



Making Visible The Afghan Men Who Are Working For Women's Rights And A Gender-Just Society

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01

INTRODUCTION

Analyses of women's rights and gender equality in Afghanistan have historically depicted a clear binary: *patriarchal and conservative men resisting aspirational women.*

Neglected in these analyses are the many men who have spoken up for women's rights and have worked for a gender-just society in Afghanistan. For instance, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in Afghanistan has had as many as 10,000 active members, out of which at times nearly 3,000 have been men. These figures may come as a surprise for those used to monolithic depictions of predictably patriarchal Afghan men. The cognitive double-take these numbers often elicit, reflects the limited space in international coverage given to the Afghan men who, while keeping a low profile, work alongside women activists for gender equality in the country.

For this piece, we interviewed the men and women who have worked together to advance women's rights and feminist peace in Afghanistan. We share their life histories, their motivations and rationales for engaging men in gender equality work, the nature of this work, the responses they get from their friends, families and communities in reaction to their work, their analysis of the Taliban takeover, what this means for their lives, and what they are doing now to continue to advance peace.

Afghan men have historically been broadly portrayed as rugged, violence-condoning and uncivilised individuals, whose cultural and religious values and norms stand in contradiction to “liberal [Western] values”. Even when a recent study¹ found that two thirds of men in Afghanistan thought Afghan women had too many rights, the media failed to explore the opinions and attitudes of the third who did not agree that women had too many rights.²

We should be curious about these men, and what motivates them to hold more gender-equitable beliefs. Their stories can encourage other men to step forward for women’s rights.

In the post-Cold War context, Afghanistan represents an interesting case study. Women and their oppression in the country have long been a “civilisational” bargaining chip, that allowed Western colonial powers to claim cultural superiority and justify their interventions. The continuity of these orientalist tropes served to justify the war in Afghanistan, in which military occupation was legitimised with the “liberation” of supposedly helpless Muslim women from supposedly violent Muslim men. This liberatory narrative allowed Western media to present its soldiers

as the “true protectors” of Muslim women. Like Afghans themselves, non-Afghan soldiers could therefore also construct their military masculinities, through notions of protection, and justifiable male violence. The “liberation” of Muslim women was thereby used to further a highly masculinist foreign policy based on violence, imperialism and military intervention.

According to Afghans interviewed in Andrea Chiovenda’s *Crafting Masculinities: Culture, War and Psychodynamics in Afghanistan* (2020), historical conflicts in Afghanistan, since the 1970s, have contributed to an associated emphasis on violence in the construction of masculinities in Afghanistan. In other words, in Afghanistan, the persistence of violence, abuse, incredible hardship and general sense of insecurity has privileged certain masculine attributes associated with dominance and violence on the one hand, and their role in the “protection”, under the tradition of *honour*, of women and homeland on the other. This privilege of violence and other masculine norms and behaviours valued by martial institutions have often been described as “military masculinities”.

¹ Gereš, N, B Heilman, SI Hashimi, R Kakar, M Kelberg, L Hakobyan, S El Feki and G Barker (2018). *Reflections on Gender, Patriarchy, and Peace: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) in Afghanistan*. Washington, DC: Promundo-US, UN Women, and Global Affairs Canada.

² Elks, S (2019). *Afghan men oppose more women’s rights; elders less hardline*. Reuters. Accessed 10 May 2022: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-women-equality/afghan-men-oppose-more-womens-rights-elders-less-hardline-idUSKCN1PN0TZ>

These operate on both institutional and individual levels, and include the valorising of bravery, warrior-like behaviour, and a denigration of everything that is deemed feminine such as vulnerability, willingness to compromise, or caregiving.

With the Taliban back in power the war is over for now, at least in terms of having a “negative peace” in the country. But military masculinities and highly patriarchal values and institutions shaped by decades of war will define the lives of Afghans for years to come. However, in the shadow of these military masculinities and broad generalisations of Afghan men, thousands of progressive Afghan men have worked with civil society organisations like WILPF, to engage in activism for women’s rights and gender equality in Afghanistan.

WILPF Afghanistan was established in 2015 as an independent country section of WILPF, the longest-standing women’s peace-building organisation in the world, established in 1915.

About one third of the 10,000 members WILPF Afghanistan counted on, prior to the Taliban takeover, consisted of men who had chosen to join an organisation that has as its very raison d’être “the advancement of women’s rights”.

To understand what motivates men in Afghanistan to stand up for women’s rights, and to counter major myths and generalisations about Afghan men, we interviewed the WILPF staff who conceptualised their male allies’ initiative, and spoke to some of its male allies. Our interviewees and allies – Jamila Afghani, Hareer Hashim, Dr Fazal Ghani Kakar, Mohammad Rahim Jami, Firdous* and Irshad*. In addition to our four male allies, we spoke to other men involved in supporting women’s rights and education activists, such as Wesa. All come from different backgrounds.

Their responses, however, are indicative of how these generalisations of the “stereotypical Afghan man” are inaccurate; their stories convey the importance of highlighting gender equality work with men and of telling the stories of the men and women involved in this work in a patriarchal society. Moreover, the accounts and efforts of our allies and activists indicate how relatively ordinary Afghan men – who choose to maintain a low profile and are often not active on social media – working for a gender-just Afghanistan, are ignored and fail to gain the required support from the local and international civil society organisations.

WILPF Afghanistan’s remarkable and unusual success in getting men to join and become outspoken women’s rights advocates is largely due to the vision and hard work of two women’s rights activists: Jamila Afghani and Hareer Hashim

Jamila Afghani is the founder and President of WILPF Afghanistan and a member of WILPF’s International Board.

For over 25 years, Afghani has been championing women and girls’ rights against discrimination, the rights of persons with disabilities, and non-violent conflict resolution. She believes strongly that Islam promotes equal education, and is motivated by the knowledge that many girls and women are not allowed to seek education in many parts of Afghanistan.

