DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 10.03.2025 | Palwasha Hassan & Shafiqa Khpalwak

# Let Afghan women lead

## Progress on women's rights and representation is stalling. And the prospects for improvement appear bleak

This year's International Women's Day is marked by a sense of foreboding, even despair. Progress on women's rights and representation is stalling: the number of women in parliaments grew last year at the lowest rate in a generation, and the global financing gap for gender initiatives remains wide. At a time of widespread democratic backsliding – and with US President Donald Trump freezing foreign aid, including for gender initiatives – the prospects for improvement appear bleak.

No one understands the consequences of such setbacks better than women and girls in Afghanistan, where some of the world's most severe gender-based rights violations are occurring. And yet, Afghan women also offer compelling reasons for hope and powerful motivation – especially for those of us who enjoy rights, freedoms, and opportunities they do not – to keep fighting.

## Creative means of resistance and the need for support

Afghan women have long had to find imaginative ways to resist and circumvent harsh repression. In the late 1990s, as the Taliban consolidated control of the country and imposed regressive policies, women established underground schools, community centres, and health clinics. Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Afghan women have renewed such initiatives. For example, they have set up secret schools, which girls – who are now prohibited from education past the sixth grade – can attend in person or online. Where such classes are not accessible, mothers often educate their daughters at home, using their phones or tablets to access the necessary materials.

Forbidden from speaking outside their homes, women have used social media and the press to tell their stories. Unable to protest peacefully without facing violence from the authorities, women have embraced creative forms of resistance, depicting their experiences and demanding

change in poetry, paintings, and film. Sahra Mani's moving documentary, *Bread & Roses*, which provides a glimpse into Afghan women's efforts to resist Taliban repression, has earned international acclaim.

***Admiring the courage or sympathising with the plight of Afghan women means little if we do nothing to keep them on the global agenda.***

We are from Afghanistan, but we were fortunate to have the opportunity to restart our lives in a new country, where we can advocate for our sisters back home without fear for our personal safety. But the heroines of *Bread & Roses*, and countless other Afghan women activists, face mortal danger every day. It is thus imperative that we do not stop at listening to their stories. Admiring their courage or sympathising with their plight means little if we do nothing to keep them on the global agenda. That is why, at the upcoming United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), we will be calling on the international community to take three critical steps to support Afghan women.

First, Afghan refugees must have credible and timely options for safe and permanent resettlement. When the Taliban returned to power, hundreds of thousands of refugees – including Afghan nationals who had worked with American or NATO forces during the war – fled to neighbouring Pakistan, where they applied for their promised US visas. Many have waited for years for their chance at resettlement, often facing arbitrary detention and harassment in the meantime.

Far from accelerating this process, Trump has suspended the US Refugee Admissions Program. This has put Afghans at elevated risk of deportation – tantamount to a death sentence for many – by the Pakistani government, which has expressed frustration at the lengthy relocation timeframes. A credible pathway to permanent resettlement in safe locations must be established as soon as possible.

***If the Taliban seek to deny women a seat at the table, as they have so far, the international community must push back.***

Second, the international community must give Afghan women the resources they need to effect change within Afghanistan. Afghan women have the vision, tenacity, experience, and commitment needed to make a difference. But, since the Taliban's return to power, donors have been afraid to support them. Far more financing must be provided to Afghan women-led programs, including those facilitating dialogue

between Afghan women at home and in exile.

Finally, women – and civil society more broadly – must be included in any political dialogue or peace process related to Afghanistan. If the Taliban seek to deny women a seat at the table, as they have so far, the international community must push back. Afghanistan's future, and the region's stability, depends on it.

This year's CSW meeting will mark the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the world's most progressive blueprint for advancing women's rights. When it was created three decades ago, the women involved were filled with hope that the fight for gender equality had reached a turning point. But despite progress in some areas – including women's labor force participation, political representation, and financial inclusion – the declaration's promise remains unfulfilled. Now is the time to draw on the creativity, leadership, knowhow, and courage of a new generation of women activists – not least those in Afghanistan.

© Project Syndicate

---



**Palwasha Hassan**

Palwasha Hassan is a Senior Technical and Program Director at Mina's List, and a former senior fellow at the Institute for Women, Peace, and Security at Georgetown University.



## Shafiqa Khpalwak

Shafiqa Khpalwak is a poet, writer, and activist, who supports Mina's List with communications and advocacy.