP) است که برابری جنسیتی و حقوق زنان را به شیوه ای مبتنی بر حقوق بشر و متقاطع ترویج کند، به طوری که توصیه های فوق بخشی از این سیاست است.

**الف.** فنلند تضمین کند که سیاست امنیتی اش کور جنسیتی نیست، بلکه صراحتاً حقوق بشر و مشارکت زنان و دختران را در نظر می گیرد.  
**ب.** فنلند قطعنامه 1325 سازمان ملل در مورد زنان، صلح و امنیت را به عنوان بخشی جدایی ناپذیر از سیاست خارجی و امنیتی فمینیستی خود ادغام کند.  
**ج.** فنلند به نظارت بر وضعیت زنان در افغانستان از دیدگاه خود زنان ادامه دهد.

# FOREWORD

**HOW DO** women of Afghanistan feel about the work Finland was striving to do for them since 2002? Did our efforts make any difference? These questions were discussed at the Advisory Board for International Human Rights, IONK, in late autumn 2021 after the Taliban had marched back to Kabul, shocking everyone.

The National Council of Women of Finland decided to put these questions directly to the Afghan women who participated in the projects funded by Finland either as partners or beneficiaries. Overall, what was done and did it create anything sustainable? And what do Afghan women think about Finland now, what do they want and need from us? And what does Finland have to learn from the 20 years of partnership?

20 years ago, the world wanted to rescue Afghan women from the Taliban's oppression. Western countries were supposed to free Afghanistan of terrorists and lead it towards democracy and balance. Along with other Western countries, Finland decided to send their military to participate in NATO's Isaf operation in late 2001 to carry out this mission.

By autumn 2022, the Finnish military is back home and the Taliban is firmly back in power. Democracy, the rule of law and the laws decreed by the parliament have been overturned. There are no free elections, and laws are interpreted only through the Sharia law. At the same time, the country is struggling with record drought, severe food shortages and economic crisis. In just over a year, 1.3 million Afghans have fled to the neighbouring countries.

The Taliban has severely restricted women's fundamental human rights. Teenage girls have been excluded from middle schools and women from universities. Women are forced to wear burqas and niqabs and they have been kicked out of most workplaces. Women's movements outside the home are severely restricted.

For years, Afghanistan was the biggest receiver of Finnish development aid. In 20 years, Finland spent approximately 430 million Euros on development cooperation and civilian crisis management. In both fields, strengthening the status of women and girls became a central goal.

The National Council of Women of Finland selected different projects of various sizes funded by Finland to review in this report. The common goal of these projects was to strengthen the status of Afghan women. For some partners, the collaboration with Finland has been active for over 20 years and is still ongoing. However, most of the projects have been finished by now.

Finland has had only a few development projects in Afghanistan of their own. Approximately half of the development aid granted to the country was directed through the World Bank. In many large projects produced by sub-organisations of the World Bank and the UN, women have been the main beneficiaries, but it would have been difficult or impossible to interview these women for this report.

For this report by the National Council of Women of Finland, 30 Afghans (28 women, 2 men) were interviewed. Just over half of them still live in Afghanistan, the rest have left the country, most of them since the Taliban usurped power. The interviewees are of different age groups and ethnic groups.

Most of the Afghan women who have left their home country speak under their real names in this report. Apart from a few exceptions, the names of the women still living in Afghanistan have been changed to protect their identities. For the same reason, their place of residence is not precisely defined.

The interviews for this report were conducted between Aug 15th and Oct 30th 2022, primarily through video calls. Shakiba Adil, journalist and educator, worked as an assistant and an interpreter during the interviews.

The contents of this report reflect the UNSCR Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, with the exception that Afghan women who participated in military cooperation were not interviewed, as it would have been extremely difficult to reach them. Instead, security authorities are represented by women police officers in this report.

This report and the recommendations based on it are not an evaluation of Finland's work in Afghanistan. Instead, the National Council of Women of Finland expects the Afghan women's experiences, thoughts, and feedback to become building blocks for the future Afghanistan policies of Finland, as well as for planning any new civilian crisis management and development cooperation projects.

Due to the emphasis being on the women's interviews, the report was carried out with a journalistic approach. Furthermore, the author's reportage trips to Afghanistan as a reporter for Suomen Kuvalehti magazine between 2002 and 2012 were leveraged in the report.

This report by the National Council of Women of Finland was funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

Helsinki, 20th January 2023

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## EUPOL: THE COMPLEX CAREERS OF WOMEN POLICE OFFICERS AND PROSECUTORS

Towards gender equality in the rule of law

**JAMILA CAME** to the police station to report a crime. She told the police that her neighbour, Naseem, had violently raped her. The police questioned Jamila briefly about what had happened - and proceeded to arrest her. According to the police, Jamila had just confessed that she committed adultery, or *zina*, with her neighbour Naseem. Jamila was shocked to find herself locked up.

At the trial, the judge asked Jamila if Naseem had penetrated her, and she answered “Yes”. The judge found both Jamila and Naseem guilty of the crime of *zina*, or adultery. They were each sentenced to 100 lashes.

Jamila’s case is a fictional example in the *Police Prosecutor Cooperation Manual*, created for Afghan police and prosecutors, but Jamila’s story is not unusual in Afghanistan. The manual was a part of Finland’s significant input to EUPOL, the civilian crisis management operation initiated by the EU in 2007 with the purpose to reform Afghanistan’s security sector and strengthen the country’s rule of law.

The police who filed Jamila’s report of the offence made one mistake after another. They were not familiar with the country’s Criminal Code. They figured Jamila had already confessed to the crime and even named her accomplice. The police falsely based their assessment on the interpretation of adultery by the traditional Islamic Sharia law. They also didn’t appoint a legal counsellor for Jamila, even though she is illiterate.

A legal counsellor could have informed the police that, according to Afghanistan’s Criminal Code, a woman is the victim of rape, not the culprit, and that only the perpetrator should be convicted. Afghanistan’s constitution from 2004 said that the traditional Sharia law should only be implemented when there is no appropriate legislation in the Criminal Code. The Criminal Code clearly defines rape and the appropriate punishment. The police, prosecutors, and judges alike are in desperate need of more training.



PHOTO: KAISA RAUTAHEIMO

**Afghan woman police officer with her family in Kabul in 2012. At the time, there were 3,000 woman police officers in Afghanistan.**

When the international troops displaced the Taliban in 2001, the new government and their supporters began reforming Afghanistan's security structures - the military, police, judicial system, and anti-drugs policies. They were supposed to become a professionally functional, efficient, and reliable unity.

After the Taliban reign from 1996 to 2001, there were an estimated 50,000-70,000 police officers left in the country. Most of them were uneducated and illiterate former soldiers. Only a handful of women police officers were left.

A lot of new police officers were needed because the Taliban often directed their terrorist attacks and bombings at police stations. On average, 1,000 police officers died each year. From 2001 to 2019, 69,000 soldiers and police officers died in the war in Afghanistan.

The United States took responsibility for the police's basic training. They wanted to quickly gain additional help to fight the terrorists. They considered 8 weeks of training to be sufficient for this purpose. The training included mostly shooting and marching exercises; human rights or international agreements were not discussed. Turkey also trained over 5,000 new Afghan police officers at their training facilities; this training, too, focused on military skills.

Europeans were tasked with training the police chief officers and subordinates. The European approach was that the police are not there to fight terrorism alongside soldiers but to act as a civilian authority, serving and protecting the people. The police should represent the state on the streets: patrolling, guiding traffic, producing passports and IDs for the citizens.

All parties wanted to increase the number of women police officers, so they set a goal to train and hire 5,000 women police officers.

EUPOL, established in 2007, was implementing the EU's common security and defence policies in Afghanistan. EUPOL was a civilian mission whose goal was to have the police, prosecutor, and court in Afghanistan to comply with the laws passed in the parliament as well as the international human rights agreements to which Afghanistan had committed. All this was far from obvious in Afghanistan.

The EU member states sent their own experts to build a civil police force in Afghanistan and to support the development of the Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs.

Finland was one of EUPOL's most active participants and a key donor. Finland sent a total of 140 experts to Afghanistan, many of them police officers. Finnish experts in different fields were recruited from ministries, non-governmental organisations, and the private sector. Approximately a quarter - 30 people - of the experts were women.

From 2007 to 2017, Finland funded EUPOL activities with a total of approximately 23 million Euros. EUPOL activities finished in 2016 because the EU member states were no longer willing to sufficiently fund the operation. Two of the EUPOL Heads of Mission were Finnish: Jukka Savolainen of the Finnish Border Guard (2010-2012) and Pia Stjernvall, a long standing diplomat and the last Head of Mission (2015-2016).

However, in 20 years, the international community and the Afghan government only managed to train and hire 3,000 women police officers. This was still less than 2% of the police forces, and far from the target of 5,000 women police officers.

## A woman's long way to the head of police

Police Colonel Shafiqa Quraishi was one of the most important EUPOL partners in the Ministry of Interior Affairs. She graduated from the police academy already in the late 1980s during the regime of President Mohammad Najibullah and specialised as a criminal police officer. After the fall of the Taliban, Quraishi rapidly rose to a leading position in the Ministry of Interior Affairs, and was eventually promoted to the director of Gender, Human and Child Rights Unit. Only a few women have reached the same level in the whole country.

“Afghanistan is a society strictly dominated by men. They hold the power, and it's very difficult for a woman to progress in her career. That's where the Western countries' support was important to us - including myself”, Quraishi says in a video interview in autumn 2022. “I would not have been able to rise to this position without the strong support from our Western donors.”

Shafiqa Quraishi's own path to police officer was not without complications. She had 5 older sisters and 5 younger brothers. Her mother was illiterate but encouraged the middle child to do her best. However, Shafiqa's brothers-in-law were critical of her career choice. “They were concerned of the reputation of myself and the whole family.”



*“Afghanistan is a society strictly dominated by men. They hold the power, and it's very difficult for a woman to progress in her career. That's where the Western countries' support was important to us - including myself.”*

**Shafiqa Quraishi**, Police Colonel

Society in general looked harshly on Afghan women who joined the police force. It was considered so clearly to be a man's job. A woman police officer might end up in a situation where she would need to order or even arrest an unfamiliar man. This was unheard-of. So, a woman police officer in uniform had to face degrading calling, harassment, even aggression. It was common practice for women police officers to not get into their uniform until they got to the police station.

Inside the police stations, the patriarchal culture was no different from the surrounding society. A significant number of women police officers were mainly forced to sit around at the station and do a completely different job than what they were trained for. Women made tea, cooked, cleaned, or carried out nurse duties. It was extremely difficult to advance their ca-

reers. Furthermore, women police officers faced harassment at the workplace, and to keep their jobs many women were practically forced to give sexual favours.

Because the whole society frowned upon women police officers, women who became police officers often had few options available: they were widowers, single mothers, and daughters, who had to support their family one way or another. Many of them did not have a calling to become police, so they were struggling to embrace the professional role.

“Support from other countries in training the women police officers was extremely important. It empowered women to gain confidence and to understand their role”, Quraishi says.

## **Income was a safety net against violence**

Over 3,000 Afghan women still wanted to work in the police. Fatema, 29, who worked as a police officer in the Balkh Province of Northern Afghanistan, shares the reason for this. As we are carrying out the video interview in autumn 2022, Fatema is sitting in a dark room wearing a black head scarf. The windows are carefully covered with curtains.

“Already as a little girl I wanted to become a police officer, but my parents were strictly against it. In their opinion, no respectable Muslim girl could become a police officer.”

But Fatema wouldn't let go of her dream. In her own family, she had seen brutal violence against the wives and daughters, and she thought, “This has to change”. “I had also seen that once the women in the family were educated and started earning money, the violence against them decreased. This was really important to me.”

After finishing school, Fatema entered the Police Academy where she completed eight weeks of basic training. The training did not include anything regarding violence against women or preventing it, nor was there any talk about human rights. However, because Fatema was one of the best in her class, she was allowed to continue her studies and fly to Turkey for an additional training period for six months.

After returning to her hometown, Fatema participated in EUPOL's complementary training, where violence against women was discussed in a completely new way. Some of the trainers were women police officers from Europe, Fatema says. She found their way of training and discussing even difficult topics, such as domestic violence, encouraging.

In 2003, Terre des Hommes, the international federation for children's rights, carried out a survey with 400 mothers to investigate how common domestic violence was in Afghanistan. The survey revealed that domestic violence happened in 95% of all households.

14 years later in a study by UN Women, 87% of women said they had experienced physical, sexual, or psychological violence.

“At the EUPOL training we learned how to talk to a woman who faced domestic violence, how to start the investigation, and how to take the victim to a safe house. We should also tell the victim that she has a right to a lawyer. We learned to follow up on the case handling and take it to a lawyer after the investigation”, Fatema shares.

After the course, Fatema started working at her local police station's Family Unit. The station had just been established. *Police-e-Mardumi* was a local version of the European district-level police where women police officers played a key role. When the police station received a report of escalating domestic violence in the neighbourhood, the women police officers in the Family Unit were sent to the scene. Fatema explains that it was culturally more appropriate for a woman police officer than a man to enter a family home.

A separate space was set up next to the police station where the victim of domestic violence could be taken. A nurse or a doctor checked and treated her injuries, if necessary, the events were reported, and the police started a preliminary investigation. If necessary, the woman was appointed to a shelter.

Around Afghanistan, a total of 184 family units were established; Kabul alone had 17 units. Finland participated in developing the work in these units.

Fatema says that she worked hands-on in the domestic violence unit for 5 years. “It was easier for women who had been beaten and raped to talk to a woman police officer. They wouldn't have even mentioned rape if they had to talk to a man police officer. With a woman they felt safe”, Fatema says.

If the violence wasn't particularly brutal, the police would speak to the husband and ask him to promise that it wouldn't happen again. The couples were commonly encouraged to reconcile. Only if the assault was exceptionally brutal was the case sent to the prosecutor.

Fatema says that in 5 years she saw unbelievably many abused women. “Women who were beaten black and blue; women who were almost strangled; women who were forced to prostitution by their husbands;

women who attempted suicide because they couldn't see any other way out", she recalls.

## **Physical harassment at the workplace**

Often the police were too late to help. Once a dead woman was brought to the police station. She had been shot right between her legs. "The husband claimed that she had committed suicide, and forced their children to testify to the same. We were unable to forward the charges even though we knew that he did it", says Hajira, another woman police officer who used to work in Northern Afghanistan.

Hajira also participated in the EUPOL trainings and she says they were very useful. "It wasn't until these trainings that I realised that women's rights are human rights, too. They never taught us that in the Police Academy."

Despite her young age, Hajira was promoted to Police Chief in her province. During her career she saw some changes. Violence reported by women started decreasing over the years. "This was puzzling us, so we wanted to find out the reasons. It turned out that the number of educated women was increasing, and that led to a decrease in violence. Women's increased economic control had a direct correlation to decreased violence against women. The change was evident."

Hajira and Fatema say that they have faced repeated threats because of their work; from both common Afghan people and the Taliban. Hajira was targeted by a bomb attack, and she only survived after being treated in the hospital.

Both women often found it difficult to work at the police station. Fatema also faced physical harassment. "Even trained policemen don't want women working alongside them. In this sense our society is very conservative."

Keeping their jobs was also an ongoing battle. "Even if I did a good job and delivered satisfactory results, some directors wanted to get rid of me and give my job to one of their relatives. It was hard to fight against that, because I don't have political networks or influential relatives."

## **Facilitating collaboration with a murder story**

In Finland, the police conduct the preliminary investigation independently and only after that the prosecutor decides whether to prosecute, where-

as in Afghanistan, practically all power over the criminal investigation lay with the prosecutor. And unlike in Finland, the Afghan police and prosecutor didn't co-operate much. Their scarce collaboration was fruitless, and crimes often failed to be solved due to lack of trust and teamwork between the professional groups.

The underlying reason for this was the educational gap between the prosecutor and the police. The prosecutor has a university degree in law, whereas the police receive training for eight weeks, followed by remote patrol missions in the mountains to scope the Taliban's movement - often months at a time.

Up to 70-80% of the police could not read or write. This had an enormous impact on how the preliminary investigation was carried out and documented. The police rushed to conclusions, and confessions were regularly extracted by torture. On the other hand, any crime scene evidence, such as fingerprints, was not taken seriously.

In addition, corruption and nepotism were deeply rooted in the police – for enough money, a criminal could clear themselves of almost any crime. From the perspective of a regular citizen, the Afghan police was more often a part of the problem than the solution.

To improve the situation, in 2009, Crisis Management Center Finland (CMC) together with EUPOL initiated a joint training for police and prosecutors. Their goal was to increase their collaboration and improve the quality of crime investigations. The official request was made by the Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs and Afghanistan's prosecuting authority. The project was funded by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

Another goal for the training was to strengthen the status of women police officers and prosecutors. "After the collaboration started, we realised that if we want the police and prosecutor to work together, they need a shared manual", says prosecutor Maria Basher.

Basher was the first woman to be appointed Chief Prosecutor in Afghanistan. For several years, she was the chief prosecuting authority of Herat Province. Herat is a province of ca. 3 million residents, located in the western part of Afghanistan near the Iranian border.

From 2009 to 2013, a group of Afghan prosecutors and police visited Finland four times to workshop first ideas and later policies for the manual. For weeks, the participants spent time in Tahko creating drafts, brainstorming ways to proceed, and discussing the challenges of an investigation. In Helsinki, the Afghans also became familiar with the Finnish legal

system and procedures. The resulting manual was a sort of “ABC of Police work and Prosecution”.

The main question was how to create a manual that would be understandable for a barely literate police officer while also being relevant to a highly qualified prosecutor. The solution was drawings – and a captivating murder story.

The manual starts with a phone call to the police: Diba, a young woman from Kabul, has been found brutally murdered in her home. This launches a thorough preliminary investigation, illustrated with images of police “Nasraddin” and prosecutor “Amanullah” together delving into the details of the evening of the murder. The police question the family, neighbours, and friends; collect samples and analyse them. Prosecutor Amanullah makes observations and politely makes suggestions when they notice the police is missing something.



