

In times of negotiations, U.S. Left Must Not Forget Afghan Women

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Photo: February 2013 women's march in Kabul, via [RFE/RL](#)

The US government's announcement that it has opened negotiations with the Taliban to help bring the war in Afghanistan to an end should be a source of concern for women's rights advocates everywhere. While it's still not easy to be a woman in Afghanistan, women have made [progress](#) in the areas of education, employment and representation in government since the Taliban were overthrown by the US-led invasion of 2003. President Donald Trump also has [worried many Afghans](#)—although some were optimistic about the decision—by talking about pulling troops out of the country to end US involvement in what is now its longest war.

The danger of women losing hard-won rights should not only be a concern to those who supported the war—but for anyone who cares about human rights and gender equality. The feminist writer Meredith Tax has a point when she criticizes many anti-war activists for [not being able to hold two ideas in their heads at the same time](#). While the anti-war movement is not homogeneous, too many activists see the world from a US-centric viewpoint that narrows their vision and prevents them from seeing and understanding the struggles of progressive figures in other countries.

For example, when activist group like [Code Pink](#) focuses most of its energy on US drone strikes and ending the war in Afghanistan, it often ignores local human and [women's rights groups](#) in the country. This resembles how pro-war voices instrumentalized the suffering of Afghan women under the Taliban to justify the invasion of Afghanistan, while ignoring some of [unsavory warlords](#) and human rights abusers the US has allied with in the country over the years. Both worldviews omit inconvenient truths, presumably because such truths would dilute the strength of the narratives they were selling to the public.

Political dialogue should be about more than branding, public relations, salesmanship, groupthink and confirmation bias. If anyone on the right, left or center wants to make an argument about a topic as complex as Afghanistan, they have a moral obligation to provide a balanced perspective of the war, even if that makes their own policy proposals less popular. For example, if someone on the left is championing direct talks with the Taliban and pulling US troops out of Afghanistan, that person must give his or her honest assessment of what this might mean for women's rights in the country.

If a leftist's position is that too many civilians and Americans have died fighting an unwinnable war, and therefore US troops must be brought home even if this means a regressive rollback of women's rights—then he or she should make that argument. But it's dishonest and condescending for a group like Code Pink to imply that they speak for all women—[including Afghan women](#)—when they oppose

the US war in Afghanistan. This US-centric position ignores the many local Afghan women's rights groups that have supported the US military presence. Surely, we on the left have not become so knee-jerk that we can't oppose a war while also showing solidarity with the heterogeneous women's rights movement in Afghanistan.

Showing solidarity with women's rights groups doesn't mean critics of the war should ignore the horrific human rights [violations](#) attributed to the [Afghan Local Police](#) and other security forces and militias backed by the Afghan government. Nor does it mean the left (or anyone concerned about human rights) should remain silent about the civilian deaths—mostly women and children—caused by US and Afghan government [air-strikes](#). But anyone critical of civilian deaths attributed to the US and its local allies in Afghanistan also have the moral obligation to not omit the fact that the Taliban, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP, the Afghan branch of ISIS); and other insurgents are now responsible for the [majority of civilian deaths](#) in the country.

The Afghan women's movement has a proud [history](#) that long predates the war in Afghanistan. Despite attempts by some on the right and left to instrumentalize this movement to support their own political aims, women's rights advocates in the country have a diverse range of opinions about what the US role in Afghanistan should be. The courageous freedom fighter [Malalai Joya](#) and the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan ([RAWA](#)) have strongly criticized the US war effort and occupation. Other Afghan feminist voices—such as [Wasma Frogh](#) and the [Women for Afghan Women](#), a network of NGOs that work on violence against women— [were supportive of the US-led war](#). Malalai and Wasma both merit attention, dignity and respect from the left, even if Western leftists don't endorse all their views.

There are many good reasons to be for or against US forces remaining in Afghanistan. There is nothing hypocritical about calling for troop withdrawals while also voicing support for women's rights in Afghanistan. It would be intellectually dishonest to label anyone in favor of troop withdrawals as pro-Taliban. That visceral style of criticism has become all too abundant in the age of five-second soundbites, tweets and Facebook posts.

However, anyone calling for US troop withdrawals should either offer alternative options such as effective foreign aid earmarked for Afghan women, or be willing to admit that the absence of US forces could have terrible consequences for people who have already witnessed or suffered violence that no human beings should have to endure. The Afghan women's movement will soldier on without the US military, as it has for more than a century. But it would be a tragedy if those on the right and left were both too blinded by an US-centric worldview to declare solidarity with these courageous women.

Andy Heintz, CounterVortex

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