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For Afghan Women's
Education

The Voice of Afghan Diaspora Women must be heard

A dialogue between Afghan diaspora women and Members of the European Parliament

Report from the online public event on 27 October 2021

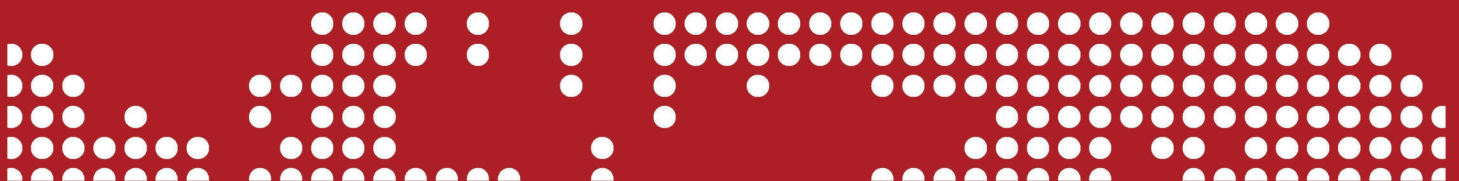


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1. Introduction

After 20 years of war and instability, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan on 15 August. This dramatic change has created increasing uncertainty for Afghan women and girls who must now wait to see how life pans out under the Taliban rule, as fears and uncertainties remain without a government in charge. Many women activists and those with links to the former government are also fearing for their lives; leaving their country seems the only survival strategy.

On 27 October 2021, the Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme (DRC DP), Members of the European Parliament, and the Rahela Trust organized an online public event between members of the EU Parliament and women from the Afghan diaspora to discuss the growing issues of Afghan women under the Taliban ruling.

The event took a deep dive on some of the main issues related to Afghan diaspora women in Europe. The aim was to provide Afghan diaspora women a platform to explain the situation on the ground from their point of view, voice their concerns and start a dialogue with key European Union stakeholders on how the EU can ensure that the gains from the last 20 years are preserved, how to respond to the humanitarian crisis with the specific needs of women and girls in mind and how to protect girls and women in Afghanistan as well as those seeking protection outside of Afghanistan.

At this event, we had contributions from:

- Members of the European Parliament, namely, MEP Dr. Dietmar Koster, MEP Cornelia Ernst, MEP Tineke Strik
- Afghan women: Rahela Sidiqi, Founder & Director of Rahela Trust for Afghan Women's Education; Sima Samar, the former Head of Afghanistan's Human Rights Commission; Farzana Elham Kochai, the young Afghan women leader and former the youngest Member of the Afghan Parliament; Lima Anwari, Women's Regional Network Afghanistan Core Group Member; and women/human rights activist, Manizha Wafeq, the President and Co-founder of Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI)
- Jared Rowell, DRC Country Director for Afghanistan

The event was moderated by MEP Dr. Dietmar Koster and was livestreamed on DRC Afghan Diaspora Engagement in Europe (ADEE)'s Facebook page, where you can still watch it. 64 participants took part in the event online and 1115 watched the video on DRC Facebook page at the time of this report.

2. Opening remarks

2.1. European Union's contribution towards women in Afghanistan

MEP Cornelia Ernst started her opening remarks by signifying the importance of having consistent dialogue between Afghan diaspora women and Members of the European Parliament. She explicitly mentioned that "to have spaces like this is very important for our work in the Parliament and also for our communication and understanding, as we already see that the topic of Afghanistan is disappearing from the major news outlets. We need to keep working together in order to keep the topic on the agenda". She believes that strengthening women in Afghanistan is key for development and for overcoming the existing social problems of the Afghan society. Without the collaboration with and information from Afghan diaspora women, the EU's work would not be possible, "as the EU works based on facts and experiences of stakeholders and now it is important that we align the facts and experiences of Afghan women with EU's work" added MEP Ernst. S

She elaborated that continued engagement with Afghan women will help the European Parliament to keep an eye on the actions of the European Commission and Member States towards Afghanistan. Regarding the protection of Afghans at risks, MEP Cornelia Ernst stated that "it is our obligation to protect Afghans at risk, keep up the evacuation and allow the humanitarian visas in Afghanistan and neighboring countries, safe travel and safe routes to protection. We need more pledges for resettlement and family reunification in Europe".

MEP Cornelia Ernst concluded by expressing the EU's commitment and solidarity to Afghan women in these difficult times. She mentioned that "We all know the situation for Afghan women and girls, and we are here as the Members of the European Parliament to express our full solidarity to Afghan women in and outside of Afghanistan, we see you, we hear you, and we need you".