*“Even trained policemen don’t want women working alongside them.”*

**Fatema**, former police officer

The manual consists of almost 400 pages, and it includes dozens of illustrations of the course of events; including symbols, boxes, and tips for proceeding in the investigation. The investigators make some mistakes, but these are identified and rectified. Diba’s murder investigation is unravelled from the first telephone call all the way up to the murderer being convicted in court.

In addition to the Finnish and EUPOL experts, 33 Afghan officials took part in planning and executing the manual. Maria Basher and other prosecutors alongside the police created a framework for the manual. The actual writing was done by German lawyer Cornelia Schneider together with Afghan legal expert Rohullah Esmat.

The manual was completed in spring 2012. Over 3,000 copies in Dari and 1,500 copies in English were quickly printed. Later the manual was also translated into Pashtu. The manual became an official tool for training police and prosecutors both in the Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs and in EUPOL. Already that same year, 2012, separate trainings were organised for all trainers and for women in Mazar-e Sharif.

## 9—D: Sixth Scenario

In the morning of 10 Aqrab 1387, Samina calls Nasraddin with a question:



Nasraddin-Sahib, this is Samina. As you know, I work with Amanullah on "Operation Diba."

Amanullah asked me to confirm with you which defence lawyer is representing the suspect, Ahmed Zubair. We want to interview Ahmed and need the lawyer to be present.

Nasraddin responds:

We will keep you informed of how the interview goes.

Thank you, Samina-Jan. It is very kind of you and Amanullah to keep me informed. The name of the lawyer is Rohullah Herawi. Wait a minute, I will give you his phone number.



An hour later, she looks up again from the file.



Amanullah-Jan, listen! There were two alien footprints in Diba's room, right?

Amanullah just nods, listening attentively, as Samina continues:



One of the footprints belonged to Ahmed.

Amanullah shakes his head in doubt:



Yes, but the footprint alone is not enough to tie him to the murder!

Samina is excited:



Exactly! What if it wasn't Ahmed at all? What if we were wrong with our assumption?

Remember what the other witnesses said about the break-in? And look at the crime scene sketch that Nasraddin drew - see, the window was wide open and there were blood traces on the table underneath the window! What if Diba surprised a burglar, got killed for it, and Ahmed turned up at the scene later?

For years, police training centres across the country were using the manual extensively, and countless new copies were printed. Maria Basher says that the manual has proven to be very important. “It worked magnificently and made our jobs easier. We often used the manual when investigating crimes against women, and it was particularly useful for women police officers, supporting their professional development.

Basher also used the manual herself when training women police officers alongside her job as a prosecutor. “First, I explained to the participants what their legal rights were - even though they are women, they have the same rights as policemen”, she describes. “Then we went through the manual chapter by chapter.”

Basher witnessed hundreds of women police officers gaining new skills with the manual. It was constructed in a way that the content was easy to embrace. The manual was a success, Basher says.

## **“The ideas were ours”**

Ever since Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban in August 2021, Europeans have been criticised for their overly ambitious approach and optimism in improving the status of civilian and women police officers. Critics say that the time wasn’t right for changes because the country was still in the midst of a bloody conflict.

Some critics have even considered it neo-colonialistic to force Western values onto a conservative Islamic country; the society was not ready for the women police officers’ role models, which eventually turned out to be dangerous to the women.

Maria Basher disagrees with the critics: “If you want to construct a rule of law, the basic principles are the same everywhere”, she says. “The Afghanistan constitution from 2004 was based on Islamic law. The donors were not requesting anything that would contradict the laws of Afghanistan. There’s no reason to criticise them for that.”

Shafiqra Quraishi agrees with Basher. “The Western countries were not going against our wishes. The ideas were ours, and they helped us realise them. They always kept the traditions of the Afghan society in mind and considered what was possible in that context.”

Quraishi thinks that the only mistake the Western countries made was that the police training started too late and in the wrong place. “Had

they kicked off the training quickly and started in the provinces, further away from city centres, the benefits would have been much bigger. The police in the countryside didn't receive any training, and the remote locations didn't get any women police officers."

Dissatisfaction and hatred against the international troops first started spreading in the most remote provinces. The hatred was triggered by bombings of civilian targets, as well as the Taliban propaganda and strikes against remote police stations. "If the police in the rural areas had received better training, the Taliban would not have been able to gain power so quickly", says Quraishi.

Training women police officers didn't always go as well as possible either. The separate trainings for women were brief, only a few days, and EUPOL was not able to arrange a separate police academy for women despite the obvious need for one. In addition, because the number of highly motivated and professionally oriented women police officers was small, the same small group of officers kept rotating from one international course to the next, filling a gender quota.

The Finns also organised a 3-week refresher course for women police officers in Kabul, as well as in a few provinces. But the training did not result in any significant changes: Many of the women continued working in their old basic jobs even after the training.

Many women police officers quit their job after a short while. Not being able to move on from a kitchen assistant role at the workplace and feeling a constant external pressure created a burdensome conflict. Getting married and staying home was always a generally accepted alternative.

However, prosecutor Maria Basher thinks that the biggest mistake that the donor countries made was their reckless spending which eventually resulted in massive corruption. According to Basher, they brought loads of money into the country, but never created proper structures to control the spending.

"The donors didn't really do anything to stop corruption. That's where they failed miserably. Unfortunately, this also applied to the money given to NGOs. Instead of building proper funding systems, for example, to improve women's financial situation, many NGOs were buying cars, building big houses and organising massive conferences - and, of course, paying themselves huge salaries."



PHOTO: KAISA RAUTAHEIMO

A boxing club for girls training in 2012 at the same stadium where, in the 1990s, the Taliban carried out executions. The girl pictured wanted to become a doctor, so her brother allowed her to join boxing practice in exchange for spending her evenings sewing clothes they could sell.

## “We had already been sold”

In October 2022, Maria Basher, the former Chief Prosecutor of Herat province, attends our phone interview in Italy. She has been granted asylum in Italy and is travelling around Europe to talk about the rights of Afghan women and the principles of legality.

Meanwhile, Police Colonel Shafiqra Quraishi is sharing her experiences with us through a video call from Norway. She had to flee her home country already in 2012 after she and her family received repeated death threats.

Police Chief Hajira answers the phone in Washington, DC. She’s wearing a black head scarf, and tears run down her cheeks when she describes her last weeks in Afghanistan just over one year ago. For 90 days, Hajira fought with a gun in hand to defend her hometown from a Taliban attack. “Over and over, I kept demanding Kabul to send us more forces, but we never got any.”

After Hajira was injured in battle, she was transported across the border; first out of the country and eventually into the United States. “It wasn’t un-

til later when I realised that it had all been for nothing - training women police officers, fighting, investing into Afghanistan. All those thousands of deaths across the country were also in vain. We had already been sold in the Doha negotiations between the Americans and the Taliban.”

“Thanks to the Doha Agreement, us women lost everything. Absolutely everything.”

Fatema, who worked in the police Family Unit for years, takes our video call in Northern Afghanistan. She would also leave the country immediately if she could find a way to get out. In August 2021, the Taliban kicked her out of the police force, along with the other 3,000 women police officers in Afghanistan. The Taliban announced that they were no longer needed. They also made redundant the 300 women judges in the country as well as all woman prosecutors and legal counsellors. Even most men employees in the judicial system were let go.



*“Any Taliban member now feels entitled to interpret the Sharia however they please.”*

**Maria Basher**, former prosecutor

The Taliban replaced them with their own soldiers and supporters. For tasks where women police officers are still needed the Taliban has only hired Pashtun women. “Uzbek, Tajik, and Hazara women’s jobs have been given to Pashtuns”, Fatema says. This further exacerbates tensions between the ethnic groups.

Now Fatema is hiding from the Taliban as well as from the common criminals. In August 2021, the Taliban opened the prisons, and many criminals who Fatema had arrested before wanted revenge. “They kept calling me and saying that they know where I live. I take turns hiding here in Northern Afghanistan and in Kabul.”

Because Fatema is the only breadwinner in her family, she has tried applying for any job to buy food for her mother and little brothers. “I finally built up courage and walked into the Ministry of Interior Affairs in Kabul and demanded to get a job. But the doors are closed to me. The Taliban thinks that anyone who worked for the previous government is heretical.”

The Taliban considers women police officers who participated in training with the Western countries particularly suspicious. “In their eyes, I am a

spy. I don't blame the Western countries for this - their training intentions were good. But we are now paying a hefty price for it."

Some of the trained women police officers died in battle, some were murdered. Great many have left the country, while some are in hiding like Fatema. Who are the women police officers that the Taliban says they have hired to the Ministry of Interior Affairs? Fatema doesn't know. "But I do know that they're not the ones who were trained as police by the international community."

Both Maria Basher, the former prosecutor, and Shafiq Quraishi, the former Police Colonel at the Ministry of Interior Affairs, say that they would return to their home country right away if their safety could be guaranteed. "Everyone wants to live in their home country. In Afghanistan, I was Shafiq Quraishi - here in Norway, I'm just one of thousands of refugees."

## **Sharia law is now being interpreted at police stations**

In November 2022, the Taliban announced that from now on, justice will only be served according to the Sharia law, including in criminal matters. The Taliban deems all previously enacted laws - including the constitution - unnecessary. All leadership positions in the country – from ministerial posts to government leadership positions - are in the hands of the Taliban. And they have no intention to organise any elections.

In practice, the rule of law has ceased to exist. There is no more systematic criminal investigation, prosecutor activity, defence, or independent court. Now, the Sharia law is being interpreted at hundreds of police stations, provincial councils, and Sharia courts across the country, based on whatever knowledge of the holy books is available at the time. Generally, the decision of interpreting the Sharia for each crime is made by a commander of the local armed forces.

The interpretations and implementations of the law in different parts of the country fluctuate greatly. "Any Taliban member now feels entitled to interpret the Sharia however they please", says Maria Basher. "This is particularly problematic for women, because in the Taliban philosophy, women's blood is worthless. They consider a man, brother or father to have the right to inflict any kind of violence on a woman." Even kill her if they want to.

The interpretations made by the Taliban's Sharia courts have deprived women of the possibility of, for example, divorce, even if her life is in danger because of a violent spouse. In late 2022, there have been reports of flogging of women who ran away from home.

Another influential Afghan who knows the Taliban well and has a graduate degree in Islamic law but wants to remain anonymous says that the Taliban leaders are “shockingly ignorant regarding Islam. Their competence is based only on the rituals of Islam. They know nothing of the philosophy or ethics of Islam.”

How about the Police-Prosecutor Cooperation Manual? Is it of any use now? Does it even exist anymore? Prosecutor Maria Basher cries out when she recalls the years of work that went into the manual. “It was such a good training tool, especially for women police officers. And now it is completely wasted.”

Rohullah Esmati, who oversaw distributing and copy editing the manuals in Afghanistan, now lives in Switzerland. He doesn’t consider it impossible for at least some Taliban members to be using the manual. “The training centres have lots of copies of the manual so it’s possible that some trainers are still using it. Already during the making of the manual we decided that it needs to be adaptable to different contexts. But can it stand the return of the Taliban? That’s impossible to know.”

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# AFGHANISTAN'S NATIONAL ACTION PLAN 1325 BECOMES FINLAND'S FLAGSHIP

Afghan women pushed forward the Women, Peace and Security program

**ON OCTOBER** 31st, 2000, in New York, the UN Security Council approved Resolution 1325, called Women, Peace and Security. With this resolution, for the first time in its history the Security Council approached war from women's point of view: How differently wars and conflicts affect women than men, and how women's voices almost always go unheard when the parties seek peace.

The world had realised especially that sexual violence was ruthlessly weaponised in conflicts. The gang rapes in Bosnia and Rwanda had shed light on the issue, and hundreds of women's organisations and activists across the world pushed the matter all the way to the UN Security Council. In Finland, Minister Elisabeth Rehn significantly advanced the issue. Gang rapes of women had exactly the effect that the culprits wanted: in addition to pain and suffering, they inflicted deep shame on the women and their communities. That's why they were kept quiet.

Resolution 1325 calls on all parties of conflict to protect women and girls in conflict situations, particularly from sexual violence. It also calls for women to be involved in all the implementation mechanisms of the peace agreements; only then can peace be sustainable. Protection of women and girls should be recognised particularly when they need to escape a conflict. That is when their status is particularly vulnerable. And to make sure women's approach is considered in rebuilding post-conflict society, the resolution calls for increasing the participation of women at all political decision-making levels. To reach these goals, each member state was encouraged to create a National Action Plan (NAP).

One year after the UNSCR had approved Resolution 1325, the US and British troops invaded Afghanistan with the unanimous support of the UN Security Council. The 9/11 attacks across the United States shocked the world, and the fact that Osama bin Laden was staying in Afghanistan was considered reason enough to attack: al-Qaeda and terrorism must be eradicated from the country. Liberation of Afghan women from the Taliban oppression was used as a moral basis for the attack



PHOTO: KAISA RAUTAHEIMO

**Woman running in a Womens' Garden in Kabul in 2012. Parks were freely accessible for women.**

both in the United States and in Europe. However, none of the UN Resolutions authorising the attack in 2001 mentioned the Security Council's Resolution on Women, Peace and Security, adopted only a year earlier.

## **The Burden of History**

If in any country, then in Afghanistan, the goals of Resolution 1325 were in dire need. During the decades of war and occupation, Afghan women had become a key instrument of warfare - without them having a say in the matter.

During the Soviet occupation (1979-1989), in big cities women were encouraged to study and become more modern, but at the same time in the countryside, the Soviet army was allowed to rape and torture and force women into marriage or prostitution.

Violence against women reached a whole new level during the civil war of 1992-1996, when armed forces from different ethnic groups and tribes systematically used rape as a tool to undermine the morale and honour of the rival group. Women were kidnapped and sold; girls were forced to marry soldiers. At the same time, when living conditions in the country were becoming more and more difficult, domestic violence against women was also increasing.

Ordinary people were left in the middle of unspeakable violence and destruction, especially in Kabul. Armed forces led by warlords used their position in the mountains to hammer a third of the capital to ruins, killing up to 50,000 of the capital's inhabitants.

And still, the warlords who were guilty of mass destruction were included in the new leadership of the country at the request of the United States in the early 2000s. The US had enough of an enemy in Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, they did not want to start another front. This further strengthened the culture of impunity in Afghanistan.

It was the chaos and rapes during the civil war that was one of the key reasons for giving a warm welcome to the extremist Islamic Taliban in many parts of the country in 1996. The Taliban executed rapists and solved the issue of women's safety by confining them into the home - as the Pashtun culture traditionally saw fit. From 1996 to 2001, in the name of Islam and protection, the Taliban stole women's and girls' rights to study, work and move outside of the home.

## **Women's organisations activate**

Since the early 2000s, the Finnish embassy in Kabul had been paying careful attention to the wishes of active women's organisations in the country. Many Afghan women who had received education abroad had returned to their home country and joined an existing women's organisation or started a new one. The organisations were running political campaigns in Kabul to make women's voices heard and to advance bills in the Afghan parliament that were important to women.

After the UN World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing, women in Afghanistan had established the Afghan Women's Network, a non-partisan umbrella organisation. During the 2000s, 125 organisations and 3,500 individual members joined AWN. AWN's mission was to promote a profound positive change in the lives of Afghan women both socially, culturally, politically, and legislatively, while honouring Islamic values. Finland was also supporting this work.

In the early 2000s, the Director of AWN was Samira Hamidi. Hamidi has a degree in International Human Rights Law from the UK, and she had a strong will to promote the status of Afghan women. “We had started campaigning for the UNSCR 1325 goals already in the early 2000s, long before the official process started in Afghanistan. Across the country, we were raising women’s awareness of their own rights”, Hamidi tells us over a video interview. Nowadays, Hamidi works for Amnesty International.

In addition to local activism and women’s education, the woman leaders of various organisations frequently met with the ambassadors of donor countries and, whenever possible, with the country’s political leadership, and communicated to them the necessity and urgency of change.

Another influential promoter of the Women, Peace and Security agenda was Soraya Sobhrang, serving as the Commissioner of women’s rights of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, AIHRC. Finland was also supporting AIHRC’s work for several years.

“The foundation of our work was the Afghan constitution; it guaranteed women the same rights as men and called the government to respect all international agreements. For us, this was the foundation for the work on the National Action Plan 1325”, says Soraya Sobhrang.

A progressive constitution and a 27% women’s quota in the House of People of the National Assembly were not enough. Thanks to massive efforts by women’s organisations and women politicians, also a new law on Elimination of Violence towards Women (EVAW) was established in 2009.

## **Finland becomes an NAP donor**

Despite the efforts of women’s organisations, it took almost a decade until the republic, under President Hamid Karzai, was ready to start preparing Afghanistan’s National Action Plan 1325. Finland played a key role in this process.

Finland’s own first NAP 1325 was published in 2006. Over time, Finland and its NAPs have become an important international forerunner, and Finland has also supported the creation and implementation of NAPs in other developing countries. During the 2000s, gender equality has become an overarching goal in the Finnish development cooperation policy.

The idea of Finland’s role in the preparation of Afghanistan’s NAP 1325 was generated in 2010, in discussions with women’s organisations and human rights activists at the Finnish Embassy in Kabul. For the small nation

of Finland to take on responsibility for preparing such a significant plan was met with concern at the embassy. That same year, Pauli Järvenpää, a prominent figure in the defence administration, was appointed as the new Ambassador in Kabul. He kept encouraging the embassy staff: We can do this.

Eventually, Finland took the main donor responsibility for the development of Afghanistan's NAP. Finland funded both the preparation of the NAP and its implementation from 2013 to 2019 by approximately one million Euros. The funds were channelled through UN Women. When the Finnish embassy announced that they were starting the project, Sima Samar, chair of AIHRC, says that she urged everyone to be persistent. "I said it would take 10 years to finalise the action plan and another 10 years to implement it."

