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Still Reclaiming Voice – Afghan Women's Knowledge Production under Repression

Editorial

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The months since the publication of our first special edition have underscored an uncomfortable truth: the erasure of Afghan women from public, political, and intellectual life not only continues – it is being refined. New restrictions illustrate a deliberate effort to close off even residual spaces of women's knowledge production (UN Women 2025, Manchanda / Kundu 2025). For example, in September 2025, the Taliban ordered universities to remove nearly 700 textbooks, including 140 authored by women (Ghazniwal 2025, Akbari / True 2025). They also removed 18 fields of study, one third of which focused on women's issues (including Gender and Development, Sociology of Women, Sexual Harassment, Gender-Equal Employment Diversity, Gender Communications, and the Role of Women in Public Communication; see Ghazniwal 2025). These measures sit alongside ongoing restrictions on women's voices, public engagement, and media appearances, among others (UN Women 2025, Manchanda / Kundu 2025).

These are not isolated violations. They form part of an architecture of governance that systematically seeks to erase women as political, economic, and epistemic subjects. The tightening control over what can be read, taught, broadcast, or archived makes explicit what was already implicit: that women's knowledge, creativity and critique are perceived as threats. A recent report drawing on extensive interview data outlines how the Taliban regime has institutionalised gender-based segregation, systematically dismantled women's access to education and public life, and imposed intersecting layers of repression, particularly targeting minority and ethnic-group women (Manchanda / Kundu 2025).Yet even as repression intensifies, Afghan women persist in solidarity, knowledge-

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sharing, and activism, finding "new, innovative modes of resistance" (ibid.). Similarly, Afghan scholarly and creative production has not disappeared. On the contrary, over the past years, we have witnessed a steady flow of new work by Afghan authors in multiple languages and genres.

Furthermore, the language used to describe this system has evolved, largely due to sustained advocacy around the concept of "gender apartheid" (Akbari / True 2023). Led by Afghan women activists, jurists, and transnational feminist coalitions, this advocacy has gained significant traction. Afghan and Iranian women's movements – supported by organisations such as Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists – have argued that existing legal frameworks fail to capture the structural and intentional nature of gender-based segregation and exclusion, calling for its explicit recognition as an international crime (Goudarzi 2024, Raz Mohammad / Radhakrishnan 2025).

Whether or not a new legal category is ultimately codified, this shift in vocabulary matters. It reframes what is happening in Afghanistan not as a series of disconnected abuses, but as an intentional system of rule. It strengthens the conceptual and legal tools available to scholars, practitioners, and activists seeking to name, document and contest the ongoing violations.

Among the notable recent contributions are memoirs by a young Afghan woman rapper (Alizada 2025) and a soccer player (Popal 2025), as well as the poetry anthology *Hair on Fire: Afghan Women Poets* (Coolidge 2025). There are also two coming-of-age stories by young Afghan women, one based in Berlin (Aber 2025) and the other told from within Afghanistan (Herawi 2025). There is more in other languages, of course in Persian and Dari, but also in French, Italian or German. Afghan women authors have begun to claim their space in fiction.

But there are also narrative non-fiction works that foreground Afghan women's experiences while not being authored by them, such as *The Almond Garden of Kabul* (Hendessi 2025), set in a women's prison, and *Escape from Kabul* (Bartlett 2025), which follows the Afghan women judges who fled after the Taliban's return. These texts acknowledge Afghan women's agency and resistance under extreme constraint. Yet, as several contributors to this special edition (as well as the pervious one) argue, a crucial distinction remains between narrating Afghan women as the subjects of someone else's account and enabling Afghan women to narrate, theorise, and represent themselves. The difference is not merely stylistic but epistemic: it shapes whose interpretations are centred, whose lived knowledge is validated, and whose voices ultimately define the meaning of Afghan women's struggles.

Recent academic volumes on knowledge production authored or co-edited by Afghan women include *Literary License and the West's Romance with Afghanistan* (Jalalzai 2023), *Decolonizing Afghanistan: Countering Imperial Knowledge and Power* (Osman / Crews 2025), and *Mapping Futures for Af-*

ghanistan (Saba et al. 2025). These works exemplify both the breadth and the growing visibility of Afghan women's scholarly contributions, a space that is likely to be increasingly claimed in the years ahead.

