

Research Report Beyond Stereotypes: Afghan Men as Allies for Gender Equality and Feminist Peace

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Abstract

Analyses of women's rights and gender equality in Afghanistan have historically depicted a clear binary: *patriarchal and conservative men resisting aspirational women*. However, such analyses have failed to account for the significant number of men in Afghanistan who have been vocal advocates for women's rights and have worked tirelessly towards building a gender-just society. To challenge stereotypical representations, this report draws on primary interview data to explore the views of Afghan male allies who are working for gender equality and feminist peace in the country. The report discusses the allies' perspectives on gender relations and their commitment towards feminist peace. The report also offers an analysis of the current situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime and its implications for our male allies and their work. Through their stories, the report hopes to shed light on the challenges faced by men who support women's rights in Afghanistan and challenge the narrow portrayal of Afghan men as culturally and religiously conservative and opposed to gender equality.

Keywords

masculinities, feminist peace, gender equality, Afghanistan, Taliban

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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 10,000 active members, out of which nearly one-third have at times been men. These figures may come as a surprise for those used to often generalised representations of patriarchal Afghan men (see e.g., Moghadam, 2002; Schütte, 2014). 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.

Afghanistan is a case study that highlights the persistent nature of orientalist tropes in the post-Cold War context. For years, the oppression of women in the country has been used as a "civilisational" bargaining chip by Western colonial powers to claim cultural superiority and justify their interventions in Afghanistan. These orientalist tropes have been perpetuated in Western media and discourse, often framing the war in Afghanistan as a battle between supposedly helpless Muslim women and supposedly ultra-conservative and patriarchal violent Muslim men. This narrative has been used to legitimize military occupation and intervention, positioning the West as liberators who are rescuing Afghan women from oppressive conditions. This liberatory narrative allowed Western media to present its soldiers as the "true protectors" of Muslim women (Mehrdad, 2021; Wills, 2021). 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 (2019) *Crafting Masculinities: Culture, War and Psychodynamics in Afghanistan*, 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 a 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 *honor*, of women and homeland on the other. This privilege of violence and other masculine norms and behaviors valued by martial institutions has often been described as "military masculinities" (Atherton, 2009). These operate on both institutional and individual levels and include the valorizing bravery, warrior-like behavior, and 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 in Afghanistan, 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 the broad generalizations of Afghan men, thousands of progressive Afghan men have

worked with civil society organizations to engage in activism for women's rights and gender equality in Afghanistan. Even when a study (see Gereš et al., 2018) 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 other third who did not agree that women had too many rights. 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.

Against this backdrop, this report delves into the experiences and challenges faced by male advocates striving for gender equality and feminist peace in Afghanistan. Utilizing primary data collected from interviews, as well as secondary content analysis, the report emphasizes the importance of showcasing the stories of Afghan men who champion gender equality and defy prevailing stereotypes. By highlighting these positive contributions, the report seeks to deconstruct biases that often perpetuate traditional gender roles within the country. The report presents a detailed examination of the viewpoints and motivations driving these male advocates in their pursuit of gender equality. Analyzing interview data, the study explores their insights on gender dynamics and their dedication to fostering feminist peace. Subsequently, the report presents an analysis of the current state of affairs in Afghanistan under Taliban rule and its impact on the work of our male allies. The report underscores the immense hurdles faced by these individuals in their quest for gender equality under the Taliban regime and advocates for a unified effort to support their ongoing struggle.

Challenging Stereotypes in Afghanistan

The stereotypical portrayal of Afghan men is consistent with Western media representations of Muslim men more generally. Referring to an International Men and Gender Equality Survey conducted in four Muslim-majority countries, Inhorn and Naguib (2018, p. 16) write: "Although the study report attempted to highlight positive directions and signs of hope for gender equality across the Middle Eastern region, the Western media—in typical fashion— reported the study results in highly negative terms". The British journal *The Economist* led with this nested series of headlines in its 4 May 2017 edition: "Down and out in Cairo and Beirut," "The sorry state of Arab men," and "They are clinging to the patriarchy for comfort." Inhorn and Naguib (2018, p.17) continue: "Given these ongoing, stereotypical western media portrayals, it is important to counter with ethnographic research showing how real Muslim men, under considerable stress from war, impoverishment, and flight, are responding in unexpected and surprising ways..."