Together with the representatives of the Finnish Embassy in Kabul, the Afghan women activists met with decision-makers in various ministries to convince them of the importance of NAP: Why it was important to gather the key issues regarding the improvement of the status of women together and which parties should be involved in the preparation and implementation of the Action Plan.

However, Finland did not want the NAP to become another plan drafted by consultants or donors, but rather that the Afghans would do the groundwork and create the plan themselves. This way it would genuinely reflect what the society needed. "It didn't need to be perfect, just good enough", one central Finnish civil servant summarises.

Finland also assigned a coordinator from the embassy's payroll to the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate the preparations.

## **Speak to the women first**

For the work on NAP 1325 to begin, the rapporteurs needed to hear what the Afghan women were thinking. A group of women's organisations and activists disembarked to the provinces to inform women about the work starting in Kabul and ask what they wanted. How did they feel about their possibilities to influence matters and how could they be improved?

Finding these women turned out to be challenging. According to statistics by the World Bank, over 70% of the Afghan population lived outside of cities, in the countryside, and many of them were surrounded by rough mountain ranges. In addition, since 2009 the Taliban were occupying larger and larger areas. By 2011, it was estimated that they were occupying

up to 40% of the country. Attacks on girls' schools, women's clinics and women-run newsrooms were the first signs of the Taliban returning to the provinces. Volunteers from women's organisations were not welcome in these regions.

Even explaining Resolution 1325 was a challenge. According to UNESCO, over 80% of women in Afghanistan were illiterate, and most of their lives were limited to their own village and home. Women's everyday life was filled with field work, cooking, and giving birth to and caring for an increasing number of children.

First, the women had to be explained what the UN was, then what the UN Security Council was, and what its Resolution meant for them, describes Hasina Safi who participated in the education work. "First we had to explain terms such as *gender equality, human rights, or legislation*, and it was challenging, to put it mildly. Safi herself has a Master's Degree in Teacher Training and a BA in Law and Political science. She used to be one of the most well-known women's rights activists in Afghanistan. Safi served as Afghanistan's Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of Women's Affairs - the last one in the country. Nowadays she lives in England.

Hasina Safi describes how they tried to formulate the NAP goals in such a way that they could later be delivered to ordinary Afghans in an understandable format. "For example, what would a safe environment mean to a poor Afghan widow? It would mean to safely transport her children to an appointment with a woman doctor, who in turn was able to safely work at the village clinic. This was a way for the widowed mother to understand how the Security Council's goals were relevant to her life."

Women from all 34 provinces were consulted via representatives. "We spoke to both illiterate and literate women. Some of them were being held captive in their own home. We listened to them, and that way we were able to get them involved in the process", Safi says.

Hasina Safi describes the best ways she found to approach the women. "I never told them what they should do or say. I spoke to them about my own experiences, including the encouragement I had received in my life - but also about the problems I had faced. This encouraged the women to open up and share their experiences. It also helped them to analyse their own needs, which eventually helped them see their options. I always say: Start at the bottom."

The deep-rooted patriarchy in Afghanistan had ensured that the rights of women and girls came last - their voices were not being heard in the society nor at home. Hasina Safi thought that if there were new ways to make

women's voices heard, it would reduce the likelihood of domestic violence and might even help stop the rampant killings everywhere.

“Protecting women from violence and incorporating them in this work was fundamentally important”, says Soraya Sobhrang of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission as well.

## High-level ministers join the work

While women's organisations were talking to women across the country, in the capital, Kabul, the process of mapping out who should be included in drafting the NAP 1325, and which elements of 1325 already existed in the Afghan legislation, was ongoing. Soraya Sobhrang and Samira Hamidi were participating closely in the groundwork and meeting with different authorities.

“Even many ministers were not familiar with Resolution 1325. We had to increase their awareness - and that was a long process”, Soraya Sobhrang, MD, sighs. Of the 25 ministers in the government at the time, 3 were women.

The NAP 1325 would be prepared by a steering committee of the highest possible quality to give the plan credibility. The 11-person committee eventually consisted of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Ministers, and Directors of six key ministries, such as the National Directorate of Security, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

AIHRC was represented in the Steering Committee by Soraya Sobhrang. The civil society was represented by Hasina Safi. There were also three other women in the group when the committee started their work in spring 2012.

Finland was aiming to impact the group by setting an example. The Steering Committee was flown to Finland to learn how the NAP 1325 was prepared in Finland and how different ministries and the Defence Forces implemented the gender equality goals. Finland also organised training to the preparing officials in Afghanistan.

The starting point was that the Steering Committee would create Afghanistan's NAP themselves and in Dari - but that's not what happened. One by one, the ministers and deputy ministers dismissed their role and sent a high-ranking ministry official in their place, who, in turn, delegated their responsibilities to a lower-ranking official. These officials didn't have sufficient competence or commitment to the work.

The preliminary draft was indeed written in Dari, but three years later when the plan still wasn't complete, consultants were called in. In the end, a consultant hired by UN Women wrote the entire NAP in English, and it was translated to Dari in 2015.

Within the NAP Steering Committee, the skill level, interest, and ambitions varied greatly between individuals, which was causing friction. While NGO representatives and their well-trained supporters wanted to include highly progressive goals, some ministry representatives found it impossible to even understand how marital rape could be outlawed. In general, sexual violence and attitudes towards it raised many kinds of interpretations and contradictions in the group.



*"Protecting women from violence and incorporating them in the work for 1325 was fundamentally important."*

**Soraya Sobrang**, Human Rights Commissioner

It also quickly became clear that no budget had been allocated for the practical implementation of the plan. Finland had committed to funding the writing of the NAP but not the implementation. To implement the plan, mainly the Nordic countries rushed to raise a small amount of money.

While high-level officials were struggling to understand the UN Security Council's choice of words during numerous meetings in Kabul, ordinary Afghans were living amid ever-increasing fighting. The Taliban had licked their wounds and were escalating their attacks, and more and more civilians were dying. In the same year when the Afghanistan NAP was finished, according to UN statistics, 3,545 civilians died and 7,457 were wounded in the war. The Taliban and other insurgent groups were responsible for most of the deaths, but in some years, the Afghan army and the international troops were responsible for nearly half of the civilian victims. At the same time, over one million Afghans were forced to flee their homes to get away from the war and seek shelter elsewhere.

## What were the end results?

Afghanistan's NAP is a document of approximately 25 pages, outlining the most central goals for 1325. The plan covered eight years (2015-2022) and

was divided into four pillars: Participation, Protection, Prevention, and Relief and Recovery.

A clear objective was for women to be more closely involved in all decision-making in society, to participate in elections and in peace negotiations. Another overarching goal was to guarantee the protection of women from all forms of violence and discrimination by implementing, monitoring, and reforming existing laws,

as well as to improve women's legal remedies, provide more efficient support to survivors of violence, and raise awareness across the society regarding the consequences of violence.

The Action Plan specifically aspired to prevent violence against women. The aim was to get rid of the culture of impunity and to strengthen women's role in the Security sector and the legal system. It was also considered important to involve men and boys in the battle against violence against women, to increase training for women police officers, and to provide more human rights education to all police officers.

The ministries and authorities would have a key role in implementing the Action Plan. Each ministry would be responsible for reporting on their assigned activities on an annual basis to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A mid-term review would be carried out after two years.

The civil society was also given a central role in implementing the NAP from the start. Their role was to raise public awareness and monitor the NAP implementation independently. Support from the international community would be particularly important.

Afghanistan had high expectations for the NAP. When the action plan was published in June 2015, it was widely advertised in the media. Afghanistan's NAP was the 50th NAP on Women, Peace and Security in the world. The NAP would finally change women's participation in politics and the country's security structures, and it would provide a tool to fight violence against women. It would provide help to refugees and education to women. President Ashraf Ghani who participated in the opening ceremony said that the NAP was a fundamental priority to the government in office and that the implementation would be closely monitored.

Even Finland considered Afghanistan's NAP their own flagship project. At the end of the document, gratitude was expressed to Finland for its financial support.

## No money for the implementation

After celebrating the NAP, it was time to start the implementation. At the same time, shortcomings in the NAP - and criticism of the plan - became even more visible. The main concern was money, or rather lack of it.

Soraya Sobhrang, member of the Steering Group, says that because each ministry was responsible for implementing the NAP, they were also responsible for raising money for its functions.

“All ministries said that the funding for NAP needs to come directly from the state budget so that they don’t always have to apply for international funding for each function”, says Soraya Sobhrang.

In practice, this was the crack that the NAP fell through. The international donors were not allocating any extra “1325 money” to the state budget. While at the same time the Taliban were escalating their attacks and the international community was pulling their troops out of the country, more and more Afghan politicians were starting to view advancing women’s issues as a secondary goal. The work towards the NAP ceased before it even got started.

Both Sima Samar, Chair of AIHRC, and Wazhma Frogh, one of Afghanistan’s most prominent women’s rights activist, consider the biggest problem - apart from the lack of funding - to be that the NAP was never institutionalised, or made a part of the society’s legislation and structures.

Wazhma Frogh, who has a Master’s degree in Law and Human Rights from the UK as well as post-graduate studies at Harvard University, says that “the NAP was a wish list of many dreams” with very little concrete.

“Lots of pictures were taken at the publishing events and put on the media and all that noise - but nothing kind of happened afterwards. There wasn’t any institutional responsibility for implementing these goals into the structures of society”, Frogh says.

For example, women’s participation in peace negotiations - although it was one of the key points of Resolution 1325 - was not defined in Afghanistan’s NAP. A few years later, once negotiations with the Taliban really started, women’s participation in them was not at all taken for granted. Getting four women included in the Doha negotiations required a big effort from the women’s organisations.

It is also striking that cooperation with, for example, religious leaders was almost completely omitted in Afghanistan’s NAP. However, in the conservative Afghan society the role of a religious leader is pivotal in the implementation of any kind of reform.

NAP raised huge expectations. But already the very first phase of the NAP process - consultations - proved to be challenging.

“The consultations evolved around the elite women in Kabul and in major provinces”, says Wazhma Frogh who has established many women’s organisations across the country. Hearings were limited to the provincial capitals and their immediate surroundings, simply because the security situation further out was too weak.

Therefore, women who lived either under insurgency or under the rule of the Taliban were completely left out of the consultation process, along with their hopes and fears. And they are not a small group.

According to Frogh, the plan itself has big gaps. It completely lacks a comprehensive assessment of the current state of women’s status - what reforms had already been made to the legislation and what were the most urgent reform needs. Even a description and statistics of the initial situation were missing.

For example, the NAP set a goal to increase the number of women police officers by 10%. “However, in the absence of a baseline, it is impossible to measure an increase”, Frogh says. Compared to the Kosovo NAP - another country recovering from conflict - there is no doubt that Afghanistan’s plan is undetailed and thin.

The NAP remained a ‘wish list of many dreams’, Frogh thinks.

In Resolution 1325, the UN Security Council emphasises the importance of protecting women and girls who are forced to flee from their homes. There are over a million internally displaced people in Afghanistan, but there is no mention of their protection in Afghanistan’s NAP.

It is also justified to ask if it is meaningful to produce a NAP in a country amid a conflict, where hearing and involving citizens is going to be difficult, if not impossible. A Finnish official who participated in the work gives the following answer: “Afghanistan has been in the middle of an ongoing conflict for decades. Was there ever going to be any better time to do this?”

Hasina Safi doesn’t consider the NAP production a failure. “Things were progressing well, but as a women’s activist I know that women face similar problems all over the world.”

Women’s organisations kept campaigning for the programme across the country and running 2-3-day workshops for officials on the topic. “We were doing it because UN Women were able to fund it”, says Wazhma Frogh.



PHOTO: KAISA RAUTAHEIMO

**The Taliban converted the former building of the Ministry of Women's Affairs into a Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.**

Among the donors, the Nordic countries - primarily Finland - remained loyal supporters of NAP by funding its promotion through UN Women. UN Women received a total of 7 million Euros from Finland for their work in Afghanistan in 2013-2022.

However, Finland has been criticised for not taking responsibility for implementing the NAP. "When the NAP was finished, the Finnish embassy practically disappeared from the stage", says Samira Hamidi. She also thinks that Finland like many Western countries made a mistake in relying on UN Women too much. "Apparently, Finland thought they had done enough for the plan for UN Women to finish the project. Finland's role

should have included supervising the implementation after the plan was finished.”

Hamidi feels that UN Women was not able to complete the tasks which they received funding for from the international community. In her opinion, it was partly a question of generally weak organisation, partly of the increasingly strict security regulations of the UN, which made both travelling and even attending meetings more and more difficult. In general, Samir feels that the European countries were relying on UN Women too much.

## **The Taliban threw the NAP away**

When the Taliban marched onto Kabul and seized power in August 2021, one of the first things they did was to abolish the Ministry of Women's Affairs and, in the same building, establish the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, whose task is to monitor women's clothing and movements.

At the same time, they ceased all work on advancing the Women, Peace and Security agenda and overruled any of its achievements: Afghan women are no longer involved in any decision-making in the society. Any official structures that had been set up to secure women's rights and protect victims of violence in the country were dismantled. 26 of the 27 shelters for women have been closed. Under the threat of the Taliban, most women's organisations have stopped operating or wasted away. Almost all known women's rights defenders have fled the country. Wazhma Frogh lives in the USA; Hasina Safi in England; Soraya Sobhrang in Germany; and Samira Hamidi in Sri Lanka.

The office of UN Women in Kabul says that they have frozen all support for NAP 1325. It's not possible to advance the NAP goals in Afghanistan while it's being led by the Taliban. At the moment, UN Women along with other UN organisations focuses on humanitarian aid and offering help directly to women's organisations and women on a local level.

In practice, Afghanistan's NAP has been thrown away. So, was it all in vain, the entire NAP process funded by Finland? “No”, say the interviewed women's rights activists one by one. “The investment in women during the process and the awareness we managed to raise may be undercover now but they haven't disappeared”, says Wazhma Frogh.

Hasina Safi says she has seen how the NAP process boosted Afghan women's confidence across the country. “More and more women found the

courage to speak up in situations where usually only men would speak. The women also started promoting things important to them in their own environment.”

Over the years, European countries and the United States made strong speeches about advancing women’s issues, but many countries did not actually do much. “That’s why I want to thank Finland in particular. Finland enabled us to do the work we carried out in the end”, Hasina Safi says.

The NAP brought people together to discuss matters concerning women and security. This was new and meaningful. “Attitudes changed, the culture changed”, Safi says. “If there’s one thing Western countries can be proud of in Afghanistan, it’s the work they have done for Afghan women and girls”, says Safi.

## **First priority: Direct dialogue**

The Taliban may have buried the goals for NAP 1325, but they live on amongst women. This became clear when, at the end of November 2022, on the anniversary of Resolution 1325, the UN invited 100 Afghan women from around Afghanistan to discuss the current situation of women and the need for changes. Women from different ethnic groups and backgrounds carried out a thorough analysis of the situation, and they ended up writing a list of recommendations to be shared with international actors, the current leadership in Afghanistan, and Afghan women across the country.

Their most prominent wish was that the UN would start organising events where Afghan women could have a direct dialogue with the Taliban. The only way that the country’s leadership can learn about the reality of women is through dialogue. The participants also found it important to open a fast communication channel towards the authorities.

The women also wished that the international community would continue to put pressure on the Taliban to restore women’s rights. In addition, women’s entrepreneurship and financial empowerment need support from the UN as well as from the Afghan leadership. Eliminating violence against women and solving crimes were also added to the list of demands.

However, the Afghan women did not only place demands on others. The last item on the list was assigned to the women: Each Afghan woman must stop supporting cultural practices which are harmful to women and which reinforce inequality and the oppression of women. Because sustainable change starts with the women.

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# FACING A LIFE-THREATENING SPIRAL: WOMAN DOCTORS ARE LEAVING, AND NO NEW ONES ARE COMING

MSIA continues their work supporting women giving birth

**YOUNG AFGHAN** woman Shah Koko, 25, sits down on the floor of a mud hut and lifts the sky-blue burqa off her face. The veil reveals a beautiful young woman with deep-green eyes and noticeably light skin, but her smile reflects exhaustion. Humidity is rising through the cold dirt floor. That's where she is due to give birth in a few months.

In February 2012, Shah Koko, her husband Mohammed, and their six children lived in a muddy refugee camp, filled with tents and mud huts, just outside of Kabul. A couple of years earlier, the poor farmer couple and their children had fled the war from Helmand Province, Southern Afghanistan. In Kabul they were struggling to stay alive on food from relief agencies.

Even though the free maternity hospital was only a stone's throw from the refugee camp, Mohammed had no intention of taking his wife there to give birth. "If there was a man doctor on duty, the visit would be pointless", he said. Mohammed's sister can assist with this birth, too. "Our women know how to handle it."

Even in Kabul they wouldn't go to the hospital because in the conservative Pashtun culture a strange man is not allowed to even look at a woman, let alone touch her. There would have been several maternity clinics in Kabul where the doctor or midwife was guaranteed to be a woman, but Mohammed or his relatives were not aware of those because they were illiterate. Or because they did not care. Men's honour is always a priority. This was partly the reason why, at the time, every two hours a woman died in childbirth in Afghanistan.

Shah Koko was 12 years old when she was married off to her cousin Mohammed who was three years older than her. Since then, she has given birth every 1-2 years. Every time she has pushed out a baby without a midwife's help, only with her young sister-in-law by her side.

Even now, in Afghanistan, many times more women die from complications related to childbirth than in any other Asian country. 20 years of development efforts did not change the situation greatly. The infant mortality rate is also the highest in the area.

One of the safe places for Shah Koko to give birth in Kabul would have been the MSIA clinic, where all doctors and midwives are women. Apart from UN organisations, MSI Reproductive Choices is one of the few international actors who have stayed in Afghanistan to continue their work after the Taliban seized power.

In autumn 2021, Dr Yaqoob Muslih, Country Director for MSI Afghanistan, met with the Taliban representative responsible for health care and told them about the organisation's actions and principles. Eventually, MSIA was allowed to continue their work.

