2025, #4

Solidarity Committee for Afghanistan

Policy Brief

Between Ambition and Reality: Lessons Learned From the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Afghanistan

Kajsa Johansson and Katarina Härröd[1]

Key recommendations[2]

1. Women, peace, and security (WPS) initiatives should be embedded within social, cultural, and religious contexts, to prevent them from being perceived as external imposition. In the context of Afghanistan, the sustainability and resilience of reforms can be strengthened by linking rights to Islamic frameworks, engaging trusted community actors—including men and religious actors—in both rural and urban areas, and supporting the diverse ways in which women exercise agency.
2. Guarantee women's rights in inclusive political settlements. Symbolic quotas or isolated projects cannot replace genuine peacebuilding. International actors should ensure that women are truly included in meaningful political negotiations, reconciliation processes, and governance structures – not as token representatives but as active decision-makers. Without inclusive settlements, rights will remain fragile.
3. Prioritise sustainability over short-term visibility. Investments should focus on initiatives that combine immediate needs with long-term social change, led by Afghan women themselves. This requires moving beyond counting women and large-scale targets towards measuring changes in agency, participation, trust and security, and include efforts that prioritise grassroots engagement by working with existing structures and forms for participation that still enjoy relative acceptance.

Introduction

Four years after the Taliban takeover, women's and girls' right to secondary and higher education, employment, and public participation continue to be systematically denied in Afghanistan. Female victims of violence are often charged with moral crimes, and women's movements in public spaces are severely restricted. Set against two decades of international investment in women, peace and security (WPS) efforts under United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325[3], this reversal raises difficult questions: What lasting change was achieved within Afghan society? How can the rapid regression of women's rights be understood?

1 Katarina Härröd is a Programme Manager and Kajsa Johansson is the Secretary General of the Solidarity Committee for Afghanistan. A special thanks to Annette Lyth, Maria Sommardahl, Annika Schabbauer, Klara Backman and Anders Fänge for providing constructive comments on draft versions the policy brief. N.B. that the responsibility for the content is solely the responsibility of Solidarity Committee for Afghanistan and the authors.

2 These are primarily directed at international actors—donors, multilateral organisations, and INGOs—who are responsible for designing and funding WPS (and peacebuilding) initiatives in Afghanistan and other contexts.

3 UNSCR 1325 is built on four pillars: Participation: Protection, Prevention, Relief & Recovery. This brief rests on a wide understanding of the resolution, as reflected in Afghanistan's 2015–2022 National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security which included increasing women's role in governance, security, and peace processes, safeguarding women's rights, preventing GBV, and ensuring access to justice, engaging women in conflict prevention, early warning, and education as well as addressing women's needs in aid, healthcare, reintegration, and recovery.

At the same time, the international community is pulling back—reducing humanitarian and development assistance and limiting engagement with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) authorities—which exacerbates the vulnerability of already marginalised groups, especially women and girls, who face increasing restrictions. This moment demands reflection not only on lessons for future action, but also on which actors will remain committed to promoting the women, peace, and security agenda in Afghanistan.

Advancing the Participation of Women Post-2001

After 2001, women's rights were promoted as a central justification for the international military intervention in Afghanistan. Although the rationale was counterterrorism, Western leaders framed the war as a humanitarian mission to "liberate Afghan women". US First Lady Laura Bush's radio address in November 2001, in which she described the invasion as "a fight for the rights and dignity of women" symbolised this framing—presenting the intervention as a moral struggle against Taliban oppression (Bush, 2001). This type of framing helped mobilise domestic support in the US and Europe, turning the burqa and girls' schooling into powerful symbols of oppression and progress respectively. This followed a longer pattern in Afghan history in which women's rights were instrumentalised as proof of legitimacy, by both Afghan and international actors alike (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Wimpelmann, 2017). As a result, the question of women's rights became deeply politicised and Afghan women were often portrayed as passive victims unable to influence their own situation.

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The political settlement that followed the intervention entailed deep contradictions. The Bonn Agreement 2001 laid the foundation for post-Taliban governance. Far from a genuine peace settlement, it was primarily a power-sharing deal among anti-Taliban factions—many of whom were warlords and former commanders implicated in grave human rights violations during the civil war and mujahideen era in the 1990s—heavily shaped by US counterterrorism priorities. As such, it sidelined prospects for peacebuilding and subordinated state-building and women's rights to counterterrorism concerns (Wilkens, 2012).

