



# International Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics

Volume 20, Number 1 (2023)

ISSN: [2790-6345](https://doi.org/10.1080/27906345)

DOI: [10.55521/10-020-100](https://doi.org/10.55521/10-020-100)

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# Is Working with the Taliban Ethical?

DOI: [10.55521/10-020-106](https://doi.org/10.55521/10-020-106)

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Truell, R. (2023). Is Working with the Taliban Ethical? *International Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 20(1), 44-51. <https://doi.org/10.55521/10-020-106>

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## Introduction

In February this year, IFSW visited Afghanistan at the request of the Afghanistan Organisation for Social Work. The visit coincided with global condemnation of the Taliban government's decision to temporarily ban girls and women from middle and higher education. In the weeks before the visit several large INGOs withdrew from the country, and during the time of the visit, the UN Deputy Secretary-General publicly announced that she did not like the Taliban and would separately hold private talks with the UN Security Council which potentially would increase the global sanctions against the country.

Judging from a few social media comments written by activists in the broader professional networks, the IFSW visit was seen by some as a reinforcement of the Taliban government's gender discrimination. The individuals further argued that no 'real social work' could be conducted in such a country.

While most, if not all IFSW member organisations, supported the visit, the activists' claims should be responded to as they question the ethics and principles of the social work profession, with a heavy accusation: That IFSW is now supporting the systematic oppression of girls and women.

## Why travel to Afghanistan

The IFSW visit to Afghanistan was triggered by The Afghanistan Social Work Organisation applying for IFSW membership. Three years earlier, ASO was formed during the time of the US backed government by the first ever group of graduate social work students. They wanted to make an impact on social development in their country and identified the need for a professional body to support trained and competent social professionals at the national level.

ASO members developed a code of ethics, a constitution, and strategies for building social work across the country. These were consistent with any national association of social work. They emphasised the profession's principles, human rights, professional conduct for their membership as well as the organisation's internal democratic procedures. The US-backed government subsequently recognised ASO as a professional body and placed their organisation on their register of professions.

After the withdrawal of the US army, the Taliban took control by military force, forming a new unelected government based on their understanding of Sharia law. As a result of ASO's advocacy, the new government also formally recognised the social work profession as an independent body based on the previous ethical code and statutes.

## Our initial observations

As the IFSW visit commenced, it was clear from the first sights of landing at the airport in Kabul that little infrastructure has been left behind by the US occupying forces. The tiny airport seemed more fitting to a rural country runway. The electricity in the small rundown building that operated as customs clearance wasn't working, requiring the manual filling out of forms to be done by torch light.

Against our expectations, entering out into Kabul's busy streets it could have been any of the less wealthy Middle Eastern countries. Men walked with sacks straddled over their shoulders on the way to market. Women

walked freely; the vast majority of them wearing a headscarf, and the occasional one in a full burka. The reality was substantially different to the expectations of international visitors. Each of us had been influenced by the global news and expected women in burkas to be only permitted out when accompanied by men. We also wrongly thought that women were barred entirely from the workforce, but at the airport, as well as the government offices, and the social services we visited, women worked in senior, practitioner and in administrative roles. They caught the bus to work like everyone else, went shopping, and either they or their husbands would collect the children at school.

Unemployment is extreme, however, for everyone. In one province we visited, Herat, 90% of working age adults were unable to obtain work. The previous occupying administrations had made no or little effort to build the political infrastructure necessary for economic development and the only viable industry that survived the last 25 years was the illegal manufacturing of opium and its distribution to Europe.

There is also the temporary ban on women working in INGOs and being able to access middle and higher education. This is real and has massive negative effects on the girls and women that can afford schooling, their families, as well as the social and financial economy. But asking social workers and members of the public what life is like under the Taliban government, they replied, 'It is the same as usual', as this generation has never known political freedom. 'The lack of work and absence of welfare systems', they report, is their main priority, 'as the long-term broken economy breeds other injustices.

Longstanding poverty is evident everywhere. The vast majority of the 80 million people scrape by. Children beg on the busy streets holding out their trembling hands in the -15C degrees cold, some in light shoes, others with bare feet, and all in substandard thin clothing.

## ASO and the current role of social work in social development

In its short years of existence, ASO has primarily focused on women's economic empowerment to support families and communities out of poverty. They have facilitated and continue to support over 8,000 women's cooperatives. This involves working with a community, family or families to develop social entrepreneurial businesses. The social workers help the communities to identify their strengths and assets and how these can be brought together to develop income that addresses the social challenges. In many of the examples, the cooperatives also set up schools or find ways for their children to attend an existing school programme.

ASO has also facilitated regular communication with the network of NGOs running throughout the country to share information and to act as one large group to influence social policy. These actions have started to gain traction with the new government and this year ASO has signed memorandums of cooperation with the Ministers of Health, Social Affairs and Labour which will ensure the NGO network is involved with the respective areas of government strategic planning.