“They have visited our clinics and have a positive approach towards our operations, particularly because we don't employ any men”, Muslih says. One of the Taliban's most important social goals is the complete separation of women's and men's activities. Giving birth to children is still important in their eyes.

All 545 employees of the MSIA - doctors, midwives, nurses, and educators - are women.

## **Prioritising the most vulnerable**

Since 2002, Finland has been funding MSI's operations in Afghanistan with 14 million Euros and the support continues. MSIA specialises in providing Afghan women and girls with counselling and services related to sexual and reproductive health; in practice, this means counselling and tools for birth control; health monitoring during pregnancy; gynaecologist services; and assistance in childbirth and care after childbirth.

MSIA's key target groups are women and girls in the most vulnerable positions and their small children; the poorest and most marginalised women in cities, and women who live in rural areas far away from health services. MSIA is still operating in almost half of the 34 provinces in Afghanistan.

MSIA approaches women through different channels. The organisation owns 11 permanent clinics where women can meet a doctor or nurse. The clinics also have ultrasound devices and laboratories for pregnancy monitoring.



PHOTO: KAISA RAUTAHEIMO

**In 2012, Shah Koko, 25, in the blue burqa, was pregnant with her seventh child. Once again, she would give birth on the floor of their mud hut in Kabul, as her husband refused to take her to the maternity hospital nearby.**

Meanwhile, their mobile clinic vehicles reach the most remote areas where there are few or no health services. Each vehicle has three employees who meet women and girls in their communities. Village elders can invite an MSIA clinic vehicle to come to meet women who in the most conservative regions are not even allowed to leave their homes. In turn, the village's religious leader can announce at the mosque that on a certain date, women can go to the vehicle to meet a midwife or a doctor. Since women's movements have become more and more restricted since the Taliban rose to power, mobile clinics have become even more important.

MSIA's third tool has been the training of health nurses and midwives for different Afghan communities. Finland has been the main donor for these trainings. Each trained couple is responsible for 1,500 families in the area. Previously, local nurses would go round from door to door, but since the Taliban, this practice needed to be changed. Now the nurses' homes are equipped appropriately so that mothers can visit them for a health check.

MSIA also provides so-called satellite services; in practice, they host clinics and offer services in connection with public hospitals. The idea is to make sure that even the poorest individuals have access to high-quality services. At the same time, the MSIA staff is transferring their skills, latest knowledge, and higher quality standards to public hospitals.

One of the most efficient ways to share information about sexual health, menstruation, sex, pregnancies, and birth control with young girls in Afghanistan has been through school and teachers. After the Taliban closed all schools for girls over 12 years old in autumn 2021, adolescent girls were excluded from all health education.

However, many women teachers have stayed in contact with MSIA, who has provided them with more health education materials. The teachers still stay in touch with their former pupils, visit their homes to talk to them and provide them with e.g. period products, which MSIA was able to purchase in large quantities through Finland's funding.

## **Decisions are made by mother-in-law**

Change happens slowly in the deeply patriarchal culture of Afghanistan, and as demonstrated by Shah Koko's life, the availability of services alone is not a solution. That's why training and education are still at the core of the organisation's work. "We regularly train and meet with the community elders and volunteers regarding reproductive health. Community leaders, religious leaders, and their wives have a pivotal role in forwarding that information", says Dr Yaqoob Muslih. He has been leading the organisation's activities since 2012.

Through the village elders and religious leaders, the information regarding childbirth health care reaches the husbands, and wives of the religious leaders reach out to mothers-in-law of young mothers. "We focus on these groups because they are the ones who decide whether the expectant mother and child are taken to the clinic or family planning meetings.

In 2020, the MSIA's work was subjected to international evaluation. The organisation's work was considered very effective: the programme has reached its goals and offered women access to high-quality family planning and reproductive health care.

## **New names, same services**

None of MSIA's services have been changed due to the Taliban takeover; only the terminology has been edited somewhat, says Dr Yaqoob Muslih. "We no longer talk about birth control, but about family planning or pregnancy timing. Instead of sexual health, we talk about maternal health. Instead of talking about support for survivors of gender-based violence we refer to psychological counselling." After the initial fears, the clients also

returned to the clinics just like before. “We have adjusted to the situation”, Muslih describes.

One of the biggest challenges for Afghanistan is now the fact that doctors are leaving the country. In many public hospitals, especially in more remote areas, doctors might only be available for part of the day. Even the most demanding treatments are handled by newly graduated, inexperienced doctors or professionals with insufficient training. Inflammation prevention has already suffered badly in hospitals. This has dire consequences.

There is an ongoing downward spiral, which has extremely dangerous effects on all women in Afghanistan - about 20 million people. Women doctors and their families are fleeing the country because their daughters are not allowed to go to school. At the same time, there will be no new women doctors because girls finish school at 12 years of age and women are not allowed in universities. “If girls are not allowed to go back to school, how are we going to get any more doctors, midwives and teachers? The need to have more of them is already great”, Muslih says.

For MSIA, the emigrating doctors pose a huge challenge. “We trained our employees but now most of them are leaving. We do recruit new ones to replace them, but this takes time”, Muslih says.

The *mahram* rule imposed by the Taliban, i.e. a mandatory male chaperone to a woman, makes it difficult to hire new employees. The organisation recently tried to hire a new midwife in the southern province of Helmand. When they finally found a suitable candidate after a long search and her family gave their permission for her to work, it turned out that there was no male *mahram* in the family who would take the midwife to work and back. All the men in the family were working elsewhere. The midwife position remained unfilled, and women in the area couldn't get vitally important help.

## **Hunger and domestic violence are evident**

On an October day in 2022 in the city of Mazar-e Sharif, Dr Adila has already met with several patients before it's even midday. She says that most women come to see her because of pregnancy complications, but these days many also suffer from pneumonia. Women's general health has deteriorated. Medication is too expensive for many.

In addition, women showing serious psychological symptoms is becoming a major concern. “Domestic violence has increased massively, and it's

more serious than before. Most women who come here complain about their husband being violent”, says Dr Adila.

The situation in homes has escalated to the extreme. The country’s economy has all but collapsed and, consequently, men are losing their jobs. In turn, many women have lost their financial support. At the same time, much of the country is suffering under severe prolonged droughts. Large families are being crammed inside small homes, everyone is upset and anxious. Men beat women, women yell at their children and beat them, describes Dr Adila.

When the families are low on money and fighting hunger, in the patriarchal culture, any remaining food and the healthiest parts are given to men and boys. More and more MSIA clinics are resonating with the same message: there is not enough food for mothers and children. Mothers who come to the clinic to give birth are sometimes so weak they can’t even walk. They are not able to breastfeed the new-born either.

Dr Muslih describes his recent visit to the Samangan province in Northern Afghanistan. There was a mother with children at the clinic. He thought she looked around 35, but when Dr Muslih asked the mother how old she was, she said she was 15 years old. “Lack of food combined with too short birth intervals makes the women’s situation particularly vulnerable.”

That’s why MSIA has started a new project with UNICEF. Supplementary nutrition is offered to expectant mothers and those who have given birth, and new-born babies receive breast milk formula at the clinics.

The international community continues providing massive food aid across the country to meet the enormous need. In late 2022, the UN estimated that 97% of Afghan households are food insecure; and 100% of women-led households.

24.4 million people need humanitarian aid; 13.1 million of them are children. 1.1 million children under the age of 5 are suffering from severe acute malnutrition. The funds allocated to the UN Assistance Mission are not sufficient for the winter. Collaboration with the Taliban is not making aid distribution any easier either.

## **Destructive spiral ahead**

Sultana, a gynaecologist working at the Kabul clinic, also says that the number of clients is growing rapidly. “I’m the only doctor there, and on a normal day there are 60-70 clients, sometimes more than a hundred. But



PHOTO: KAISA RAUTAHEIMO

**Maternal and child mortality rates in Afghanistan remain among the highest in Asia.**

I am not exhausted because I feel that what I do is helping Afghan women”, she says.

MSIA has three permanent clinics in Kabul and two satellite clinics. There is a small fee to visit the clinic, but those who cannot even afford that can get the service for free.

Most Sultana’s clients are seeking help for pregnancy complications or postnatal issues. Intra-uterine devices are in high demand. Gynaecological infections are also common. But just like in Mazar, domestic violence is also visibly increasing in Kabul. “The economic situation is so bad that psycho-social problems have increased.”

When problems started emerging, MSIA established a psycho-social unit in the Kabul clinic in spring 2022 where women are welcome to talk about their problems. More and more very young girls are visiting the unit after having been married off to older men due to their families’ money trou-

bles. The situation for these girls, who are pregnant with their first child, is often extremely difficult. Their life is overwhelmed with violence, oppression, and hopelessness. Once they stop crying enough to talk, they have a thorough discussion with the staff. Afterwards, the clinical psychologist will ask the girl's mother-in-law to come to visit. If this is not possible, they speak to the husband over the phone.

The family often reacts negatively to being contacted, because they don't want to discuss their problems with outsiders. But a skilled employee knows, for example, how to appeal to the well-being of the unborn child, and promote the mother's well-being that way, Sultana says.

"We wish that families would visit the clinic before they arrange a wedding, so these issues could be prevented. But that rarely happens."

Starting to give birth at a very young age is particularly dangerous to the mother, and right now, that is increasing in Afghanistan. More and more often the news also reports on suicides by young girls and women.

Sultana's greatest wish is that schools would be quickly reopened to girls. If the girls were at school they would know their rights better, and after finishing school they would be mature enough to decide whether they want to get married. After finishing school, they would be in a much better position to negotiate their situation. They would be able to offer their families a different idea of the future, not just a marriage arranged by their parents.

During the 20 years, international efforts were able to reduce maternal and child mortality in Afghanistan. Now, these achievements are about to go to waste. Yaqoob Muslih thinks it's clear that maternal and child mortality rates are already going up. In late 2022, five provinces - Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Nuristan, and Sar-e Pol - have already reported that they don't have any woman doctors left. Over a million women and girls live in these provinces alone.

"If there's no woman doctor or midwife available the family won't take the mother to the hospital to give birth. It is clear that mortality is increasing day by day", Muslih says.

As in many sectors of society, healthcare is also crippled by the Taliban's lack of capacity. The Taliban's understanding of matters related to childbirth or maternal health is thin or non-existent. Some of the local leaders acknowledge this, so they listen and strive to understand what the goals of organisations like MSIA are - and eventually give their support. On the other hand, some Taliban leaders require explaining over and over, and they still might not get the message. Some Taliban leaders consider all

organisations that receive international funding just an opportunity to direct the money flow to goals that they prefer, or to get their relatives or supporters on the organisation's payroll.

## **Sultana's choice**

Dr Sultana herself faces a difficult situation. Her daughters are 13 and 15 years old. When Sultana heads out to work at the clinic and her son goes to school, her daughters stay inside at home. "This makes me really sad. They both want to study to become a doctor like me, but now all we can offer them is a chance to learn English and a few courses online. But it's not the same as real education."

For the same reason, many women doctors have already left the country. Families are willing to leave everything behind to make sure that their daughters will receive an education, too. Sultana has thoroughly considered the matter.

"I don't see any other choice but to stay. I have studied here and invested a lot in my work, and above all, I want to contribute to benefit Afghan women."

Sultana hopes that the international community will continue to negotiate with the Taliban to restore equal rights for all. "It is best to continue the dialogue with them. I hope they will change and start understanding what the people want. Regardless of the Taliban ideology, they are also all kinds of people who have different ideas - and still, they are Afghans."

Sultana also has a clear message to the decision-makers in Finland. "We are very grateful for the help we have received from Finland. Now, above all, we hope that you don't forget about the women in Afghanistan; please stand with them. Afghan women have been the biggest victims of all of this, both in the war and in the past. Please, be our voice out there."

## **Sources:**

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# ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The Family Federation of Finland has been collaborating with the MSIA in Afghanistan since 2019. Their goal is to advance the sexual rights of people with disabilities by empowering people with disabilities, educating health-care professionals, and influencing general attitudes.

At least 1 in every 5 Afghan households has a family member with disabilities. In particular, girls and women with disabilities are subjected to violence, harassment, discrimination, and blatant violations of sexual rights.

The regional project involves organisations from neighbouring countries; Tajikistan and Nepal. The Threshold Association is also involved in the work. The project is due to continue until 2025.

Disability work in Afghanistan is challenging but the organisation reports promising results. Nearly 14,000 people with disabilities have received family planning services. In 2022, 33 pairs with disabilities trained to become community healthcare workers, and 754 members of the Afghanistan foundation for the visually impaired have been introduced to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of people with disabilities.

The SRHR Guide has been printed and distributed to approximately 30,000 people. MSIA staff have also received training. Services for people with disabilities are offered through permanent clinics, remote services, and mobile clinics in the regions of Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat.

# THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION'S RELENTLESS BATTLE FOR WOMEN

AIHRC - Afghanistan Independent  
Human Rights Commission

**IN FEBRUARY** 2002, the first snow has turned the muddy streets of Kabul white overnight. Dr Sima Samar, wearing a brown cardigan and jeans, welcomes a Finnish journalist to her home. Only a couple of months earlier, Samar had been appointed Minister of Women's Affairs in the new temporary government, but now she has no more ministry, office, or a desk.

Samar was sitting on her sofa, holding some papers and wearing a small black scarf around her shoulders. She wrapped it around her head just for the photos. Samar wouldn't wear a burqa even when she went into town. She also announced that she wouldn't remain a symbolic minister but that she was demanding real changes in the country to improve the status of women - and she needed money for it. "In this battle, however, it is necessary to be very careful," she added.

Sima Samar was outspoken, and that didn't please everyone. After repeated death threats, Samar was forced to leave her minister position already in summer 2002, but she took on another task which was at least equally demanding and dangerous: Chair of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, AIHRC. Over the next 17 years, Samar built a strong and independent commission who criticised both the Afghan government and the American troops for trampling on the human rights of Afghans and for arbitrary treatment of prisoners. The Commission also pushed forward the rights of Afghan women both in legislation and in the conservative society as a whole.

"Women must be strong now", said Sima Samar in her home already in 2002. "If the traditions are poor, we must get rid of them. A culture that doesn't support humanity is not worth preserving."

Sima Samar has also experienced the reality of human rights violations herself. Samar, born in 1958, belongs to the Hazara ethnic group, and in the late 1970s she was studying to be a doctor at Kabul University. One night in 1978, a group of men showed up at the door of Sima Samar and



**Women queuing for food aid in Kabul in 2021.**

her husband, a physics professor at Kabul University. They walked him out, and Sima Samar never saw her husband again. With her young son, Samar fled to Pakistan where she worked as a doctor helping Afghan girls and women like herself for almost 20 years.

Already in 2002, Finland started funding AIHRC. Over two decades, Finland supported the Commission's work by 10.8 million Euros, thus becoming one of its most important donors. Other Nordic countries and the Netherlands have also been important supporters of the AIHRC.

"Support from Finland and the other donors was highly valuable to our work. It's good to remember where we started: During the Taliban's first reign it was illegal to even use the word 'human rights,'" Samar says.

## **Mission enshrined in the Constitution**

The obligation to establish the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission dates back to December 2001, when the international community gathered in Bonn, Germany to pave the way for an Afghan republic free from terrorism, oppression, and drug trafficking. The temporary

government of 30 people included two women - and Sima Samar was one of them.

When the AIHRC started working in 2002, the state of human rights in Afghanistan was poor. More than 20 years of fighting had created a culture of violence where individual rights were almost non-existent. During their five years in power, the Taliban had been amputating hands of thieves, hanging murderers, and stoning to death women who were suspected of infidelity. People were getting flogged for even minor offences.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the country's new interim government - backed by the Western countries - considered democracy, the rule of law, peace, and human rights as their guiding principles - albeit largely at the insistence of foreign actors. The Human Rights Commission was tasked with eradicating the culture of arbitrariness and violence from the country.

In the AIHRC's first activity report in 2002, Sima Samar bluntly described the human rights situation in the country. As the country's new army and police were in the making, the warlords continued to hold Kabul in fear. Homes and aid organisations were looted, aid operations were attacked, people disappeared and were sold. Internally displaced people fleeing the fighting were particularly vulnerable.

The warlords also maintained their own prisons in several provinces. During its first year of operation, the AIHRC managed to free 400 prisoners who had neither been charged nor convicted of any crime.

Ordinary Afghans discovered the Commission surprisingly quickly. Already during its first year of operation, the Commission received more than 1,300 complaints of human rights violations. Over the years, the number of human rights complaints submitted to the Commission has reached several thousand every year.

In 2004, the role of the Human Rights Commission was also enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The Commission's main role was to monitor and report human rights violations, promote the implementation of human rights, and bring reported violations to the attention of the formal judicial system.

The AIHRC was growing rapidly. By 2010, the Commission was employing 335 people, 60 of whom were women. 14 regional offices in 34 provinces were monitoring and receiving human rights complaints and helping people to escalate their complaints to the formal judicial system. At the Kabul headquarters, the Commission's leadership and the about ten Commissioners were monitoring the implementation of hu-

man rights in various sectors of society and advising the government on how to promote them.

Many countries around the world have similar independent human rights commissions. Some are state-run, others run by NGOs. Regional human rights bodies, such as the Council of Europe, also exert considerable influence.

## **Harmful old traditions**

Some of the AIHRC's key tools were getting reliable information and promoting human rights. During their 19 years of operation, the Commission published a total of 65 reports on the human rights situation in Afghanistan. In addition to annual reports, the Commission commissioned special reports on violence against women, civilian victims of conflict, use of torture, the situation of repatriates, implementation of children's rights, living conditions of people with disabilities, and conditions in detention centres and prisons. The researched information was distributed to the provinces via radio, TV, and newspapers. The understanding of what human rights meant was slowly beginning to take up space.

The AIHRC commissioned several special reports on the situation of women, including on the rights of widows, the role of young women within the family, women's suicide, the sale and trafficking of women and children, sexual violence, and honour killings.