Between 2001 and 2021, the international community committed substantial but uneven resources to women's rights in Afghanistan. Projects in which women's rights were the principal objective amounted to an estimated USD 1.2–2.0 billion, rising to USD 6–12 billion when including initiatives where gender equality was a significant objective.[4] Most funding went to girls' education, maternal and primary health, governance and legal reform, women's economic empowerment, services for survivors of gender-based violence, and women's civil society organisations. However, reliance on mainstreaming within broader programmes meant that direct support to Afghan women's organisations remained limited, leaving gains vulnerable to political change (Brown University, 2025; SIGAR, 2021; OECD DAC, 2024).

Furthermore, the spending on gender equality represented only a fraction of the more than USD 90 billion spent on official development assistance overall. Compared to military spending, the fraction becomes minuscule. The estimated costs for direct military and war operations by only the US in

[4] Official development aid is reported with markers showing the sector/topic of the main objective but also other significant objective, hence the reference to principal and significant objective respectively.

Afghanistan over 20 years is around USD 800-900 billion. If broader associated costs are included (reconstruction, aid to Afghan security forces, future obligations for veterans, interest on borrowing, etc.), the figure rises significantly, possibly above USD 2 trillion (Brown University, 2025; SIGAR, 2021; OECD DAC, 2024).

Afghan women made a number of inroads into previously male-dominated public spheres, and advanced in education, health, politics, and media. By 2020, around 80,000 women were employed as teachers, accounting for nearly one-third of the national teaching workforce, while 3.8 million girls, from 2002 to 2021, enrolled in first through 12th grade (USIP, 2023). In the health sector, the number of trained midwives increased from just 467 in 2002 to more than 6,000 by 2020 (AMA/UNFPA, 2023). The number of women serving in the police rose from 180 in 2005 to 3,650 in 2019, though many of them faced stigma and threats at work (NATO, 2018; SIGAR, 2021). While these investments contributed to important progress, many gains—but not all—remained urban-focused and fragile.

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The centralised constitutional design was unsuited for Afghanistan's power dynamics, its ethnic and religious diversity, and its communal and tribal complexities. Women had to navigate ethnic and factional loyalties and patronage networks, often serving warlords' interests. These dynamics reflected negatively on women's agency, exposed them to threats, and framed their participation as part of corrupt politics rather than genuine representation (Akbari and True, 2024).

The 2004 Constitution, along with the ratification of the Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW), represented significant legal progress. However, when Afghan women have sought protection under these laws, for example when trying to escape abusive situations, the laws failed to safeguard them, with police, prosecutors, and judges often deterring women from filing complaints and pressing them to seek mediation within their family (Human Rights Watch, 2013). While the Afghan government made efforts to protect and empower women through legal frameworks, these measures consistently fell short in practice, largely because such laws were not rooted in Afghan social realities (Firchow and Urwin, 2022; Wimpelmann, 2017).

The changes also coexisted with strong backlash and contradictions. While all these developments were rapidly transforming Afghan society—albeit primarily urban areas—conservative and fundamentalist groups were equally and strongly resisting change. In 2012, the Afghan Ulema Council declared men "fundamental" and women "secondary," restricting women's movement, and declared that they needed male guardians for travel.

[5] https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/wps-afghanistan_national_action_plan_1325_0.pdf

The council's position clashed with the Constitution's gender equality clause but was supported by another clause stating that no law can contradict Islam, which gave clerics the upper hand. Women's rights activists who were small in numbers and busy fighting on many fronts could not build the necessary strong connections with their constituencies, especially in the rural provinces, as it required structure and resources that they did not have (Nehan, 2022).

There was a flurry of activity focused on enhancing gender inclusion in the peace process between the US and the Taliban in 2020–2021. They were, however, not concrete and had no clear political strategy. The few Afghan women who participated came to a table that was already set by others, where deals had been made in their absence, and where women's rights were traded off for a deal with the Taliban (Akbari and True, 2024).

In the Taliban-US peace deal, the aim was to ensure that Afghan soil would not be used for attacks against the US and its allies, and to facilitate the withdrawal of US forces. This is a big contradiction to what was initially claimed to be a mission to liberate women. At the time of the Taliban takeover 2021, embassies closed, and little remained of the international community's presence in Afghanistan. While Afghan women had achieved undeniable progress, the fragility of these gains underscored their dependence on external support and their limited anchoring in Afghan social, cultural, religious and political realities.

