



The Voice of Afghan Diaspora Women must be heard

A dialogue between Afghan diaspora women and Members of the Danish Parliament

Report from the online public event on 10 November 2021



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Introduction

On November 10th 2021, Gender Equality Committee of the Danish Parliament led by MP Samira Nawa, Rahela Sidiqi, Founder and Director of Governance and Reform Advisory- Aid (GRA) & Rahela Trust for Afghan Women's Education and the Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme (DRC DP), engaged in a public discussion between Afghan diaspora women and Members of the Danish Parliament to address the situation in Afghanistan for Afghan women and girls.

The discussion provided space for testimonies from Afghan women on the situation in Afghanistan after the take over from Taliban, covering protection risks for women and girls; access to education and work; specific needs for the humanitarian response; concrete suggestions for future engagement and necessary accountability mechanisms.

The event was moderated by MP Samira Nawa, and was broadcasted on the Danish parliament TV Channel, where you can still find the video. 271 watched the event live online and more than 300 have seen the video afterwards.



Afghan diaspora women dialogue with the Danish MPs, 2021, photo credit: Adrien Bory

2 Opening remarks

2.1. Introduction by MP Samira Nawa from the Gender Equality Committee of the Danish Parliament

Samira Nawa opened the discussion presenting the main aims and topics of the event. MP Nawa mentioned the need of providing a platform to Afghan diaspora women, where they could explain the situation after the takeover of the country from their perspective. The aim of the dialogue with the Parliament's members was to shed light on how to protect girls and women in Afghanistan as well as those seeking protection outside of Afghanistan. Three key-topics were presented:

- Implementing of the Danish political leverage to ensure women's rights are preserved and accessible to all women and girls in Afghanistan
- Implementing a tailored humanitarian crisis response based on women and girls' specific needs
- Woman and girls' access to protection outside Afghanistan

2.2. On the situation in Afghanistan and DRC's response, by Shanna Jensen Executive Director of DRC Operations in Middle East, Europe and Asia

Shanna Jensen marked how crucial is the conversation on how to protect women's rights and uphold women's participation amongst Afghanistan's local communities. She pointed out that the situation is deteriorating with increasing gender-based violence, exploitation, and oppression: early marriages, suspension of upper secondary education and increased dependence are only some of the exacerbated issues. Moreover, the Taliban takeover has major repercussions in national NGOs and local civil society's operations. Several organizations already interrupted their work, resulting in critical immediate unmet needs.

The Danish Refugee Council, present in Afghanistan since 1999, remains committed to the principles that are leading its approach to the field: the continuation of DRC programming is contingent upon the ability of the female staff (which is nearly a third of DRC 700 staff in the country) to resume working in the safe and culturally appropriate conditions as in the past twenty years.

Alongside its operations on the ground, Shanna Jensen mentioned DRC's activities in Denmark, including integration and asylum work. In fact, *"DRC recently facilitated the revision by representatives of the Afghan evacuees of the draft bill presented in Parliament on providing recent Afghan evacuees with a two-years residence and work permit"* added Shanna Jensen. DRC has been supporting the role of the Afghan diaspora as transnational civil society actors since 2010 and, by virtue of the DRC Diaspora Programme, is now fully active in supporting diaspora mobilization in response to the situation in Afghanistan through humanitarian projects, information provision to those seeking protection inside and outside Afghanistan, and advocacy for the rights of Afghan women and girls.

2.3. On the lack of access to basic rights in Afghanistan, by Rahela Sidiqi from Rahela Trust

Rahela Sidiqi shed light on the socio-economic challenges in Afghanistan and in the neighboring countries, alongside a few recommendations. Rahela Sidiqi reported some insightful figures. She stated that according to World Food Programme (WFP) over 9 in 10 Afghan families have insufficient food for daily consumption. Rahela Sidiqi stressed that minorities, widows and disabled women and girls are struggling to survive, inside and outside of their homes. She underlined how the Taliban are exacerbating already existing problems: even before August 2021, there were not enough female teachers at secondary schools and university levels. Now, two out of three girls in education are not going to school due to poverty, displacement, or insecurity. Secondary schools and universities are closed to women, and Taliban are planning to introduce teaching, cooking or household management and religious subjects as new curricula for women. Hundreds of thousands of women are hiding due to fear of assassination, they are being sexually abused, abducted, and assassinated.

While Afghan women played a crucial role in Afghanistan democratic processes and economic activities in both rural and urban areas, they are now at home, not being able to carry on their work. Finally, Rahela Sidiqi urged the Danish government to contribute and rescue Afghan women at risks including artists, police employees, army members, civil society activists, judges, journalists, and widows.