The AIHRC listened to women's experiences of human rights violations and passed them on to the judicial system. In 2018 alone, the Commission received a total of 4,340 complaints about violence against women.

The 2007-2008 annual report identified violence against women and child marriages as the country's most pressing human rights violations. In the law, the minimum age for marriage was 16 for girls and 18 for boys, and marriage agreements were not allowed without the consent of the parties. In practice, significantly younger children were regularly being married off, and their consent was rarely asked.

The AIHRC also raised questions about sensitive practices deeply rooted in the Afghan culture. The most serious of these were the honour killings of girls and young women. Between 2011 and 2013, 243 honour killings were reported in Afghanistan. The actual figure is estimated to be significantly higher. The reason for this is a strong belief that the honour of a family depended on the sexual morality of its women, and that lost honour could only be restored by punishing or killing the woman suspected of immo-

rality, and possibly her supposed partner. However, in the Afghan judicial system, the perpetrator of an honour killing was not convicted of murder; instead, he was sentenced to a maximum of two years in prison. It was only after the 2018 reform of the Criminal Code that honour killings would be considered ordinary murders.

The AIHRC was also fighting against the widespread use of virginity testing in the country. The tests were being carried out by families, but also routinely by the police, for example during criminal investigations. According to the AIHRC, the humiliating and non-consensual tests were a flagrant violation of women's autonomy.

Furthermore, the traditions of *baad* or *bacha bazi* were leading to serious human rights violations of girls' and boys' rights, including sexual violence. In the *baad* tradition, the family of a man who has committed a crime hands over one of their girls or women to the victim's family as a servant or wife as compensation for the crime or as a gesture of reconciliation. This is to avoid a spiral of revenge. It is common that a girl who was handed over as *baad* is abused, starved and, forced to give birth too young and too often. Many girls end up paying for their brother's crime with their life. The *baad* is often decided by a *jirga*, or village council, made up of the village elders; i.e. the oldest and most influential men in the village.

*Bacha bazi* refers to a form of sexual slavery in which wealthy older men buy young boys for entertainment. The AIHRC, and in particular Commissioner Hamida Barmaki, Professor of Law, were determined to ban this deeply rooted tradition. Barmaki, her spouse and their four children were killed in a Taliban suicide attack in Kabul in 2011.

The AIHRC, together with active women's organisations, were pushing for changes to the law so that both *baad* and *bacha bazi* became included in the Criminal Code. Despite the law, harmful traditions often continued with the support of local *jirgas* - partly because national laws were poorly known, partly because especially *bacha bazi* was practised by powerful local commanders of the various militias.

The AIHRC reports were also trying to unravel the factors behind violence and find ways in which these human rights violations could be addressed. The AIHRC found that human rights violations were the result of general insecurity and the ongoing conflict, as well as a failure by the authorities to respect and enforce the laws. Perpetrators of human rights violations were repeatedly left unpunished. People were also unaware of their human rights. Poor and illiterate people were particularly vulnerable to serious human rights violations - and most of them were women.

The perpetrator was often the victim's own family member, but the feminist view is that there is no use making the distinction between private and public violence. The climate of lawlessness and violence during conflict also increases the risk of domestic and individual violence. The weapons that men receive from militias for combat are often the same ones used in domestic violence.

The Afghan society was so deeply militarised that even in school maths could be practised by adding up corpses, burnt villages, or Kalashnikovs.

## **Fighting torture with education**

With financial support from Finland, the AIHRC was training local human rights activists and organisations, who in turn were able to influence local decision-makers. The Commission also launched a large number of different types of training and awareness-raising projects aimed at raising women's awareness of their rights, including the right to live without violence. They also explored alternative ways of dealing with conflict situations. The programmes were implemented in schools, universities, teacher training colleges, and military training centres.

In its first 13 years of operation, the AIHRC recorded that it had provided human rights training to half a million people. It produced 2,300 hours of radio and TV programmes on human rights. 27,400 cases of human rights violations and 30,000 acts of violence against women were recorded and assessed by the AIHRC offices. The Commission carried out 15,860 visits to detention centres, resulting in the release of 5,650 illegally detained people. 50 private prisons were closed, and the victims from 92 mass graves were identified.

The AIHRC's efforts to promote human rights were paying off. One of the most important early achievements was the inclusion of equal rights for women and men in the country's constitution in 2004. Afghan women's organisations, the AIHRC, and Sima Samar herself were fighting throughout the constitution-making process to get the word 'woman' written into Afghanistan's constitution for the first time in the country's history.

Another key achievement, according to Sima Samar, was that torture was significantly reduced through police training and more effective reporting. "Before, anyone who was arrested would be tortured - whether it was a young boy stealing a loaf of bread or a violent rapist. Very often the victim of rape, a woman, was also tortured."

Samar says that at the end of the 2010s, there were around 30,000 prisoners in the prisons of Afghanistan. “Among these, only about 80 cases of torture were reported. So, the change was really big.”

For years, Sima Samar was arguing both publicly and privately with the country’s presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani on several key human rights issues. One of them was the death penalty, which was being handed out based on both criminal law and Sharia law. The death penalty could be imposed primarily for committing an act of terrorism or murder, but, under Sharia law, also for rape, homosexual acts or extramarital sex. By the end of 2010, 700 death sentences had been dealt.

There was strong international pressure to abolish the death penalty, but as the death penalty had clear support among the general public, executions continued - albeit infrequently.

## Finland was counting on work

International actors had strong confidence in the AIHRC’s work. In the classification by the International Coordinating Committee on Human Rights Commissions, it achieved the highest possible category – A-status. “In a country where the rule of law is weak, I think it was quite an achievement,” says Sima Samar.

But the Commission’s independence was not obvious. Leading politicians were seeking to use their power to appoint Commissioners in a way that occasionally undermined the credibility of the AIHRC. For several years in the late 2010s, the Commission’s work was overshadowed and hampered by a prolonged battle over the appointment of Commissioners.



*“We were criticising the Americans’ activities and they didn’t like it.”*

**Sima Samar**, Chair of AIHRC

Despite the storms, according to evaluations on the AIHRC, the organisation has advanced the human rights situation in the country. Finland was particularly appreciative of the fact that the AIHRC were also seeking to promote the rights of children and people with disabilities.

Finland considered the AIHRC's work to be nationally and internationally respected and the organisation was seen as a visible and well-functioning human rights institution, trusted by its partners. Apart from Finland, the AIHRC was supported by other Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, and Switzerland. The United Nations Assistance Mission In Afghanistan, UNAMA, and UN Women also supported the work in various ways.

Finland was particularly welcoming towards the reform work that was launched in the AIHRC in the late 2010s. They started shifting from sharing information and raising awareness towards more concrete work: more and more complaints were being taken in and forwarded to the formal judicial system - a system that Finland, through EUPOL's work, was trying to develop further. Finland also regularly participated in joint meetings of the AIHRC's international donors, and interaction with the AIHRC's management was considered positive.

Sima Samar appreciates the support from the Nordic+ group (Nordic countries and the Netherlands), but regrets that there was little financial support from big powers such as the US and the UK.

“We were criticising their activities and they didn't like it. For nearly seven years we were fighting to get access to inspect American detention centres, for example, and even then they were not really giving us free access. We were also very critical of American troops raiding people's homes in the middle of the night.”

Sima Samar found it extremely frustrating that the terms of office of international force commanders were very short, sometimes only six months. “When one commander left, they left no information for their successor. So, every time we had to start the work all over again, for example with the prison visits.”

The same short-sightedness and lack of strategies on the part of international donors characterised all development work in Afghanistan, according to Samar. It also disabled efforts to promote the status of women.

## **A raped girl will no longer be murdered**

In 2019, Sima Samar was eventually succeeded as AIHRC Chair by Sharzad Akbar, a human rights activist with a Master's degree in Philosophy from Oxford University who led the Open Society Foundation's work in Afghanistan.

Shaharзад Akbar (b. 1987) also thinks that the worst donors were the United States and the UK - they both had huge amounts of money but very little time or motivation to think about how to spend it. "The bigger the donor, the less effective they were, in a way, because they were just throwing money at problems," says Akbar. "In reality, it was money that caused the biggest problems."

Akbar thinks that the AIHRC made a huge contribution to human rights thinking in Afghanistan. "We had a lot of discussions that we never really had before: What does violence against women mean; how do we define it within the context of Afghanistan; how do we define it in the Islamic context?"

Akbar says that the discussion regarding violence against women has changed a lot in the last 20 years. "There is a high sensitivity towards violence against women, both among women and in the legal community. And although the situation is bleak right now, the Taliban will not last forever. The seeds have been sown and they will prevail, even if the laws are thrown away."

The moments of change culminated around major legislative changes. When the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) was being formulated in Afghanistan, the debate around it had almost the whole society reflecting on the issue. "People were arguing about it on radio, television, and in their own communities. Thanks to the law, violence against women became an issue for the first time. People were taking a look around and started to take a stand on what they saw."

The law was blocked in parliament by ultra-conservative MPs, but it was passed by presidential decree in 2009. However, understanding of the law remained incomplete. "Because the security situation in the whole country was deteriorating rapidly around that time, we couldn't get out of Kabul to communicate about the law in the provinces," says Akbar.

The deteriorating security situation affected all of the Commission's work. The further the Taliban advanced, the less of the population the AIHRC was able to serve. They were able to carry on working only in some provinces, and even then, mainly in the provincial capitals.

But Shaharзад Akbar says the biggest change in Afghanistan was in what people wanted or demanded from society. "When I was a little girl, if a woman was raped by a powerful man in the village, the family would try to kill their daughter, because she brought shame to their family." But already in the 2010s, a significant number of fathers would come with their daughters to the AIHRC office to demand justice for them.



PHOTO: KAISA RAUTAHEIMO

**In 2012, a woman wearing a burqa was the exception in Kabul. After gaining power in 2021, the Taliban imposed strict dress codes on women.**

“The weak institutions in Afghanistan may not yet have been able to deliver justice to them, but something changed in the fathers’ minds; they no longer saw the situation as daughter’s fault for getting raped, and even if they did, they were no longer trying to kill her. The family felt that the situation was unjust and that something had to be done about it,” says Akbar, describing the change. “In other words, the Afghans themselves started demanding new solutions from society.”

A similar change has happened regarding the right to education. Akbar describes how, when her father was a child, residents of his home village in northern Afghanistan petitioned the authorities not to open a school in the village. The villagers feared that the school would turn their sons into heretics and that they would no longer want to work on the farms. The boys’ job was to look after the cattle, not sit in school.

“Two years ago in 2020, in that same village, people were supplementing the salaries of women teachers so that also their daughters could go to school.”

The change is now evident, with the Taliban again banning girls from secondary schools. “First time the Taliban got into power, there was hardly any resistance. Now there are strong demands and intense pressure for girls’ right to go to school.”

However, women's right to work, for example, is not being defended in the same way. Not yet, anyway. In Akbar's view, the whole Afghan society and legislation should have been built with more persistence. "We made a lot of excellent laws very quickly and signed some great agreements, but we didn't spend enough time socialising people with these changes."



*"Finland has supported us and been supportive of women's rights. Now we are calling on you: do more."*

**Shabnam Salehi**, AIHRC Commissioner

International donors demanded rapid, measurable results. As a result, both the country's leadership and organisations learned to think and act according to the donors' wishes - and not necessarily according to what was most important for the Afghan society. "The state received its revenue from foreign donors rather than their citizens through taxes, so ordinary Afghans didn't really care about how the money was spent. The power relationship was so imbalanced - we Afghans tried to guess where the donors' priorities lay and work in accordance to them."

Particularly long-term planning and development work suffered, but the demanding and often dangerous process of implementing decisions in the provinces was also left undone. As the religious leaders in the provinces were not systematically involved in the process of change either, the laws and regulations formulated in the capital remained unknown to the vast majority.

## War crimes still unsolved

In 2022, the Afghan women are angry. And so is Shaharзад Akbar, who lives in exile in London. She believes it is crucial that Western countries also look in the mirror and reflect on what they should have done differently. She thinks it was a grave mistake to involve the warlords in decision-making when the Taliban was ousted in 2001.

"When the Afghans started formulating the constitution, they thought that these warlords should not be allowed in these discussions. But when they saw that the ambassadors were taking pictures with the warlords in the cabinet, they thought: Okay, Afghans think about survival, so you need to look at the balance, and be in close relationship with the guys who

were in power, because otherwise they might come and take away your daughter and kill your son.”

“So you Westerners came to our country where horrific things had happened. You decided that we should just forget about the past. And then subsequently you were empowering the warlords, your soldiers were bombing ordinary people, invading their homes and killing them in the name of the fight against the Taliban. And you thought that this is fine, that we can live with that. But it was precisely this that turned people’s minds against the West,” Akbar says.

The AIHRC was the only institution in Afghanistan that sought to investigate and bring forward war crimes committed between 1978 and 2001. In 2005, they produced a comprehensive report named *A Call For Justice*.

It found that 70% of Afghans considered themselves or their families to have been victims of either a human rights violation or a war crime between 1978 and 2001. Everybody committed crimes: the Russians, the *Mujahideen*, the Taliban, and the armed groups that emerged from various ethnic groups and tribes. Most interviewees wished for reconciliation, but to them it did not mean forgetting or forgiving. In their view, the perpetrators should still have been brought to justice or at least removed from positions of power.

The report never led to any consequences, because President Karzai refused to publish it. Instead, in 2008, the country’s parliament approved a full amnesty for acts and crimes committed during the previous 30 years. President Karzai gave his blessing to this law.

## **Human rights defenders in exile**

In October 2022, twenty years after we first met, Sima Samar answers a Zoom call in New York. She has just flown in from Germany to the US the night before, to give a speech - and she will be back in Germany in a few days. Sima Samar is a refugee, once again.

In the eyes of the Taliban, who have seized power, talking about human rights is frivolous and dangerous. They terminated the Human Rights Commission in May 2022. The Taliban announced that the AIHRC is no longer needed as the human rights situation is better than ever.

Now Sima Samar travels around talking about the situation of Afghan women at the UN and in EU decision-making bodies, trying to make

world leaders understand that now, more than ever, Afghan women need support from the world.

Shabnam Salehi, who lives in Canada, is also concerned about continuing the human rights monitoring. “The Taliban does not want any human rights monitoring happening in Afghanistan. Moreover, all reports of a serious deterioration in the human rights situation are unequivocally denied by the Taliban,” says Salehi, AIHRC Commissioner for Women’s Rights.

“Most of the AIHRC staff have left, but we still have 60 ordinary people in the country monitoring the human rights situation in their regions. We keep in regular contact with them and pass on the information,” says Salehi.

Information on the human rights situation is also collected by UNAMA, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. They will continue to monitor and publish summaries. UNAMA has repeatedly highlighted human rights violations committed by the Taliban. They have reported on illegal killings, arbitrary arrests, imprisonment, torture, and maltreatment. In particular, the restriction of women’s fundamental rights has been repeatedly highlighted.

Salehi has some reservations about UNAMA’s reporting. “The picture that their reports paint is not the whole truth. I’m afraid only a small proportion of human rights violations are coming to light. There is a huge amount of violence in the country that goes unreported.”

Sima Samar feels the same way. “UNAMA’s reports are better than nothing, but if we compare the number of human rights violations emerging on Afghan social media and UNAMA’s reports, their reporting is insufficient.”

“And people don’t necessarily have the courage to talk about what’s happening anymore, even on social media. Unfortunately, the sophisticated intelligence equipment previously brought in for the Afghan police is now in the hands of the Taliban,” says Samar.

However, small grass-roots NGOs are still active in Afghanistan - such as WPSO (Women & Peace Studies Organization), whose members across the country are sharing information on human rights violations. Every two weeks, the WPSO publishes their own comprehensive reports covering these.

## **Arrestees are disappearing**

In late October 2022, Richard Bennett, OHCHR’s Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, reported on his discussions with a wide range of actors in

Afghanistan, including the Taliban. In his final report he expresses “grave concern about the staggering regression in women and girls’ enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights since the Taliban took power.”

“In no other country have women and girls so rapidly disappeared from all spheres of public life, nor are they as disadvantaged in every aspect of their lives,” Bennett writes.

The picture that various sources paint of the human rights situation in Afghanistan is very bleak. This is due to both political factors and the collapse of the country’s economy. The Taliban are arbitrarily arresting and imprisoning people - including many women human rights defenders, women journalists and peaceful women activists. Many of those arrested have disappeared permanently. “I’ve been told that never before have such torture methods been used in prisons as today,” says Salehi.

Women’s fundamental rights have been effectively abolished, contrary to the teachings of Islam. The economic plight of families has brought back bad old practices. Very young girls are sold as wives to provide food for the family. Many men would also rather marry off their daughter to an acquaintance, even an elderly one, than risk her being forced to marry a Taliban fighter. Excluding girls from schools specifically exposes them to forced marriage. Human rights and aid organisations in Afghanistan say that forced marriages have increased dramatically since the Taliban took power.

In summer 2022, Shabnam Salehi spoke at the UN Human Rights Council debate on Afghanistan about the situation in her home country. She tells straight out how disappointed she is with the actions of the UN Human Rights Council. “There were two in-depth debates on Afghanistan at the UNHRC over the summer, but I have not seen any action on them.”

Finland is a member of the UNHRC and participated in the Afghanistan talks in summer 2022.

With the AIHRC no longer able to carry out comprehensive human rights monitoring in Afghanistan, Salehi now considers it crucial that a team should be established, with the support of the UNHRC, with a mandate to monitor the human rights situation across Afghanistan - and to pay particular attention to the situation of women.

Only when comprehensive enough facts are collected about the human rights situation in the country can a credible dialogue take place with the Taliban. Here she is appealing directly to Finland.

“Finland has supported us and been particularly supportive of women’s rights. Now we are calling on you: do more. What we need now is concrete action. If Finland brings the situation of Afghan women to the foreground in all UNHRC debates and demands real action, it will make a difference.”