Connell (2016) asserts the field of masculinities studies is, like mainstream media, often beset with colonial tropes and blind spots. Writing about masculinities studies, Connell (2016, p. 304) argues:

Most of this research and debate has occurred within the global North. It is increasingly recognized that the resulting geopolitics of knowledge is a problem. For a deeper understanding of the issues raised in the debates about hegemonic masculinity,

we need to learn not only from Western Europe and North America but also from the majority world. We need, in short, to decolonize the study of masculinities.

Similar to Connell, and in his piece ‘An invitation to decoloniality in work on (African) men and masculinities’, Kopano Ratele critiques the body of work on men and masculinities for its lack of focus on colonialism. He writes: “Whereas colonialism reconfigured men’s lives and masculinities, it has tended to be peripheral in the global work on men and masculinity” (Ratele, 2021, p. 769). Our report responds to some of the challenges laid down by Ratele, Inhorn and Naguib, and Connell while countering stereotypes of Afghan men.

The prevailing stereotypes of Afghan men fail to capture the fuller picture of men’s lives and their relationship to gender equality. For example, Pashtunwali, a collection of cultural codes and traditions followed by many Pashtuns, who make up a significant portion of Afghanistan’s population, is frequently viewed as male-dominated and restrictive for women. However, Pashtunwali is a multifaceted and evolving tradition with some potential for more gender-inclusive interpretations (Yousaf, 2019). The Taliban’s predominantly male membership and imposition of ultra-conservative laws further perpetuate these stereotypes. They use both Islam and Pashtunwali to justify their policies. Echavez et al. (2016, p.32) explain the dichotomy between Pashtunwali and Islam, highlighting a focus group discussion in which some men following Pashtunwali admitted to sending their daughters to school due to Islam’s support for girls’ education, even though the Taliban infused local culture discouraged it. Similarly, Ebtikar (2020, p. 4) conducted a study on Afghan men who opted against using violence, choosing instead to challenge prevailing hegemonic masculinities and re-evaluate their perceptions of gender relations within evolving social and familial contexts. Ebtikar (2020), hence, argues that recognizing masculinities and femininities as social constructs can enable us to comprehend how these constructs are not fixed and are subject to change, particularly in response to shifting circumstances. It is, therefore, essential to acknowledge the intricacies of Afghanistan’s cultural and religious landscape and resist oversimplified binary narratives that inadequately represent the diverse perspectives and experiences of Afghan men and women.

We seek to build on the arguments above and aim to counter some simplistic generalizations of Afghan men through this report. However, readers may still ask why these stories of feminist Afghan men, discussed in the report, are important to highlight and what purpose they achieve. In response, we have the following objectives in sharing these stories:

First, the research report honors WILPF’s male allies and the brave work they have done in partnership with many women’s rights activists, who too face ongoing threats of reprisals and murder. Mostly these men have not been acknowledged for their efforts. They deserve recognition and respect.

Secondly, in surfacing the stories of those Afghan men who are increasingly supporting women’s human rights, we aim to encourage additional scholarship that can shed light on what motivates these men, what activities they engage in, and how they can best be supported to work for feminist peace. Hopefully, it also affirms the changes

already taking place among more gender-equitable men, strengthens their convictions to stay the course, and encourages more men to step forward and work in solidarity with women to advance rights for all.

Thirdly, we hope this piece and its richer and more nuanced portrayal of Afghan men's relationship to gender equality and women's rights encourages donors, UN Agencies and INGOs to support gender equality work with men in Afghanistan. All too often gender equality work is defined narrowly to mean funding only women-led organizations focusing on women's empowerment. Work with men and boys is seldom funded.

