



Socialist International Women

SOCIALIST INTERNATIONAL WOMEN

Situation of Women and Women's Rights in Afghanistan

DECLARATION

Following the fall of Afghanistan into the control of Taliban forces, the Socialist International Women stands in firm solidarity with the international community both in condemnation of all forms of violence and oppression in Afghanistan and in firm support of innocent civilians caught up in this distressing situation.

Unfortunately for the Afghan people there has been almost continual civil un-rest for several years causing almost 111,000 casualties since 2009, which has severely affected all civilian lives but particularly women and children. In addition, the catastrophic effects of a severe drought have resulted in widespread hunger and acute poverty. The dire situation of the Afghan people is a heart-breaking humanitarian crisis, which requires an urgent, immediate response from the international community.

Trust in the Taliban is extremely fragile given their historically harsh and restrictive actions, particularly towards women and girls. Memories of oppressive practices including forced marriages of adolescent girls to older men, very limited access to healthcare, a refusal to adequately educate girls and a ban on women working outside the home have not been forgotten. What is also fresh in women's memories is the significant progress on women's rights, freedoms, status and wellbeing that have been made in the last 20 years. These include female life expectancy rising from 56 in 2001 to 66 in 2017, the number of girls in primary schools increasing to 33 per cent and increases in the number women in key roles in education, medicine, the judiciary, governance, military and civil infrastructure. These have given women more of a voice and influence in their communities than they had ever had before.

In rural areas the picture was admittedly less progressive, with ultra conservative views being held by the majority, meaning the possibility of sliding back to extreme female oppression was ever present. There remained significant issues with education, with around 3.7 million children receiving no education at all and 60 per cent of those being girls. It was also discouraging to note that women's participation in governance and decision-making remained disappointingly minimal, including during the March 2021 Afghanistan Peace Conference in Moscow where there was only one female delegate - Habiba Sarabi – and no females amongst the Taliban delegation. As women have proven themselves to be skilled peace negotiators, who knows what might have been agreed had more women been involved.

For Afghan women, although there were significant gaps and progress overall could have been much faster, there was some excitement and hope for the future, and the confidence and aspirations of women were gradually growing.

Now, in August 2021, Taliban leaders have asserted their intention to create peace, their plans to demonstrate fair treatment towards women and girls and to include women in governance roles. However, sadly this does not appear to be the case in reality and already there have been a number of disturbing incidents which suggest that, once the international spotlight is removed, the plight of women and girls may return to brutal oppression.

Government roles once held by women are being withdrawn and offered to their male relatives instead. Female medical personnel are too afraid to turn up for work, which will have a negative impact on women's health. Female activists, journalists and TV presenters, lawyers and businesswomen are now living in fear for themselves and their families, and female students are being prevented from going to their universities to study. Sadly, many women and girls are now expressing alarm for their futures and a desperate desire to escape.

Another significant issue is the effect of civilian internal displacement, which has caused immense disruption and distress for civilians for several years now. Since the end of May 2021 alone there have been a quarter of a million civilians displaced due to civil un-rest, of which 80 per cent are women and children. It is well documented that female refugees are at increased risk of physical and sexual violence during their refugee journeys, as well as when they arrive at their destinations. Women refugees are also frequently deprived of basic human rights, including resources to enable personal and hygiene dignity and access to medical care, including maternal care. So for many Afghan women and girls right now their daily physical and emotional suffering is an urgent, acute humanitarian crisis, which the international community cannot ignore.

As this distressing situation continues to un-fold over the coming weeks and months the eyes of the international community will be watching the Taliban's response with intense interest. The Socialist International Women joins its voice with the international community to strongly urge the Taliban to prioritise humanitarian, gendered approaches to the creation of sustainable peace and prosperity in Afghanistan, including respecting the human rights and freedoms of all citizens under international law, particularly those of women and girls, and urges all actors to allow humanitarian aid and support, including evacuation efforts, where needed.

The Socialist International Women urges all members of Socialist International, affiliated groups and NGOs to stand in firm solidarity with the Afghan people and commit to supporting and enabling their full emancipation, peace and prosperity.