3. Panel discussion

3.1. On the situation in Afghanistan for Women and Girls, by Wahida Faizi Former Gender Coordinator at Afghan Journalist Safety Committee

After thanking the Danish humanitarian assistance and the Danish embassy in Kabul and Islamabad for the good humanitarian work, Wahida Faizi highlighted how Afghan women still have dreams for their country being peaceful and free of violence of any kind. When she started working as a journalist in Afghanistan, she started using a pseudonym. Wahida Faizi stressed how being a woman journalist in Afghanistan was hard, but she never gave up. She mentioned that:

"During the past twenty years, Afghan women have fought and sacrificed a lot for their rights, and this was reflected in the fact that past two governments respected women's rights, values, and freedoms to decent extents. With the fall of the Republic and the establishment of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, all the hard-gained achievements obtained through the great struggles of Afghan women together with the international community were discarded".

At present, Taliban enacted new laws for women that violate all human rights laws and international conventions, while economically dragging the country to starvation and hunger. Wahida Faizi mentioned how the Islamic Emirate deliberately removed the Ministry of Women's Affairs - the only key ministry working for women at all levels of the government - and replaced it with their Ministry of Religious Rulings and Principles. Moreover, women and girls are not allowed to go to school and study in upper secondary schools; they do not have the right to work in government offices or the right to travel without a man supervisor. Women in police, female judges, athletes, journalists, or women working in international organizations are at serious risk. According to Wahida Faizi, the Taliban ideology has become more radical than in the past, they do not recognize human rights, freedom of expression, or women's rights to work

3.2. On the access to work and recreational activities for Afghan women in Afghanistan, by Maryam Farzami, Former Communication Manager at Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission

"This [meeting at the Danish Parliament] reminded me of the celebrations of the twenty-second anniversary of the Women Rights Commission, just a few months ago. I didn't have any fear that day, I was free. I could travel. I travelled through sixteen provinces, meeting many educated and experienced women there. I would have never thought I would need somebody's permission to continue my work and I would not be able to go to my office. I was getting my promotion in three months, maybe in December. A generation of Afghan women is experiencing a gradual death every day. This war in Afghanistan is not against any regime, this is not about power. I feel this war is against Afghan women, this is how it is." Stated Maryam Farzami.

Maryam Farzami opened her intervention going through her personal experience, followed by a reflection on access to work and recreational activities for Afghan women. She addressed how equitable access to work and leisure is a fundamental human right recognized in all the international human rights legislations. The governing laws of Afghanistan, in accordance with the stated human rights documents, had also recognized equal rights for both men and women. Despite these facts, since the Taliban's grasp of power and under their Islamic Emirate, we observe the harsh restrictions and hard rules preventing Afghan women from access to their right to work

The Islamic Emirate of Taliban in their first action closed the doors of the Ministry of Women Affairs and then made an announcement ordering to stay at home for the Afghan women working with the government institutions.

Moreover, the Taliban have emphasized that women are not allowed to go out, even for getting medical services without a (Mahram) a male companion from their family and Hijab as per their interpretation of the Sharia law. They even banned women from entering the sports clubs, stadiums, parks, and even shrines. At present, women across Afghanistan are deprived of their fundamental right to work and leisure; and this has caused extensive poverty, and other negative economic impacts in the lives of Afghan women. Farzami noted, however, that the most horrendous of these barbarisms is the ban on education of schoolgirls of seventh grade and above. Maryam Farzami stated that "a nation that fails to educate its children, both male and female, is not only a burden on itself but on the world as well".

3.3. On the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan and how the Afghan diaspora in Denmark is affected and responding, by Mina Qaume, Board Member at From Street to School & Dansk afghansk kvinde og diasporaforum-DAKDIF

Mina Qaume opened her speech by addressing the harsh food insecurity the country is facing. She mentioned that:

"The story of the eight orphan children who starved to death took over social media a couple of weeks ago. Losing their bedridden father and grief-stricken mother, meant they were left to fend for themselves on the streets of Kabul, with the youngest just two years old. And hearing that people are being forced to do the unthinkable to feed their children, by selling their babies, makes the desperation and urgency of the situation hard to put into words".

Already at the start of this year, Afghanistan was barely surviving before the Taliban took over, but now Afghanistan is facing the worst humanitarian crisis of the world marching towards starvation.

