Afghanistan Five Years On: From the Security Transition to Today

Digital Development Dialogue (3D)
29.10.2026 Seminar Summary

This seminar explored Afghanistan during the withdrawal of international forces and five years after the Taliban takeover, focusing on the situation of women and girls. **Sarah Langlotz** opened with research on the withdrawal of international forces, its implications for women's political participation, and the possibilities and limitations of humanitarian assistance. **Shaharzad Akbar (Rawadari)** then presented a human rights perspective, focusing on the restrictions imposed on women and girls since the Taliban's return to power in 2021. The discussion considered how these restrictions affect livelihoods, education, health and access to assistance, alongside the scope for resistance and international accountability.

Sarah Langlotz began by placing the 2021 withdrawal within Afghanistan's longer history of political and institutional transitions over the past decades. She presented evidence on the security effects of the formal transfer of responsibility from international to local forces and the physical withdrawal of foreign troops, drawing on Fetzer et al. (2021). While the handover was associated with a sharp decline in violence, physical withdrawal was followed by an increase that reversed the earlier gains. Langlotz also cautioned against interpreting the decline in recorded conflict events after the Taliban takeover as a comprehensive improvement in security, given continued violence against women, journalists and former government and security personnel.

Turning to her own ongoing research, Langlotz examined women's political participation during the withdrawal period. In the 2014 election, both polling-station records and household surveys showed higher recorded female participation in districts where the last international military base had closed. At the same time, preliminary evidence points to women reporting less autonomy over their vote and greater fear of political participation. Langlotz therefore cautioned against reading the higher figures as greater political agency: they largely reflect pre-existing differences between districts.

Langlotz highlighted the difficulties of obtaining representative data, including selection bias in telephone surveys and limited coverage of isolated areas. Given these data limitations, she presented evidence on economic conditions using nightlight data (Saenger et al., 2024), which suggests a decline in GDP of around 16% between 2020 and 2022. She concluded with a study on digital assistance providing vouchers to poor, female-headed households in urban areas (Callen et al., 2025). Take-up was much higher than experts had anticipated, and recipients experienced improvements in food security and well-being. The gains in well-being, however, faded once payments ended. Langlotz emphasised that assistance can reach women and relieve immediate hardship, while restrictions on employment and mobility constrain the possibilities for sustained improvements in livelihoods.

Shaharzad Akbar's presentation, titled **"Alive, but Not Living,"** described the continued construction of a system restricting women's rights. Drawing on documentation by Rawadari, she explained how the dismantling of existing legal protections was accompanied by decrees limiting movement, education, employment and expression. Women are required to travel with a male guardian (mahram) and to comply with restrictive dress rules, affecting access to healthcare, justice and assistance. Girls are excluded from secondary education, and women from universities and most employment sectors. Akbar emphasised that enforcement extends beyond women themselves: relatives, taxi drivers and healthcare providers may also be punished for enabling women to move or access services outside these restrictions. This makes families and service providers part of the enforcement system and reduces opportunities to challenge exclusion.

Akbar outlined the wider consequences for development and well-being. Excluding girls and women from education threatens the future supply of female healthcare professionals, with particularly serious implications where women face barriers to receiving care from men. Employment restrictions remove household income and increase dependence on male relatives, including in abusive households. Restrictions on women's movement and on female humanitarian staff further obstruct access to assistance, particularly for women without an adult male family member. During the discussion, she also explained that losing access to schools, workplaces and public spaces deprives women of social networks and sources of support. Mental health services remain important, but their effects are limited when poverty, isolation and exposure to abuse persist.

Akbar also highlighted forms of resistance within and beyond Afghanistan. Families continue educating daughters through home-based classes, online learning and other available channels, while some women sustain small businesses despite restrictions. Afghan organisations document abuses and pursue international advocacy, including through a people's tribunal whose judgment serves as an advocacy tool rather than a formal court ruling. Overall, the seminar illustrated why

lower recorded conflict, higher measured political participation or short-term improvements in food security cannot alone establish progress in development. Akbar's account demonstrated how restrictions on rights and agency undermine both everyday well-being and the prospects for lasting recovery. ***At the end, her message was clear: Do not normalize Taliban!***

References

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