Fourth, at a time of growing calls to decolonize scholarship on men and masculinities as well as international development more generally, this report directly challenges the neo-colonial assumptions often made about men in the Global South who are too often depicted as inevitably violent and patriarchal.

Lastly, we hope that acknowledging that Afghan men can, and a lot of the times do support women's rights challenges the self-serving justifications used in the West that foreign military interventions are the best/only way to advance Afghan women's rights.

Afghanistan's Male Allies in Feminist Peace and Gender Equality

To understand their personal stories and to counter myths and stereotypes about Afghan men, we interviewed Afghan male allies working for feminist peace to get a better understanding of their work and motivations. These allies—Dr Fazal Ghani Kakar, Firdous*, Mohammad Rahim Jami, Mohammad Hashim and Irshad*—all come from different backgrounds. Their responses, however, are indicative of how assumptions about the “typical Afghan man” can be wrong and why it is important to highlight both our allies' personal stories and their struggle within a largely patriarchal society.

Dr. Kakar is the executive director of Noor Educational and Capacity Development Organization, (NECDO), and the founder of Nahdhatul Ulama Afghanistan, a network of Ulama which he describes as being based on five principles: “moderation, social justice, tolerance, equality, and participation”. 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”. In his quest for gender equality in Afghanistan, Dr. Kakar works with local youth to promote women's rights, demilitarization, and a commitment to peace and reconciliation in the country.

Dr. Kakar is not alone in this work. 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. While mentioning some verses from the Holy Quran, Irshad argues that “gender equality and Islam never supports militarism and masculinity, and that there is gender equality (in

Islam) where both men and women should seek education, and both should have an equal right to work”.

However, it is not only religion 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 witnessed first-hand how devastating this ban was on his three sisters who were left disappointed and frustrated at not being able to continue their education. He knew instinctively the ban was unfair and it 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 set him on the path to becoming a “gender rights” and a “gender equality” advocate in Afghanistan.

Mohammad Rahim Jami’s circumstances were like those of Firdous. “After the internal war in Afghanistan and during the Taliban’s first government (between 1996 and 2001), I witnessed, as a student, the exclusion of women from education, sport, and economic and political activities”, says Jami. This exclusion, therefore, led him to lobby and advocate for women’s and girls’ rights and education in Afghanistan in 2002. For him, it is a long-desired dream to see women, who make up half of Afghanistan’s population, have an independent voice and better participation in governance structures in Afghanistan.

The men we interviewed who work for gender equality in Afghanistan carry a sense of real pride in their activism. Dr. Kakar feels especially proud of promoting women’s rights and their constructive “role in reconciliation, peace and security”. He feels that his organization’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. 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”, says Dr. Kakar. He believes 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 the teachings of Islam are very pro-women. These misconceptions among the Afghan people motivated Dr. Kakar to become part of this movement for gender equality. 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 his 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.

Firdous, too, feels a sense of accomplishment when he can see Afghan women fighting for their rights in a difficult environment, especially when the country is controlled by the Taliban. He is also proud of contributing so far to the national efforts

alongside other national and international women's rights defenders toward women empowerment in the country. Mohammad 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. "I feel and see a lot of positive changes in my personality since starting my journey as a women's rights defender", says 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 raised and living in the Global North, his statement with its emphasis on sharing household tasks may seem like a low bar to set. 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 (Schütte, 2014; Sudarshan & Sinha, 2011). 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's statement represents a major ideological shift, which was made possible through his work for, and with, the women of Afghanistan. Firdous now actively participates in household activities without feeling embarrassed. He enjoys sharing household chores with his wife, mother, and sisters and encourages his male friends, colleagues, and peers to follow suit. Similarly, the emphasis in his quote on defending women may seem at odds with political sentiments in the Global North, where feminist activists are often critical of men assuming the role of defending or protecting women and argue that men's role is to challenge male supremacy rather than defend or protect women.