After living the life of a refugee in Pakistan for many years, Afghani and her family returned to Afghanistan in 2002, where she started a literacy programme for 2,000 Afghan women. She strongly believes that Islam promotes equal education. For her, however, it is unfortunate that girls and women are not allowed to seek education in many parts of Afghanistan.

As a woman living with a disability and often using a wheelchair, Afghani’s work and activism have been characterised by a patient and persistent determination to empower the Afghan women so that they can live a dignified life.

Describing her life’s trajectory to women’s rights activism, Afghani told the story of her relationship with her own father. “My father was the second top businessman in Afghanistan. As he was rich, he was a ‘tribal’ leader, and he was a very conservative man. He did not allow my sister to go to school. So, thank God I got this disability, I got polio. One day one of the doctors suggested to my father that he put me in a school to become busy. I was very happy because I had a good alternative, reading books, drawing, painting. Usually after fourth or fifth grade, girls are considered to have become ‘adults’ and therefore, they do not need to go to school. But each year I insisted to my father, ‘Just one more year, please.’ My father is now very proud of me and even my brothers are telling their children that I am a role model [for them] and [they are] sending their daughters to higher education institutes.”

Explaining her approach to engaging and mobilising men, Afghani said, “Afghanistan cannot be like European countries, or the USA or any other country. Afghanistan has its own dimensions and problems. We need localised approaches, informed by a global perspective.

To be honest, the word 'feminist' is a very sensitive word in a society like Afghanistan.

Saying I'm a feminist or that I'm working for feminist peace will create lots of prejudice towards our work. We are using the words sisterhood and womanhood, which can be tolerable in our society."

She explained why they've chosen this more cautious approach. "We are working to change men's mindset, so we are very much conscious of how we are talking, which words we are using, what kind of physical actions we are using. We consider all these sensitivities. We use religious arguments to support our work, working with imams [prayer leaders] from an Islamic perspective."

As an example, Afghani described a workshop with religious leaders, during which she asked the imams to draw a family tree. She noticed that none of the religious leaders was including the names of his wife or daughters. Animated by the memories, she said, "So, I asked them, 'Why do you not share the name [of your wife or daughter]?' They were saying, 'It's very shameful for us. We are Afghan men. How can we share the names of our wives and daughters in front of other men?' I was thinking, 'How should I work here?' I said, 'You know the most supreme person in the life of a Muslim is the Holy Prophet [Muhammad], and we know the names of wives and daughters of the Holy Prophet. He was a strong man. He was a highly moral man. If he was not feeling embarrassed at sharing the names of his family members, are we superior to the Holy Prophet? Are we higher in value to the Holy Prophet? Then the imams realised their mistake. Then one of the imams came and he said, 'My wife's name is Fatima, and Fatima is the name of the Holy Prophet's daughter, so I'm proud of this name.' So this type of activity is what I do."

Due to her visible leadership, she and her family were repeatedly threatened by the Taliban throughout 2020 and 2021. She was forced to leave the country in late 2020, but returned to Kabul in April 2021 to be with her ill father. Following the Taliban's takeover, there were threats on her life, and she was evacuated from Afghanistan in August 2021. Afghani is now based in Norway, where she continues to advocate for women's rights under the Taliban and for gender equality and social justice.

Hareer Hashim is a 24-year-old activist, who was also evacuated from Afghanistan to Norway after the US withdrawal and the Taliban takeover. Hashim has co-ordinated WILPF Afghanistan's Countering Militarised Masculinities initiative for the last two years, building alliances between women peacebuilders and men who work for gender equality. Her work also focuses on advocating for the rights and protection of human and women rights defenders, whose lives are at stake, especially with the new political regime in Afghanistan.

Explaining the strategy WILPF Afghanistan has used to mobilise male allies, Hashim said, "I think it is really crucial that you work alongside men that have very different visions than the stereotype that we see in the media about Afghanistan. The men we have been targeting are usually from diverse groups, such as men from the parliament, from the legal fields, policemen, youths, professors, teachers and students.

The reason we've reached out to these various groups of men, is to ensure that we have better exemplary role models for men inside Afghanistan, so a very strategic methodology. It is crucial to challenge the narrative inside Afghanistan that all strong men are physical; we have to redefine this narrative and showcase that not all men are violent, abusive and for militarisation. That is our project's sole focus. Afghanistan is a country that leads through example, hence why it is pertinent to showcase exemplary male role models who support women, the feminist peace movement, and support equal rights for both genders. So that is the network we have. Within our network, what we did was we created a core group, which was the 12 to 15 men that were supposed to be the representatives or the face of the male alliance.

And within that core group, we tried finding each entity and representation of the different groups. So we had two male *ulema* (religious scholars), we had two professors, we had two youth activists, we had two parliamentarians. And each one of those would be the ones that would work like a force with us."

Hashim continued to say that leading this project was the perfect segue for her to make an actual difference in Afghan society. Today, even in exile, she can see the impact that this project can have on Afghan society, even in such unexpected circumstances, and that is her main driving force to continue working and hopefully positively impacting the rights of Afghan people, especially women.

She said, "I did not study and work so hard for my best interest. I want to utilise my struggle to pave the way for other young Afghan girls and women who deserve as much of an opportunity to be the best versions of themselves. My best and work-in-progress version is the version that serves the best interest of the people of Afghanistan, and that is why I work so tirelessly to ensure that our efforts with our male allies are not wasted."

Hashim credits Afghani for conceptualising the work with men. She said, “I like to give credit to people who deserve credit. It was Jamila who came up with the idea of mobilising male *ulema* because she saw how influential they are in Afghan society, and how limited many were in what they were preaching. She decided it was important that they be given the right education.