Research platforms and fellowships have also helped bring Afghan women's voices to the forefront. Initiatives hosted by institutions such as the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (Lund, Sweden), the Princeton SIPA Policy Lab on Afghanistan (Princeton, US), and the Afghanistan Research Network, managed by the London School of Economics and Political Science IDEAS think tank in collaboration with the Civic Engagement Project and published through the PeaceRep Consortium (UK)[1], among others, now provide spaces – however precarious – where Afghan scholars, including many women authors, can author and assert their own analyses and viewpoints rather than being positioned merely as sources of data. These developments are encouraging. But they remain uneven and heavily gendered. Afghan women scholars and artists still face disproportionate barriers: visa precarity and passport hierarchies, institutional and disciplinary gatekeeping, security risks for families in Afghanistan, as well as the very practical constraints of care responsibilities, surveillance, and livelihood insecurity.

In this context, a journal space explicitly centring Afghan women's knowledge remains both academically and politically necessary. It responds to a problem well-documented in feminist and postcolonial scholarship: the tendency to frame women primarily as victims to be saved or spoken for, rather than as actors with complex forms of agency under constrained conditions (cf. Mohanty 2003, Abu-Lughod 2013, Mahmood 2005, Kandiyoti 1988). Afghan women writers, artists, and researchers have long resisted this flattening. Many of the contributors to both parts of this special edition explicitly reject being positioned solely as symbols of suffering. They insist instead on being read as thinkers, organisers, and theorists whose choices – including the choice to stay, to leave, to remain anonymous, to compromise, or to refuse – are shaped by, but not reducible to, structures of domination.

This second part of the *IQAS* special issue continues the project begun in the first: to foreground Afghan women not as objects of study, but as producers of knowledge in their own right. Whereas the first volume combined historical, literary, media, and diasporic perspectives, this follow-up issue focuses more closely on how Afghan women navigate, negotiate, and contest epistemic erasure from within and beyond Afghanistan.

It opens with first-person narratives from women activists and organisational leaders in Kabul who choose to remain and work within an increasingly hostile environment. Their accounts of negotiating with Taliban authorities,

1 Consortium members include Conciliation Resources; the Conflict and Civicness Research Group at LSE; Coventry University's Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations; the Edinburgh Centre for Constitutional Law; International IDEA; LSE Middle East Centre; Queens University Belfast; the University of St Andrews; the University of Stirling; and the University of Glasgow.

sustaining women-led organisations under intense pressure, and carving out "safe" spaces for learning and psychosocial care illustrate forms of everyday, relational agency that rarely appear in policy reports. These pieces, anonymised to protect the women behind the stories, neither romanticise endurance nor deny risk. Instead, they illuminate the ethical and affective labour required to keep institutions, networks, and hopes alive under gendered repression.

The contributions that follow extend this focus on agency and representation. Wazhma Osman analyses Afghan women in documentary film – both in front of and behind the camera – tracing how visual narratives alternately reproduce and unsettle dominant tropes of victimhood, authenticity and rescue. Weeda Mehran reflects on the positional dilemmas of being an Afghan female researcher working on Afghanistan, unpacking the politics of access, credibility and risk in a field still dominated by non-Afghan voices. Nazeela Elmi examines the "double erasure" of Uzbek women's knowledge and suffering in human rights reporting – marginalised both as women and as an ethnic minority – and explores how feminist standpoint theory might help re-centre their experiences within global advocacy. Finally, the piece by Razia Arooje, Zahra Mousawy, Zakia Shefayee, and Shabnam Simia further illustrates how women's knowledge travels across legal, poetic, oral, and organisational spaces and how legends and storytelling can be mobilised in struggles for justice and resistance.

Across these contributions, a shared argument emerges: recognising Afghan women's agency is not a matter of denying violence or romanticising resilience, but of taking seriously the ways women think, strategise, and act within – and against – the constraints imposed upon them.[2] To frame Afghan women predominantly as victims is, as several authors note, to reproduce another form of erasure: it obscures their resistance and activism, their intellectual labour, their political imagination, and their capacity to theorise their own conditions. At a moment when Afghan women's physical and epistemic presence is being forcibly excised from classrooms, offices, media and public space, this special issue affirms that their knowledge is neither peripheral nor expendable. It is central to understanding Afghanistan's past and present, and indispensable to imagining its futures.

2 See Mahmood 2005, Abu-Lughod 2013, Kabeer 1999, Kandiyoti 1988, Fluri 2011, Daulatzai 2006, Partis-Jennings 2017.

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