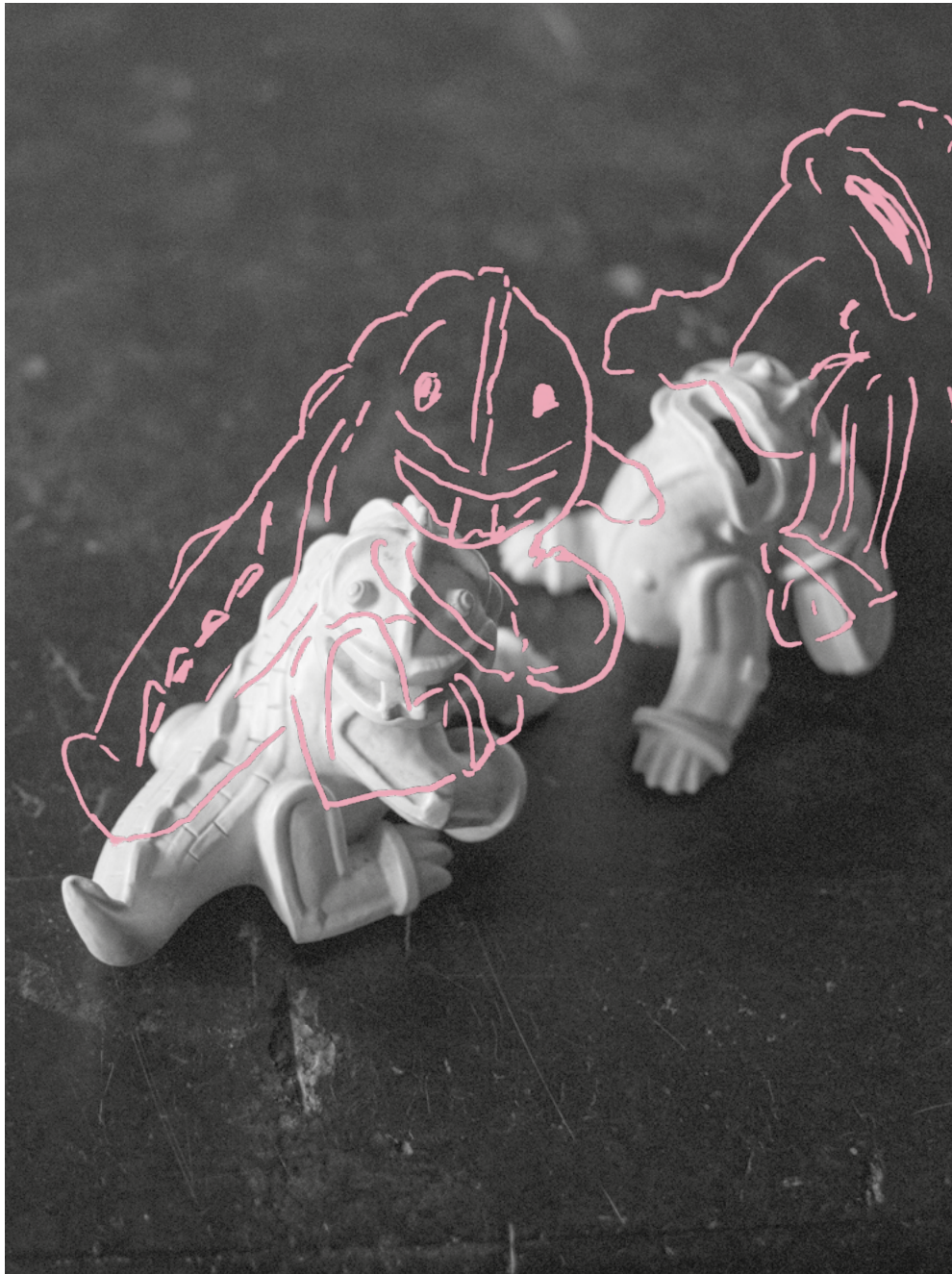


Back to basics: Fighting for women's rights under the Taliban

Alison Davidian



The dragon sculptures. In Chinese mythology, dragons represent the ultimate form of masculinity, and as such, Hammarskjöld's white porcelain dragon statues may serve as a metaphor for the Taliban and their take-over in Afghanistan in 2021. However, dragons are ambiguous creatures that can be seen in their dual nature as symbols of perseverance and courage, and also of chaos and change. This view carries great symbolism of the fight for women's rights in Afghanistan, where Alison Davidian calls for investment in women's empowerment and protection and for a long-term commitment to this struggle – in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