When an *aalim* [singular for *ulema*] says, ‘This is what the Quran says, or this is what God said, then they start believing it.’ Hashim appeared almost surprised by the impact WILPF had with the male *ulema*.

“Over time they grew more comfortable working with us. They were willing to be educated by us; even though they had the knowledge, we’d just polish it.

And I think that we were able to successfully reason with them and shift, a little bit, their perspective from the conservative male alumnus who was believing in one type of Islam, and that Islam was rigid. In some cases, we were able to convince participants on moderate teachings [of Islam]. And we made them understand the rights of women. And now they’re the strongest force we have.”



02

PROFILES OF MALE ALLIES WORKING FOR PEACE AND GENDER EQUALITY

In societies where social norms and gender roles are defined through the prism of religion and tradition, men compared to women, often acquire unassailable rights.

Therefore, in such societies, reforms, such as efforts towards gender equality, can only take place from “within” through a bottom-up approach, where like-minded men are taken on board as allies on feminist peace. In this section, we introduce our male allies and interviewees (Dr Fazal Ghani Kakar, Mohammad Rahim Jami, Firdous, Irshad and Matiullah Wesa), who even with resistance and restrictions, are playing their part in making Afghanistan a gender-just society.

Fazal Ghani Kakar is the executive director of Noor Educational & Capacity Development Organization (**NECDO**), a local partner of WILPF Afghanistan.

He is also the founder of Nahdlatul Ulama Afghanistan (NUA), a network of *ulama*, which he described as being based on five principals: “moderation, social justice, tolerance, equality and participation”. He is a member of the WILPF Afghanistan male alliance as well as a civil activist, peacemaker and member of the civil society of Afghanistan for the past 35 years. In explaining his journey to gender equality activism, he said, “I was very young when we immigrated to Peshawar after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. As refugees, I and my family faced lots of misery. These hard-life conditions shaped me and influenced my decision to work for those who face the same conditions in their life, in particular Afghan women who are deprived of their very basic rights. The suffering of women and girls in refugee camps in Pakistan, and their deprivation from very basic rights, such as the right to education and to social participation, made me think about the need to change men’s attitudes and behaviours towards women.” Dr Kakar described himself as “a supporter of my wife and my daughters and all women to be active members of their society”. He said, “The world should know that I and

my organisation are working to combat extremism through moderate teachings [of Islam]. We are against all sorts of violence. We struggle for a globe free of armed conflicts.”

Born in Kabul in 1984, **Mohammad Rahim Jami** is a well-known public figure, who appeared often in national media debates prior to the Taliban takeover. He has translated his degree in economics from Kabul University into a career in human rights work, focusing especially on women’s rights, violence prevention, girls’ access to education, and peace advocacy. His goal is for “citizens of the country to participate meaningfully in creating a trustful environment of co-existence”. He said, “I’m usually in the media to fight against human rights abuses, counter-corruption, civilian casualties, women’s rights abuses, transitional justice, and many other relevant issues. Jami describes himself as usually quite calm and logical. But when he sees injustice against women and girls, he said, “I can’t stop myself and want to do more than I have done to bring justice for them.” For his work he has won many national and regional awards, including the first Afghanistan National Human Rights Award, 2021, from Civil Society and Human Rights Network (CSHRN), for efforts to promote and defend human rights principles and values in Afghanistan, as well as the 2020 Peace Builders Award from

the Women’s Regional Network of Afghanistan, Pakistan & India, among others.

Firdous calls himself a true lover of peace. While explaining his life’s philosophy, he quoted 13th-century poet Saadi, and said, “Human beings are like parts of a body, created from the same essence. When one part is hurt and in pain, the others cannot remain in peace and be quiet. If the misery of others leaves you indifferent and with no feelings of sorrow, you cannot be called a human being.” It was this feeling of pain for girls and women in Afghanistan that made him work towards feminist peace in the country. His worldview has been shaped by wars in Afghanistan, which have “taught him how precious peace is”. The realisation of the preciousness of peace has also motivated and encouraged him to work towards human and women’s rights in Afghanistan.

Firdous believes in “constantly learning”, which he has continued, even though he has spent the past eight months in a refugee camp. His drive to work for women’s rights and girls’ education is also fuelled by the lasting negative impressions of the Taliban’s first regime in Afghanistan, when girls and women were not allowed to study or work.

Firdous wants the world to know that he is an “Afghan feminist man”, who contributed to feminist peace and broke the stereotypes that exist of Afghan men and their militarised masculinities.

Irshad, a 58-year-old Afghan writer, human rights defender and social activist in Afghanistan, got married in 1985 and has five children. He has completed his semi-higher education in Islamic studies in Afghanistan. He is the author of two books, which were published in Pashto. His goal was to encourage and motivate people of Afghanistan to get an education and “change their thoughts positively”. In his writings, which also include newspaper articles, he has emphasised the importance of peace, democracy, human rights, education, ways to prevent extremism in Afghanistan, social coherence

and solidarity, and children’s and women’s rights. For the past 40 years, his passion for finding the similarities between human rights and his knowledge is what drew him to fight for the rights of women and children, with a comprehensive understanding of the teachings of Islam. It is due to his work that the Taliban have often threatened and tried to kill him.

“In the last two years, I repeatedly received intimidatory messages from the Taliban, who threatened to kill me for my work on girls’ education and gender equality,” said Irshad.

These threats, according to him, turned into reality around a year ago, when the Taliban fired three bullets at him, grazing his neck and head. Even with such a near-death experience, Irshad vows to continue his work for gender equality. However, he still hopes that both he and his family will be able to relocate to a safer country.