Shaharзад Akbar shares the same message. “I would like to see more activism on a higher level in the Finnish government in terms of women’s rights in Afghanistan. The countries that are claiming to have a Feminist Foreign Policy or are talking about it all need to sit down together and think about what your foreign policy means in Afghanistan: what can be achieved, what cannot. Every single voice counts now.”

Highlight: “Finland has supported us and been supportive of women’s rights. Now we are calling on you: do more.” Shabnam Salehi, Commissioner in the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

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# PROFESSIONAL SKILLS TRAINING FOR WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN AFGHANISTAN

“Learning Together” project for journalists

**FIND THE** right angle, focus the TV camera towards the studio table, press the red *rec* button. The broadcast was ready to start. A group of Afghan women journalists had each found their place in front of Jahan’s TV studio equipment in Kabul in autumn 2016. Some sat in front of microphones around a round interview table. Others were in the control room at a wide control table adjusting the sound, camera alteration, and light. And then there were the two lucky ones who got to use TV cameras for the first time.

“The atmosphere was palpably excited. Some of the women journalists had come to Kabul from remote provinces, and this was the fulfilment of their dreams: being able to practise in a real TV studio,” recalls Shakiba Adil, a journalist and educator living in Finland. For some, the studio internship was even a turning point in their lives: two of the students ended up working in television, partly because of the inspiration they got in the studio.

One of Finland’s small-scale NGO projects was training Afghan women journalists. The idea for cooperation was born in 2007, when Eeva Koskinen, Acting Executive Director of Unifem Finland, met Shafiqah Habibi, President of an Afghan women’s organisation in Kabul. Habibi, who is very influential, asked directly whether Finland, known for its high-quality education, and its women journalists, could start organising further professional education for Afghan women journalists.

There was a great need for it. Afghan universities were teaching journalism, but the education was focused on a theoretical level and there was no introduction to practical journalism. In a media field dominated by men, women journalists were in a particularly weak position.

Eeva Koskinen was also president of Women Journalists in Finland at the time, and the association was quick to take on the challenge. Many Finnish women journalists were interested in Afghanistan, and in 2009, a nine-year project “Learning Together” was launched, during which 22 Finnish women journalists provided training to their Afghan colleagues. Over the years, more



In autumn 2016, women journalists got a chance to practice using a real television camera at a studio in Kabul.

than 500 women participated in the courses. Over the 9 years, the project received a total of 654,000 Euros from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

In most years, there were two courses - one in spring and one in autumn. When the security situation allowed, courses were held not only in Kabul but also in other areas of the country, mostly in Mazar-e Sharif, Bamiyan and Herat.

In Bamiyan - the same city where in the 1990s the Taliban had destroyed the world-famous 1,400-year-old Buddha statues - the course was attended by Aisha, a young journalist just starting her career. As her parents did not approve of her daughter's career choice, she had studied natural sciences in Kabul. But journalism won the day. "For me, those courses were invaluable because I had already started working as a radio journalist, even though I didn't know much about journalism," says Aisha.

"Perhaps the most important thing for me was getting to know other women journalists from all over the country. My professional self-esteem was low, perhaps because of my family's opposition, but after hearing that others had had similar experiences, I felt much stronger," Aisha says on the phone from Bamiyan.

## **Bolder and more competent journalists**

News work, photojournalism, documentary making, and using the internet to write articles. These and many other topics were included in the training, from the very first course in Kabul in 2009. Ethical guidelines for journalists and the role of the media in democracy were also regularly highlighted.

In addition to lectures, Afghan politicians, NGO activists, Finnish ambassadors and senior UN representatives were invited to speak at the courses and explain society from their perspective. And after each speech, the women journalists had a chance to practise both how to participate in a press conference and how to conduct quick interviews.

In particular, the meetings with women decision-makers and activists in Afghanistan were mutually beneficial. The course provided an opportunity for informal discussions on issues that concerned all Afghan women. Many women journalists were able to network in a way that encouraged them to stay in touch with the decision-makers.

Visits to the Afghan parliament, ministries, and media house opened doors for the women journalists that would have been difficult for them

to open on their own. On the other hand, the women's shelter and MSIA's reproductive health clinic showed a different reality.

Rula Ghani, President Ashraf Ghani's wife, invited the students to visit the Presidential Palace. They were also invited to visit the country's Prime Minister Abdullah Abdullah. The women journalists visited the Finnish Embassy's receptions on several occasions. These high-level visits improved both the profile of the course and the professional self-esteem of the participants.

In addition to professional skills, encouraging and empowering women journalists were the central goals of the course. Afghan society considers women journalists a dubious bunch: women in the public eye, asking critical questions, are the complete opposite of the feminine ideal of the conservative society - a humble woman who respects men.

The same alienation was present in the newsrooms. Women and their professional skills were not trusted, so men were preferred at hunting for news. In general, Afghan women were much more restricted as journalists than men. Women also reported having to work significantly harder to be taken seriously, but they were getting paid less for their work.

Many women journalists chose to resolve the issue by starting their own radio or TV channel. It was relatively easy to receive funding for it from international actors. Especially in rural areas, it was the radio that reached illiterate women much better than the print media, and talking about issues important to women on the airwaves felt like a part of Afghan culture. Women's programmes were a natural way to talk about all aspects of a woman's life, and on the airwaves the presenters were able to discuss even sensitive topics. And they often did.

## **Visibility for the Finnish agenda**

The journalist training sessions highlighted themes that Finland was also trying to promote more widely in the country. Afghan Women's Networking Director Samira Hamidi gave the women journalists a lecture on what UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is and what its implementation in Afghanistan meant in practice. Most of the training sessions circled back to the themes of NAP 1325 and their media coverage. The participants were also interested in discussing how women could get involved in peace talks with the Taliban - and how to report on the talks. Most of the course participants had first-hand experience of living under Taliban rule, so they knew what a woman's place was in the eyes of the Taliban.

Pia Stjernvall, the Finnish Head of Mission of EUPOL, gave a presentation on EUPOL's activities, providing an impressive example of how a woman can rise to the top on her own merits. The Finnish police came to talk about the training of Afghan police officers and the tools they were using to tackle violence against women.

The more courses were held, the more people wanted to participate. 20 to 30 students were able to actively participate in the group work. However, for example, the course in Kabul in 2013 already attracted 52 women journalists.

The need for further education was particularly high for journalists in the provinces. This is why, for many years, courses were also held outside of Kabul.

When the cooperation started, the project partner AWJU (Afghan Women Journalist's Union) was only getting established. As a result of the educational cooperation, AWJU grew from 200 to 500 members, and in 2012 it was registered as an independent association. The organisation also opened offices in 15 provinces and started taking an active public stand for freedom of expression and reacting to acts of violence against women journalists.

Early on, the trainers and AWJU identified a group of particularly motivated, courageous and skilled women journalists among the course participants, who had potential to become trainers. These eight Afghan women ran the first "Learning Together" courses in July 2016 in Mazar-e Sharif and Jowzjan and in November 2016 in Herat and Parwan. The courses in these provinces were attended by 88 women journalists from the surrounding regions.

## **Embracing new technology**

One of the trainers was Mina, mother of six children and an accomplished journalist. She is a well-known radio journalist and writer in her region. Mina also started a magazine for women where Afghan women could share stories from their lives. "They talked about the war, how it had affected them and their children." Later, Mina also wrote a book on the subject.

Mina herself participated in six "Learning Together" training courses and also went on a study trip to Finland before becoming a trainer herself.

"I took everything I learned on those courses back to this remote province - and taught the same things to the young women journalists here," says

Mina. “I independently conducted a total of eight training courses, and later I ran the same training courses at our university’s journalism department.”

The themes for future courses were planned together with both course participants and the AWJU. Radio journalism, video journalism and TV journalism were also put into practice. Year after year, investigative journalism, political journalism and multi-channel news reporting were areas that women journalists wanted to learn more of. The use of social media at work was also a regular item on the wish list.

Women journalists felt that learning digital skills on different devices was particularly important. When newsrooms acquired new technical equipment, men journalists usually took them over. To get involved, women journalists had to master new technologies, preferably better than men.

## **Personal safety first**

A recurring training theme was ensuring the journalist’s own safety. Journalists were being targeted by Taliban intimidation and violence long before the 2021 takeover, but there were also threats from elsewhere in the conservative society.

In autumn 2015, for security reasons, the course could only be held in Kabul. The Taliban had advanced rapidly in Kunduz in the north of the country, and eight women journalists who had fled the province travelled to Kabul for a course, hiding in burqas. They had left behind not only their families but also their radio stations and newspapers. During the course, they learned that the Taliban had taken over the city of Kunduz, destroying their newsrooms and radio stations. Some of their homes had also been attacked and their relatives killed. They all knew they were on the Taliban’s persecution list.

“I remember the message I learned on the course so well: My safety comes first. Only if I am alive can I contribute to important issues in society,” recalls Masha, who took part in training in her province and who now continues working despite daily threats from the Taliban.

Journalists’ ability to cope with the demanding and dangerous work was also regularly addressed in the courses. Especially for women journalists working outside Kabul, the AWJU became an important home base for peer support and networking in their provinces.

As the security situation deteriorated, travelling got harder for the Finnish trainers, but local trainers were able to continue running the courses in

the provinces. Each year, the Afghan women were given more and more responsibility over the trainings. Finnish journalist volunteers were producing new training material, providing background support, and acting as mentors.

Elections are one of the cornerstones of democracy, and as they were approaching, the courses focused on the role of journalists in the run-up to elections: How to follow the election campaign, who to interview, what kind of articles to write before and after the elections. What does it mean to be a watchdog of power in the Afghan reality?



*"I remember the message I learned on the course: Only if I am alive can I contribute to important issues in society."*

**Masha**, journalist

The training package "Elections and Media in Democracy", produced by the Finnish journalists, was created by volunteers during spring 2018 and hosted in Kabul in autumn by Shakiba Adil, the project editor. All eight trainers from six different provinces attended this training, and at the end of the session they ran the lessons on elections, peace, and journalism in their respective provinces.

In the same year, the "Learning Together" project was awarded a 5,000 Euro democracy prize by the Finnish Ministry of Justice. The money allowed the training work in Kabul to continue for another couple of weeks.

## Understanding democracy in the Parliament

In August 2011 and autumn 2017, "Learning Together" invited the Afghan women journalists on a study trip to Finland. On the first visit, 8 Afghan women - and 13 on the second - met with a number of Finnish politicians, media representatives and researchers, and visited the Åland Islands Peace Institute.

However, for many the most memorable experience was a visit to the Parliament. Amina, a journalist for Kabul newspaper, still remembers that visit in 2011 clearly. "During that visit to the Parliament, I understood democracy in a whole new way - that all people are truly equal, regardless of their background. We met, among others, Nasima Razmyar, an Afghan-born

Finnish MP, and I felt immensely proud of her achievements. I think that was also when I understood how Finland had developed into the country it is today,” Amina says.

She also realised that society can actually have gender equality. “But even in your country, women have been fighting for their rights for a long time. We still have a long way to go.”

Mina, another Afghan journalist who joined the trip, also recalls her visit to the Parliament. “We heard that ordinary members of the public, such as students, could come and talk directly to decision-makers once a week. That’s really impressive. In 2017, Finland had just celebrated 100 years of independence and peace. I realised that you have had to work extremely hard to achieve and maintain this peace.”

The women journalists were overall impressed by Finland. Mina and Amina, who visited Finland, said that they were reflecting on the factors that made the change possible. “You obviously work very hard,” said Amina. “And I think the fact that Finnish society puts culture at the centre says a lot about you,” said Mina.

At the end of the visit in 2017, five women journalists did not return to Afghanistan. Three of them sought asylum in Finland, one in Germany. One woman journalist eventually returned to Afghanistan.

In 2022, Finland was voted the happiest country in the world - and Afghanistan the unhappiest. The Afghan women journalists were keen to discuss this in their interviews. They could easily identify the underlying reasons for their unhappiness, but the recipe for happiness was left unresolved. “We can only dream of regaining even the human rights we had before,” says Amina.

## **The work went online**

After each course, participants gave the organisers feedback and expressed their wishes for the future. Many reported that their skills, self-esteem, and professional identity were stronger than before and that their position in the labour market had improved. Over the years, one of the students went on to start up both a women’s news agency and a women’s newspaper.

The Finnish trainers also recognised this change. They saw that many of the participants felt encouraged and free to talk about very confidential matters. During the visit to Finland, this could be seen in the students’



PHOTO: KIRSI MATTILA

**Three Afghan women journalists practicing video editing on a Learning Together course in Bamiyan in 2017.**

open-minded contributions, for example at ministerial meetings. Even the most painful issues were discussed frankly and with feeling.

“They dared to speak their minds and describe the situation of their country and of women as they saw it in reality. There was no longer any sign of the reservations that we saw in Kabul,” said Eeva Koskinen, the project leader.

The project by Women Journalists in Finland with funding from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs ended in 2018. However, “Learning Together” kept going as an informal network afterwards. The security situation in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate, but Afghan women journalists kept calling for more training. In February 2021, online training was started over Zoom - again on a voluntary basis.

At a rapid schedule, Badakhshan, Kunduz and Takhar provinces were connected. One of the first participants in the 2021 Zoom trainings was Latifa, the host of a women's radio channel. Her home town in northern Afghanistan was already surrounded by the Taliban, with only the city centre still under government rule. Everyone was afraid of what lay ahead.

"When a Zoom call opened from our newsroom to Finland, it was as if a window to the whole world had opened: We were not alone. It was an incredibly important day for us. It gave us another reason to keep working forward," says Latifa.

Experienced Finnish radio and TV journalists taught the women in Latifa's newsroom team how to plan a structured radio programme that attracts listeners, how many people to interview, and how to select your sources. "Having that contact with Finland reassured us and gave us faith," Latifa describes.

## Free media disappeared

In summer 2021, everything changed. The Taliban occupied one city after another. Women's radio stations were closed and newspapers shut down. The young women journalists, who had been moving freely all their lives, had to start wearing sky-blue burqas and black niqabs for the first time in their lives. They were frightened and anxious.

Mina, an experienced newspaper journalist from Kabul, says she was immediately sent home from work after Kabul was taken over. "Now I go there once a week to collect my salary, which is only half of what it used to be - because I work from home."

On her half of a salary, Mina supports her elderly mother and two sisters, one of whom used to work in the Supreme Court - but lost her job, just like everyone else from cleaners to the highest judge.

"*Mahram* is limiting our lives, the Taliban in Kabul are very strict about it," says Mina. "I can move around inside the city, but travelling any further would be impossible as my family doesn't have a chaperone."

When the Taliban stormed the town of Bamiyan in central Afghanistan, Aisha, a member of the Hazara minority, had already fled. For a month, Aisha was hiding in the mountains with her young child and her husband. The city was in total chaos and there was sporadic looting everywhere.

Aisha says that at the end of autumn 2022, the situation in Bamiyan is dire. People are disappearing, but no one dares to talk about them. "At first, people were discussing the forced disappearances on social media, but soon we learned to keep quiet." Even the media is staying silent about them.

The Taliban has not directly banned women journalists from working, but in practice they have made it almost impossible. The rapidly deteriorating financial situation of the newsrooms forced many media houses to close their doors. Only a handful - an estimated 1-2% - of women journalists are still working. The most outspoken and prominent women journalists are being targeted by the Taliban. Many of them were participants in the "Learning Together" training.



*"The attackers said they were looking for me. All we could do was run."*

**Mina**, journalist

Even outside Bamiyan, journalists are disappearing, being arrested, and badly beaten. This has been reported by both local and international journalists' organisations. In spring 2022, the Taliban banned women from studying journalism at the university. By the end of the year, the ban was extended to all university studies.

## **New rules for the game**

Latifa, who used to run a radio station and had been forced to flee her hometown in the Badakhshan province, built up courage, returned and approached the Taliban. "I asked them if I could restart the radio station. They stated their conditions: The programmes should only cover matters of Islam, such as hijab, how women should obey their husbands, focus on taking care of the family and not argue with their husbands," Latifa describes her conversation with a Taliban leader.

It was also forbidden to play music on the radio and for a woman to host a programme, so that her voice would not arouse sexual feelings in men.

"I accepted the rules, but I'm being creative with them. I don't play any music. But I have found my own ways to cover issues that are important to women. For example, when discussing violence against women, we

look in the Quran to see what Mohammad's youngest wife, Bibi Aisha, said about it. For example, she says that no-one has the right to harm another. That's a good place to continue the discussion."

Working closely with local religious scholars who Latifa already knows helps her find the right verses in the Holy book of Quran. Muhammad's wives have expressed their views on many key issues at least indirectly. The "Daily Mirror" broadcast invites listeners to send in questions, and Latifa often invites the Taliban to answer them. "It's a challenge to get them to come, though."

At the moment, Latifa's radio channel broadcasts shows from 6am to 10pm. Latifa and her women employees work from home. They deliver the finished episodes to their men colleagues, who in turn broadcast them to listeners on the radio.

There are 600,000 people within the reach of the broadcast, and as it is the only radio station in the region that produces programmes for women, there are many listeners. The channel doesn't receive any financial support; everyone works for free.

If money was available, Latifa would also start broadcasting a distance learning school for girls in secondary school age. "I even had a teacher lined up already, but because I couldn't even pay his travel expenses, he couldn't come. But I think this would be a great way to reach girls who are locked up at home and give them a chance to continue their education."

Masha, another young radio journalist who took part in the "Learning Together" training, has been targeted by the Taliban. When the Taliban took over Masha's hometown, she fled to Kabul. "I keep getting calls from the Taliban. First the callers were threatening me and demanding that I stop working. Then they started asking me where I was. Then they changed their tactics: Now they're begging to meet up with me. I know that if I go, it will be the end of me."

Masha still continues making radio programmes for an international producer. When the threats started and she had to keep running away, Masha decided to get married. It made it easier to move around the country. Masha's husband strongly supports her.

When working on her radio programmes, Masha invites her interviewees to sit in groups wearing burqas in as public a place as possible, such as in front of a mosque. There she can hold a tape recorder under her burqa and record the interview without causing any suspicions.