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I was in Kabul on 15 August 2021 – the day the city was captured by the Taliban. I was acting as the representative for UN Women, a position to which I would later be formally appointed. The day started like any other but by midday, the dread that had been building for some days materialised with the news that the Taliban had entered Kabul's city gates – their final stop in a takeover that happened so quickly, it felt both inevitable and impossible at the same time.

The staff meeting I led later that day was the most difficult meeting I have ever held. My colleagues – mostly Afghan women, activists, and women's rights defenders – were angry and desperate, some in tears, all fearful for their lives and the lives of others. They asked me why I hadn't told them sooner that the Taliban would be capturing Kabul. They would have left earlier. 'You must have known', they said. I wish I had.

In less than 24 hours, the security guarding United Nations compounds changed from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's to the Taliban's, whose intentions in relation to the UN was still unclear. There was so much that was unknown. What we did know was that we had no control over the airport, no UN planes or helicopters were operating, there was no medical evacuation, we had no access to banks – and we had no certainty over what the next hour, or the next day would bring.

These challenges were incomparable to what millions of Afghans were going through. The airport was overflowing with people trying to get on flights, a suicide bomber detonated among the crowds trying to get inside killing hundreds, and people were clinging to the wings of planes taking off, falling to their deaths. Images of those days broadcast across the globe haunt us in the same way that the hanging of a former Afghan president's body from a traffic light did more than two decades ago when the Taliban first came to power in 1996. Both transitions marked by grief laden signaling that a new era in Afghanistan was beginning.¹

In this fragile and volatile situation, leadership decisions needed to be made quickly. Over the next days, the UN had to decide who would stay and who should go. Choosing to stay came with many uncertainties including not knowing if, and when, anyone would be able to leave. I knew one thing – UN Women had to stay.

I have seen countless UN resolutions adopted and reports written over the years I have worked on women's rights that testify to the same principles – that sustainable peace, good governance, effective humanitarian planning and delivery, and vibrant economies are linked inextricably to equality between men and women, and that women's rights are human rights and thus inalienable.^{2,3} When crisis hits, leaders are faced with difficult choices. But it is precisely in these moments when we need to be guided by our principles. If not in crisis, who are these principles for, and when do they apply?

Early phases set the tone

UN Women fought hard to stay in Afghanistan. This was the first of many battles we have had to fight in country because we knew that the early phases of the international community's engagement with the Taliban would set the tone and baseline for how we would engage in later months.

For example, if women weren't part of those first delegations meeting with the Taliban, it would be much harder to include women down the line. If women's rights were sacrificed in those early days to secure access, there would be grave and ongoing protection consequences. As UN Women, we had a role to play in ensuring that gender equality and women's rights remained front and center in the UN's and the international community's response, declaring through our efforts – and our presence – that these are not just principles for peacetime, that can be traded away or left to later. They are cardinal values that apply in all times, including and especially in crisis.

Three UN Women international staff were allowed to stay. It was a small but significant win.

The decision for UN Women to remain in the country became a pivotal one in the weeks following the takeover, as the humanitarian community was developing ground rules on how we would engage with the Taliban.

Afghanistan was in the depths of a humanitarian crisis and one of the issues we needed to agree on was whether we would continue to provide humanitarian aid if the Taliban would not allow women humanitarian workers to be involved in its delivery. At the time, it was a theoretical discussion based on questions of principle. Later, it became our reality as edicts introduced by the Taliban increasingly restricted where and how women could work.

When crisis hits, our decision-making is often hour-by-hour and the urgency of acting in the now can trump thinking about the long-term impact of those actions. It is easy to adopt the narrative that we focus on saving lives now and leave sensitive issues like women's rights for later. But the truth is, if we take this view, we will not be able to address the most urgent needs effectively, and we risk losing ground that we will never get back, leaving women and girls further behind. In this global era of protracted crises, 'later' often never comes.