Does this mean that social workers support the gender discrimination policies of the Taliban government? No! ASO and IFSW, for example, held an open press conference in Kabul which was covered by all the countries' main media. Social workers were explicit and clear that girls and women should have the same opportunities as boys and men to education and work. It was also clear that there are common areas of interest between social workers, the NGOs and the government – to work together in finding solutions to economic and social challenges. But absent in these proceedings and silent on these issues were the local UN agencies. There are many UN agencies housed in a compound in the outskirts of Kabul. They are caught in a dispute between the global geo-political actors and the Taliban government. This clash has led directly to the temporary banning of girls and women in middle and higher education, as well as women being prohibited from working in INGOs.

## Geo-political sanctions and ethical investment

The geopolitical use of economic sanctions lies at the root of a human rights challenge for us to consider at a global level. The dispute between the government in Afghanistan and the UN relates to the international community freezing and redirecting the Afghanistan government's bank accounts. The seized money is being transmitted to the local UN agencies who are not allowed to spend any of it on projects connected to the government. One example of a UN project that these funds were spent on, was a children's park, but this caused widespread frustration in the communities because the children still don't have adequate food and clothes.

The Afghanistan Government is angry about this situation and also with the UN led international sanctions that are driving tens of millions of people into further poverty. One Taliban minister told us of the high numbers of children that are dying at night from the cold and that they are found the next day partly eaten by wild animals. In their desperation to get their money back in order to start a process of social and economic development, the government's Supreme Leader announced prohibition of women in parts of public life. This was seen by the Supreme Leader as a bargaining tool, a tactical attempt to push the buttons of the UN, so that they would rethink returning the seized funds.

This situation reminds me of a question once put to Kofi Annan, a previous UN Secretary General. He was asked why so many governments in the African region fail after their countries had gained independence from colonisation. He answered that new governments in these situations were often formed by differing groups of freedom fighters. Their skill base involved fighting and the transition to political diplomacy and engagement is a challenging one. Annan argued that at these times, it was important for the international community to support that transition through investment and collaboration.

Yet, the geo-political environment of today has chosen another method, to completely close Afghanistan off to the rest of the world with

sanctions that prohibit trade, investment or cooperation. Consequently, the 80 million citizens are being punished because of the groups of ex-freedom fighters that have assumed power. The same geo-political environment also seems to have significantly influenced the global media, portraying Afghanistan, and its people in the worst possible light, wrongly informing the world that woman must wear burkas, or they will be beaten on the streets.

Each of the government Ministers that the IFSW team visited alongside ASO, spoke openly that they hoped the ban on women's participation in education would soon finish. Some commented, they hoped their daughters could resume their studies. Another said, 'we cannot run this ministry without women'. One said all peoples, men's and women's human rights should be equal under sheria law. The situation is not, however, something they are easily able to change as the decision is made beyond government.

The Ministers also showed a firm commitment to working with people locally and internationally to build the required systems for everyone's development. They said, they had limited experience in these processes and needed external advice.

### IFSW/ASO Social Work Action, being true to our principles

Shortly after the visit, the IFSW UN Commission [made a statement to a high-level UN meeting on human rights](#). The submission stated that all people have a right to development and that civil society and the UN needed to work together to develop new systems where sanctions did not undermine people's basic rights to health and wellbeing.

IFSW has acknowledged the skills that sit within ASO. They will not only be able to advise the new government, with the support of their local and international connections, on developing services for development, but in accordance with the profession's ethics and principles they will also be able, along with others, to hold the government to account and help nurture the government forward towards democracy and full respect of all people.

Another aspect of social work ethics and principles is challenging negative discrimination. In my experience, I find that social workers tend to think carefully about this in order to get the best result. As a profession practicing with people in complex situations, we have learnt that it is very rare to get a good outcome when telling someone: 'You don't like them, that they are 100% wrong, stupid and they and their view should not exist'. This is certainly not the way social workers proceed when working with a divided family or community. The result would be disastrous. Rather, social workers bring people together so that all people can be heard, and their rights balanced and respected. It is through this process that discriminatory behaviours are challenged, and rights realised.

Interestingly, this approach was echoed among leaders of global activism in last years' [People's Global Summit](#). They acknowledged that telling people they disagreed with, that they are wrong, only polarises the situation and potentially makes things worse. Using Donald Trump supporters as an example, they felt that a better approach would be to say: 'When you do or say these things, that affects me (us, or them) and I don't agree, we need to talk and find solutions we all agree with'. The global activists considered that these approaches, consistent with Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela (to name a few) to be the change that they themselves needed to take, in advancing a sustainable and fair world that we can all live in.

It is in this spirit that IFSW is taking action with the UN and the Taliban government. In other words, the change we seek includes the skills of engagement to build a vision and action towards all, contributing to everyone's rights.

It is hoped that the above information will provide more context for the social media activists that have condemned IFSW's involvement in supporting social work and people's wellbeing in Afghanistan. It is understandable that people join the meta-narrative of sanctions when they are only exposed to the images and worst betrayals of Afghanistan, along with the reality of the temporary bans on women. What can be forgotten however in that narrative is that there are 80 million people in the country.



People not dissimilar to those reading this article, but who live in a different country, a country at war for more than 40 years with an ongoing series of un-elected governments and now living with increasing poverty. They too, in accordance with the professional's international ethics and principles, also have rights; and we, the profession, have the obligation to support their rights, including their right to sustainable development.