2.2. DRC humanitarian response towards Afghanistan

On behalf of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Jared Rowell, DRC Country Director for Afghanistan, underlined DRC humanitarian commitment and contribution towards Afghanistan since 1999, as well as continued support to the constructive role of the Afghan diaspora in Europe. DRC is one of the largest NGOs in the country, with over 700 staff, nearly a third of whom are female Afghans. DRC is committed to resuming its programming, but conditional upon the permission by the de facto government for female staff to resume working in the same capacities as they used to do prior to August 15. Jared Powell noted that:

"Since August 15, DRC has made significant progress on this issue [female employee access to work], we have reached agreements with the new de-facto government in 11 out of 18 provinces where DRC provides humanitarian aid [...] However, female staff are operating under high degree of uncertainty and are very bravely continuing to work under a new regime that has concerning attitudes around the roles of women in the public sphere that is completely out of line with international norms and standards".

Moreover, with regards to supporting the Afghan diaspora, Jared Rowell underlined that since 2010 DRC has been supporting the constructive role of the Afghan diaspora as transnational civil society actors. On that note, currently the Diaspora Programme has 4 mutually reinforcing lines of activity focusing on supporting the Afghan diaspora humanitarian response; access to funding, migration information provision, and dialogue and advocacy.

2.3. The overall situation of Afghan women

Rahela Sidiqi elaborated on the current situation of Afghan women. During the last 20 years, Europe alongside the US played a central role in supporting Afghanistan's transformation for Afghan women. According to Rahela Sidiqi, supporting Afghan women against the Taliban was one of the main reasons for the interventions of European countries in Afghanistan. In the last 20 years, "I could see that women in Afghanistan were growing rapidly, they were fighting for equality and their rightful place in public life [...] some of them became artists, doctors, businesswomen, lawyers or professional athlete" added Rahela Sidiqi. But after the collapse of the country, the Taliban rapidly deprived women and girls of their rights to access education, choose their work and exercise freedom of expression.

To exemplify the situation, Rahela Sidiqi reflected on her personal experience of engaging with Afghan women after the 15th of August, stating that:

"Experiencing the desperate situation of my fellow Afghan women who are suffering, from England is extremely terrible [...] I receive hundreds of voice messages and emails on daily bases from women and girls that are in high danger of assassination. They scream out and cry. They beg me to help them flee the country as soon as possible. They are begging for their lives and the lives of their close ones".

Rahela Sidiqi emphasized that after investing so much in Afghanistan, Europe must continue supporting Afghan women and ensure that the Afghan women can live the life they deserve.

3. Panel Discussion

3.1. The situation of Afghan women and girls under the Taliban ruling

On the violation of human rights - including the violation of Afghan women's and girls' rights - Sima Samar underlined several critical points. First, Sima Samar stated that the Afghan people have always been victims between extreme right and extreme left political parties. In the past 40 years, all regimes have violated human rights without any accountability and justice for the victims of these abuses. For Sima Samar, there are multiple crises happening in Afghanistan.

Firstly, there is the political crisis as the Taliban took over the country by force: *"Political crisis for the normal people is that they don't know what will happen to them tomorrow [...] political uncertainty forces people not to focus and plan for their future"* stated Sima Samar.

Secondly, there is a widespread economic crisis throughout the country. The banks are in the verge of collapse, people had already been displaced because of the drought and war, losing their harvest incomes. "In the north for example, they have very good quality melon, but they could not collect it because of the conflict, and same is true for the other harvests such as almond, pomegranate, watermelon, etc." mentioned Sima Samar.

For Sima Samar, the third crisis that hunts the lives of Afghans is Covid-19 and the lack of basic social services and resources linked to that. She mentioned that: *"Covid-19 has put a lot of people in a difficult situation. Because of social distancing, people were not allowed to work, particularly it was hard for women when they were working as domestic help or doing some handicraft at home, because there was no market for them"*.

The fourth major crisis for Sima Samar is the increasing violation of the basic human rights of Afghans, such as the 'freedom of expression', 'censorship', or 'human security'. "Human security for me is to be free from hunger, to be sure that my children are going to school, and that they are coming back, and to be free from the tension that I paid the rent of my house for this month what about the next month" stated Sima Samar. In addition, poverty has increased and has caused more violence against women. For instance, Sima Samar explained that "child marriage and forced marriage have increased, because they sell one child to feed the others [...] prostitution has increased, because there is no other possibility for women to survive".

For both the domestic and outside violence against Afghan women, there is no institution for women to claim their rights and get a service. Because the human rights commission is not working, the Ministry of Women's Affairs has been eliminated, and Family Response Unit in the police is not working.

