

Reclaiming Voice – Afghan Women and the Politics of Knowledge Production

Editorial

Susanne Schmeidl, Morwari Zafar

This special double edition of *IQAS* on Afghan Women's Knowledge Production foregrounds the knowledge, creativity and critical voice of Afghan women. It brings together perspectives from both within and beyond academia, spanning geographies and disciplines, centring women not as subjects of study but as authors, critics and theorists in their own right.

Afghan women's rights and voices have long been instrumentalised by both modernising and imperial projects.¹ Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 and their articulation of a state based on a restrictive Islamic framework, women have lost many of the hard-won gains achieved over the past two decades (UN Women 2025, Rahimi 2022). They are now banned from secondary and higher education, face severe restrictions on employment and are required to travel with a male chaperone (*mahram*). Politically, women have been entirely excluded from formal governance structures, effectively erasing their representation and voice (Rahimi 2022).

With limited legal protection and a rapidly shrinking civic space, Afghan women are increasingly marginalised and silenced, a situation many Afghan women and human rights activists have described as a form of gender apartheid (Akbari / True 2022, Barr et al. 2025). Against this backdrop, it becomes vital that Afghan women be reaffirmed in their enduring role of producing knowledge, shaping discourse, theorising lived experience and imagining alternative futures. In this spirit, this special double edition was conceived and coordinated by editors deeply engaged in Afghan contexts and women rights, and committed to rethinking the politics of knowledge. It emerged from a desire

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to resist the silencing and to centre Afghan women not as passive victims, but as complex, agentic individuals engaged in producing knowledge, asserting their voice and enacting resistance. This issue is thus both a gesture of solidarity and a commitment to shifting power in how knowledge is produced, shared and recognised.

Morwari Zafar is an Afghan-American anthropologist and writer whose work critically explores the intersections of culture, power and foreign intervention in Afghanistan.² Born in Kabul to a diplomat father and a doctor mother, her early life was shaped by displacement, social expectations and the navigation of both Afghan and American cultural worlds. Trained in cultural anthropology, she has conducted extensive research on how cultural knowledge is operationalised in U.S. military strategy, including during her tenure as an instructor for the U.S. military. Her scholarship deconstructs dominant narratives of Afghan identity – especially those concerning Afghan women – revealing how they are shaped by imperial logics, racialised expertise and policy discourse. Writing in mainstream media and academic journals, Zafar challenges reductive representations of Afghanistan and calls for more historically grounded, ethically engaged approaches to knowledge production about the region.

Susanne Schmeidl, the only non-Afghan contributor to this edition (excluding book reviews), identifies as an ally of Afghan civil society and women and has worked on Afghanistan since the 1990s.³ After her first visit in 2000, she lived in the country from 2002 to 2005 and from 2007 to 2014, with numerous visits since 2014. Over the years, she has been deeply humbled by the insights shared by Afghan colleagues and communities, particularly the rich, embodied knowledge of Afghan women. At the same time, she observed how most published knowledge about Afghanistan has remained dominated by outsiders,⁴ often sidelining local voices or filtering them through reductive lenses (Schmeidl

1 Cf. Abu-Lughod 2002, Ahmed-Gosh 2003, Kandiyoti 2005, Daulatzai 2008, Schmeidl 2008, Ahmad / Ancil 2016.

2 Works by Morwari Zafar: Operationalizing “Afghan Culture”: Role-Playing and Translation in US Military Counterinsurgency Training in Decolonizing Afghanistan. In: W. Osman / R. D. Crews (forthcoming 2025): *Decolonizing Afghanistan: Countering Imperial Knowledge and Power*. Durham: Duke University Press. Morwari Zafar (2023): Cultural Biases in Contemporary U.S. Afghan Policy. *Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security* 10(1), pp. 12–24. Morwari Zafar (2018): Not So Quiet on the Western Front. *The Small Wars Journal*, 6 August 2018, <https://archive.smallwarsjournal.com/index.php/jrn/art/not-so-quiet-western-front-snowball-effect-afghanistan> (accessed 7 August 2025).

3 Works by Susanne Schmeidl: “Whose Stories, Whose Voices, Whose Narratives? Challenging the Western Gaze on Afghanistan – Exploring Ethical Knowledge Co-production in Afghanistan”, in A. Fleschenberg / K. Kresse / R. C. Castillo (eds): *Thinking with the South: Reframing Research Collaboration Amid Decolonial Imperatives and Challenges*. Berlin et al.: De Gruyter Brill, 2024, pp. 177–199, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110780567>. S. Schmeidl / I. Blomfield (2018): Editorial Refugee Voices: The Power of Storytelling. *Human Rights Defender* 27, pp. 4–7. Susanne Schmeidl / D. Tyler (2015): Listen to Women and Girls Displaced to Urban Afghanistan. Kabul: Norwegian Refugee Council / The Liaison Office; https://adsp.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/A-70_Listening-to-women-and-girls-displaced-to-urban-Afghanistan.pdf. Susanne Schmeidl (2009): The Undoing of Gender Inequalities in Traditional Societies. The Example of Post-Conflict Afghanistan. In: C. Eifler / R. Seifert (eds): *Gender Dynamics and Post-Conflict Reconstruction*. Vienna: Peter Lang Verlag, pp. 71–93.

