



Photo credit: Afghans living in India gathered at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office in New Delhi to demand refugee status: Pradeep Gaur, Shutterstock, August 2021

As an International Community, We Cannot Turn Our Backs on the Women and Children of Afghanistan

Natalie Gonnella-Platts

Afghan women's and children's rights, agency, and well-being were eroded overnight when the Taliban seized power in August 2021.

As in nearly all conflicts and humanitarian crises, it is the women and children who now shoulder the burden of most of the fallout in Afghanistan, including increased instances of gender-based violence. This is particularly sad because Afghan women achieved more during the previous 20 years than most women's movements did across many more decades.

Afghan women were an important catalyst for progress—for themselves, their communities, and their country.

Critical pillars in the pursuit of democracy, security, and development, some of the most courageous women in the country have been threatened, assaulted, and killed by the Taliban for making the very impact that was previously celebrated by the international community.



**Gender Based
Violence**



**Wilson
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About the Series

Gender-based violence (GBV) affects one in three women worldwide, making it an urgent and important policy challenge. Many countries around the world have passed laws intended to protect women from violence, yet violence persists. Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised awareness of the perils women face from gender-based violence—what has come to be known as the “shadow pandemic”—but it has also aggravated risk factors while increasing barriers to protection, support, and justice.

This publication aims to focus on the intersection of gender-based violence and the rule of law by examining how legal frameworks, judicial system responses, and public policy contribute to the ways in which gender-based violence is—and is not—addressed around the world. Each piece addresses the complicated challenge of gender-based violence and the successes and failures of various public policy responses globally, and offers recommendations for a path forward.

Gender-based violence was already endemic across Afghanistan, with limited recourse and access to justice for survivors, despite protections outlined in national legislation.¹ Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the Taliban takeover, a majority of Afghan women experienced some form of physical, psychological, or sexual abuse, according to various studies, with underreporting also a serious challenge.² Most often, the perpetrators were reported by survivors to be close contacts—male relatives or spouses.³

“The international community still has a role to play in protecting the rights and well-being of Afghan women and children and other vulnerable populations.”

Today, the Taliban and other perverse actors like the Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) have already heightened the prevalence of the issue significantly—strategically leveraging violence against women and girls, as well as their exclusion from society, as a cornerstone of state-sponsored oppression.

Despite the recent US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the international community still has a role to play in protecting the rights and well-being of Afghan women and children and other vulnerable populations. Actions taken in the months and years ahead not only have the capacity to improve millions of lives but also to demonstrate the authenticity of the world’s commitment to confronting injustice and gender-based violence everywhere.

Afghanistan ranked as the worst country in the world for women, based on the 2021 Women, Peace, and Security Index from Georgetown University’s Institute for Women, Peace, and Security.⁴ Afghanistan’s relative and absolute score in 2021

was nearly 30 percent lower than it was in 2017, in part because of worsening security conditions.

Under the Taliban, women and girls live in daily fear of assault and even death for walking without a male escort in public or for leaving home without the cover of a burka. Unmarried women and young girls are also being forced into marriage and sexually abused, according to numerous accounts documented in the media and via personal testimonies received by advocates and organizations like the George W. Bush Institute.^{5, 6, 7}

Women have been excluded from employment, and adolescent girls and young women have been prevented from attending secondary and tertiary schools in most provinces. Those who have protested the restriction of their rights and agency in this way—including journalists documenting the struggle⁸—have been harassed and assaulted.⁹

Women’s shelters have been shuttered, and survivors of violence have been forced back into homes with their abusers.^{10, 11}

“Women’s rights advocates and other at-risk Afghans have been unable to secure safe passage out of Afghanistan.”

Female judges and lawyers who were instrumental in the advancement of access to justice and anti-gender-based violence efforts are being hunted by the very criminals whom they worked to put away for crimes against women and children.¹² As are female doctors who helped survivors of domestic violence, including women whose husbands set them on fire or threw acid on them.¹³

Meanwhile, women’s rights advocates and other at-risk Afghans have been unable to secure safe

passage out of Afghanistan. There is virtually no access to asylum in bordering countries. And serious barriers persist to obtaining a visa to escape to other regions, because the United States and other allies no longer provide consular services within Afghanistan. Advocates seeking safety have been beaten and killed.

“Afghan refugees face the harsh challenge of survival with limited access to resources or protection.”

Moreover, since the Taliban took over full control of Afghanistan in August, scarcities of food, water, and basic health care, as well as the likelihood of imminent economic collapse, have made the struggle of daily life extraordinarily difficult for ordinary Afghans. Families—desperate to survive in the midst of economic collapse and famine—have resorted to selling their daughters. Some are barely toddlers.

Those women who miraculously and courageously make it out face further risks of gender-based violence and inequity.

Idling in third countries for months and even years awaiting visa processing and resettlement, Afghan refugees face the harsh challenge of survival with limited access to resources or protection. And, in an already difficult environment, Afghans face further challenges to their well-being as a liquidity crisis has made access to personal assets impossible. Amid extremely uncertain immigration situations, limited financial means, and without access to basic support, Afghan women and children are forced to confront the risk of further exploitation and revictimization by traffickers, organized crime syndicates, and other nefarious actors.

Additionally, Afghan mothers who give birth in third countries face the very real possibility that their children will be denied their universal right to identity and nationality, further restricting future access to justice and protection of their rights under the law. While gender-based violence in Afghanistan was a serious challenge before August 2021, the Taliban’s brutality and the current humanitarian crisis have already exacerbated the issue significantly. Though the withdrawal may be complete, the international community shoulders a responsibility to protect the status and well-being of the Afghan people, especially the most vulnerable.

The United States and other NATO allies should expand the pathways to safety for at-risk women and other marginalized populations. For example, in the United States, the Biden administration should use executive authority to implement a special parole program for at-risk Afghans.

Donor countries and private-sector institutions must increase support for humanitarian aid into Afghanistan, particularly to meet acute food and medical needs for those most at risk—often women and children.

Intergovernmental organizations should work closely with regional nations to ensure that borders remain open, asylum is available, and refugee conventions are followed.

Public-private partnerships must mobilize to support at-risk Afghans in third countries awaiting final resettlement in places like the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, especially those most at risk of exploitation and gender-based violence in the future.

Resettlement efforts should also include gender-specific responses to integration, such as information advising women of their rights and

agency under the law and how to access social services and trauma support. These resources must be culturally competent and available across multiple languages.

Most important, the United Nations must uphold the protection of Afghan women and children's individual rights, well-being, and agency in keeping with its own international human rights guidelines. And as an international community, we must all ensure that those most impacted by the Taliban's abuse are represented and heard where it matters most. From social media to decision-making forums, we all have a role to play in elevating the voices, strength, and experiences of at-risk Afghans.

For some, the status of women and children in Afghanistan may seem like an isolated problem—an extreme example of gender-based violence and injustice, horribly unfortunate, but beyond the scope of concern considering other political and national security challenges. But the opposite is true.

When women and girls are marginalized, abused, and denied recognition and status under the law, countries fail and global security weakens. We've seen how this plays out before.

As an international community, we cannot turn our backs on the women and children of Afghanistan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

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