In her final remarks, Sima Samar called upon the European Parliament to stand firm and condemn the violation of human rights. She suggested that *"our approach should always be based on human rights principle and non-discriminatory[...]. In order to protect basic human rights, we need an inclusive, diversified government based on rule of law and based on respect for human rights"*.

3.2. The situation of former political women in Afghanistan

Following the remarks on the general situation of Afghan women, Farzana Elham Kochai dug into the specific challenges that the Afghan women politicians are currently undergoing in Afghanistan. Farzana Kochai stated that:

"Everyone knows that Afghan women politicians, women's rights defenders, promoters of democracy and freedom have always been the targets of the Taliban. The Afghan women politicians were already concerned about their security situation and were focusing more on their safety.

Unfortunately, some of them have lost their lives and their loved ones during the last 20 years. But now, the Afghan women politicians cannot do anything. They are forced to hide and relocate from one place to another to protect themselves. Their personal and private properties and belongings have been taken from them by the Taliban. They have no place to seek help from".

With the takeover of the Taliban, the political participation of Afghan women has been completely taken away. There is zero representation of Afghan women in any of the senior government positions and there is no sign or hope for their future political participation. According to Farzana Kochai "Afghan political women are living in great uncertainty, fear, bad feelings and not knowing what will happen to them".

To exemplify how the situation is like for Afghan political women in Afghanistan, Farzana Kochai touched upon her personal experience of struggle, mentioning that *"I was in Afghanistan for two months after the takeover of the Taliban. I was struggling day and night with hiding and relocating myself to different places due to the fear of assassination, until I luckily managed to flee the country".*

Having said that, Farzana Kochai urged the EU Parliament to make the legitimacy and recognition of the Taliban conditional to women's rights protection in Afghanistan and requested to continue to have similar dialogues with EU politicians to ensure a space for Afghan women to tell their stories and raise their concerns.

3.3. Access to education and social activism for Afghan girls

After the Taliban seized power in August, they closed girls' schools throughout the country. While they repeatedly said that they will reopen secondary schools, access to education for Afghan girls is severely restricted. Lima Anwari explained how restricted access to education has become for Afghan girls after the takeover.

"Since the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Afghan girls regained their rights to education. They enjoyed going to schools and studying various programmes - from software engineering to medicine and different other fields in the last 20 years. In 2018, according to UNESCO report, the female literacy rate in Afghanistan reached to 30% [...]. However, when the Taliban took over Afghanistan, they severely restricted access to education for Afghan girls, in addition to other women's rights abandonment. Despite the Taliban's claim that they will open the schools and universities for girls, up until this second all schools and universities are closed for Afghan girls above grade 6. [...] There is a major disconnect between what the Taliban mention in the international media that they have changed on women's education and social activism and what they are actually doing, despite the assurances from their leaders and commanders, they impose restricted and harsh rules".

On the restriction on access to education for Afghan girls, Lima Anwari further elaborated by sharing the daily experience of her mother, who is a schoolteacher in a female high school at the central part of Kabul city. Lima Anwari mentioned that:

"Every day when I call her [Lima Anwari's mother] and ask her about the situation in Afghanistan, my first question is: did the Taliban open the girls' schools in Afghanistan above grade 6. The response is unfortunately NO not yet. She [mother] tells me that there are rumors that they will open the schools and universities for girls soon, but it is not true because they would say the same things during their previous government in 1990s".

Lima Anwari further elaborated that when there are weekly school committees' meetings, the female teachers are not even allowed to attend. The Taliban ask female teachers to send their male representatives. The joy and happiness that the female students and female teachers had when entering their classrooms have been lost and replaced by fear and uncertainty- *"for many girls the end to their education means shutting down their dreams"* added Lima Anwari.

Therefore, Lima Anwari, in her final remarks, urged the EU's Parliament support to push the Taliban to ensure access to education to Afghan women and girls.

3.4. Access to work and economic activities

As the President and Co-founder of Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (A WCCI), Manizha Wafeq provided an overview of how many women businesses were active prior to August 15 and at what the situation is now.

"We have had over 57,000 women businesses in Afghanistan, 2471 of them were formal licensed businesses and the rest over 54,000 of them were informal unlicensed businesses all over the country. All of these 57,000 businesses in Afghanistan were in all sectors. They have started in all non-traditional sectors and all male dominant sectors, such as media services, IT services, private schools, private clinics, exporting, manufacturing, logistics, construction, etc. they had really become role models for the next generation of our young women to choose entrepreneurship and business by profession and start their businesses. Not only these women had become role models, but also women that were employees in different sectors, such as telecom, other big factories, service industries".

