

Afghanistan and Its Challenge to Feminism¹

Frieda Afary*

*Correspondence: fafarysecond@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article examines Afghan women's resistance against the return to power of the Taliban since August 2021. It also critically evaluates the different attitudes that global feminists have expressed about the plight of the Afghan people and the much needed solidarity with Afghan women.

In the two years since the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Afghan women have resisted in many ways, ranging from street protests to organizing underground classes and meetings, and distributing food among impoverished women and children. Some feminist activists have been abducted by the Taliban or executed. Others have been forced into arranged marriages in order to have a male guard at all times. Many others are languishing in refugee camps in Pakistan, Europe, and the United States. The Taliban have banned girls from continuing their education after sixth grade, and have banned women and girls from going to public places, including parks, or traveling without male relatives. They have also banned Afghan women from working for local and international aid organizations, including the United Nations (see chronology). These decisions have led many aid organizations to suspend or scale back their programs across the country. Without female aid workers and without funding from aid organizations, Afghan women and children have been cut off from aid and are dying of hunger and disease. Afghanistan is facing an increasing humanitarian crisis due to the flight of non-governmental organizations that had provided many with jobs, health care, and food



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¹ Parts of this article first appeared in *New Politics* in Winter 2022.

assistance. Half of Afghanistan's population of 40 million is facing food insecurity, and 6 million are facing famine (Goldbaum 2023).

The Taliban's August 2021 takeover of power following the brutal, twenty-year, imperialist occupation by the United States was a catastrophe not only for Afghan women but also for women throughout the world. It is true that often times world powers close their eyes to atrocities against women, including most recently the rape and mass incarceration of Uyghur Muslim women in Xinjiang by the Chinese government, the rape and ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslim women by the Myanmar government, and the rape and assault on women in Sudan, Congo, and Ethiopia's Tigray Region by government forces. What is different about the case of Afghanistan, however, is that the US government and other occupying NATO allies practically handed over power to the Taliban, a misogynist, racist, and jihadist army that the occupation had originally sought to uproot. The Taliban is an army that is in many ways similar to ISIS and to the Ku Klux Klan in its extremism and brutality (Achcar 2021; Cole 2021).

Since taking power, the Taliban have assaulted women's protests, beaten and censored reporters, stopped girls over the age of twelve from attending school, forced girls over age twelve to marry Taliban fighters, banned women from universities, forced most employed women to stay home, reinstated complete gender segregation, and replaced the Department of Women's Affairs with their morality police, aka the Department of Promotion of Virtue and Prohibition of Vice (Nebhay and Farge 2021; Pal 2021; Engelbrecht and Hassan 2021).

Pakistan—which groomed and financed the Taliban from its inception—along with China, Russia, and Iran, which have all been assisting the Taliban for some years, are now the dominant imperialist powers in

Afghanistan. They have made their own arrangements with the Taliban to further facilitate the ability of all parties to exploit and oppress the population (Rashid 2010; Zhou 2021; Kuo 2021; Fathollah-Nejad and Azizi 2021; Chatterjee Miller 2021).

According to a representative of RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, ‘The roles which the U.S, Europe, China, Russia, and Pakistan have played in Afghanistan have been very destructive and militaristic. China, Russia, and their allies are also competing with the United States and do not care about the plight of the Afghan people. The U.S. used the slogan of democracy and “war on terror” to promote an imperialist occupation and a corrupt, U.S. -backed government for twenty years and to force this government on the Afghan people. The U.S. has shown that it can make peace with the Taliban when it is in its interest. All these governments use the very real need for humanitarian aid to justify diplomatic recognition of the Taliban.’ (quoted in Afary 2021a).

After the Taliban’s return to power, some progressives and feminists around the world issued statements in solidarity with Afghan women. Activists from Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and India, as well as Europe, Canada, the United States, and Hong Kong organized protest gatherings and meetings. Many are also actively helping Afghan refugees. Some African American feminists now include discussions of Afghan women’s rights alongside those of Haitian women (Black Women for Wellness 2021). Some feminists are collecting funds for female refugees and women inside Afghanistan. Others are attempting to provide online education to women and girls.

There are many barriers, however, in the way of organizing global feminist solidarity. These barriers are not limited to lack of funds or resources, but also emanate from the lack of a clear analysis of why Afghan women are in

this crisis and what can be done to address this situation in a fundamental way. Here I would like to consider three of the attitudes expressed by feminists that reveal both the barriers and the pathways that can help us move forward.

