

November, 2026

THE NATION WITHOUT A SPOTLIGHT

AFGHANISTAN

By Christopher Wei



Let's start this with a fact.

Feminism has long been a movement worth fighting for. Starting during the 19th century, people convened, gathered in groups, and fought for things such as women's suffrage.

And their initiative has not stopped. For good reasons too. In 2023, a report published by the World Bank revealed that only 14 countries offer full-legal protection for women. 14 countries out of 190 that were assessed. Ultimately, this highlights people are still fighting, even till this day.



But these fights for rights aren't just focused on the political realm. Feminism goes so much beyond that. It represents a want for equal representation, not just in politics, but also society.

Unfortunately, a place that lacks the spotlight is the one in need of it most. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security explains that ever since the Taliban has seized power in Afghanistan, they've led the world by the most devastating example of "systematic persecution of women and girls."







And what are international communities doing? Nothing. Instead, they've turned a blind eye towards this nation, resulting in the normalization of its assaults.

But let's first ask two questions. One, what is the Taliban? And two, what does its specific effects on Afghanistan look like?

To answer the first, forming in the early 1990s, the Taliban was able to gain traction in the post-Soviet era and controlled 90% of the country before its 2001 overthrow. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, the Taliban is an "Islamic fundamentalist group" that returned to power in 2021 over Afghanistan after "waging an insurgency against the U.S.-backed government in Kabul since 2001".

After their 2021 reassumption of de facto rule, the Taliban has spurred a laundry list of devastating effects on the Afghanistani people. The economy plummeted, millions of jobs were lost, food supplies diminished, and tensions with Pakistan only increased. And pressingly, discrimination against women has become state policy, under which 20 million Afghan women and girls are denied basic necessities such as education and medical aid.

That is what the effects look like.

To address this systematic failure, SALEHO takes a stand.

Who Helps the Future?

This time around, I was lucky enough to speak with a group of volunteers for SALEHO (Gulnisa, Radman, Sohrab, Neha, and Mumtaz). Our conversation revealed many things about Afghanistan, as well as the things they're trying to fix. But first, who/what is SALEHO?







SALEHO is a non-governmental organization, primarily functioning in Afghanistan, who aims at "supporting vulnerable women, youth, and also other people in the community."

Some of their tangible accomplishments include running 16 projects worth $245,000 over 10 years that have impacted 970 women in their regions. These projects target the problems Afghanistan suffers from, such as women's rights, education, and many more. Some examples include:

- Creating green gardens run by women, with 2,400 fruit saplings distributed.
- Initiating health and hygiene training for 970 women.
- Organizing awareness events on underage marriage.
- Implementing handicraft income programs, including for former opium addicts.
- Establishing five village libraries, with about 201 readers a month, where roughly 73% of them are girls.

Amongst those not listed, a particular project intrigued me. Smokeless ovens. This in particular stood out, because amongst the more well-known problems within Afghanistan, environmental damage doesn't seem to get as much coverage.

Tolo News reports that Afghanistan suffers from major air pollution. This is linked to its "poverty and economic hardships," as people resort to smoke-producing fuels due to it being cheapest. Smoke is emitted almost everywhere, from things including, but not limited to, transportation, factories, and homes. Unfortunately, the air pollution crisis led to approximately 37,000 deaths in 2019, per the NIH.







SALEHO's ovens play a crucial part in this dynamic. The first step is related to its design. Being one of SALEHO's most successful projects, they aimed at solving the issues with past ovens: that being, wood consumption and smoke production. Amazingly, they were able to implement 20 ovens within communities reducing wood consumption by a substantial "50% and [reducing] household smoke from 15 to 20%."

But the second part aids something more structural. Like said before, the Taliban has set strict regulations on women, limiting their opportunities throughout. Economic opportunities like the rest come very limited for not just women, but also the general population; per the UN, around "28 million people in Afghanistan were living in poverty in 2025", with their conditions worsening.

Interestingly, women uniquely can play a powerful force in solving this crisis. According to a World Banks Blog, that while traditional norms have restricted women, "women who are empowered and given the opportunity to develop economically have shown significant contributions to the growth and development of their community as well as the larger society."

SALEHO links in because along with BBS, not only does the oven project reduce environmental issues such as smoke emissions, but they've also provided local women with small economic opportunities.

Local women are organized to create these newly designed ovens and are provided with a small stipend in exchange. And in a society where such opportunities are scarce, these efforts show so much to the oppressors, as well as the oppresse



At the end of the day, the story is crystal clear. It's about communities. People come together, noting the problems that they grow up with, and trying to solve them for the generation. They have people who grew up with limited access to education and hygiene. They have people who believe that women have a vital role within society and are motivated by their actions.

The communities in Afghanistan have shown that they want help, so give them the spotlight.



In recent times, Afghanistan is not on mainstream news. It doesn't break any headlines, but it should. Because for a country that's been suffering under oppression for the past 4 years and even longer before that, something should be breaking other than the living conditions and status of women.

SALEHO is doing something which international communities are turning a blind eye towards. Give them, give Afghanistan, and give its people the support they deserve.



Note: All of the images in this article are from the BBS SALEHO breadmaking oven project. In 2027 we will continue the campaign to support households and women in the Badakhshan region of Afghanistan. If you wish to give to this project, please click here.







www.businessforbettersociety.org

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