4 Cf. Monsutti 2013, Hanifi 2022, Daulatzai / Ghumkhor 2023, Zeweri 2022.

2024). There has been particularly limited attention to knowledge generated by Afghan women – an absence that spurred her to help create space for their voices.

Susanne Schmeidl and Morwari Zafar first met in 2019 during a workshop co-organised by Schmeidl with Swisspeace on “Decolonising Peace in Afghanistan”, which foregrounded the perspectives and knowledge of Afghan scholars. Their collaboration began there, culminating in the vision for this IQAS special edition on Afghan women’s knowledge production. Their cooperation also demonstrates the importance of relationality of knowledge production.

This special double edition is situated within a broader landscape of local resistance to dominant, Western-centric forms of knowledge production on Afghanistan. An increasing number of Afghan and regional scholars are challenging externally driven narratives that marginalise local perspectives and speak over, rather than with, Afghan voices.⁵ Within this broader critique, Afghan women have often been spoken for rather than spoken with – their experiences framed through reductive tropes rather than narrated in their own voices.⁶ And even when they do speak for themselves, it is often within frameworks shaped by Western expectations of empowerment, reinforcing a positional superiority that serves the logics of colonial feminism (Fernandes 2017, see also Yeğenoğlu 1998). Collectively, this emerging body of work calls for a more reflexive, locally grounded and politically conscious engagement with Afghanistan – one that recognises Afghans, especially Afghan women, as producers of knowledge with agency, rather than as passive subjects of intervention.

Feminist scholarship has long highlighted that knowledge production is shaped by power: positionality, access and recognition are never neutral (Fricker, 2007; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). It challenges the exclusion of women from dominant epistemologies, arguing that *who* produces knowledge deeply affects *what* is deemed valid.⁷ These dynamics are especially pronounced in contexts of war, displacement and authoritarianism (Björkdahl / Mannergren 2025). By centring Afghan women as epistemic agents, this special issue moves from extracting knowledge *about* Afghan women to enabling knowledge production *by* Afghan women – on their own terms and in their own words. It thus engages with both scholarly debates and the broader politics of representation and erasure.

Thus, facilitating exclusively contributions by Afghan women – book reviews aside – in this project was quite a deliberate choice by the editors in a moment of political silencing and enforced invisibility. Each piece challenges the notion that knowledge about Afghan women must be produced by outsiders, offering instead critical reflections grounded in poetry, literature, radio, theatre, activ-

5 Cf. Abirafeh 2009, Daulatzai 2006, 2008, Manchanda 2020, Ebtikar 2020, Osman 2020, True / Akbari 2024, Safi et al. 2025.

6 Mill 2013, Kumar 2012, Natanzi 2021.

7 Cf. Harding 1987, Haraway 1988, hooks 1989.

ism and lived experience. An artwork by Tamana Barakzai frames this issue to affirm that knowledge does not have to be written but can also be visualised. We thus understand women's knowledge production as extending beyond formal academic research to include oral traditions, community-based knowledge, artistic expression and political activism. Recognising and valuing this diversity is essential to challenging dominant epistemic systems that have historically excluded or marginalised women's intellectual contributions. The contributions in this double edition offer distinct ways of theorising experience and shaping public discourse. They reflect our broader editorial commitment to include multiple forms of expression, across different genres, and to affirm that feminist knowledge is made not only in universities but also within families, in community spaces, on the stage, in the studio and through lived struggle.

In the first part of this double edition, Parwana Fayyaz examines Afghan women's poetry as a site of memory and resistance; Mejgan Massoumi traces the role of women in shaping radio as a medium of public discourse in Afghanistan; Morwari Zafar interrogates dominant literary portrayals of Afghan women; and Zarlisht Sarwari explores how Afghan women create, sustain and transmit knowledge across diasporic spaces.

