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## ECONOMICS

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### UNFINISHED BUSINESS

# Don't pity the women of Afghanistan, support them



“The fight is not over.”

Image: Thomson Reuters Foundation/Stefanie Glinski

By **Annalisa Merelli** Published August 19, 2021



It is a terrifying time to be a woman in Afghanistan. With the Taliban's history of oppression and reports of violence and threats against women, the new government's reassurances that it will respect women's rights—to study, work, and participate in the government—are [hard to believe](#).

The situation is in flux, and those on the ground are preparing for the worst. Yet the Afghan [women](#) who can are standing up to that fear and showing up for work. As a [Chinese commentator](#) put it they “treat their routine work as a way of resistance.”

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Female anchors of [TOLO News](#), Afghanistan's most established 24/7 news network, are back [hosting broadcasts](#), despite [facing pushback](#) from the Taliban. [Their colleagues](#) are reporting on camera from the streets of the capital. Other women have been [taking to the streets](#), and activists have not shied away from [exposing their identity](#) on social media, demanding that their rights be maintained under the new rule.

Ending the oppression of Afghan women has long been used as a justification of American [intervention in Afghanistan](#), as well as often touted as a sign of the success of foreign military presence in the country. But the architects of the US troop withdrawal, and even the peace talks that preceded it, largely discounted women's safety, suggesting their freedom was never a top item on the agenda.

### **Women's rights at risk under the Taliban**



Life for women in Afghanistan changed significantly in the past 20 years, with most gains made since 2011. [Workforce participation](#) rose more than 50%, and according to USAID, enrollment in schools went from 900,000 male students in 2001 to 9.5 million in 2020, with girls making up 39%.

But this only means more is at stake, and Afghan women risk losing all they have accomplished as foreign forces left them to their fate. This is causing a deep sense of betrayal, says Mina Sharif, an Afghan rights advocate who had left Afghanistan last year due to Covid-19, but was planning to return home.

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While the speed of the Taliban's takeover caught most by surprise, signs the US withdrawal agreement wouldn't be enough to protect women's rights were always there. At the peace talks between the Taliban and the US [conducted in Doha](#), Qatar in 2019, female representation was limited and negotiating parties did not spend much time considering how to ensure women's safety. As a result, the agreement [doesn't include any provisions to](#) preserve the social advances made by women.

"They didn't prioritize the role of Afghan women," says Raziya Masumi, an Afghan lawyer and human rights activist who is studying in the Netherlands. "This is the reason Afghan women are in this tragedy."

### **Afghan women will keep fighting**

Now that women are enduring the fallout from that plan, the narrative that is emerging from the White House is that locals lacked the will to stand up against the Taliban, despite all the help they received. "We gave them every chance to determine their own

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future. What we could not provide them was the will to fight for that future,” Joe Biden said of Afghan troops in his speech addressing the unfolding situation in the country.

That’s an unfortunate narrative, says Sharif. “I know what it looks like from abroad. It looks like money has been pumped into Afghanistan for all this time and the international community has sort of offered this new concept of democracy, and women going to school, and women being in the workforce, and we didn’t get it” she adds.

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But whatever progress women conquered over the past decade wasn’t due to the influence of international values, but to the fact that [the Taliban](#) was under control, she adds. Afghan women don’t need foreign models of freedom and empowerment; what they needed, she says, was a plan to protect their safety after troop withdrawal.

“Afghanistan has a 5,000-year history and it has had women in leadership roles far before the West,” she says. “We didn’t need to be taught how to do these things. We simply needed, and got, and appreciated the promise of a secure environment in order to get back to that.”

### **What can the world do for Afghan women now**

Now many of the women who have had pivotal roles in rebuilding Afghan society in the past decade see fleeing the country as their only hope. The US and other countries can help with this, both by opening [borders to refugees](#), and setting them up so they can help fight the Taliban’s restrictions on women’s rights from abroad.

But beyond the immediate state of emergency, the international community’s focus should be on holding the Taliban accountable, says Pashtana Durrani, a female [education activist](#) who is in hiding in Afghanistan and is committed to stay in the country. “The Taliban today isn’t the Taliban of 20 years ago: It needs the confirmation of the international community,” she adds.