Matiullah Wesa was only in fourth grade in 2002 when armed militants stormed into his school (consisting just of open-air tents) and started setting it on fire. The incident left a significant mark on both his mind and his life, and motivated him to become an education activist in the country. After his school was burned down, his father, who had also previously established a girls' school in his village in 2000, vowed to continue fighting for the students.

As a teenager in 2009, he established Pen Path, a volunteer-run organisation that works for education in Afghanistan. Since then, his organisation has helped re-open dozens of open-air schools, established numerous libraries, secured scholarships for over 3,000 orphans, and expanded access to education for girls, marginalised communities and students with disabilities.³

³ Source: *Global Citizen*

03

MOTIVATION TO WORK FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

It is widely perceived that many Afghan men base their justification for gender inequality in the country on cultural norms, such as *gheirat* and *nang* (honour) and *namus* (protecting one's women and objects of importance).

Another perception is that such justifications are enshrined in religious values and harsher (and often wrong) interpretations (of Islam) advocating for women to stay within the confines of a household. However, when it comes to our allies' work and their common cause for gender equality in Afghanistan, their motivations vary.

Dr Kakar is one of WILPF's allies and co-founder of NUA. His life and work are a counter-narrative to how Islam and religiosity are perceived, and how they are often bracketed with violence and extremism in the Global North. This is because his opinions and mission for gender equality are strongly rooted in the "teachings of Islam". For him, "Islam means peace and stands for solidarity." When he returned to Afghanistan from his PhD studies at Peshawar University in Pakistan, he was struck by the ways in which Afghan society was mixing cultural and tribal traditions with the teachings of Islam. With a sense of quiet indignation, he explained that, "Islam is in total contradiction with those oppressive traditions." Fuelled by his concerns for women's rights, he wrote a booklet on women and girls' rights in Islamic teachings. He explained, "I focus in that book on five core rights of women: right of education, right of ownership, right of social participation, right of marriage and right of divorce." In his quest for gender equality in Afghanistan, Dr Kakar now works with the Afghan youth to promote women's rights, demilitarisation and a commitment to peace and reconciliation in the country. He has conducted hundreds of training sessions, seminars, workshops and awareness programmes through NECDO, NUA and WILPF Afghanistan, in both separate and joint projects in various parts of Afghanistan: "from north to south and east to west".

Dr Kakar is not alone in taking inspiration from Islam to promote peace, reconciliation and, above all, gender equality. Irshad, whose professional career working in various government and non-government positions spans over two decades, argues that the Quran and Islam strongly advocate gender equality and education for all. Irshad points to the Quran to make the case for gender equality, and to show that Islam does not support militarism. The Quran, in various places, does talk about gender equality and peace, whereas the only distinction it creates between men and women is based on their deeds (and righteousness) and not on their gender. In this regard, chapter 59, *Al-Hujurat* states, “O mankind! Indeed, we created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes, so that you may get to know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you.” (49:13) On peace, among other instances, chapter 5, *Al-Ma'idah* states,

“Whereby Allah guides whomever closely follows His all-blessed satisfaction in the

ways of peace; and He brings them out of the darkness into the light by His permission, and He guides them to a straight path.” (5:16)

This, for Irshad, is a perfect illustration of why Islam supports gender quality. He mentioned other verses from the Quran to argue why it is necessary for both men and women to gain education. He also argued that Islam is about “peace, and never accepts militarisation”. He said, “Women and girls should be educated, and they should have the right to work.”

It is not religion alone that inspires Afghan men to work for gender equality. Firdous recounts how during his university days in the 1990s, women were not allowed to pursue higher education during the first Taliban regime (1996–2001). He saw how his three sisters were left disappointed and frustrated, due to a widespread ban on girls’ education.

This ban not only made him upset, but also made him question why women, “who were mothers, sisters, wives and made up half of Afghanistan’s population”, were systematically ignored and excluded by the regime. It was this introspection that played a crucial role in shaping his worldview, and helped him become a gender rights and gender equality advocate in Afghanistan.

Jami’s circumstances were like those of Dr Kakar and Firdous. “After the internal war in Afghanistan and during the Taliban’s first government, I witnessed, as a student, the exclusion of women from education, sport, and economic and political activities,” said Jami. This exclusion led him to lobby and advocate for women and girls’ rights and education in Afghanistan in 2002. For him, it is a long-desired dream to see women have an independent voice and better participation in governance structures in Afghanistan. Wesa comes from one of the “most underdeveloped” parts of the Kandahar province. Back in 2000, his father built the very first girls’ school in his village. However, the school came under attack from unknown assailants, which ended up depriving local children of education.

When he moved to Kabul later in his life, to gain higher education, he saw boys and girls going to school together, which led him, in 2009, to establish his volunteer-run organisation *Qalam Lar* (Pen Path). Pen Path was established to ensure equal education access for Afghan children. Wesa, who looks up to his father as his major inspiration in life, believes that it is “only through education, especially girls’ education, that we [Afghanistan] can come out of war”.



04

WORKING FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS AS A "MAN" IN AFGHANISTAN

Understandably, working for gender rights as a man in a relatively conservative society like Afghanistan, presents its own challenges and complications.

However, for our male allies, it was their position of privilege, of being a man, that both influenced their work and motivated them to work for gender equality in the country. This privilege for men stems from the patriarchal and conservative nature of Afghan society, where men can talk freely about and discuss topics that are deemed culturally and socially controversial, but women are often sanctioned when they do.

Hashim believes that working on gender equality and masculinity is particularly difficult, when you have to deal with men who are not only masculine figures, but are also using militarised weapons and strategies to govern the society.

For Hashim, Islam promotes gender equality and women's rights, however, many Afghan men use religion as a tool to propagate their extreme and conservative narratives. As a result, she believes that it is her right, both as a woman and as a Muslim, to challenge these narratives that are being imposed on her and are used to oppress women of Afghanistan.