To extend beyond academic formats, this issue begins with two first-person narratives from activists in exile: one recounts the founding of a women's organisation under Taliban rule; the other reflects on a life of advocacy through theatre. These stories contribute to feminist knowledge production by transforming oral histories into written archives – making *HERstory* legible and lasting.⁸

In bringing these contributions together, this volume aligns with calls within decolonial and feminist theory to centre subaltern voices, not as data points or illustrations, but as theorists in their own right.⁹ It also resonates with growing attention to epistemic injustice and the systematic silencing of marginalised groups in knowledge production (hooks 1989, Fricker 2007), calling for pluralising knowledge – across languages, genres and positionalities. Afghan women, as these contributions powerfully demonstrate, have long theorised survival, politics and change, whether through poetic form, broadcast media, critical scholarship or activism in exile.

This volume does not offer a single narrative or claim to speak on behalf of “Afghan women” as a homogeneous category. Rather, it is a textured, dialogic space – where multiplicity is not a weakness but a strength. In this way, it contributes to ongoing efforts to pluralise the sites, languages and forms through which knowledge is produced and validated.

This special double edition is intended to serve both as a platform for its contributors and as an impetus for reflection among global scholars and insti-

8 Cf. Etim 2020, Zungu et al. 2014, Kolodny 1996.

9 Cf. Spivak 1988, Mohanty 2003, de Sousa Santos 2014.

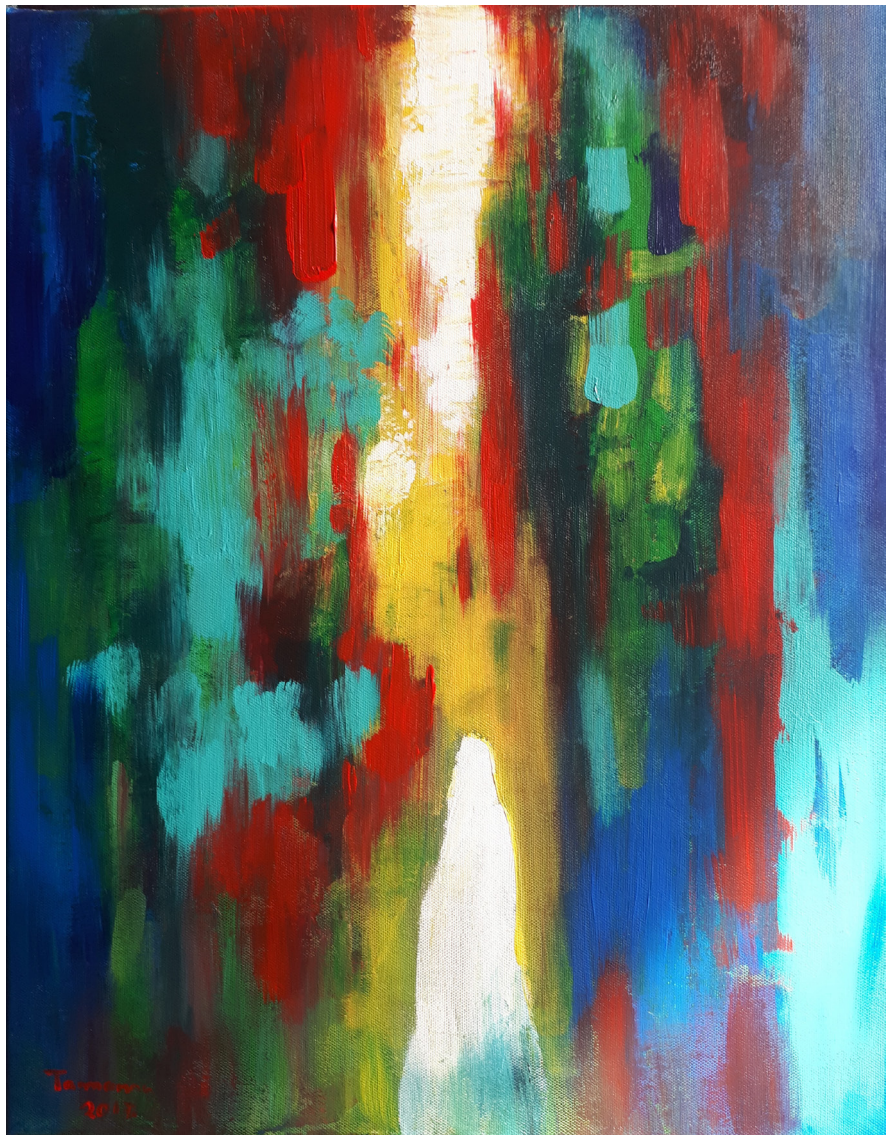
tutions. It invites a reconsideration of whose knowledge is valued, and what it means to write *with*, rather than merely *about*, those most directly affected by exclusion. In doing so, it encourages deeper engagement with the politics of representation, the ethics of research and the multiple forms of resistance that Afghan women continue to embody – across the airwaves, in exile and through the written word.

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“My dream 1” © Tamana Barekzai, 2025
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