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This need for international recognition and aid provides leverage to force it to respect women’s rights. Since the takeover, Durrani has been demanding that the Taliban replace its vague statements about education and work rights with [specific commitments](#) to guarantee that women can continue their non-religious education all the way to university, and pursue their career of choice. “I don’t think what [the Taliban] are saying and doing is the same thing,” Durrani says.

The international community should track metrics—school enrollment, workforce participation—and pay attention to the reality outside the capital and bigger cities. It should also listen to women on the ground, especially when their accounts contradict official statements, she says.

Masumi, meanwhile, believes Afghan women will keep on fighting even without international support, fueled by the progress they had made in recent years. The Taliban, she expects, will try to strip them of their ability to study and work, but by doing so it will eventually sabotage itself. In the long run, it won’t be able to run a country without the women, who have become part of the fabric of key institutions.

“I am not going to feel like I am defeated. We have to rise up,” she says. “If the Taliban takes out all women from their roles, how long will it last?”

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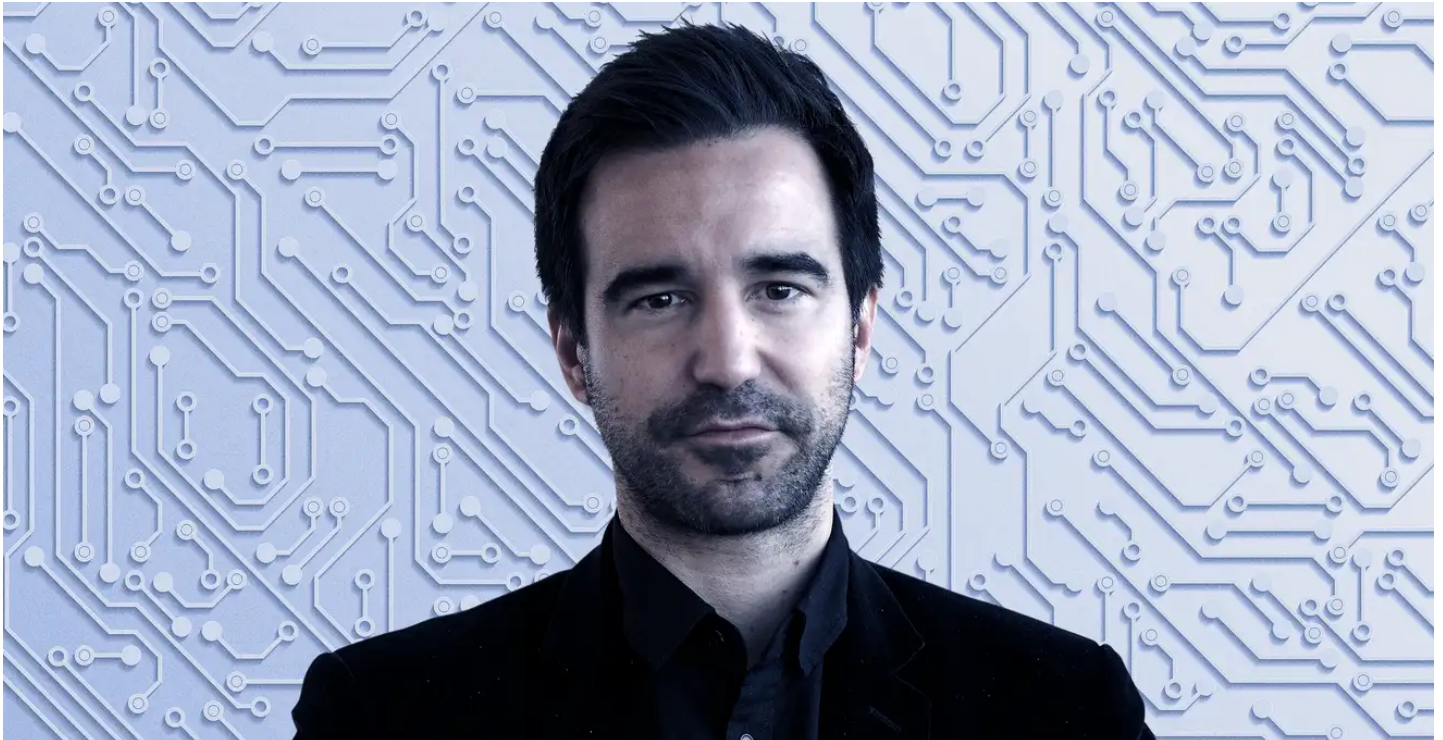