The takeover weakened an already fragile economy that was heavily dependent on foreign aid. Urban residents, for the first time, suffer similar rates of food insecurity to rural communities; a shifting pattern of hunger in the country. This winter, millions of Afghans will be forced to choose between migration and starvation. The aid cut-off is devastating social services in Afghanistan: basic health services are on the brink of collapse. Financial system collapsed as well. The freezing of the national reserves and the drying up for all types of aid has sent financial shockwaves in the country. Afghans cannot withdraw their money, let alone humanitarian organizations and other NGOs still operating in the country. "As a result, just like we have witnessed some time ago, needy Afghans commit suicide because they cannot provide for their families. The number of beggars on the streets is increasing. Girls are sold in exchange for money and food, and this is only the top of the iceberg" added Mina Qaume.

Mina Qaume then focused on the work of Afghan diaspora organizations in Denmark. Diaspora organizations have been playing a crucial role in their country of origin, individually and collectively, demonstrating vast capacity. Especially within the younger generations, Afghans are not easily giving up on their country, they are not ready to abandon their hopes and achievements from the past twenty years: countless new initiatives and campaigns are populating the diaspora. However, diaspora organizations are adapting and facing new realities and challenges. Some projects on the ground are put on hold because of the issues in transferring money to Afghanistan due to barik accounts being shut down and difficulties in withdrawing money.



Afghan demo in Denmark, photo credit: Sergiu Leustean, 2021

3.4. On access to protection in Denmark, by Zohreh Yusna Faizi, Chairperson of Afghan Lawyers Association in Denmark

Zohreh Yusna Faizi opened her intervention by addressing the issue of access to protection, appealing directly to members of the Danish Parliament and the Danish government, stating that:

"Fellow advocates, and members of the Danish parliament and the Danish government, if I may be honest the situation is not good. After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, Denmark evacuated around 950 Afghans in August, then submitted a proposal for a special law regarding these people. This could mean the permit would only last two years, without possibility of extension and protection from international law - as with asylum. Almost everyone will end up applying for asylum as well, and this is confusing because it is extra administration, and it contains unjust discrimination between families especially those who happen to be evacuated. Fellow advocates, is this all we can do?"

The reality of the Danish response to Afghan women's access to protection is limited. Danish authorities are very conservative for access to protection to civilians from Afghanistan, and now, Zohreh Faizi pointed out, *"asylum processes are on hold for Afghan applicants, in the very moment in which they would need the most protection"*. Zohreh Faizi addressed how the asylum system is *"gender blinded, often granting men asylum more likely than women. Moreover, Denmark has rejected around 50% of Afghan refugee applications for family reunification"*. In a number of cases, she mentioned, children are the ones being granted temporary residence permits, but without their mothers. Even UNHCR had directly urged Denmark to facilitate family reunifications from Afghanistan to Denmark and to open quotas of refugees from Afghanistan. *"Fellow members of the parliament, is this all you can do?"* questioned Zohreh Faizi.

The criteria for family reunification is indeed tight, the Danish immigration service does not take into consideration the cultural difference between Afghanistan and Denmark, and often quickly decide that marriages are not valid. Danish lack of cultural understanding in these legal matters results in many families failing to reunite.

"We are all sitting here to fight for justice and equality: And this is it. The only thing left is to act... over to you!" concluded Zohreh Faizi.

4. Questions and answers

The testimonies were followed by a discussion between panelists and Members of the Danish Parliament.

Q1: by Bertel Haarder, The Liberal Party: *How can we help girls and women in Afghanistan without helping the Taliban? I think that's the dilemma we are facing.*

Answer by Rahela Sidiqi: "There are ways of multilateral approach. The aid should go to humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan because the population is in need. This can be done through multilateral channels, international NGOs and also national NGOs, in partnership with charity organizations. The private sector in Afghanistan in collaboration with diaspora organizations around the EU countries. Aid has to be channeled in Afghanistan and the system of financial aid transfer needs to be discussed amongst the governments. The diaspora has been very much supportive of the Afghans' situation: those channels need to be facilitated by the governments."

Answer by Mina Qaume: "Supporting civil society actors in Afghanistan is very important right now, organizations in Afghanistan are going door to door, from village to village, trying to negotiate for village members ensuring women and girls access to work and education. Moreover, UN corridors were established for humanitarian assistance, and that's what can be done. There is a way of providing aid without legitimizing the Taliban."

Comments and Q2: by Eva Flyvholm, The Red-Green Alliance:

Comment 1: "I posed some questions to the Ministry of Development about the financial issues in mobilizing resources towards Afghanistan, but I would like to urge the other Parliamentarian forces to raise this issue because there's going to be a discussion on this. Secure internationally based organizations will grant access to bank accounts. I urge you to coordinate with your spokesperson in culture and development. I hope we can work together in improving this situation".