Mohammad Jami also experienced major personal changes 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", says Jami, who believes that women's rights activism positively changed him personally and professionally.

Resistance to Men's Gender Equality Activism

Women's rights activism, both as a concept and in practice, is met with preconceived biases and resistance from various sections of Afghan society. A general perception among local communities, both in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan, especially where literacy rates are lower, is that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs), advocating for equal rights, are an extension of Western hegemonic power structures (Jamal & Baldwin, 2019). It is due to this perception that people working for these NGOs and CSOs are considered "Western agents". As a result, community members advocating for women's rights understandably face local resistance.

Some male allies have faced violent reprisals, including assassination attempts. A scholar who works with WILPF describes 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 and had hidden their faces came after me. They shot at me.... Two to three bullets. One bullet hit me in the ear, and another one in the neck. Once I regained consciousness, I realized that I was in the hospital and had gone through surgery. I also realized that I was alive. The doctor said it was a miracle. After that attack, we left our house and came to the city. We are not giving our address even to other relatives. We are fearful of another attack.

For many other male allies, though, the resistance has been more subtle. Muhammad Hashim belongs to a “very conservative” family. He has four sisters, out of which three have little 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. However, as soon as his kids were admitted to an American school in Kabul, he faced resistance from his family members. However, when his family and relatives saw the benefits of his children getting an education, they were also encouraged to send their children to schools. Similarly, Mohammad Rahim Jami also initially faced resistance and threats from within his community for women’s rights activism. However, over 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 responses from the community for his work, especially the work that he does with *imams* (prayer leaders in the mosques). He uses quotes and citations from the Quran, and evidence from the tradition and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad of Islam to promote women’s rights in Afghan communities. It is his organization’s use of such evidence and tools that lead to a positive change in the mindset of the people. As a result, men are changing their perceptions and according to him, “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 the provision of equal rights for men and women in the country. He was also often arguing with male colleagues who had a leaning toward the Taliban and who were against women’s rights activists and activities. However, his passionate arguments and debates now carry implications not only for himself but also for other women’s rights activists, given the resurgence of the Taliban’s rule in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan’s Male Feminist Allies and Taliban’s Return to Power

In the aftermath of the Taliban’s return to power in August 2021, these men foresee difficult times ahead. Moreover, like most Afghans, the return of the Taliban came as a shock to our male allies. Reflecting on his shock and surprise, Firdous says:

Taliban's victory was something out of my imagination. I strongly believed that the international community, which during the past twenty years significantly supported the ex-Republic government of Afghanistan, would not permit a terrorist group to destroy our dreams and capture Afghanistan so easily and rapidly.

While working with an NGO focused on socio-economic development in Afghanistan, Firdous encountered a colleague who was suspected of having ties to the Taliban. The two were at odds due to Firdous's outspoken commitment to women's rights. In response to this conflict, Firdous received a threatening phone call from a representative claiming to be affiliated with the Taliban. The caller was aware of his residential address and feminist activism. Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 and the collapse of the Afghan government, Firdous received another call in his Kabul office from a friend warning of a former colleague who had been inquiring about his whereabouts and address and who intended to cause him harm.

These events left Firdous deeply concerned for the safety of his family. Firdous's experiences highlight the risks and challenges faced by individuals advocating for progressive values and human rights in Afghanistan, particularly in the current political climate. Such incidents demonstrate the ongoing need for increased support and protection for those committed to promoting social justice and gender equality in the region. Even with such fears, Firdous believes there is still hope. He believes the Taliban's victory should not be regarded as something that "ends all hope for gender equality in Afghanistan". Instead, for him, it should signify a starting point, especially for young Afghans and human rights defenders working together towards achieving equal rights in the country. However, even with this hope, his focus is currently on relocating to a safer environment that will allow him to continue his work.

