



## OUR VOICES

# Help For Afghan Women Was Needed Before Taliban Takeover



by The Chicago Reporter

August 27, 2021

In the short week since Kabul fell to the Taliban, the U.S. corporate media — and those who uncritically buy into it — are once again beating the drum that calls upon Western heroes to save Afghan women from Islamist extremism. While a *New York Times* headline reads, “Desperate Afghan Women Wait for U.S. Protection,” CNN sensationalizes the issue with shocking stories of the Taliban killing women.

As these media stories trickled down into daily life, a teacher in my neighborhood texted me asking where she can donate funds to help Afghan women. Feminist groups are teaching people how to “save Afghan women.” To be sure, the Taliban are exceptionally violent when it comes to gender justice and women’s rights and fundraising could indeed be helpful. Yet more than ever before, our society must shift the focus of our apparently “feminist” concerns.

Where have these concerned voices been for the past two decades while the U.S. empire has been bombing Afghan women and devastating their lives? Where were these voices even prior to 2001 when the U.S. was funding the violence in Afghanistan?

Many of the people jumping on the “saving Afghan women” bandwagon have remained silent on the rampant problem of sexual abuse across U.S. society. Perhaps the drive to “save” is driven more by a liberal humanitarian imperialist stance that ultimately reinforces U.S. superiority rather than a feminist stance truly committed to ending gender violence. Indeed, it’s easier, and probably even feels better, to focus on gender violence in stereotypical “Muslim” contexts “far away” than to consider the root causes of women’s oppression in one’s own backyard or how violence abroad has its roots, in part, in U.S. policy.

Yet we need to address the Taliban’s promotion of gender violence in ways that do not ignore, as news media typically do, the Rambo-like U.S. complicity from which this violence emerged.

Those responsible for the new wave of violent conservative gender abuses are in power because the U.S. armed and trained them. This reality was fully covered up in 2001, when the Bush administration and liberals and conservatives alike joined the choir of support for a war that was promoted to help “liberate women.” Now, that choir has re-emerged as if it is only U.S. troops that can save Afghan women. The code of silence in the corporate media on the U.S.’ role in propping up Afghan warlords must come to an end.

While a dominant idea circulating in the U.S. now blames the withdrawal of U.S. troops for the devastation of Afghan women’s rights, the U.S. military has a terrible record of sexual violence within its ranks while simultaneously killing women and children at alarming rates with aerial bombardments in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Where are those news stories?

In 2011, a Department of Defense estimate affirmed 22,800 violent sex crimes in the U.S. military. Some 20,500 service members were sexually assaulted in 2018 not by a “few bad apples” but by an institution rooted and founded upon sexualized violence. According to the film Invisible War, 20 percent of all active-duty female soldiers are assaulted and 33 percent of survivors do not report assault because they must report to a friend of their rapist — if not the rapist himself — and they fear retaliation.

The corporate media’s coverage of gender violence and Afghanistan also conveniently ignores the U.S. soldiers who have raped or assaulted Afghan women and girls; the U.S.’ rampant killings and torture in Afghanistan; the U.S.’ refusal to prosecute while blocking International Criminal Court investigations into U.S.-led torture and abuse; and the many detainees who have been tortured, abused, and/or sexually assaulted in Afghanistan by the CIA. We must stop expecting that an institution, and an empire, rooted in sexual violence and torture will help end sexual violence and abuses abroad and we must hold U.S. militarism accountable.

U.S. leaders call for an end to sexualized violence in Afghanistan only when it benefits U.S. policy. It is no secret that the Obama and Bush administrations forced U.S. soldiers to remain silent on — and avoid reporting on — child sexual abuse in Afghanistan when it was practiced by their allies in the Afghan police and militia they trained. The same leaders who allegedly fought to “save the women” from the Taliban enabled allies to sexually abuse children.

Overall, the bombing of hospitals, massive civilian casualties, deadly landmines, poverty, malnutrition, lack of sanitation, inaccessible health care, and environmental destruction disproportionately devastate women. As the primary community-based caretakers, women carry these tragedies on their shoulders.

As an Arab woman whose region of the world has been divided and destroyed by U.S.-led wars, I am offended by hypocritical feminist advocates who call for ending gender violence only when it aligns with U.S. military agendas. These advocates should adopt a more consistent feminist politics.

They could challenge the imperialist notion that the U.S. is the world's leader and savior in the struggle to end gender violence. Rather than striving to "save Afghan women," they could acknowledge their own privileged position in relation to Afghanistan including what their own tax-dollars have been funding. They could call for an end to U.S.-led militarism and the racist-sexist violence it wreaks upon the world. They could demand an end to sexual violence enacted by the U.S. state—in the military, on the streets, in prisons and jails, in detention centers, upon the bodies of indigenous women, and in the courtroom. They could also challenge the U.S.' funding of leaders who have promoted gender injustices—in Egypt, Israel, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and beyond.

As the movement I have been involved in, INCITE!, said shortly after the U.S. launched its war on Afghanistan in the name of "saving women" in 2001, "wars have never liberated women of color and third world women." The travesty of Afghanistan affirms this reality more than ever before.

Yet again, we are learning that U.S. imperialism was never meant to "help." It was meant to divide, conquer, and destroy. The U.S. spent hundreds of billions of dollars in Afghanistan and yet is departing in many ways more devastated than before 2001. This is a failure not just to recognize the limits of US military power, but a failure to recognize the inherent violence and cruelty of imperialism – feminist imperialism or otherwise — and the certainty that it will elicit a strong pushback.

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**Nadine Suleiman Naber**

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Professor, Department of Gender and Women's Studies and the Global Asian Studies Program  
University of Illinois at Chicago

Acting Director, Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy at UIC

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