1. Among liberal feminists, many accept the US deal with the Taliban and seem to think that the only solution for now is to use economic pressure to make the Taliban more inclusive.
2. Among leftist feminists, some believe that the Taliban are the lesser of two evils for Afghan people after twenty years of US occupation and should thus be recognized or engaged with.
3. Among some progressives and socialist feminists, there is principled opposition to the United States and other imperialist powers, as well as the Taliban. There is also support for the struggles of Afghan women against religious fundamentalism and imperialism.

Liberals Who Justify US Imperialism's Deal with the Taliban

Many liberal feminists, such as Michelle Goldberg, columnist for the *New York Times*, admit that the US occupation was a corrupt effort that led to the deaths and suffering of tens of thousands of Afghan civilians. They have supported the US withdrawal. However, they argue that President Joseph Biden could not renege on the deal that former President Donald Trump had made with the Taliban (Goldberg 2021; Goodwin 2021). They ignore the fact that Biden was not obliged to carry out the deal in order to withdraw US forces. They also ignore the fact that it was the Obama administration that started negotiating with the Taliban. The Obama administration asked the Qatari government to open a diplomatic office for the Taliban in Doha in 2013; the purpose was to facilitate negotiations behind the backs of Washington's own puppet Afghan government (Whitlock 2021; Tankel 2018).

Another liberal feminist, Farah Stockman, a member of the *New York Times* editorial board, argues that the US government should ‘leverage money and international recognition to incentivize the Taliban to establish the most inclusive and moderate government possible.’ In her view, ‘even a deeply flawed government in Kabul is preferable to no government at all’ (Stockman 2021).

Leftists Who Call for Recognizing or Engaging with the Taliban

Nancy Lindisfarne, co-author of *Afghan Village Voices* and co-editor of *Dislocating Masculinity and Masculinities under Neoliberalism*, and Jonathan Neale, former abortion and HIV counselor and author of *A People’s History of the Vietnam War*, argue that the Taliban should be viewed as the will of the Afghan people (Lindisfarne and Neale 2021). They emphasize that the Taliban, although ‘deeply misogynist’ and ‘sometimes racist and sectarian,’ have popular support inside Afghanistan because of the cruelty and corruption of the American occupation. ‘The Taliban have offered two things across the country: ... They are not corrupt ... [and] are willing to rule for the poor.’ Lindisfarne and Neale go on to argue that, the ‘new’ Taliban, are not the Taliban of 2001 but have become more inclusive and also have ‘concerns for the rights of women.’ They are ‘an army of poor peasants.’ They are ‘anti-imperialist.’ They ‘want peace.’ Lindisfarne and Neale make a distinction between Afghan women and Afghan feminists. They claim that most Afghan women do not oppose the Taliban and sarcastically add that those progressives who want to help Afghan feminists can ‘organize to buy them airplane tickets and give them refuge in Europe and North America.’ While most leftists do not back such a crude and shameful defense of the Taliban, the view of the Taliban as a popular, anti-imperialist force with support from women is not uncommon within the left.

Anand Gopal is the author of *No Good Men Among the Living* (2014) a Pulitzer Prize–winning book on the US occupation of Afghanistan. In his moving article, “The Other Afghan Women,” he recounts the life story of a rural Afghan woman named Shakira from her childhood during the Soviet Union’s occupation up to the return of the Taliban in 2021. He shows that even when some rural women say they prefer the Taliban forces to the Karzai and Ghani governments and the US occupation, it is not because they admire the Taliban but because they have experienced bombings under US occupation. In fact, rural women do support women’s rights and want rights for *all* women, not only for urban women (Gopal 2021).

However, even Gopal calls for engaging with the Taliban. He does not advocate for the immediate recognition of the Taliban government, but he does argue that ‘given that there are different currents within the Taliban, the extent to which the international community tries to engage with the pragmatic current, that could empower that pragmatic current against the hardliners’ (Remnick 2021).

Principled Anti-Fundamentalist Feminist Solidarity

As part of an effort to articulate a principled collective position, a group of Iranian feminist organizations in exile issued a statement, in which they wrote: ‘We condemn the recognition of the Taliban government by any country under the claim that “the Taliban have changed and have become more moderate.” We stand with the women of Afghanistan against the Taliban, who, after reconquering power, have turned women and girls into sexual slaves for their soldiers’ (Collective Action 2021).