The young women generation had started getting from mid-level managerial to high leadership roles in the private sector. For example, in the banking and telecom sectors, each employing approximately 300.000 persons before the Taliban take over, "20% of their employees were women. Right now, less than half of them are going to their jobs, and more than half of them are not going to their jobs especially in small cities and provinces due to fear that they have had from the previous Taliban rule in Afghanistan" added Manizha Wafeq.

Manizha Wafeq explained that in the last week of July and the first week of August, they were planning and designing on how to promote women businesses not only at the national level but also at the international platforms.

She mentioned that:

"We were planning to take 60 businesswomen to Dubai Expo, who had all kinds of traditional and non-traditional businesses. Also, we were planning to have two fashion shows, because the clothing industry and jewelry industry had emerged so well, and the businesswomen were able to present it to the international markets using the Dubai Expo platform. But unfortunately, all of a sudden after the first week of August we changed from planning and talking about promoting women businesses to security, evacuation, and visa applications. This was a very unprecedented situation. I think none of us Afghan deserve to be put in that situation".

Moreover, Manizha Wafeq criticized the roles and responsibilities of the International Community concerning their development approach for Afghanistan. She mentioned that the investment that the International Community have made to elevate the status of Afghan women in Afghanistan somehow paid off, but comparing the inputs to the outcomes, Afghanistan could have had better stronger sectors, institutions and communities. Manizha Wafeq believes that Afghanistan collapsed because of the development approach of the International Community, "[...] the Afghans didn't have ownership, they were considered beneficiaries, not stakeholders and partners in the process of development".

Manizha Wafeq recommend not only to restart humanitarian aid but also development aid in which Afghan women are considered as partners, stakeholders to the development and to the change of their situation and not beneficiaries. *"We need to continue our engagement talking about women's status and women's position from a powerful position [...] they should be allowed to resume their businesses and other operations"* concluded Manizha Wafeq.



Afghan demo in Denmark, photo credit: Sergiu Leustean, 2021

4. Discussion

The panel testimonies were followed by a question-and-answer session by the panelists and MEPs. Rahela Sidiqi, on behalf of the Afghan women panelists, raised the following questions to the EU Parliament.

Q1: *How can the European Parliament support in restarting evacuation of those at the highest risks including: widows of victims of war, female police, civil society activists/human rights defenders, judge, solicitors, journalists, army wives and children, and low-ranking government female employees?*

Answer by MEP Cornelia Ernst: "I think we should look at EU Parliament and EU commission as important actors and we have the responsibility to put it in the agenda, in the plenaries, and in the committees. I, Dr. Dietmar, Tineke and other colleagues from the Parliament are in the process of establishing a 'working group' on Afghanistan where we can discuss about all questions and look what we can put in the agenda and in the resolutions in the Parliament. But all of this is one level at the EU. The other level that we must keep in mind is the Member States level. And when we speak about the evacuation, it is necessary to work with the Parliament. I, together with my other colleagues will try to put it in the agenda and initiatives inside the Parliament. But we need a lot of pressure on the Member States, and this is very important".

Answer by MEP Tineke Strik: "I think we also have a responsibility in terms of the resettlement. The EU Commission has called for 40,000 pledges for Afghans. But I am a bit pessimistic on that because we can see that such announcements were made before, but were not met by the Member States. We really need to push much harder the Member States. In my meeting with the team on resettlement, I proposed to organize a conference with members of national parliaments and maybe also you [Afghan women] could take part in that to show the urgent pledges on stepping up the resettlement programmes.

"On the evacuation, we urge the EU to take a much more proactive coordinating role in this evacuation. Because until now it is really left to the Member States. We see ad hoc cooperation; therefore, we see some gap for the people who worked for the EU funded projects. So, we really urge the European External Action Services to ensure the EU member states do take out these people and prioritize women like female judges and so on.

"Regarding the Afghan diaspora outside Afghanistan, I think we should be critical towards Afghans who are now stuck in Iran and Pakistan, because their [Pakistan and Iran] positions are not always positive because of the regimes over there. I think if we are providing our support there, it should also go with conditions regarding empowering women gaining their rights. We could do that as there is a lot of money promised for supporting refugees there".

Answer by MEP Dr. Dietmar Koster: "Regarding the evacuation, I think it is very important to organize safe passages to those in need. That's a moral duty for EU that the refugees are coming from Afghanistan and must be ready for it".

