

“[Do] not forget us”: Evacuated Afghan Women Leaders in Greece reimagine an Equitable Future

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(Photo: Members of the Afghan Women Parliamentarians and Leaders Network (AWPLN) voting for the board directorate at the Melissa Network office in Greece, April 2022)

November 27, 2023

"I don't know where we will go and how we can start everything from zero. Still, I think I have the power to do things, but I don't know how I will start back. Maybe we support, politically and financially, could help us when we resettle, and we could find our lost power to start again."

— **Former Afghan woman member of Parliament, 52 years old**

More than two years since the United States withdrew its armed forces from Afghanistan, wiping away decades of progress in Afghan women's empowerment, a new report with evacuated Afghan women leaders throws light on their political careers, experiences, and difficulties and the way forward. The report is summed up in one message: they have fought too hard to be forgotten.

Similar to the work of the Emergency Rescue Committee in 1940s France, the [Melissa Network](#) worked to resettle Afghan women Ministers of Parliament (MPs), judges, senators, and other government officials in Greece to sustain their collective work for a society in transition - and to be ready when things get better back home.

Titled, "[***Reclaiming Lost Power: The Political Trajectory, Despair and Aspirations of Exiled Women Afghan Leaders***](#)", the report is the result of longstanding relationships between the [Afghans in Crisis Network](#), [Newcomb Institute](#), and the [Center on Gender Equity and Health \(GEH\), UC San Diego](#). Supported by [EMERGE](#) - a gender equity and empowerment measurement platform - the report is also the result of continued attention on the issue by [Mariam Taqadussi](#), Visiting Lecturer in [Tulane's University Program of Gender and Sexuality Studies](#) and part of [Tulane's Scholars At-Risk taskforce](#). An Afghan national, Taqadussi had to discontinue her studies and employment following the Taliban takeover. The report also marks the launch of the Afghan Women Parliamentarians and Leaders Network (AWPLN)'s advocacy forum on 29 November 2023.

Fortunate to get an education - but the backlash stung

Support from their husbands and broader families, good social positioning, and financial security helped these Afghan women leaders navigate challenging gendered roles, norms, and laws during the US invasion to gain an education and get to where they are. They inspired their peers to pursue education at a time when teaching girls was still stigmatized. Many women spoke of their desire to formally re-educate themselves in the host country as part of their rebuilding lives and returning to their previous professions but in a new country.

However, relatively improved representational changes did little to stem the backlash of women's leadership. Disrespect and abuse in the workplace were commonplace: 26 out of 27 leaders reported verbal mistreatment, gossip/rumors, and a hostile reaction at their workplace on account of their gender in a male-dominated political world. In many cases, abuse from colleagues went far beyond disrespect and included physical and sexual threats and abuse.

“My (political) life started with daily threats. All the people were Talib, even in the presidential government. Being a woman is a matter of honor in our society, and they abused me a lot.. My brother was killed because of me, by the Taliban. They sent a letter during the night to my house that said, “Leave the parliament, otherwise we will kill, one by one, your family members and you as well.” Another brother was beaten by the Taliban... Being a woman politician in Afghanistan has not come to me by chance or by luck; it required a lot of suffering and sacrificing.”
— **Former Afghan woman MP, 43 years old**

To improve the situation of women’s rights, the report concludes countries, especially Afghan allies (e.g., Pakistan, China), and religious scholars should continue to lobby the Taliban to reopen schools.

Decades of progress in women’s rights wiped out - but all hope is not lost

When the Taliban took over, an era of achievements of these leaders was put to an immediate stop with dire repercussions for their mental health, their dreams and ambitions, their families and communities, and the wider nation for generations to come. The report questions if any country can develop by suppressing the rights of half of its population.

“My country collapsed. I have lost my position. I have lost the achievements of my whole life. I have lost my future, and the worst was that during my evacuation from the Kabul airport, my daughters and my sons had their visas, but their eight-month-old infant didn't. I was on the terminal side, and my family was on the other side. They were coming... but the Taliban in the airport didn't allow it. It was a tragic time. I will never forget...”
— **Former Afghan woman MP, 52 years old**

Yet, in Greece, the interviews form a story of resilience. Many women spoke of wanting to continue their work for the women of Afghanistan despite their many fears and concerns related to resettlement. They spoke with strength about their

capacities to continue their efforts for the country and, for some, even the goal of returning. These women inspired their peers to pursue education at a time when teaching girls was still stigmatized. Many women spoke of their desire to formally continue their education in their host country as part of rebuilding their lives and returning to their previous professions. They hoped for support from host governments to help them get their footing to continue their work of visible and sustained opposition.

“When I go to Canada, I want to study for a master's degree and continue my education so that I can have a good job there. I wish that my academic documents will be accepted (for graduate education).”

— **Former Afghan woman judge, 40 years old**

Report Partners: Afghan Women Parliamentarians and Leaders Network (AWPLN); Melissa Network, School of Global Policy and Strategy, University of California San Diego (UCSD); Afghans in Crisis Network; Newcomb Institute, Tulane University; Evidence-based Measures of Empowerment for Research on Gender Equality (EMERGE); Center on Gender Equity and Health (GEH), UCSD

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