Irshad sees the situation in Afghanistan, under the Taliban, as even more dire than what is being portrayed in the media. "The current situation (under the Taliban) is very dangerous, and we have gone back 20 years", opines Irshad, reflecting on the Taliban's takeover of the country. While he remains resolute in his commitment to promoting girls' education, he feels that the challenges faced by male allies like himself are not being adequately highlighted by the international community. Irshad is passionate about advancing gender equality, particularly when it comes to providing education for all in Afghanistan. However, he is finding it increasingly difficult to continue his work in light of the current political situation. Despite the difficulties he faces, he believes that it is his duty as a Muslim to empower girls and women in Afghanistan, regardless of the cost.

Over the past two decades, Irshad has dedicated himself to educating Afghans in various schools and institutes. Despite his traumatic experiences with militant groups, especially the Taliban, Irshad remains steadfast in his belief that educating girls and women is a sacred duty that he must fulfil. He remains committed to promoting the empowerment of girls and women in any way he can. He is willing to have conversations about gender equality, even if people have different interpretations of Islamic teachings. He believes that Islam, as one of the major religions, promotes and protects

women's rights, and is dismayed that it is being used as a propaganda tool by extremist groups and the media to further their agendas. Despite the challenges he faces and the darkness that seems to loom over Afghanistan, Irshad remains hopeful that progress can be made towards gender equality. He firmly believes that he must continue working towards this goal, regardless of the risks involved.

Dr. Kakar, however, has a more positive outlook. He "hopes" 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. His hopes are rooted in his religious network of male and female scholars, who may be in a better position to convince the Taliban, through Islamic teachings, on gender equality. While calling upon the Afghan civil society and the international community, Dr. Kakar says:

The Taliban strictly adhere to a hardline interpretation of Islam, but there have been some changes in their views compared to their earlier regime. The civil society of Afghanistan and its international supporters need to continue working towards changing the mentality of these hardline Taliban, who remain strict in their rules and traditions. Through continued efforts, we hope to see more positive changes in the future.

He further encourages the international community to engage with moderate religious leaders, who are respected within their communities, to promote gender equality through Islamic teachings in Afghanistan.

Based on the interviews and opinions discussed above, it is clear that changing extreme views towards gender and women's rights in Afghanistan is a difficult and risky task for our allies. The country is governed by a highly militarized group that uses extreme religious views to control society. Despite these challenges, some allies who remain in the country feel compelled to continue engaging with individuals and groups who hold different, often extreme, views. They view it as their civic and religious duty to work towards gender equality and feminist peace in Afghanistan. Given the risks that these allies face, it is crucial for the international community, especially donor partners, currently engaging with the Taliban regime to incorporate policies and strategies to protect these male allies working towards gender equality in the country. The protection of these allies should be a key consideration, along with the protection of girls, women, and women's rights activists, in any engagement with the regime. By prioritising their safety and well-being, the international community can ensure that the important work towards gender equality and feminist peace in Afghanistan can continue.

Conclusion

The stories of Afghan men who are allies in feminist peace and gender equality serve as powerful examples of the potential for changing the stereotypical representation of Afghan men. These men have risked their safety and reputation to support women's rights in a society that often marginalizes and silences women's voices. These male allies have spent years, in some cases decades, advocating for girls' education and

gender equality in Afghanistan. Despite facing challenges and threats, they remain steadfast in their commitment to empowering girls and women in their communities. These men, and others like them, serve as examples of the powerful impact that male allies can have in promoting gender equality and feminist peace in Afghanistan. They challenge the stereotypical representations of Afghan men as conservative and resistant to women's rights and demonstrate that gender equality is not just a women's issue, but an issue that men can and should also be involved in championing. By highlighting the stories of these male allies, we aim to affirm their efforts and create greater awareness of the challenges they face in advocating for gender equality. We hope these stories encourage donors to support their work. Ultimately, recognizing and supporting men's activism for women's rights can play a crucial role in creating a more inclusive and just society for all Afghans.

*All names anonymized due to the current political and security situation in Afghanistan.

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