

Special Session Webinar Series on Women's Stories of Survival, Innovation, Resilience and Development

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Between Hope and Fear: Afghan Women and Girls in Political Transition

Transition refers to a change in the system, state or condition in a society or country. While favourable transitions are often steps taken towards the betterment of the larger society, transitions can also be towards deterioration, depending on the circumstances. In case of deterioration, transitions are often extremely violent, difficult and long-lasting in terms of their impact. Transitions can be man-made, such as initiated through war, regime change, coups or revolutions; they can also be natural, initiated by climate disasters. Displacement, subjection to newer unfavourable conditions and dramatic changes to economic and social life can disrupt people's positive path of a favourable transition. Many scholars, such as O'Donnell et al. (2013) and Hagopian (2000), have studied the concept of political transition and democratization, describing the favourable conditions in which democratization can emerge and sustain, leading to a positive outcome. However, in situations where political transitions do not

lead to more civil liberties, the impact of such transitions must be understood and addressed. Sudden political transitions as a result of coups, upheavals and power-sharing agreements have a tremendous impact on people who live through them, especially in already fragile conflict-prone states.

Afghanistan is one such fragile country where a humanitarian crisis has been unfolding already for decades, with conflict, political instability, and widespread poverty affecting the lives of millions of people, particularly women and girls. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2021), nearly one-third of the Afghan population is in need of humanitarian assistance, with over 2 million people displaced by conflict and violence. The COVID-19 pandemic has further added to the suffering, with healthcare systems struggling to cope and communities facing economic hardship and food insecurity (WHO, 2021).



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In addition to this, in August 2021, Afghanistan underwent a drastic political transition initiated by a US-brokered peace deal with the Taliban. The transfer of power from a US-backed government to the Taliban happened rather swiftly and without much resistance after the Taliban launched a military take-over of major cities. The impact of this transition was massive, as many Afghans who were formerly employed in the civil and administrative structures of the previous government had to flee the country. The transition had an even more severe impact on women and girls.

This political transition for young Afghan women and girls means complex and multifaceted changes and shifts that have taken place in their lives following the return of the Taliban to power in 2021. Those transitions can be characterized by the following:

- Increased restrictions on their rights and freedom, i.e., access to education and employment.
- High level of insecurity and violence, i.e., sexual assault and domestic abuse
- Lack of representation in social and political decision-making processes
- Deep-rooted societal and cultural attitudes perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination.

According to the United Nations (2021), nearly two-thirds of Afghan women continue to face physical, sexual, and psychological violence, while only 23% of women are literate, and just 17% participate in the labour force. The transitions and restrictions faced by Afghan women and girls under the Taliban are in clear violation of numerous international human rights treaties and agreements, including the Convention on the Elimination

of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (OHCHR, 2022). Some experts, such as Karima Bennouna, argue that the gender-related laws enforced in Afghanistan are systematically promoting strong segregation on the basis of sex and where sex can determine the nature of access to rights and have argued that a strong redressal is required through catering to the voices of women and girls (Bennouna, 2022).

On International Women's Day, we remember the Afghan women and girls who have lost their lives due to avoidable causes and who struggle with the challenges thrown at them. We recommit ourselves to working for a better future for all women and girls in Afghanistan. The struggles of Afghan women must be acknowledged, and we must deliberate upon new ways to garner help and offer continued support. Additionally, in the background of this recent transition, it is necessary to listen to women writers, activists and scholars who are struggling and fighting back against difficult circumstances. Therefore, with this **Special Session Webinar**, we as expert scholars, practitioners and humanitarian first responders wish to address our knowledge gaps by understanding the issue of political transition through the experiences of Afghan women and girls on **International Women's Day** on the **8th of March 2023** to support Afghan women and girls in their transition.

Facilitated by the University of Leicester, New Vision University, and Avoidable Deaths Network, this panel aims to explore the following:

- Understanding women and girls' experiences of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, especially in terms

of political, social and cultural changes and raising awareness about challenges faced by Afghan women and girls.

- Understanding women and girls' lives as they have been set in transition, whether at home with the changing political system or through migration for safety and education, especially to highlight stories of resilience and determination.
- Ascertaining what kind of support women and girls need both inside and outside of Afghanistan to continue to affect change in their home country and to improve their lives, especially in terms of access to healthcare, education, and infrastructure.

Note

Description of the Special Session is written by Dr. Inshah Malik and Dr. Ayse Yildiz. © Avoidable Deaths Network (2023). Image: © Shutterstock (2023).

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