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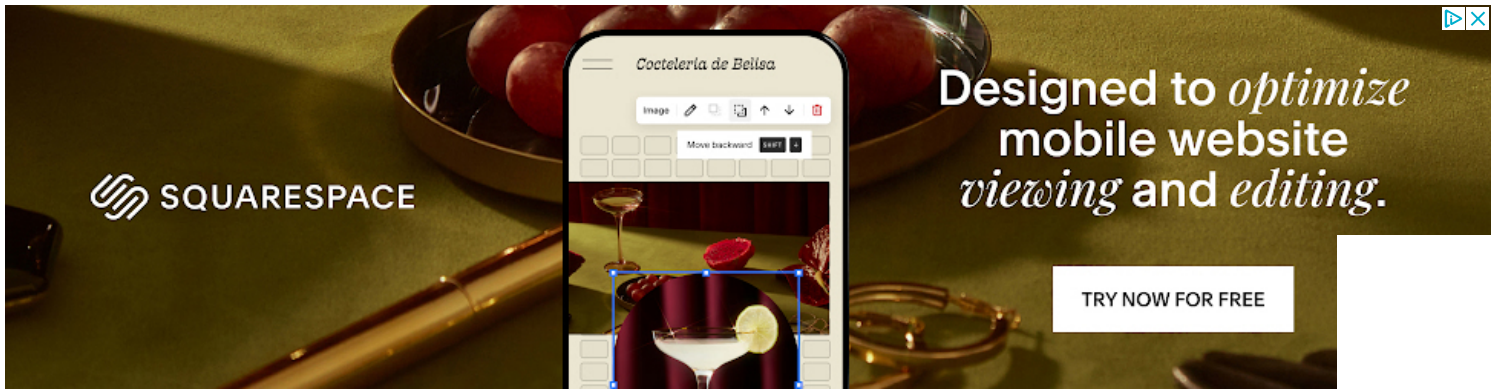
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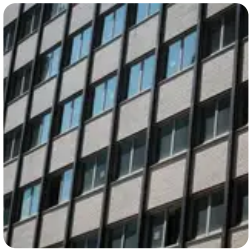


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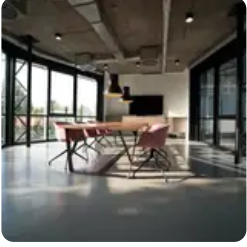


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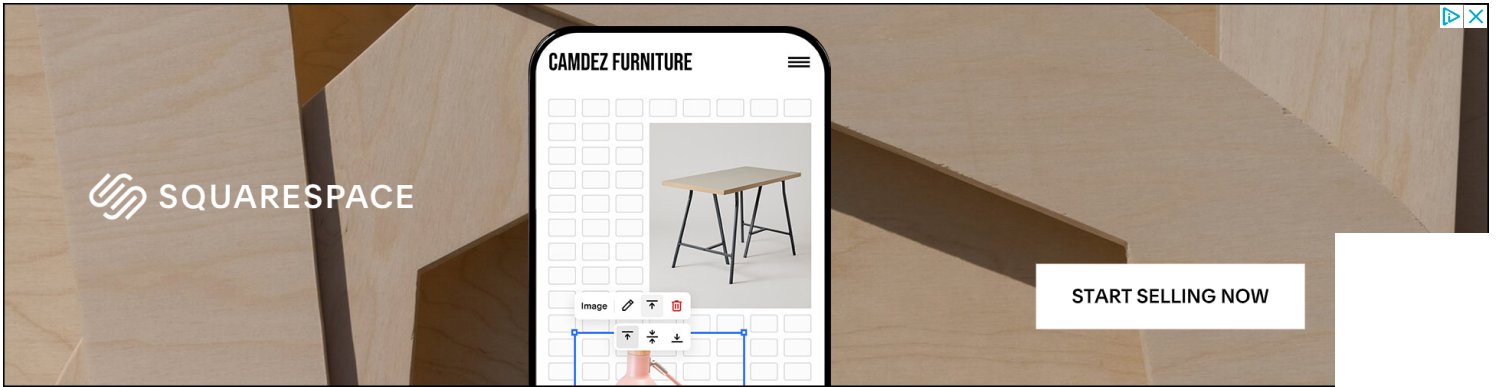


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