An Outlook on 1325 in Sweden's Intervention

There is no overall reporting on the international community's commitment to resolution 1325 but one has to turn to individual countries. Therefore, this brief will examine Sweden's intervention. Sweden incorporated 1325 into its Afghanistan engagement from 2008 onward, linking it to NATO's policies and its own national action plan. Over the years, successive government propositions increasingly emphasised gender equality, especially through Sweden's feminist foreign policy which was launched in 2014. Development aid integrated gender equality from the start in 2001, unlike the military intervention, where this perspective was initially absent (SOU 2024:92).

Military

Sweden contributed to the different international military interventions in Afghanistan, including ISAF (2001-2014) and Resolute Support Mission (2014-2021) with the aim to stabilise security and build the capacity of Afghan security forces. Within the framework of its participation in military missions, Sweden actively integrated the principles of UNSCR 1325 in planning and implementation—including training of both international and Afghan staff— starting in 2008. The years before, more general formulations on women's rights were included (SOU 2024:92). Concrete initiatives included gender advisers within Swedish-led units in Afghanistan, cooperation with Nordic partners to evaluate implementation of 1325, and the establishment of the Nordic Center for Gender in Military Operations (2012), which became NATO's hub for gender integration. Sweden also piloted projects such as Femcop (female special police units) and MOT Juliette (a female military observation team).

The parliamentary committee that evaluated Sweden's engagement with Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 concluded: "Gender mainstreaming has made an impact at the strategic level within the Swedish Armed Forces, but it has not been as visible at the operational level in Afghanistan" (SOU 2024:92: 31). The bulk of the action is centred on Sweden itself and the international fora in which Sweden is active. The goal tends to be defined in terms of the number of women recruited in a certain

context, rather than the effects of these efforts on the ground (Wilkens, 2012). This shows an imbalance between policy ambitions and the actual capacity to transform conditions and strengthen Afghan institutions. Also, the international intervention in Afghanistan from 2001 was massive, leaving Sweden as a relatively small player with little separate identity inside that intervention.

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The challenges met by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)/Resolute Support Mission (RSM) as a whole also applied to Sweden. As other ISAF contributors, Sweden was in Afghanistan to support the Afghan government, but with the lack of credibility of that government, the legitimacy of the international intervention and its ambitions also gradually eroded. In addition, ISAF support to local militias and supplementary police forces was perceived to have contributed to increasing insecurity and the goal of creating stability was over the years thwarted (Wilkens, 2012). The work for gender quality and women's rights in peace and security cannot be separated from this development.

Diplomacy

Beyond military engagement, Sweden consistently promoted gender equality in political and diplomatic arenas. It held responsibility for gender issues in the EU's human rights dialogue with Afghanistan, used its UN Security Council membership (2017–2018) to spotlight Afghan women's rights, and organised training for Afghan women in dialogue and mediation through its embassy and the Folke Bernadotte Academy. High-level visits reinforced this agenda.

Development aid

Development aid consistently emphasised women's and girls' rights, participation, security, education, and health, with Sida's statistics confirming a strong focus on gender (SOU 2024:92). The parliamentary evaluation underlines progress mainly in education and health, with more limited results in broader areas like gender equality, democracy, human rights, and independent media.

Between 2001–2021, international and Swedish support contributed to higher literacy, reduced child and maternal mortality, more women in the workforce, a stronger civil society, and a more diverse media landscape. Women working professionally as midwives and teachers helped shift norms in many communities. Access to education and healthcare for girls and women also fostered acceptance of their economic contribution through paid work, the evaluation highlights. According to the evaluation, a key lesson is that addressing immediate needs can be combined with long-term efforts if local conditions allow. Changes that are demanded and driven by the Afghan population are a prerequisite for achieving long-term development.

Pain (2021) found that the most significant results in Afghanistan have been achieved through interventions addressing bounded and concrete problems and by expanding access to essential public goods such as education and healthcare. These interventions, while often modest in scope, can contribute to longer-term shifts in behaviour and values through a contextually grounded and incremental process. For example, support to women's entrepreneurship at the local level—such as cooperatives, self-help groups, or small businesses—has provided income opportunities while also strengthening women's roles in their communities, building trust and acceptance gradually.
As Pain (2021) highlights, many Afghans experience what is termed "dependent security" – a condition shaped by the existing social order, the constraints of

the rural economy, and a context where the absence of freedom from fear severely limits individual agency. Processes of social change that allow women, in particular, to move towards greater freedom of action are therefore complex, and gradual. This points to the need for programming that is both principled–anchored in rights and values– and relationist–sensitive to context, grounded in relationships–and adaptive to local dynamics.

What Can We Learn?

