



Atlantic Council

The advocates for women in Afghanistan



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Those speaking up for the women of Afghanistan are exhausted. Women's Day does not feel like a celebration that includes the women of Afghanistan or those who support them. Advocates for the women facing gender apartheid in Afghanistan include men and non Afghans as well, but the group that holds the

most personal connection to what is going on, are the women from Afghanistan who are outside of the country. As we speak out for our sisters in tiny spaces of social media or at roundtables and art shows, many of us express and feel shame that it's not enough to change what the Taliban are doing. I see advocates that keep going in the name of raising awareness on a daily basis, even while time and time again a basic right is taken away from our sisters and world leaders do nothing meaningful to stop it.

The women in Afghanistan have had over 533 days without the right to a full education. The list of bans continues to grow, as the Taliban fixate on their obsession with control over women. From clothing decrees to career bans, to gyms and parks, sim card purchasing, travelling and the right to divorce. None justified by religion or culture. To the advocates, it seems a simple message to say that women are facing violations of human rights and that the world has a responsibility to take action. What advocates have had to face as we repeat this and watch the women of our country suffer, desperate to help them, is that we are not speaking to a healthy world. The audience to which we speak is a big part of the challenge, because gender equality itself, what we call systems of "progress" are not stable and strong anywhere. Advocates are realizing that if there was a true sense of collectivism or equality, we would not be met, at best, with looks of sympathy, and pity for our cause. We would instead be joined by the entire world with anger, determination and respect for the courage of Afghanistan's women. The Taliban is the ideology that hurts Afghan women, but we have also learned in the past nineteen months that the lack of support is an obstacle in itself.

Advocates have solicited help from politicians and humanitarian organizations to the point of exhaustion. We may feel defeated by the lack of meaningful response, but it is worth critically thinking about what we are up against when we approach representatives of these systems. Yes, women exist in high political positions and it makes sense we implore them and their colleagues to effectively lobby for or create consequences for the Taliban in response to their treatment of Afghanistan's population. Since August 15 2021, western politicians have shown

up for endless meetings to discuss how bad things are for the women of Afghanistan, taking notes and sending emails of thanks for the discussions and insights. Perhaps we need to face the fact that people in such positions usually work less for change or freedom and focus more on making their political party look effective. That is their job. We must understand that when politicians, especially women, speak against their party, they risk their careers and sense of credibility. That risk is only worsened if they speak up for the women of Afghanistan or against the Taliban. How would they comfortably keep their political careers if they spoke up for a country their own armies were instructed to walk away from? It makes sense that many will, for their own sake, remain silent and inactive unless an action or stance suits their political aspirations. Looking for change in the narrative of individual politicians is not necessarily practical, including from women in politics who have to keep themselves employed in the most patriarchal profession of all. Support may come, if it is convenient, the way it was in 2001 to "save Afghan women".

Advocates for the women in Afghanistan have also faced that many proclaimed *feminists*, both women and men who claim to support equality, are excusing themselves of speaking up for Afghanistan. Many are finding comfort in their inaction, by saying the situation in our country is *confusing*. To a degree, they have a point. The messages on behalf of the women in Afghanistan are rarely given by *them*, or more safely by those who have left since August 15, 2021. Instead there is a perplexing array of people and mixed messages. There are American led think tanks on TV claiming that money is the only thing Afghanistan needs. Western men *experts* meet with rooms full of other men and conclude little to nothing. The Taliban even shared "protests" by "women" in clothing unfamiliar to Afghanistan, saying Afghan women *don't want rights*, all while engaging in what appeared to be the right to protest safely. Logic has disappeared from the large media platforms thanks to this failure to amplify the voices of Afghan women themselves. Afghanistan has been made to look confusing, and this chaotic messaging has given many an easy reason to walk away. Advocates are left to repeatedly echo the words of women protestors in Afghanistan, on much smaller platforms than these Taliban lobbyists are given.

With patience, the advocates echo their sisters in Afghanistan: basic human rights are a must. That should not, no matter what they hear the lobbyists say, confuse anyone. When you say Afghan women want the right to go to school, to work and to provide for their families, and people still find it confusing, it is exhausting. But the advocates keep going.

Advocates are also faced with accusations of abandoning their country, while case after case, it is proven that voicing concern for women is punished in Afghanistan. Advocates are faced with a lack of interest by the media. Advocates are faced with conversations that put the burden of political solutions on them. "What should be done?" is a regular question. And the answer we all want to scream is, do what you would do if it were your sisters! Start by being openly angry about it!

The advocates that dedicate themselves fully to the rights of Afghan women, despite the limited response, I applaud you. Activist groups, artists, authors, filmmakers, teachers, mothers, daughters, sisters, brothers, fathers and friends. Any politicians who dare to be exceptions. The members of humanitarian groups who raise their voice on what is becoming an unpopular subject, thank you. Individuals who use whatever platform they have to say something about the women who feel forgotten, thank you. And to those women and girls in Afghanistan, of course thank you the most for not giving up. Although your supporters are not always in the highest positions with massive platforms, we do exist and we learn from your example to be steadfast in the message, clear and unwavering in the demand that all human beings deserve rights.

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