Her challenge does make men uncomfortable, however, she feels that (maybe) her actions can also encourage Afghan men to confront their preconceived (patriarchal and masculine) worlds. Therefore, to achieve her aims and goals in Afghanistan, activists like her need support from allies like Firdous, who witness the exclusion of women within their families and in society, and therefore feel motivated to advocate for women's rights.

For Firdous, working with women activists is like “working with his own sisters”, as these women are striving to gain access to financial security, health and education in Afghanistan. In the process, his activities include participating in workshops, training sessions, co-ordinating with male alliances, and contributing to implementation of WILPF projects. Firdous’ story resonates with a lot of progressive Afghans, who wanted girls and women at home to gain education, yet strict rules imposed by the Taliban regime made it difficult for them to do so. However, there are other allies like Dr Kakar, who aim to change Afghanistan on a broader societal level.

Dr Kakar looks at his work, as a man, for women’s rights in the context of the broader goals of his organisation, NUA. NUA is committed to peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. Its involvement in peace and reconciliation has been active since 2011. It has had several programmes nationally and internationally, to promote peace together with like-minded organisations. What NUA is doing differently, compared to other major religion-inspired organisations and alliances in the region, is its wing of female *ulema*, who are also committed to the five principles of moderation in Islam.

Dr Kakar argues that NUA is against all forms of “militarisation and war”. Its involvement with women in Afghanistan is mostly geared towards the awareness of their rights in state and in Islamic laws. Dr Kakar and his organisation have worked with *ulema* to train them in moderate teachings of Islam to defend and promote women’s rights. He has also worked with the Afghan youth to promote women’s rights, demilitarisation, peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.

Jami also feels proud of working for women’s rights in Afghanistan. He is especially proud of the fact that working for this cause motivated him to learn more about the “rights of women in Islam and international law conventions”. Being a women’s rights activist, Jami managed and implemented more than 20 projects all over Afghanistan “for the empowerment and capacity building of women and girls, along with managing annual campaigns, press conferences, gatherings and demonstrations”.

Wesa, while travelling to most parts of Afghanistan for his equal education activism, has met thousands of Afghans in his lifetime. In his meetings, both he and his volunteers in Pen Path, had a clear and universal message: “We (Pen Path) would tell them that women make up half our society, and should have equal rights in our society. Without women and their participation and education, we would not be able to develop Afghan society. Only in a literate and educated Afghan society can we eliminate all evils, including violence against women.”

Therefore, Wesa, through Pen Path, encouraged Afghans in rural and urban areas to allow girls and women to seek primary, secondary and higher education, and to respect their position and role in the society.

05

WHAT MAKES OUR ALLIES PROUD?

Even though working for women's rights has its own trials and tribulations for WILPF's male Afghan allies and Wesa, they also carry a sense of pride while pursuing this significantly difficult goal within their country.

Wesa feels that even though his organisation has done a lot for women's rights in the country, what he feels most proud of is helping thousands of Afghan girls realise their dream of gaining education. "We were one of the very first organisations to call for access to education in war-torn and remote areas," said Wesa, whose organisation has opened schools in remote parts where there were no schools for decades. He is also especially proud of his initiative of starting "secret" home schools in war zones, where thousands of girls and women gained education.

Dr Kakar, among many other things, feels especially proud for promoting women's rights and their constructive "role in reconciliation, peace and security". On his broader achievements towards promoting women's rights under the umbrella of Islam and Islamic teachings, he said that he is "very proud that a very big number of *ulema*, around 6,000, of NUA are trained with the approach of supporting women and the women's movement in Afghanistan".

He said that NUA's scholars work on the ground in all parts of the country to promote women's rights. "I am very proud as I am one of the founders of this organisation, which voluntarily works for the promotion of women's rights [in Afghanistan]." Another initiative that Dr Kakar feels proud of, is the opening of spaces for women's participation in the mosques in many provinces across the country. He feels that his organisation's steps towards engaging women in all aspects of life, and giving them full participation in social activities in the country, will go a long way in changing perceptions among men in the country.

It is through their initiatives that women, especially in remote parts, can play an active role in the society.

For other allies, their involvement and presence within the overall landscape and movement for women's rights in Afghanistan are a major achievement and a source of pride.

Firdous, therefore, feels very proud that he can see the Afghan women fighting for their rights in a seriously challenging environment, especially when the country is controlled by the Taliban, who are against the idea of equal rights for women.

He is also proud of contributing so far to the national efforts, alongside other national and international women rights defenders, towards women's empowerment in the country.

Jami, however, feels that instead of feeling pride in the "past achievements", now is the time, under the Taliban regime, for human rights defenders and activists in Afghanistan to "contribute and work more for freedom and human, especially women's, rights in the country".



06

HOW DID THEIR WORK CHANGE THEM?

“I feel and see a lot of positive changes in my personality since starting my journey as a women’s rights defender”, said Firdous, when asked how women’s rights activism changed him.

Through his activism and work, he has learnt that there are no differences, as created by society, between men and women, and all household activities (such as cleaning, cooking, doing laundry etc) mandated to be performed only by women can also be performed by men.

For those who have grown up in the Global North, this supposedly simple statement may be confusing and chauvinistic.

However, due to the cultural norms in many parts of South Asia, including Afghanistan, men and boys are raised with the notion that women are “supposed to” do all major household chores and look after men and boys in the house. Similarly, in such societies particularly in rural and remote parts, being a housewife is often considered a “full-time” job for women who are supposed to stay at home. In such an environment, Firdous’ statement represents a major ideological shift, which was made possible through his work for, and with, women of Afghanistan.

It was through this shift that Firdous further believed that women could perform most activities and tasks culturally specific to men, such as farming, construction, management, governance and politics. As a result, Firdous now actively participates in household activities without feeling embarrassed. He really enjoys sharing household chores with his wife, mother and sisters, and encourages his male friends, colleagues and peers to follow suit.

