

### **We are Still Here: Afghan Women on Courage, Freedom, and the Fight to be Heard**

by *Nahid Shahalimi*

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In the growing field of critical international business (IB) studies, *We are Still Here: Afghan Women on Courage, Freedom, and the Fight to be Heard* written by Nahid Shahalimi, emerges as a timely and necessary contribution. Drawing from the lived experiences of 13 Afghan women, including artists, activists and entrepreneurs, the book vividly documents the socio-political and economic exclusion that has intensified under the new Taliban regime. Through its personal narratives, it offers IB scholars insight into how institutional voids, gendered oppression and resilience shape the contours of entrepreneurship and labor markets in conflict-affected economies.

Shahalimi's work is particularly relevant to the role of socio-political and economic marginalization of Afghan women since 2021 when rights eroded along educational, professional fronts and even restricted women from being in public alone without a male chaperone. Shahalimi, who fled Afghanistan herself in 1985 due to the regime, has a strong background in advocacy and storytelling and has dedicated her career to amplifying the voices of those oppressed. Her work reflects a deep commitment to human rights and the empowerment of women through various platforms, including film and literature. *We are Still Here* is no exception; she conducted interviews over several trips to Afghanistan to profile the strict and brutal lives women face there and the outrage they feel at the erosion of their rights and freedoms. Despite decades of global engagement and billions in aid, Afghanistan's political and economic institutions continue to marginalize women. Shahalimi's collection provides valuable case studies for understanding the dynamics of institutional failure and localized resistance. These insights resonate with [Mair and Marti's \(2009\)](#) framework on entrepreneurship in institutional voids and [Cornwell et al.'s \(2023\)](#) analysis of decision-making in conflict-torn countries. The stories in *We are Still Here* offer not just personal perspectives, but reflections on how informal systems, cultural resistance and social entrepreneurship emerge where formal mechanisms collapse.

The book provides readers with an authentic perspective of Afghan women's experiences in real time and amplifies the voices that would have otherwise been silenced. One example is the testimony of Razia Barakazi, known for leading the first women's protests in 2021. Barakazi was a university professor in Kabul and worked in the president's office – a role similar to the third author of this book review, but that is where the similarity ends. On August 15, 2021, Barakazi was forced to leave her position but realized that “to be silent



would mean we were accepting and surrendering to the Taliban's power" (p. 23). She began organizing risky protests, and although threats and bombings ensued, and the Taliban managed to infiltrate her group, she continued to speak against the regime at her own peril.

Furthermore, the narratives of Fereshteh Forough and Manizha Wafeq highlight how skill-building initiatives, such as entrepreneurship programs, create pathways for financial independence in restrictive environments. As an example from the book, Forough's creation of Code to Inspire, the first computer-coding school for girls in Afghanistan, is a true commitment to the advancement and education of women in tech. The skills taught in her school have allowed between 60% and 70% of graduates to find work in their communities and has given them a voice in male-dominated households as they begin to make money. She has created a way for women to have "the freedom to do whatever they want in a virtual world" (p. 21), even when connections in reality have been severed. Also in the book, Maniza Wafeq's Peace through Business program ensures that Afghan women "continue getting recognition for being economic *actors* and not *beneficiaries*" (p. 46) by mentoring and training over 600 women entrepreneurs to establish and grow their businesses throughout 17 provinces in Afghanistan. These voices shared by Shahalimi exemplify the need for education and economic independence in women all over the world. Programs like Code to Inspire and Peace Through Business are emblematic of social entrepreneurship initiatives responding to gendered constraints. They cultivate economic agency among women in fragile contexts, yet their scalability remains tenuous without structural backing from multinational enterprises (MNEs), NGOs or state actors. Labeling these efforts as grassroots responses to institutional voids (Mair and Marti, 2009) brings them into the language of IB. Shahalimi's portrayal of these initiatives challenges us to reframe how we conceptualize economic development and FDI spillovers, not just in terms of capital flows, but in their potential to either disrupt or reinforce existing inequalities.

This book thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection of gender and IB in conflict zones, extending Michailova and Hutchings's (2016) critique of how women's experiences have been sidelined in mainstream IB scholarship. And while the IMF (2018) and other multilateral institutions have highlighted the macroeconomic costs of excluding women, Shahalimi offers micro-level narratives that emphasize the personal risks, courage and innovation required to survive and thrive under systemic patriarchy. In doing so, the book strengthens the call by Rašković *et al.* (2025) in this journal for DEI-informed, socially just IB research that incorporates intersectionality and lived experience.

Moreover, the collection prompts a broader reflection on the role of MNEs, policymakers and educators. How can international actors engage meaningfully in contexts where formal institutions are not only absent but hostile to women's rights? Can ethical sourcing, inclusive hiring, and gender-sensitive investment strategies be developed that are attuned to such complexity? Shahalimi does not provide policy prescriptions but invites scholars to consider these questions through the lens of those most impacted. The book also engages with postcolonial feminist critiques (Fotaki and Pullen, 2024), showing how global capitalism often overlays pre-existing patriarchal systems rather than dismantling them. Importantly, Shahalimi's work also resonates with Indigenous perspectives on decolonization and de-othering (Henry and Leroy-Dyer, 2025), particularly in its insistence on voice, autonomy and epistemic justice. It aligns with a growing movement in IB to include marginalized and Indigenous voices in theorizing about the global economy (see Rašković *et al.*, 2025). These perspectives challenge the field to decenter dominant paradigms and foreground the realities of those historically silenced in global business.

In light of the contemporary political moment, where backlash against DEI is growing even in highly developed nations like the USA, this book reminds us of the fragility

of progress. Patriarchal ideologies are being repackaged as palatable political stances, and rule-of-law protections for women's rights are increasingly precarious. Shahalimi's narratives underscore the urgency of maintaining a critical and activist stance within IB. While the book's strength lies in its intimate storytelling, it could be further strengthened by a more robust historical analysis of Afghanistan's institutional landscape. This context would help IB scholars better situate the systemic challenges described. Nonetheless, *We are Still Here* offers a compelling, emotionally resonant and theoretically rich text that deepens our understanding of resilience, entrepreneurship and gender justice in international business. We strongly recommend this book for IB scholars, students and practitioners interested in the intersections of gender, conflict and global business. It is a call to listen to the voices at the margins and to incorporate them into the heart of our theorizing and teaching. The book's relevance extends beyond Afghanistan, serving as a testament to the universal struggle for women's rights and a reminder that progress requires continuous advocacy and solidarity. Shahalimi's work excels in politicking and humanizing the broader narrative of political and social change, creating an emotional connection that statistics and policy analysis alone cannot achieve. Shahalimi's work also demands that we rethink the boundaries of IB scholarship to include not only firms and flows, but people and possibilities. We would recommend this book to anyone wanting to understand the injustice imposed on women throughout history, and those looking for perspectives that can inspire a new generation to fight for equality all around the world.

**Imaan Alavi**

*Lee School of Business, University of Nevada Las Vegas,  
Las Vegas, Nevada, USA, and*

**Vanand Khachikyan and Kim Nehls**

*University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada, USA*

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