A coalition of Indian women’s groups issued a call for Afghan solidarity demonstrations throughout India on August 23, 2021. Their demands included the following:

- a) The Global community must refuse to recognize the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and instead support the demand raised by Afghan civil society and women's groups.
- b) Any change of political order or the constitution must happen through elections and by the will of the people of Afghanistan, not through the threat of violence, or through war and military intervention.
- c) Drafting, legislating, and implementing the civil and penal laws shall be based on the Constitution of Afghanistan, the national parliament shall be the sole legislating body, and the creation of any non-elected body, including the Supreme Theological Council of the Taliban, and the practicing of any unconstitutional power shall be outlawed.
- d) An international tribunal [must be] set up to ensure justice for the war crimes committed by the United States and NATO in the course of the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. The UN Human Rights Council must initiate a fact-finding mission to identify and bring to justice all perpetrators of atrocities and violence against Afghan civilians.
- e) United Nations Secretary General, the UN Human Rights Council, international human rights organizations, and the international community must act to ensure that Afghan women's rights groups are the center of any negotiations and other processes to ensure a just peace and secure the rights of all Afghan people (All India Progressive Women's Association, et al. 2021).

The views expressed in the these demands help feminists articulate genuine solidarity in some important ways:

- It is critically important not to separate opposition to US imperialism from opposition to the Taliban and solidarity with Afghan women, oppressed minorities, and refugees. Any talk of legitimizing the Taliban as the so-called 'will of the Afghan people' should be rejected. If we allow for the legitimization of the Taliban government, we have

betrayed Afghan women, and we have emboldened the extreme-right racists and misogynists around the world, like those who are taking away voting rights and abortion rights in the United States in the name of ‘state’s rights.’ Instead, we need to give voice to Afghan women who oppose the Taliban.

- We need to continue to put pressure on our governments and the United Nations to deliver humanitarian aid to Afghanistan through reputable humanitarian organizations and independent channels that can be held accountable and refuse to accept the ban on women aid workers (Egeland 2021).² As recently as April 10, 2023, Afghan women’s rights activists have once again called on the UN to reject the Taliban’s banning of women aid workers, and instead refuse to provide aid without the participation of women aid workers.

However, an issue not fully addressed by many of the feminists who have taken a principled stand in solidarity with Afghan women is that even relying on the UN has severe limitations. While the efforts of Chilean feminist Michele Bachelet, the UN high commissioner for human rights, to install a UN official to monitor human rights in Afghanistan represent a step forward, we must not have any illusions about the United Nations. Among the forty-seven members of the UN Human Rights Council, nineteen—including China, Russia, and Pakistan—failed to support Bachelet’s proposal to have a human rights watchdog for Afghanistan. Two months earlier, members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation had blocked Bachelet’s call for a fact-finding mission (Cumming-Bruce 2021). Furthermore, the permanent members of the UN Security Council (the United States, China, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom) each have the power to veto any UN effort—whether by resolution or tribunal—to

² Those who wish to contribute to the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) can do so through Afghan Women’s Mission <https://www.afghanwomensmission.org/2010/08/make-a-donation/>.

put them on trial and hold them accountable for committing war crimes in Afghanistan or elsewhere.

Conclusion

Given the above, I would argue that instead of putting our focus on creating a 'feminist foreign policy' within the context of capitalism (Chattopadhyay 2021), feminists need to challenge the very logic of capitalism that leads to militarism, war, and the facilitation of misogyny. This begins with recognizing that Trump's and then Biden's eagerness to withdraw from Afghanistan were rooted not just in the failure of the twenty-year US occupation; it also stemmed from US aims to concentrate its military forces in the Pacific region in order to confront China in what could be a potentially much larger and far more destructive war for capitalist global domination (Buckley and Myers 2021).

Although the Biden administration did not want to concentrate its efforts on a potential war with Russia, which it considered a declining power, Putin's brutal and genocidal invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 started that war. The 'limitless' alliance of Russia and China, announced shortly before Putin's invasion, also warns of the possibility of a wider war between Russia and China on one side and the United States and Europe on the other.

In order to express solidarity with the women of Afghanistan and to make sure that their cause does not get lost in the increasingly militarized global situation, we need to have a deep awareness of women's struggles and anti-racist, labor, as well as LGBT struggles around the world, and bring them in dialogue with each other. The fact that Afghan feminists have expressed their solidarity with the 2022–2023 Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran shows that they are continuing to resist and demand

support from their sisters internationally (Omid, 2023). In my book, *Socialist Feminism: A New Approach*, I have tried to offer ideas for deeper, international feminist solidarity on the basis of a humanist alternative to capitalism-racism-sexism-heterosexism, and alienation.

Frieda Afary is an Iranian American librarian and translator based in Los Angeles. She produces the blog, *Iranian Progressives in Translation*, and is the author of *Socialist Feminism: A New Approach* (London: Pluto Press, 2022). She is the producer of *Iranian Progressives in Translation* and Socialistfeminism.org.

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To cite this article:

Afary, F. (2023). Afghanistan and Its Challenge to Feminism. *Feminist Dissent*, Issue 7, pp. 186-199. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.31273/fd.n7.2023.1511>