Firdous' story paints an interesting picture of why movements and initiatives geared towards an equal and just society in the Global South often produce incremental changes, both in individuals and in society at large. Jami, similarly, also witnessed major changes in his personality while working for women's rights in Afghanistan. "During my work with and for women's rights activists, I learnt how to respect women, and educated myself on their rights in Islam, domestic and international law", said Jami, who believes that women's rights activism positively changed him personally and professionally.

Dr Kakar believes that his work has had a very positive impact on his personal and professional life. "I am very proud of the fact that I was part of such [women's rights] initiatives and worked with, and for, my compatriots, both male and female, and particularly women who are deprived of their rights due to the cultural norms in Afghanistan."

He thinks that it is unfortunate that in Afghanistan, "people are more committed to the cultural norms instead of the teachings of Islam". As a result, they [Afghan people] wrongly believe that their traditional and cultural norms are the teachings of Islam.

Whereas, in fact, the teachings of Islam are very pro-women. Dr Kakar also argued that in certain cases, women have more privileges than men. These misconceptions among the Afghan people motivated Dr Kakar to become part of this movement for gender equality in Afghanistan, because half of Afghanistan's population consisted of women.

Moreover, Dr Kakar believes playing his part in ensuring women played an active role in Afghan society – which for him, will take a long time – also had a positive impact on him. He is now very much interested in "educating his daughters and helping my wife with her professional work". He also encourages his relatives and friends to send their daughters to schools and universities, so that they can play an active role in society. Dr Kakar believes that his work and efforts for women's education can play a major role in the rehabilitation and development of (war-torn) Afghanistan.

For Wesa, the biggest change in his life was the realisation that, "Afghanistan cannot progress and prosper, and get out of all its problems, as a nation unless educated women work alongside men in making Afghanistan a prosperous society."

The other change in his life, is that he is now not alone in his struggle for a gender-just society. He now has hundreds of like-minded women allies who are taking this struggle (for girls' education) forward. "My best and most trusted advisers are women, and in all my efforts, they contribute equally," said Wesa.

07

COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO MALE ALLIES

Women's rights activism, both as a concept and in practice, comes with certain preconceived biases and resistance from various sections of the generally patriarchal Afghan society.

A general perception among local communities, especially where literacy rates are lower, is that NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and civil society organisations (CSOs), advocating for equal rights, are an extension of the Western hegemonic power structures. It is due to this perception that people working for these NGOs and CSOs are considered “Western agents” who want to intoxicate the minds of communities against their religious and traditional values. As a result, community members advocating for women's rights understandably face various forms of local resistance.

Some male allies have faced violent reprisals, including assassination attempts. An imam who works with WILPF, described his narrow escape. “In January 2020, I was trying to go to the office at seven or eight in the morning. I was coming from my home near the main street. There was a side street, and two men riding a motorcycle, they hid their faces, they came after me, coming near to me. They fired at me. Two to three bullets. One bullet hit me in the ear, one in the neck. After an injection and an operation, I realised I was in the hospital.

I realised that I was alive. The doctor said it was a miracle. After that attack, we left our house, and we came to the city. We are not giving our address even to other relatives. We are fearful of another attack.”

For most of the male allies, though, the resistance has been more subtle. Wesa admitted that working for women's rights, especially in a country like Afghanistan and its remote parts, is not easy. However, he understood the nuances and cultural and traditional sensitivities of various parts of Afghanistan, which made his activism relatively easy. "My relationship with my family and relatives has improved over time due to my activism, and it is because of our activism that many girls and women in my extended family gained education," he explained, saying that his family now supports him in carrying forward his mission.

Muhammad Hashim, Hareer's father, belongs to a "very conservative" family. He has four sisters, three of whom have no formal education. The fourth was fortunate to gain primary, secondary and higher education. His fourth sister gaining higher education also encouraged Hashim to ensure quality education for his children. But as soon as his children were admitted to an American school in Kabul, he faced "very tough" resistance from his family members. However, when his family and relatives saw the benefits of his children, including Hareer, getting education, they were also encouraged to send their children to schools.

Similarly, Jami also initially faced resistance and threats from within his community for women's rights activism. However, with the passage of time and, in his words, "step by step" he built a network of like-minded people in his social circle to continue his activism.

Due to his religious background, Dr Kakar, on the other hand, has received positive response from the community for his work, especially the work that he does with imams. They use quotes and citations from the Quran, and evidence from the traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad of Islam, to promote women's rights in Afghan communities. It is their use of such evidence and tools that leads to a positive change on the mindset of the people. Dr Kakar believes that there are many people who are not aware of the true teachings of Islam, and are often under the influence of the propaganda carried out by extremist groups. However, through his work, Dr Kakar actively works in the community to change the wrong perceptions of teachings, which ultimately has a positive impact on the overall society.

Dr Kakar's network of *ulema*, in close collaboration with organisations like WILPF, is spreading awareness and the true and equitable teachings of Islam. As a result, men are changing their perceptions and "supporting women and girls at home in terms of education and professional opportunities".

Firdous, for his women's rights work and activities, has often received positive feedback from his family, relatives, friends and colleagues. However, the feedback is not always positive. He has received life-threatening messages from men who are against equal rights for men and women in the country. He also often argued with male colleagues who had a leaning towards the Taliban, and who were against women's rights activists and activities. He has, therefore, received a life-threatening call from the Taliban, who warned him against his activities and told him that they knew his residential address. In August 2021, he was warned by a colleague that another pro-Taliban colleague intended to kill him, due to his work and activism for women's rights. These developments, therefore, keep him in constant fear for his life.

A stylized graphic featuring the numbers '08' in a white, rounded, sans-serif font. The numbers are positioned over a solid blue horizontal bar that extends across the width of the graphic.