"I'm not going to stop working, definitely not. But to be honest, I'm scared. Every day."

When the Taliban came to Mina's hometown in northern Afghanistan, they attacked her home and beat up her daughter. "The attackers said they were looking for me. All we could do was run. We took the whole family to another town."

Now Mina and her two teenage daughters spend their days at home learning to sew clothes that they can sell to earn an income for the family. "Thanks to the enormous anxiety and worry, I have also become physically ill. I don't want my six children to miss their opportunities in life because of my job."

Aisha, who lives in Taliban-controlled Bamiyan, no longer works as a journalist, but is also looking for ways to support her family. "My message to Finland is this: Under no circumstances should you recognise the Taliban, but continue to put pressure on them in any way possible. Support women so that one day we can get back on our feet, so that we don't have to spend our whole lives in fear."

## AFGHAN MEDIA IN A TIGHT SPOT

The UN has repeatedly expressed concerns about Afghan journalists being abducted, getting abused and disappearing. A significant number of journalists have fled the country.

According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), only 330 of the 550 media houses in Afghanistan are still operating. Some have been closed for economic reasons, others under pressure or orders from the Taliban. Around 60% of journalists have lost their jobs.

Before the Taliban took power, there were 2,490 women journalists working in Afghanistan. 4 out of 5 of them have lost their jobs in the past year; of men journalists about half have lost theirs.

The Taliban also tightly control media content. In the Press Freedom Index, Afghanistan's ranking has fallen from 122 to 156 out of 180.

*(The author of the report has been a member of "Learning Together" since 2019)*

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# WOMEN AT THE PEACE NEGOTIATION TABLES

What really happened in Doha?

**ONE OF** the key objectives of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is to include women in negotiations where the aim is to find a way out of conflict. The Security Council has said that peace can only be sustainable if women's voices are heard while getting there.

Finland played a key role in the creation of Afghanistan's NAP 1325 - Women, Peace and Security. This could be considered a certain obligation towards the women who participated in the 2021-2022 Doha peace talks. Did the Afghan women get the support they needed? Could things have gone differently at the negotiating table?

The lives of Afghan women took the first dramatic turn in February 2020. That was when, to the astonishment of the world, US President Donald Trump made a special agreement with the Taliban. After 20 years of fighting the terrorist organisation Taliban, the Americans escorted its bearded leaders to the glow of crystal lamps and decided to forget their slogan "We do not negotiate with terrorists". For the Taliban, this was a huge victory.

The US leadership wanted to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan so badly that the Taliban got practically everything they asked for in the negotiations. All they had to do was promise to stop terrorist activities threatening the US and its allies on Afghan soil and sit down with the Kabul leadership to discuss the future of the country.

Habiba Sorabi, former Minister of Women's Affairs and member of the High Peace Council, says the whole negotiating setup was a huge mistake. "The United States went to negotiate with the enemy and completely side-lined the Afghan leadership. If those negotiations had included all three parties, the outcome could have been quite different," Sorabi says.

But the Taliban systematically refused such tripartite talks - and so the superpower agreed. Afterwards, the Taliban did not hide their joy about this.



**Fawzia Koofi (left), Sharifa Zurmati Wardak, Fatima Gailani, and Habiba Sarabi participated in the peace negotiations in Doha in 2020-2021.**

Not only the Afghan government representatives were absent from the Doha negotiating table, but also the elected MPs, political parties, women's organisations, and Afghan civil society as a whole, says Fatima Gailani. "We had no idea what the Americans were agreeing with the Taliban. All we knew was that the Americans were leaving," she says. Gailani is a long-time chair of the Afghan Red Crescent and highly respected in Afghan society, not least because her family is directly descended from Prophet Muhammad.

## **Taliban gained the upper hand**

The agreement between the Americans and the Taliban was signed on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020. "There was no mention at all of Afghan women in the agreement. At that crucial moment, the United States did not care about women's rights," says Habiba Sorabi. The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 was forgotten. Nor did the agreement mention democracy, human rights, the rule of law, or freedom of expression.

Six months later, on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the 21-member negotiating team from Kabul met the 21 Taliban members for the first time in Doha. Four of the Kabul negotiators were women, including Habiba Sorabi and Fatima Gailani. There were no women among the Taliban negotiators.

The situation was difficult from the start. For the Taliban, the foundation for the talks was the agreement between them and the Americans. "It

gave them the upper hand. They behaved very aggressively and rudely, repeating how they had defeated the superpower and NATO - and that the same would happen to our 'puppet government'," Sorabi describes.

The Kabul negotiating team had an elected parliament behind them, as well as a negotiating mandate from the 3,000-strong *loya jirga*, and the country's constitution. *Loya Jirga* is the country's traditional body, which includes tribal elders, religious leaders, and political decision-makers.

However, the Taliban had the military upper hand, and they did not even want to discuss a ceasefire with the Afghan government, which would have been essential to the government. The Taliban knew that all they had to do was wait for the American troops to leave the country as promised in spring 2021.

Habiba Sorabi describes how frustrating it was to participate in negotiations where the other side had insincere intentions. "At the beginning, our expectations were still high. The Taliban did listen, but they didn't budge at all from their standing," says Habiba Sorabi. The Taliban were mainly playing for time.

Already in Doha it was obvious that the Taliban was internally divided. Some members of the Taliban negotiating team also politely listened to the woman negotiators. The other half were outright condescending. "Some even covered their faces with a scarf when meeting with us to avoid looking at a woman's face," Sorabi describes. It gave a taste of what could lie ahead.

The Taliban had no interest in the constitution of the Republic of Afghanistan. It wanted Afghanistan to be an emirate where the Taliban would hold the seats of power and where decisions and justice would be based exclusively on the Sharia law.

The Afghan government, for their part, wanted a ceasefire first, so that a real debate on political issues could begin. The government insisted that the country's constitution would be upheld: The people will elect their leaders, and women and men are equal before the law, as are different ethnic groups. On many other issues, the government expressed its willingness to compromise. For example, the Taliban troops could merge into the Afghan army and police without any punishment for terrorist activities and countless suicide attacks on civilians.

"But our government was not united when it entered the negotiations; our political leadership was divided. We didn't have a proper roadmap or contingency plan. It was very bad," says Sorabi.

In her opinion, the choice of the venue was the first mistake. “The Taliban leadership lived in Doha under the protection of the state of Qatar; they had families, homes and businesses there. They notified us when it was convenient for them to come and talk. For our part, we made the trip to Doha to attend the meetings, because for us the negotiations were an important task. The balance was strikingly off.”

The United States put strong pressure on the negotiators to achieve results, Sorabi says. “But these processes take a long time to move forward, they cannot be rushed.” Eight months would be a very short time to reach a negotiated solution to any conflict. The Doha talks concerned the very existence of the Afghan state.

## **Football without a referee**

Negotiations dragged on for months without a single key issue being resolved. The reluctance of the Taliban was one reason, but the government leadership made a fundamental mistake early on, says Fatima Gailani.

“The negotiations started without a mediator, and this proposal came from our leadership. The idea was to have only Afghans sitting together. It was as smart as playing football without a referee,” says Gailani. “When I first heard about this, I thought it was a joke. All our international supporters and advisors warned us that this would be a huge mistake.”

And so, the negotiations did not get very far. The “yes, no, yes, no, yes, no” debate went on and on. “They knew they were winning on the military front, and that the Americans were going to leave - yet every morning we offered them a compromise on a gold plate, which they refused,” Gailani describes.

It turned out that negotiating without a mediator was the idea of President Ashraf Ghani himself. “He was counting on Joe Biden to win the upcoming US elections and put a stop to this whole mess.”

Meanwhile, the Taliban were confident that Trump would win a second term, so Joe Biden’s victory shocked them to the core. For most Afghan politicians and negotiators, it was a cause for celebration. This would change the course.

Fatima Gailani could not understand the optimism. “Already when he was Obama’s vice-president, Biden had insisted on withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan,” says Gailani.

And that is exactly what happened: Biden stood by Trump's decision, and the American troops continued their withdrawal almost on schedule. The Taliban continued as well and kept advancing until it was at the gates of Kabul in August 2021. The negotiations in Doha had come to an end. The fate of Afghanistan was ultimately decided by the US domestic policy.

"But none of us could have imagined that this would be the outcome, that the worst-case scenario for women would come true. We believed that whatever the solution, our country's institutions would prevail, that women could continue to work and girls could continue to go to school. But to have such a collapse and disaster," Sorabi sighs deeply.

## **SIGAR's conclusions**

In November 2022, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) published its own analysis of why the Republic of Afghanistan - and the status of women - collapsed. SIGAR is an independent body established by the US Congress to provide reliable and independent information on Afghanistan.

According to SIGAR, the US kept telling Afghan authorities for years that they were planning to leave the country, but their messages were contradictory. The trusting Afghan authorities did not take the departure plans seriously. The Afghan government was also totally unprepared to lead the fight against the Taliban after the US withdrew their troops.

Another reason was that the Afghan government was excluded from the Taliban-US negotiations and the resulting agreement in February 2020. This significantly weakened the government's position in the run-up to the negotiations. Contrary to what the United States had hoped, the Taliban-US deal further strengthened the Taliban on the battlefield and undermined the Afghan government's credibility.

SIGAR considered the Afghan government's insistence that the Taliban should be integrated into the Republic the third reason why the negotiations became more difficult.

The fourth reason also arose from the deal between the Taliban and the US: Making the agreement had the Taliban believing that they did not have to compromise but could focus on crushing the Afghan government on the battlefield. The fifth reason cited by SIGAR is the isolation of President Ghani, who led the country through a small band of loyalists and ended up destabilising his own government at a critical moment.

The concentration of decision-making in the capital, the structural development of corruption, and the lack of legitimacy of the administration all contributed to the collapse.

## Support from Finland

When asked whether the women negotiators received adequate negotiation support in line with Resolution 1325, both interviewees say “Yes”. “In particular, Germany, Norway, and sometimes Sweden supported us very closely during the Doha process. Every single European country, their women’s organisations, women mediators, and parliaments offered us help and asked us what we needed. There was no shortage of that,” says Gailani. All government negotiators received training from Berghof, a German peacebuilding foundation.

Although Finland was the “mother” of the Afghanistan NAP 1325 Women, Peace and Security, Finland only supported the negotiations indirectly. It donated 200,000 Euros for UNAMA’s Salam Support Group and for the training of negotiators by UN Women and AIHRC. Finland’s concrete support for advancing peace was quite small. However, it hardly affected the outcome of the negotiations.

The best-known Finnish mediation organisation, CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, was not directly involved in supporting the Doha negotiations, but stayed in touch with other advocates such as the Nordic Women Mediators (NWM).

Previously, back in 2011-2014, CMI ran a project in northern Afghanistan supporting local civil society peacebuilders.

Since early 2022, CMI has been working with the EU on establishing the Afghan Women Leaders Forum. CMI provides advice to the EU on the initiative and supports the Forum on subject matters. Among other things, CMI has chaired some of the discussions among women leaders. In May, nearly 60 Afghan women took part in a discussion initiated by the Forum on how to ensure the inclusion of Afghan women in the dialogue on the future of Afghanistan. Almost all the women activists who the National Council of Women of Finland interviewed for the report were involved in the discussion.

In November 2022, another group of 60 Afghan activists in Brussels formulated common objectives for future action. In 2023, the Forum is planning to, among other things, launch a women-led dialogue between different Afghan groups, continue to share information, conduct research,

and monitor the status of women. At the November meeting, Afghan influencers met Jutta Urpilainen, the European Commissioner for International Partnerships, and others.

## A toothless Europe

Both Fatima Gailani and Habiba Sorabi say that European countries should have stepped up to the plate much earlier, when the United States started negotiating a separate agreement with the Taliban. “European countries should have shown a united, determined front and said: “We all want to pull our troops from Afghanistan, but over 20 years we have invested so much here that we won’t leave until the time is right for the Afghan people,” says Gailani.

Hasina Sorabi also criticises Europe’s toothlessness towards the United States. “You keep talking about Feminist Foreign Policy, in Finland, too. You should have been much more serious in demanding that the United States enforce women’s rights when they opened negotiations with the Taliban.”

At the end of 2022, Habiba Sorabi is living in Germany and working to promote women’s issues in her home country. Meanwhile, Fatima Gailani travels regularly from Europe back to Afghanistan to maintain contacts especially with women there.



*“You should have been much more serious in demanding that the United States enforce women’s rights when they opened negotiations with the Taliban.”*

**Habiba Sorabi**, peace negotiator

They both say that something extremely dangerous is brewing up in Afghanistan. Extremist groups, particularly ISIS-K (Islamic State Khorasan Province), are quickly strengthening their position within the country. The Pakistani Taliban (TTP) has also been encouraged by their neighbour’s example and started carrying out terrorist attacks. Gailani and Sorabi consider it particularly dangerous that Afghanistan might become a haven and breeding ground for various extremist groups. That might make Afghanistan a battlefield for all the frustrated extremists of the world.

The tribal society of Afghanistan provides a particularly fertile ground for this. If, for example, ISIS takes root in Afghan tribal communities, for example through marriages, it will be the tribe's responsibility to protect ISIS members, warns Fatima Gailani.

"If this happens, Daesh (ISIS) will no longer be just an Afghan problem but will once again become a global problem. Including for Europe."

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## WOMEN AT THE NEGOTIATION TABLES

**FOUR INFLUENTIAL** Afghan women participated in the Doha peace talks. Fatima Gailani, who has served as long-time president of the Afghan Red Crescent Society, was familiar with the Taliban through her work, and she is highly respected in society. Fawzia Koofi, who for many years served as a Member of Parliament and as the first woman Vice President of the National Assembly. Habiba Sorabi, who served as Minister of Women's Affairs from 2002 to 2004, and was the first woman to become a provincial governor. She was also a member of the High Peace Council.

The fourth negotiator woman was Sharifa Zurmati Wardak, a long-standing radio journalist at Afghanistan's Public Radio and Television network, who won a seat in parliament in 2005.

Bringing Afghan women to the negotiating table required strong pressure from women's organisations on the country's leadership. All four women have received international awards for their work on defending women's rights.

There were no women among the Taliban negotiators.

### **“THE WORLD’S BRAVEST WOMEN TAKE TO THE STREETS”**

*“They just arrived and started imposing all these restrictions on us women.” Mina.*

Just days after the Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021, the first women appeared on the streets in protest. A small group of women were carrying handwritten signs and papers. They were calling for women’s right to work, education and security. There were also protests in other cities. The Taliban kept breaking up women’s protests with violence time and time again - and again and again, the women kept returning.

In Kabul, the growing troops have often been led by the same 30-something, strong-suited Tajik woman, who keeps pushing on regardless of the armed Taliban forces. Her name is Munisa Mubariz, and she has two Master’s degrees. For many years, Mubariz held a senior position in the policy department of the Ministry of Finance. When she was kicked out of the workplace with other women, she decided to act. A group of educated women set up a WhatsApp group, and only a few days later they were standing in front of the Ministry of Finance, holding signs.

“Nobody could have believed that Afghanistan would revert back to zero, that all the systems would collapse, and we would lose everything we had achieved in 20 years,” Mubariz says in a telephone interview. “But the truth was quickly revealed: The Taliban is exactly the same as before, and their main target is women - again.” Afghanistan’s economy has collapsed and the majority of the population is facing starvation, but the Taliban is focusing on women’s clothing and restrictions on their rights.

Similar small-scale women’s protests started popping up regularly also in Herat, Mazar-e Sharif and Bamiyan. Mubariz describes how the Taliban has not been the least bit interested in what the women are protesting for - all they want is to break up the groups as quickly as possible. No dialogue has been established.

The Afghan media have pretty much stopped reporting on women’s protests. Male journalists covering the protests have faced severe abuse, and the Taliban keep tightening their control over media content.



PHOTO: SOCIAL MEDIA

**Munisa Mubaritz, who was fired from the Ministry of Finance, started organising women's protests soon after the Taliban seized power in 2021. The women were demanding their rights and jobs to be reinstated.**

In the beginning, the protests were as big as several hundred women, but month after month the crowds are growing smaller. More and more educated women have fled to Pakistan and Iran. Yet the protests continue - and almost every time they are violently broken up.

Mubariz says that after numerous attempts to arrest her, the Taliban added an order to "shoot if necessary" to her arrest warrant in autumn 2022. "What I'm doing is very dangerous. After the shooting order, I was forced to leave the country for the time being."

Saaman is another young woman who regularly protests on the streets. As she is still in Afghanistan, we will not use her real name. On the day of the interview in early November, her back is still sore. A few days earlier, Saaman was at the head of the protest and was livestreaming the march on her Facebook page. A Taliban soldier tried to pull the phone out of Saaman's hand and when that failed, the soldier hit her in the back with a Kalashnikov. "And he hit me really hard."

Saaman used to work in the Afghan Ministry of Mines and Petroleum while studying administrative sciences at Kabul University. Like Mubariz, she has participated in dozens of protests, calling in particular for girls to be allowed back to school and for women to be allowed to work.

## **Massacre of the Hazara girls**

Then came September 30<sup>th</sup>. Suicide bombers attacked the Kaaj tuition centre in Kabul. The attack left 53 people dead - 46 of them adolescent girls -, most of whom were members of the Hazara community. More than a hundred people were injured.

Saaman herself is also Hazara, and immediately after hearing about the attack she tried to go to the hospital to donate blood. "At the hospital entrance, the Taliban were beating and pushing families of the victims and blood donors alike. They were being really violent," Saaman describes.

Saaman and the general Hazara community suspect that it was the Taliban who organised the attack. The Taliban have said that they have created a separate "martyr brigade", or suicide squad, as part of their special forces. They have not revealed the size of these forces.

Richard Bennett, the OHCHR's Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, has raised concerns about the treatment of Hazaras. "We have received reports of arbitrary arrests, torture and other ill-treatment, summary executions and enforced disappearances. In addition, an increase in inflammatory speech is being reported, both online and in some mosques during Friday prayers, including calling for Hazaras to be killed," says Bennett.