Some actors on the ground argued that aid should be delivered without 'conditions' in line with humanitarian principles. UN Women maintained that women being involved in delivering aid is not a 'condition'. It is an operational issue central to reaching women and girls. If women workers are stopped from delivering life-saving services, women and girls will not seek them because of gender norms that prevent women from engaging with men who are not their immediate relatives. We argued that if this scenario were to play out, we will lose access to half the population and further entrench inequality and discrimination based on sex.

The discussions were tense and emotional. More significantly, they were taking place without Afghan women which was unacceptable to UN Women.

This was why, under the leadership of the UN's Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, we spearheaded the creation of a Women's Advisory Group made up of Afghan women to advise the Humanitarian Country Team – the leading coordination body deciding on humanitarian issues in country – on how to strategically engage with the Taliban to advance the priorities of women. It was a transformational moment the first time the Humanitarian Country Team met the Women's Advisory Group. Humanitarian actors heard from women directly, who argued that the international community had to negotiate for women to be part of the humanitarian response. After this, women's participation was not framed again as a 'condition'. It's one thing for UN Women to make this case. It's a completely different dynamic when it's made by the women most impacted by crisis.

I've always known that a critical part of UN leadership when working on women's rights issues is to build and bridge coalitions with all stakeholders for our work to be effective and sustainable. But in that moment, I saw the power in not only advocating for the constituencies we represent but actively creating spaces for them to speak directly to decision makers, sitting at the same table.

I also came to appreciate how the UN's role in normative advocacy is tied intimately to physical presence. UN Women could have joined these meetings online or conducted WhatsApp diplomacy with those inside the country to develop messages and rally allies. But it wouldn't have worked as effectively. The most crucial and current information and analysis in crisis settings, when the situation is sometimes shifting by the hour, isn't often shared in formal meetings. It's shared in real time, in person, outside of working hours. Much of the gritty business of negotiation takes place on the ground, where cases are made, and alliances are formed.

‘Credible and effective leadership requires presence on the ground.’

It’s much harder to dismiss you and the issues you stand for when you’re at the table – especially when those issues are about women and their rights. In crisis, when certainty is stripped away, your regular interlocutors are in hiding and channels of information have broken down, the decision-making table is more physical than virtual. Credible and effective leadership requires presence on the ground.

Three years of deteriorated rights

It’s now been almost three years since the Taliban took power.⁴ And for most Afghan women and girls, almost each one of the days since 15 August 2021 has brought a deterioration in their rights, condition, and social and political status.

The Taliban’s beliefs and grievances are fed by decades of conflict and their interpretations of religion fall heaviest on women. Afghanistan remains the only country in the world with a policy to ban girls from going to school beyond the sixth grade. Women are restricted from working outside the home, except for a few sectors and particular roles. Women are required to have a male chaperone (mahram) when they are travelling more than 78 kilometers, but women tell us that in some cases, they’re asked for a mahram when travelling much shorter distances. Women human rights defenders continue to be targeted and arrested.

Afghanistan once had a constitution that enshrined gender equality and laws that made violence against women a crime. Today there are no such laws. There are no women in cabinet and there is no Ministry of Women’s Affairs, effectively removing women’s right to political participation.⁵ At one point, women were running for all kinds of public office including President. Today, they can’t even run in a park or join a gym. Previously, women were visible in all their diversity – they were doctors, journalists, governors, and lawyers to only name some. Today, the result of the Taliban’s decrees is that women’s faces, voices, and perspectives are almost nowhere to be found. Women have effectively been erased from public life.

Afghanistan before the Taliban wasn’t perfect for women – far from it. But it wasn’t this.

Some women have told me that Afghanistan feels safer now – they’re less afraid of indiscriminate attacks and relieved the conflict has subsided. But safety comes at the expense of agency – and for most women this price is too high.⁶

How do we battle this level of normative erosion? How can the UN show leadership in challenging a regime that wants to take Afghanistan back to a time where women were kept in their homes and rendered invisible, without education, work or hope?

We go back to basics. We invest in women - their empowerment and the protection and promotion of their full rights.

As a global system, we are far more comfortable talking about protecting women from sexual violence than, for example, insisting on their participation in peace and political processes. But participation across all sectors, and at all levels is crucial. Because it’s only when women are given opportunities to access and exercise their rights to health, education, justice, and public life that we can truly challenge the social behaviours and beliefs that give violence against women, and other forms of gender inequality its power.