HOW DO WILPF'S MALE ALLIES EXPLAIN THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER?

**On 31 August 2021,
when the US government
marked the end of its 20-
year war in Afghanistan,
the Taliban and their
allies took over full
control of the country.**

With this withdrawal, Afghanistan was – as BBC journalist Lyse Doucet put it – turned “upside down and inside out”. The takeover took many by surprise, including our allies. When they were asked to share their reasons for the US failure and its subsequent withdrawal from the country, they had some consensus on the fact that corruption within the ranks of the civilian government led to the fall of Kabul.

For Dr Kakar, “Corruption in the previous [civilian] government and its leadership, and the absence of unity among the country’s top leadership, caused the collapse of the government and the takeover of the Taliban.” He believes that indeed the Taliban are “hard-line interpreters” of the teachings of Islam, but in comparison to their first reign, he sees “some” changes in the behaviour and approach. He feels that the “*mujahideen* [holy warriors] who were in power two decades and were hard-line interpreters of Islam have now somewhat evolved, which can be seen in their partial concessions for working women in the country”.

He hopes that these changes will become more evident with the passage of time, and with help from Afghanistan’s civil society and engagement from the international community. Therefore, if the international community is committed to a better Afghanistan, Dr Kakar believes that certain (negative and harsh) beliefs of the Taliban can be changed, and they can be convinced to change their position on women’s rights.

For Firdous, the Taliban's victory came as a shock. He believed that the international community that supported civilian governments in Afghanistan in the last two decades, would not allow a formerly terrorist group to assume power in Kabul. Even on 14 August 2021, when Taliban captured Kabul, he was in his office and carrying on with his day as usual.

However, it was around 11am that their HR officer arrived and informed them the Taliban had entered the city.

According to him, the main reason behind the Taliban's victory was the "existence of corrupt leaders and authorities", who also lacked the commitment and the passion to serve the country. Corruption, in his view, played a key role in the fall of the republic government in Afghanistan. Firdous also quoted John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), who had warned in 2020 that corruption was "the most insidious threat" facing the Afghan civilian government. Like many Afghans, Firdous rued the fact that to survive in Afghanistan, every single individual, including him, somehow had to bribe someone to get their tasks done.

He believes that the coalition and international partners "pumped" huge sums of money into Afghanistan in the absence of proper institutional mechanisms.

A major chunk of this money was allocated to the Afghan security forces, where the top leadership were living their lives in luxury, whereas "common soldiers did not even have access to basic meals and necessities during the conflict".

Firdous also sees that the ideology of "corruption as a source of power" was common among (male) warlords and (male) politicians.

If he sees the corruption through the prism of masculinities, it was mostly men who were involved in the corruption, as they believed it was only through corruption that they could maximise their power and influence in a patriarchal society. Similarly, Jami blames "corruption, ethnic divide and clashes, and lack of rule of law" paving the way for the Taliban takeover in the country in August 2021.

With the Taliban regime now becoming a harsh reality in Afghanistan, many of our allies, in terms of their work, face an uncertain future in the country.



09

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR OUR ALLIES?

Even though opening of universities by the Taliban regime gives Dr Kakar some hope for the future,

he believes that the Afghan civil society “should continue this struggle [for girls and women’s education] because it will take a long time to change [patriarchal] cultural and traditional norms towards women”.

Wesa, on the other hand, is strong in his resolve for promoting girls’ education. For him, whoever rules Afghanistan is not as important as the promotion of equal education in the country. Explaining this point, he said, “I am neither concerned with the current Taliban government, nor was I concerned with the previous government. I work with the [Afghan] people, and the people work with me. Whoever comes to power, I will continue my struggle for educating each and every girl and boy in Afghanistan.” For Wesa, education is “our human and Islamic right”.

Unlike Dr Kakar and Wesa, Firdous does not see much hope for a bright future for women in Afghanistan. He believes that the Taliban, “being a terrorist group” should not be negotiated with. He further believes that the group’s track record leaves little hope for a peaceful country where all citizens enjoy equal rights. Firdous, however, does not see the Taliban’s victory as “the end of all hope for a prosperous Afghanistan”. Instead, he believes that it is a starting point for the Afghan civil society, especially for young Afghans, and human rights defenders, to initiate their struggle against “darkness and terrorism” in Afghanistan.

The Afghan youth, who were introduced to education and equal employment opportunities, albeit in the urban centres, in the past two decades, see the Taliban as a repressive regime. Therefore, since August 2021, the country has witnessed numerous protests against the regime in much of the country. For Firdous, “we [the Afghans] are the change makers”, who need to stick together and commit to making a difference for a better and more equitable Afghanistan.

Irshad’s statement, “We have gone back 20 years to the 90s,” perfectly sums up the current situation in Afghanistan. The Taliban, through their policies and actions, have already shrunk the space for women and human rights activists. However, he is still hopeful for the country’s future. He believes that for a better and sustainable future for Afghan men and women, the international community,

particularly the United Nations member states, should constructively engage with the Taliban regime. Jami, on the other hand, feels that activists like himself, along with their families, are in grave danger with the Taliban coming to power. Jami believes that he, along with his family, has to leave Afghanistan due to the constant threats he has been receiving from the Taliban and other fundamentalist groups. These threats, nonetheless, have not wavered Jami’s commitments and activism, as he has a strong “voice and advocacy network to support women’s rights nationally, regionally and internationally”.



10

WILL THEY BE ABLE TO CONTINUE THEIR WORK?