Both Mubariz and Saaman are angry and disappointed - and with many different actors. "For more than a year now, we have been trying to defend Afghan women against Taliban oppression and demand our rights, but we are all alone in this struggle. "You, the Western countries, supported us and spoke up for us for 20 years. But where are you now when we need you?" Mubariz asks. "Why are you staying silent now?"

Neither of them can understand the complete disappearance of the West. "You were fighting against this same terrorist mob and then you just exited the stage and left us women alone to continue the fight."

"Women who protest against the Taliban are the bravest women in the world," Police Colonel Shafiqa Qurashi.

The women do not have much sympathy towards Afghan men either. They won't join the anti-Taliban protests. "It's true that the Taliban abuse men even more than women, but I don't think that's reason enough to leave us women alone to protest. The men's daughters are banned from school, too. Why are they keeping quiet?" Mubariz asks.

Mubariz says she has noticed that many Afghan men agree with the Taliban. The Taliban also feed the conservative and violent behaviour of ordinary Afghan men. They have made men responsible for ensuring that women in their family adhere to strict hijab rules. If a woman breaks the rules, the punishment is laid onto the men in her family. This is also put into practice. Men have been arrested, flogged, and severely beaten for their wives' or daughters' negligence. This tends to fuel domestic violence.



*"Women who protest against the Taliban are the bravest women in the world."*  
**Shafiqa Qurashi, Police Colonel**

During Friday prayers, the Taliban have been reported to incite men to use their power over the women in their family in accordance with Islam, with violence if necessary. The prayers say that it is a man's right and duty.

But the baseline of Islam is that it is the man's job to protect women, says Saaman. "The Taliban have turned this on its head - men are being turned against women and their basic rights in the name of Islam."

## **"Pressure, boycott"**

The fact that most of the country's prominent and influential human rights defenders and women politicians have left the country also arouses anger among the human rights defenders who stayed. "Where are all these strong women leaders and the thousands of members of these organisations? How do they imagine that change can happen if it is not seriously demanded?" wonders Mubariz. "Our influential women leaders are now travelling around the world meeting people and speaking on behalf of Afghan women, but they are not in any contact with us."

Both Mubariz and Saaman give the same strong advice to both Europeans and Americans regarding the Taliban. "Put pressure on them, boycott

them, halt their travel and especially their financial support.” Afghan media are regularly reporting that, every month, international donors send 40 million dollars to the country.

Saaman says that women working in different ministries have used their contacts to follow the money. “The international community says the money is not going to the Taliban, but that is not true. The Taliban makes decisions regarding the money, and it definitely is going to their families, tribes and supporters.”

On the other hand, both of them stress the importance of continuing humanitarian aid. It is distributed primarily through UN agencies, so the Women’s Network believes that the aid is reaching the people who really need it. After decades of war, there are hundreds of thousands of households in Afghanistan where a widowed mother is supporting her children alone. These are the people in the most difficult situation.

Afghanistan has received a significant amount of humanitarian aid in the past year. The five largest donors - the US, the UK, the Asian Development Bank, the EU, and Germany - have donated a total of 1.77 billion dollars in aid. However, in December 2022, more than half of the 4.4 billion dollars needed was still missing.

In 2022, Finland provided Afghanistan with 7 million Euros in humanitarian aid. Delivering aid is primarily the responsibility of the UN agencies working in the country. In addition, Finland has supported Humanitarian Demining with 870,000 Euros.

## **Self-help groups emerge**

After the initial shock, women activists have set up a large number of small-scale women’s self-help groups across Afghanistan, where women support each other both mentally and financially. However, it is extremely difficult for these groups to access funding from donor countries, whose application processes are complex and rigid. “They should be streamlined and simplified quickly,” says Mubariz. The ‘Afghanistan’s Main Powerful Women’s Movement’, founded by Mubariz herself, is also registered in Afghanistan and works openly to promote women’s rights.

The WPSO Women & Peace Studies, founded by another woman activist, Wazhma Frogh, is also building a grass-roots network of women. The organisation currently operates in 15 provinces and 750 women have joined so far. Groups of ten women take turns in hosting meetings in their home. “The



PHOTO: SOCIAL MEDIA

**Women are defying the Taliban's coercive measures by regularly protesting in the streets. And virtually every time, their protests are disbanded by force.**

women involved are all educated, but now they can't do much outside the home. That's why this must start from the very basics," says Frogh.

India has provided an example for this work. First, the women decide which new skills they want to acquire - from new ways of earning an income to improving healthcare skills to supporting their mental well-being. Often, the women collect a common fund to help one of the members to buy, for example, a cow or chickens.

"This is our way to keep women active and participating in society, to enable them to do something they feel is important to them. This also helps them to cope mentally in this tight spot they have been pushed into," says Wazhma Frogh.

The WPSO is also a registered organisation, but they provide little information about their activities and they make sure to follow Taliban orders. However, in the Afghan culture it is natural for women to be getting together in homes and therefore this does not attract too much attention.

Another women's health organisation, even smaller and based solely in the southern province of Helmand, operates in the heartlands of the Taliban. Karima, a young midwife for the organisation, says she is only able to visit women when accompanied by her brother. "The emotional problems women face are enormous. Women tell me about violence within

the family. Fathers selling their daughters and passing them on as *baad* - and some of these girls are very, very young. We have had forced and child marriages before, but now they are really on the increase. In the past, these forced marriages were being monitored, but not anymore.”

Instead of tackling the problem and trying to prevent domestic violence, the Taliban is blaming women - and women’s organisations - for the violence. “One of the Taliban came to me and said that we are inciting women by talking about their concerns, that we are supporting and instigating domestic violence. That if women would just obey their husbands, there would be no violence, they say.”

But Karima still continues travelling around the area and listening to the women - stopping is not an option. “But I have to say that the misogyny that has taken over is incomprehensible!”

## **Butterfly club for schoolgirls**

Even smaller grass-roots movements are also appearing. One of them stems from the Finnish “Salaam For Peace” project, which trained a group of young Afghan activists as Messengers of Peace to bring skills and knowledge on how to resolve conflict situations through negotiation in their community.

One of the project participants was Mina, 20, a student at Kabul University. “During the Salaam project, we had a huge number of different cultural and social activities - for example, we went to meet children working on the streets, painted and played with them. We also learned meditation and made videos where we talked about our dreams.”

Mina says she also organised a book reading competition for the children, with over a hundred girls and boys joining together. “It was some of the best time of my life.” Photos of the events are full of joy, laughter and togetherness. Mina told the other participants that she wanted to be Afghanistan’s first woman president. “After that, they called me Lady President. I even got to meet Pekka Haavisto, your Minister for Foreign Affairs.”

In autumn 2022, Mina would still pull on a black coverall gown every morning before going to university. She didn’t feel comfortable in it. “The gown was boiling hot in the summer. Even in the classroom we were not allowed to reveal our faces because the teacher was a man,” says Mina. “When my mother was my age, she wore the beautiful colourful clothes of our Hazara culture. But the Taliban just came and started telling us what to wear.” Mina still finds it incomprehensible.

“At first I got deeply depressed. But then I decided that I have to stay active by any means necessary.” So, Mina started a project called Butterfly. The projects are aimed for girls in secondary school, who are not feeling emotionally well, says Mina. “I started organising 12-day workshops where we meditate, practice conflict management, and talk about issues that are relevant to them.”

The girls meet in a public education centre. “The Taliban came to inspect our activities. As long as we didn’t do anything political and followed the hijab rules, they didn’t interfere with what we did.” Month by month, however, the Taliban have tightened their restrictions on women. “We can only guess what restrictions they will impose on girls tomorrow.”

In January 2023, Taliban closed the education centre for girls. The Butterfly group has not had a place to meet after the closure.

The Butterfly project does not receive any financial support. “If we could get even a little more financial and material support from Finland to this project, we could keep the club going. This means so much for the forgotten girls.” All official Finnish development cooperation with Afghanistan ended in August 2021.

In December 2022, the Taliban decided that women would no longer be allowed to attend university. For Mina, this means putting her university studies on hold. But she hasn’t stopped dreaming. “I still want to be Afghanistan’s first woman president one day. Right now, it sounds like a very remote possibility, of course, but maybe one day.”

## **“Talk to the Taliban”**

Not all influential women’s rights defenders have left the country. One of them is Mahbouba Seraj. Seraj, born in Kabul in 1948, is the niece of Afghanistan’s King Amanullah Khan and a prominent journalist. She was imprisoned and exiled during the communist regime in the late 1970s. After 26 years in exile in the United States, Seraj returned to Afghanistan in 2003 and has since become one of the most prominent and influential figures in the women’s movement.

When the Taliban seized power, Seraj decided to stay put this time. Someone has to stay and witness what is happening to Afghanistan and its women, she thought. “I saw how democracy, which the world had worked on for 20 years, disappeared overnight,” says Seraj.

Now Mahbouba Seraj runs the only shelter in Kabul where women and girls can escape domestic violence or the threat of forced marriage. At the

end of 2022, some 60 women were living in the house. There is so much demand for shelter that Seraj is currently looking for another house in Kabul - as big as possible.

Seraj says that the Taliban have realised that the need for shelters is real. "When they find women wandering the streets after fleeing their homes, they bring them here to us. They don't know what else to do. Sometimes women who have run away from home are taken to prison."

In late 2022, the Taliban started organising public floggings, including of runaway girls and women.

The Taliban have not intervened in Seraj's activities, even though she speaks very frankly to the world about the situation in her country. At the UN Human Rights Council meeting in summer 2022, Seraj gave one of the most powerful speeches. "We women are erased, I said at that meeting. There are 20 million of us, but we no longer exist in any way in the eyes of this government. I say to them: You can't miss us; we are still here. Co-operate with women, for we are Afghan citizens."



*"This country has been at war for 45 years. We simply don't want that anymore. That's why our only option is to speak up."*

**Mahbouba Seraj**, human rights defender

Although the situation is unbearable for women, Seraj deeply believes that only by continuing an honest and persistent dialogue with the Taliban can the situation change. "Western ambassadors should ask them directly what their plans are for Afghanistan. What do they want to do with this country; do they want to go forward or backwards? Ask directly - people want to know," Seraj urges. "Isolation will get us nowhere; only by keeping up the dialogue can we move forward."

Seraj says that people do not trust the Taliban because they usurped power. "The people didn't choose them." In reality, they are just a group of men who have taken an entire nation hostage. For example, the decision to ban girls from secondary schools was made by four elderly men, religious scholars, sitting in southern Kandahar.

In early 2023, Afghanistan is on the verge of collapse: The government is not functioning; the people have no one to turn to in times of need. And they are facing a historically poor winter of famine. Instead of making ef-

forts to deliver international aid, the Taliban decided at the end of 2022 to ban women from working in all aid organisations as well. Once again, it is mainly households headed by women that suffer most.

Seraj's worst fear, however, is that tensions between different ethnic groups will reach an explosive point. "Pashtuns are hated everywhere now, even though not nearly all Pashtuns are Taliban. This country has been at war for 45 years. We simply don't want that anymore. That's why our only option is to speak up!"

## FINLAND CONTINUES TO PROVIDE SUPPORT

In 2022, Finland provided financial support to Afghanistan by a total of 22.5 million Euros. The aid was distributed mainly through UN agencies. Humanitarian aid to Afghanistan amounted to 7 million Euros, of which 5.5 million Euros was directed through the World Food Programme (WFP).

Finland also supported the UN Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan with 9 million Euros. They direct funds to UN agency activities, including cooperation with NGOs.

In 2022, UN Women received 2 million Euros and MSIA 2.6 million Euros.

With the help from Finland, UN Women promotes the rights of women and girls in particular. It also supports women's organisations, women activists, and women journalists.

The Finnish Red Cross supported the Afghan people with 675,000 Euros and the CMI with 300,000 Euros.

Funds from Finland do not go to the Taliban.

### Sources:

Khama Press: Taliban Calls Suicide Bomber Brigade 'Pride' of Group, 2022

Human Rights Watch: ISIS Group Targets Religious Minorities, 2022

# CONCLUSION

**THE COST** of the war in Afghanistan has been staggering. An estimated 47,000 Afghan civilians and some 69,000 police and soldiers were killed over 20 years. 53,000 Taliban and other resistance fighters were killed. Hundreds of thousands were wounded and disabled.

The United States spent 2.2 trillion dollars - or two thousand billion; 2,200,000,000,000 dollars - on the war. If, instead of going to war, that money had been distributed equally to everyone in the country, every single one of them would have received 55,000 dollars.

Over 20 years, Finland spent 315 million Euros on military operations and 430 million Euros on development cooperation and humanitarian aid.

The international community as a whole spent tens of billions of dollars on development cooperation, maintaining the government, and creating structures. Donors have been widely criticised for creating short-sighted policies together with the Kabul elite, who lacked an understanding of the reality in which the vast, poor majority of Afghanistan were living. When at the same time there was massive corruption, the effectiveness of any aid was not at all clear-cut. Finland was also forced to consider this issue.

During the conflict, Finland was seeking to support the promotion of women's equality, and according to the women interviewed for this report, Finland's efforts were a step in the right direction: Afghan women became more aware of their rights. The interviewees give Finland praise for its long-term and consistent support for women. Finland was perceived as a country who listened to what the women of Afghanistan had to say. Not even all European countries did that. In this respect, Finland has a positive image in the eyes of Afghan women activists. Some Finnish ambassadors also received direct praise from the interviewees for being so active.

And did the average poor, illiterate Afghan woman ultimately benefit from Finland's support? Indirectly, yes, because women's organisations and the AIHRC strengthened women's status in the country's legislation over those 20 years. In the regions where the organisations were able to work, they were also able to change attitudes.

Afghanistan's NAP 1325 played a role in forcing the country's senior and provincial leadership alike to reflect on the role of women in the society. Continued work on NAP 1325, supported by Finland through UN Women, reinforced this attitude.

Meanwhile, the training of women journalists improved not only the professional skills of more than 500 women journalists, but also their understanding of the role of the media in democracy. Their stronger handprint was reflected in an increase in articles and broadcasts on women's rights in the Afghan media.

Directly benefiting from Finland's support are the hundreds of thousands of women and girls who have received and continue to receive reproductive health advice and assistance from MSIA. Direct beneficiaries have also been the women whose basic services were improved through the World Bank's Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). Half of Finland's annual aid of more than 20 million Euros was distributed via the ARTF. However, it is difficult to assess its benefits for Afghan women.

The training of women police officers and prosecutors enforced the rule of law for at least a few years and contributed to the fair treatment of women who are victims of violence.

Girls and women have been one of the key focal points of Finland's development cooperation. In Afghanistan, however, the share of projects directly promoting gender equality is fairly small. Ilona Kuusi, doctorate student, has calculated that only 18% of Finland's development cooperation projects in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2020 were defined as 'primarily promoting gender equality' by the OECD.

## **Finland is not welcoming Afghans**

When the Taliban marched on Kabul in August 2021, Finland focused its efforts on evacuating Finnish citizens as well as Afghans working at the Finnish Embassy. Finland did not evacuate the Afghan women who were human rights defenders, journalists, police officers or other long-term collaborators in ministries or organisations. This was decided even though for 20 years Finland had encouraged these people in many ways to work for human rights, equality and democracy - work for which many of them are now persecuted by the Taliban.

Defending human rights defenders was one of Finland's key campaign messages when Finland applied for and was admitted to the UN Human Rights Council in 2021.

Women human rights defenders in Afghanistan have been granted asylum in Germany, France, Italy, the UK, the United States and Canada. They have not been welcomed to Finland.

In addition to the evacuees, only 445 Afghans have sought asylum in Finland in just over a year. The number is lower than it has been in years. In addition, Finland has agreed to take 810 Afghan refugees from Iran from 2022 to 2023 as part of Finland's annual refugee quota. Meanwhile, Germany has brought 26,000 Afghans to safety. Germany is also launching a new programme to bring in 1,000 particularly vulnerable Afghans every month. This group includes, in particular, women human rights defenders and women journalists in Afghanistan, whose protection the UN has repeatedly called for.

It is possible that Finland's international reputation as a women's human rights advocate will suffer as a result of this decision to leave Afghan women's rights defenders without protection in their time of need.

## **Women remain illiterate**

None of those interviewed for this report wanted Finland to recognise the Taliban regime. However, the overwhelming majority of them wanted Finland, as part of the international community, to continue its dialogue with the Taliban. Only then will it be possible to find a political solution for the country which will allow women and different ethnic groups to be heard. The worst possible option would be another civil war, according to many of the interviewees.

Both Finland and other countries have stopped intergovernmental development cooperation with Afghanistan, but the women consider it extremely important that humanitarian aid would not stop. However, some of the women living in Afghanistan would even be prepared to make the aid conditional in order to reopen schools for girls.

One of the great disappointments has been that the literacy rate of Afghan women and girls is still far from what was hoped for. According to the World Bank, only around 23% of all adult Afghan women are now literate, and 42% of young women. If the international community, including Finland, had invested significantly more in girls', boys' and women's education from the outset, the other results achieved might also have had a much firmer footing.

The year 2023 has started in Afghanistan amidst extreme food insecurity, drought, and economic crisis. Power is held by an extremist group that doesn't seem to be the least bit interested in the survival of citizens. But the West hardly wants to talk about Afghanistan anymore; who wants to remember a massive failure. Throughout 2022, the media and policymakers have been focused on the war in Ukraine and helping Ukrainians.

Women in Afghanistan are aware of this. That is why almost every Afghan woman interviewed appealed to Finland and Europe: Don't turn your back on us now, be our voice in the world; because, right now, we need your support more than ever. They particularly hope that Finland will be the messenger for Afghan women within the EU and especially in the UN Human Rights Council. Being forgotten is their greatest fear, because that's when they lose their most precious thing: Hope.

## **Sources:**

UNHCR: Situation Afghanistan situation, 2022

Watson, Brown: Human Costs of U.S. Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones | Figures, 2021



A girl playing football in a Womens' Garden in Kabul in February 2012.  
The Taliban closed the Women's Garden in 2022.