A frequent comment on the setbacks of women's rights after the Taliban takeover in 2021 is that it was all in vain – that the investments made in advancing women's and girls' rights over the past 20 years yielded no lasting result and were not worth it given the current situation. This view oversimplifies reality. Every single woman who had a safe delivery, every girl that attended school and every woman who earned an income through employment, a self-help group or small business prove that results were real and meaningful. Furthermore, there is also a whole generation of young men who grew up during this period with a different mindset than men from previous generations.

The current situation does not erase this fact but it does, however, underscore the fragility of these gains, and structural weaknesses in how women's rights were pursued.

There are several lessons to be drawn from the above account:

First, Afghan women's rights were never the main rationale for the international presence – counter terrorism was and that laid the framework for the priorities for the military, development and diplomatic missions. In practice, Afghan women's diverse voices, especially those living outside the provincial capitals, were marginalised, and their rights became a tool to legitimise military action rather than the foundation of genuine, inclusive change (Abu-Lughod, 2002). This is not to say that there were no interventions with women's rights at the centre, particularly in development and diplomacy as the figures above demonstrate, nor that there were not achievements that were real and meaningful. But women's rights did not serve to anchor genuine, inclusive transformation. As a result, Afghan women's voices were frequently sidelined in negotiations and policymaking, and their participation symbolic rather than transformative in shaping political outcomes.

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Second, as several studies and evaluations conclude, the interventions in general, and the ones targeting women and girls in specific, were insufficiently grounded in Afghan contexts, including cultural, religious and historic conditions, particularly the conditions pertaining to the rural context and hence many of them missed their targets, despite the best of intentions. Human rights were rarely framed within an Islamic perspective and frameworks such as UNSCR 1325, emphasising women's equal participation in peace and security were often seen as foreign impositions linked to Western dominance (Wilkens, 2012). The weak involvement of men and religious actors further limited the prospects for contextualising and succeeding in the efforts. This fuelled resistance and deepened divides. Meanwhile, investments as well as stories of change failed to address the diversity of Afghan women's experiences; they were largely concentrated among urban elites, while rural women and historically marginalised women saw few tangible improvements and bore the brunt of violence, poverty, and displacement. This imbalance created a defenceless foundation ready to fail when external support was withdrawn.

Third, the most durable gains came from bounded, concrete interventions—such as maternal health services, primary education, and support to women entrepreneurs and income-generation—which addressed immediate needs while gradually shifting norms. These are also the areas where women continue to have some space to act even under restrictive conditions, and where diverse forms of women's agency are reflected, including through village councils—*shuras*—professional associations, informal networks, and rural cooperatives.

Concluding Remarks

Looking forward, it is crucial to learn from the failures but also to question the dominant current narrative that portrays Afghan women who still live in Afghanistan as victims in need of saving. Research and accounts from women in Afghanistan demonstrate the opposite; Afghan women continue to negotiate, resist, and strategise, even under the Taliban's restrictive rule.

While Taliban decision-making is highly centralised around the supreme leader and his inner circle, the enforcement and implementation of policies are characterised by informal negotiations and local adaptations, which in turn create a certain degree of possibility for local negotiations. Women and girls, individually and collectively, are using these openings, and they negotiate with authorities to secure access to public services or permission to move in public spaces. This acts as a form of self-protection and resistance to the structural violence. They undertake this despite the risks associated with such actions. Engagement with Taliban authorities is often portrayed as endorsement, cooperation and/or submission. However, research shows the contrary: Women are finding pragmatic strategies to navigate the ambiguities in Taliban governance and pursue their interests and rights, often with support from male allies, including community elders and religious leaders (Centre on Armed Groups, 2025).

The argument that negotiation equals some form of acceptance or endorsement is also brought forward by those who argue against the international community's engagement with IEA, pointing specifically at the Taliban's policy towards women and girls. Paradoxically, the same oppression that was used to motivate international military presence, dialogue and development cooperation almost 25 years ago, is now used to motivate disengagement.

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We argue that there are still opportunities to contribute to long-lasting change by learning from the past and breaking the current deadlock and weakened commitment. Building on the everyday struggles of women and girls in Afghanistan, the international community could play a role in supporting low-key on-the-ground initiatives in areas where women continue to have space, such as economic development, primary education, health, and disaster response. These efforts should be framed in ways that resonate locally, engage men, are grounded in Islamic principles of women's rights, as well as rooted in cultural practices of mutual support in rural areas.

By navigating the space for negotiation, exceptions can be turned into structural change. This requires placing Afghan women and girls in the driver's seat. Their rights, needs and safety must be placed over the urge to make loud claims to home constituencies and against the current regime. There is no one to be saved in Afghanistan, but many to be supported.

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