**Our allies and activists,
despite their commitment
to women's rights and
gender equality, foresee
difficult times ahead for
the country.**

Irshad wants to continue his support for gender equality, particularly his support for “education for all” in Afghanistan. However, due to the current political situation, he is trying hard to find ways where he can effectively pursue his mission. Firdous, on the other hand, is constantly facing threats from the Taliban and its affiliates due to his past work and activism for equal rights. Currently, he is more focused on relocating to a safer environment to continue his mission. Dr Kakar believes that the Taliban’s near-total control of Afghanistan, unlike the previous governments, enables him to travel to other parts of the country and continue his work. He also encourages the international community to engage with moderate religious leaders, who are respected within their communities, to promote gender equality through moderate Islamic teachings.

Even though the male allies see the Taliban’s August 2021 takeover as a step back for gender equality in the country, for them, there is still hope and all is not yet lost. Firdous said that the Taliban’s victory, in his view, should not be seen as something that “ends all hope for gender equality in Afghanistan”. Instead, for him, it is a starting point for Afghanistan, especially for young Afghans and human rights defenders, to work towards achieving equal rights in the country. On the other hand, Dr Kakar believes that even though the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam is extreme and harsh, for him, it is now the responsibility of the international community and civil society organisations to engage with the Taliban and induce a positive change within their mindset.

For Irshad, the situation is as dire as Firdous fears. Even though he is strong in his resolve to work for girls' education, even with the Taliban in power, he feels that the international community, especially the media, is not highlighting the difficulties that male allies of gender equality now face in Afghanistan. He, like many Afghans and particularly allies of feminist peace, feels that the international community has abandoned them. For Jami, women's rights activism in Afghanistan is "as important as water is for life". Such activism has shaped his identity as a male human rights defender. Therefore, even under the clouds of uncertainty and constant threats, he is "more committed to a [better] future [for Afghanistan]" and wants to fight for the rights of all Afghan women and girls, including his two daughters.

There is an overarching consensus among our allies, that even during these dark times under the Taliban, they must continue their struggle for gender equality in Afghanistan. They believe that they must empower the Afghan women at any cost.

However, Irshad also fears that the humanisation and suffering of Afghans under the Taliban, like the past, may only be confined to (Western) documentaries, movies or social media platforms.

However, for Wesa, the situation is relatively different. He argued that even though eight months have passed since the Taliban's takeover, he has continued his work without major hurdles. "I have carried out my work even after the Taliban's takeover, and you can check my social media activity for evidence. I have organised meetings and established girls' schools in remote areas where children had no access to schools in the last 20 years," he said, reiterating his resolve for his activism and arguing that the fact that he is common Afghan, and his father and grandfather are respected elders, helps him gain public support for his work.

However, he, in strong terms, tells us that whether he is "beaten, stopped or killed" his struggle for equal education for every boy and girl throughout Afghanistan will carry on. He also hopes that the Taliban will soon re-open all-girls schools in Afghanistan, because "it is

the right and legitimate demand of the Afghan people". He believes that only after opening these can Afghan girls gain education and serve their respective communities.

A stylized graphic featuring the number '11' in white. The number is positioned over a horizontal red bar that extends to the left and right of the digits. The background is a solid teal color.

11

FUTURE OF FEMINIST PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Following the return of the Taliban, the small pockets of Western-style liberalism and state-building initiatives under the US-led coalition presence, which guaranteed women's rights and offered a space for open discussions about gender relations, have quickly disappeared.

The ministry for women has been closed and replaced with the ministry for vice and virtue, and women and girls have not been allowed to return to school in many parts of the country. Peace as well as gender activists will now have to operate within this new reality, to change gender norms and relations and to heal the trauma of the past. Some initiatives have already shown a potential way to bargain with patriarchy in Taliban-run Afghanistan.

The Women's Ulema Network has been in contact with the Taliban during peace negotiations. Rather than using a liberal Western tradition of feminism, these female Islamic scholars confront gender injustices of both on the same plane and with the same language as the Taliban. Working with male allies, they challenge the Taliban's stance on gender internally through the logic of Islam.

Even though fighting in Afghanistan has largely stopped since the Taliban's takeover, the issues for Afghan women and youth have become more challenging. In the words of Muhammad Hashim, the current "young Afghan generation [raised under the shadow and presence of the Western coalition] is dynamic". It has huge potential but needs the opportunity to express itself. During the past 20 years, this generation, especially women, were provided with jobs and professional opportunities. A significant number of them, after the US withdrawal, however, left the country. It is now up to the international community to keep engaging with Afghanistan, so that Afghans who decide to stay are provided with the opportunities that could fulfil their potential. For instance, activists like Wesa – who believes that the end to all misery and war and establishing durable peace in Afghanistan is "access to education for all boys, girls, men and women" – need the international community's support to fulfil their goals. Similarly, activists like Firdous, Jami and Irshad also need the international community's protection. Without protecting such allies, the dream of establishing a gender-just society in Afghanistan cannot be materialised. In the current climate, the work of male allies for a gender-just society in the country becomes more important than ever.

Women activists in Afghanistan are constantly harassed and detained, and the Taliban, so far, have indicated little flexibility in ensuring civil liberties for women.

Afghanistan is on the cusp of a major humanitarian disaster, requiring some level of engagement and negotiations with the regime.

The international community, particularly Afghanistan's European partners, have informally started their engagement with the Taliban representatives (with dialogues taking place in Norway and Switzerland).

This engagement should not come at the cost of a rollback of gains made in the last two decades towards gender equality, especially in education, healthcare and financial security.

These gains, according to our male allies, need to be persevered and consolidated. Moreover, the international partners should not forget and abandon the male allies of feminist peace in Afghanistan. Through supporting these male allies for women's rights and creating space for them at the negotiating table alongside women, civil society in Afghanistan can work towards a better and more equitable future for women in the country.

* Names anonymised due to the current political and security situation in Afghanistan.



Making Visible The Afghan Men Who Are Working For Women's Rights And A Gender-Just Society