There are numerous economic and development facts and figures that seek to explain how Afghanistan got to where it is today. For me, one of the most telling statistics is that from 2005 to 2020 Afghan women were excluded from 80% of peace negotiations. Most recently, the United States - Taliban Doha agreement in 2020 not only excluded women, but also any references to safeguarding women’s rights.⁷

When we wonder how we got to a place where girls can’t go to high school, and women can barely leave their homes, this statistic is a major part of the story. We

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cannot protect women without empowering them, and we cannot empower without mechanisms for protection.⁸ It cannot be an either/or. It must be both.

Women all over Afghanistan say they will not give up and accept their systematic exclusion from public life and the restrictions on their right to learn, gain income and have a voice. Despite the challenges and the ongoing rights violations, Afghan women are finding ways to carve out pockets of hope for themselves and their communities every day. Women are continuing to run businesses and sell their products. Women of all ages and backgrounds are leading civil society organisations and finding new ways to address community needs. Women are continuing to deliver health and protection services.

It is critical that we continue to invest in every pocket of hope and that we exercise principles of leadership by doubling down our efforts instead of turning away or acquiescing when there is push-back. We must put our political will and funding behind our solidarity with Afghan women – funding women's organisations, entrepreneurship and leadership, supporting services for women, and creating spaces and platforms for Afghan women to be heard from directly.

Nowhere in the world has UN Women's mandate been more challenged, our reason for being more questioned, and our impact more scrutinised than in Afghanistan. When I'm in my darkest moments, and it feels overwhelming I remind myself that the struggle for women's rights in Afghanistan is part of something bigger. It is the struggle of every woman who yearns to live a life of her own choosing. We belong to a global women's movement that includes those who have been through too much to be tamed or broken, seeking the same goals so that all this experience and storied history is behind every Afghan woman and girl. This movement is more powerful than any military or weapon because it's founded on a truth that is both simple and revolutionary – that men and women in all their diversity are equal and that our

societies thrive when that equality is fostered, invested in, and celebrated.

As leaders in a protracted crisis, we need to play a long game that goes beyond three-year projects or our individual tenures in a country, potentially spanning generations. Demonstrating leadership against a background of normative erosion requires structural and institutional commitment and action. It requires not just UN Women but every UN agency to go 'back to basics' and invest in women. The challenges are too great for any individual, agency or actor to find solutions alone. This is the beauty and the power of 'one UN' – using our different mandates and access to collectively push for positive change in the lives of women and girls, anchored on their voices and priorities and our principles. ■

Endnotes

- ¹ Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai, President of Afghanistan from 1986-1992, was captured by the Taliban when the group took over Kabul in 1996. Taliban fighters dragged him out of the UN compound where he was sheltering. After killing him they hung his body from a traffic light outside the presidential palace. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58477131>.
- ² United Nations, 'She Stands for Peace', United Nations Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security', available online at <https://www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/content/united-nations-security-council-resolutions-women-peace-and-security>.
- ³ See for example, Radhika Coomaraswamy, 'Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325'. (New York: UN Women, 2015), <https://wps.unwomen.org/>.
- ⁴ At the time of writing in March 2024.
- ⁵ See note 4.
- ⁶ Alison Davidian, 'The situation of women and girls in Afghanistan', Press briefing, (Online, UN Women, July 2022), available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2022/07/press-briefing-the-situation-of-women-and-girls-in-afghanistan>.
- ⁷ See Remarks delivered by UN Under-Secretary-General and UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous to the UN Security Council meeting on the situation in Afghanistan, UN Headquarters, 26 September 2023, available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2023/09/speech-the-womens-rights-crisis-listen-to-invest-in-include-and-support-afghan-women#:~:text=Afghan%20women%20were%20excluded%20from,to%20where%20we%20are%20today>.
- ⁸ See Remarks delivered by UN Assistant Secretary-General Lakshmi Puri, as part of a lecture series for the Liechtenstein Center for Self-Determination, Princeton University, organised by the Permanent Mission of Liechtenstein and PeaceWomen, 7 June 2013, available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/6/lakshmi-puri-speech-on-women-peace-and-security>.