Q2: *Access to education for girls and women is a key concern for Afghan families, is there any way the European Parliament can ensure that women's rights are upheld?*

Answer by Cornelia Ernst: "The question is that can the Parliament do it alone? I think it is not possible alone. We need strong cooperation with Afghans and Afghan stakeholders then we can make the pressure in the Parliament, but we cannot do it alone".

Q3: *which actions can the European Parliament take to ensure that Taliban do not target Afghan minorities, such as: female police, judges, sportswomen, wives and children of the Afghan National Army?*

Answer by Cornelia Ernst: "I think with the situation of minorities we can do a lot. Maybe we should think about a resolution so that the minorities should get protection. We have a lot of contacts to Hazara and other minorities in Afghanistan. The sportswomen are an important point that we should discuss. We need so many facts and experience from you that we will put these issues in agenda, and we will do that, by setting up the working group on Afghanistan".

Q4: *The Taliban is forcing families to leave their villages. What actions can the European Parliament take, to ensure that the Taliban upholds land and property rights?*

Answer by MEP Dr. Dietmar Koster: "The topic of Afghanistan might disappear from the international political agenda. We should make sure to raise it again and again to keep the topic alive. We need to ensure measures to sustainably support Afghan women and girls towards an inclusive society in Afghanistan. We must be tough on these issues towards the Taliban. We need to discuss these in the Parliament. We must make the development aid conditional to our demand on inclusivity in Afghanistan".

5. Concluding remarks and recommendations

In her concluding remarks, MEP Tineke Strik re-emphasized the European Union's commitment and upcoming policies pertaining Afghan women in Afghanistan and beyond. After acknowledging the insights of Afghan women panelists and thanking their contribution to the event, MEP Tineke Strik emphasized that such dialogue should continue, as learning about experiences and ideas of Afghan women on what is happening in Afghanistan is highly critical for the EU's programming. MEP Tineke Strik stated that:

"In the resolution of the EU Parliament on Afghanistan, we tried to cover many different aspects and many of these paragraphs were dedicated to the position of women and girls. We clearly underlined as a Parliament that we should be tough on our conditions towards the Taliban, especially regarding the rights of women and girls that there is a representation of women and girls in the government and other levels of politics. And women and girls have the same access to humanitarian aid without discrimination and education for girls to be continued".

MEP Strik elaborated that the EU Parliament will make sure not to allow development aid projects to be implemented by the Taliban, as long as they do not meet the conditions. Instead, the projects should be redirected through local communities and international NGOs that have the aim to engage with women and girls regarding their education, empowerment, and freedom.

On a positive note, MEP Tineke Strik stated that *"the labor market for Afghan women has not completely gone yet, therefore the EU Parliament will push to implement projects to seize the opportunity and strengthen Afghan women"*.

5.1. Key recommendations

Following MEP Strik's closing remarks, Rahela Sidiqi thanked the panelists and MEPs for their valuable insights and contributions. She compiled the following key recommendations and messages raised by the panelists during their interventions:

- Human rights are not a western value but a human value; therefore, the international community needs to ensure respect for human rights in Afghanistan. Without respect for human rights no peace and development will be sustainable.
- The European Parliament should help ensure that Afghan women at risks are supported to find safety.
- The European Parliament needs to ensure that the recognition of the Taliban cannot happen if women's rights, including access to political representation, is not a reality.
- The European Parliament should push the Taliban to ensure access to education. Female teachers should be able to continue teaching, following the current curriculum.
- The EU and International Community need to work with Afghan women for both aid & development as partners not beneficiaries.

To sum up, Rahela Sidiqi stated that *"women in Afghanistan are at the mercy of the Taliban and Afghan women in the diaspora are struggling to help them. We hope that this discussion will help strengthen the relations between Afghan diaspora women and one of our most important partners - the European Parliament"*.

Danish Refugees Council's Diaspora Programme (DRC DP)

Since 2010, Danish Refugee Council (DRC) has been working with diaspora groups as transnational civil society actors. Engagement with diaspora is based on a recognition of the significant role they play for people and communities in countries of origin (or heritage), for refugees and migrants in transit, and for newly arrived refugees and migrants in countries of residence, and, consequently, their potential for improving the situation for many of those affected by conflict and displacement.

For more information please visit our official website: www.drc.ngo/diaspora

Rahela Trust for Afghan Women's Education

The Rahela Trust was set up in response to the many attacks on girls and young women seeking an education across Afghanistan. Our mission is to provide scholarships to women from disadvantaged backgrounds to enable them to pursue higher education and, ultimately, to contribute to shaping a progressive Afghan society.

For more information please visit: www.rahelatrust.org

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