Comment 2: "In terms of giving visa access to people: I very much agree that this is a key-question. We've had a situation in which we were about to evacuate at least a few more people, mainly women human rights activists, and unfortunately Venstre, Conservatives and the Social Democrats changed their mind so we could not manage to get this agreement to evacuate more people. I would like to ask the other Parliamentarians to raise this issue in their parties, if we can have another chance to evacuate some human rights activists that are now in danger".

Q2: *How do you see the Danish government addressing the demand of women to be allowed to work with the Taliban?*

Answer by Rahela Sidiqi: "Something the government could do is to push the Taliban towards conditions: if there's no full women rights implemented in Afghanistan, there cannot be international recognition of the Taliban regime. Human rights cannot simply be ignored. Moreover, as a mother, I was remembering my children when I was experiencing the past Taliban attack. We must really acknowledge the root cause of the problem, which is terrorism. Today Afghanistan is in terrorists' hands and as a mother, a human, a woman, an activist, it's a big question mark in the history of the world."

Q3 by Samira Nawa: The Radical Venstre Party: Many of you mentioned gender-based violence, but we also know that this was a problem also before August 15th of this year. How much has it increased? How was it before and how is it now?

Answer by Rahela Sidiqi: "Yes, Afghan women were facing gender-based discrimination before the Taliban takeover and Afghanistan was already one of the worst countries for women. Looking at the present situation, this is a shocking time. This generation has not experienced anything like that, this is a new suffering for them. It's very different for them compared to the previous generations: they are educated, they have knowledge, and they know their rights. Restrictions did not stop them, they went out demonstrating and fighting, and they were shot dead in many cases. Yes, forced marriage and child marriage increased. What we can do is more investments on education, on economic development, on support to displaced persons in neighboring countries. Also, the media and journalists are mostly moving out of the country. There are many places in Afghanistan from which we don't receive any information. There are active observers, people who know what's going on, but there is a strong need for media coverage."

Answer by Maryam Farzami: "Imagine a society of 10 thousand people without educated women... but we are now talking of Afghanistan, a country of 35 million people. If you deprive women from education, it's very clear that they will not know about their rights, and violence against them will increase. Right now, the cases of violence against women are no longer being processed: there are no shelters or safe houses, women found in there were sent to prisons. There is no one who can listen to the women in Afghanistan."

Answer by Mina Qaume: "Covid-19 has been there for almost two years, and we've seen increased gender-based violence after men losing their jobs and girls not being able to go to schools. 8 out of 10 Afghan women are experiencing gender-based violence."

5. Key recommendations

Following the Q&A session, Rahela Sidiqi compiled the following key recommendations raised by the panelists during their interventions:

- Taliban should be incentivized through diplomatic means to stop their harsh and extreme laws against women and allow for women to exercise their rights. Until then, the international community should not recognize them. Aid to Afghan women and girls should be provided through international agencies in collaboration with the Afghan civil society rather than through authorities
- Women represent an essential part of the Afghan economy. Please engage with us as equal partners and not as beneficiaries to ensure that we maintain or regain access to work.
- We urge Denmark to continue to provide extraordinary funding to meet the needs of Afghans in this time of crisis. Please also help find mechanism for the diaspora in Denmark to send money and contribute to the humanitarian response.
- Denmark needs to recognize its responsibility towards Afghan women and girls following the departure from Afghanistan and offer protection to a larger group of Afghan at risks through evacuation and resettlement. We also urge you to ease family reunification for those already in Denmark and provide educational opportunities for Afghan women through study visa.

MP Samira Nawa thanked all the panelists for their insightful contributions, adding that outcomes from the discussion will be shared with fellow MPs.

Danish Refugees Council's Diaspora Programme (DRC DP)

The Diaspora Program is implemented by DRC's Civil Society Engagement Unit. DRC engages civil society actors rooted in and/or with direct ties to the Global South, and therefore considers diaspora transnational civil society actors an integral part of the civil society we work with. Since 2010, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) has been working with diaspora groups as transnational civil society actors. Engagement with diaspora is based on a recognition of the significant role they play for people and communities in countries of origin (or heritage), for refugees and migrants in transit, and for newly arrived refugees and migrants in countries of residence, and, consequently, their potential for improving the situation for many of those affected by conflict and displacement.

For more information please visit our official website: www.drc.ngo/diaspora

Rahela Trust for Afghan Women's Education

The Rahela Trust was set up in response to the many attacks on girls and young women seeking an education across Afghanistan. Our mission is to provide scholarships to women from disadvantaged backgrounds to enable them to pursue higher education and, ultimately, to contribute to shaping a progressive Afghan society.

For more information please visit: www.rahelatrust.org

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