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A STUDY OF HERAT WOMEN'S EXPECTATIONS OF A POST-PEACE PERIOD: DARK VISIONS OF THE FUTURE FROM AN ALREADY DARK PRESENT

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Summary

- In an online survey of 160 women from the city of Herat conducted for this study, the numbers show a vast majority do not trust that the Taliban have changed for the better on women's rights and are anxious about a future where the Taliban are included in the government and society.
- Most respondents believe any kind of deal that brings the Taliban into the government will endanger current rights that give women and girls access to education, freedom to travel and commute, have a say in politics, or remain in the workforce.
- Support for the above positions cut across the different demographic categories that could be reached by the online survey including both younger students and women already in the work force or actively seeking work. Rural women could not be reached.

During the 1990s and especially under the Taliban from 1996 to 2001, Afghan women were not allowed to leave their homes without a male chaperone (Mahram). By 2002, few women were literate as a result of

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education being closed off to girls and women for a decade. Healthcare in the 90s was virtually inaccessible to women since only men were allowed to be practitioners and women could not seek treatment from men. Brutality against women was a regular occurrence under the Taliban and the main punishment for any kind of transgression.²

Fast-forward to the ongoing intra-Afghan peace negotiations between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan which started a debate among Afghan women about their destination in a possible post-war future. Women now have to contemplate a theoretical shared future with the Taliban once more. Given the lot of women under the Taliban of the 90s, it is not irrational for women to be on their guard.

This study is based on a survey designed to assess the hypothesis that Afghan women are not optimistic towards a post-peace treaty future with Taliban. Questions will quantify their outlook of social, political, and economic gains that could be endangered by the Taliban. It will be shown that the thought of repeating the experience of the 90s Taliban rule has caused most study respondents to fear of a joint future with Taliban.

There is some progress at stake, here: while Afghans as a whole still have trouble seeing women in leadership roles, 89.3% of respondents to a 2019 Asia Foundation survey supported women's voting rights, 87% supported their right to an equal education, and 76% support women working outside the home.³ While male support for all of these have been rising, women are more likely to support these rights especially with regards to the right to employment. Urban and young respondents are much more likely than older and rural respondents to approve of women's right to work outside the home but low-income respondents were also among the most likely to support this right. Women continue to see lack of educational opportunities, lack of rights and justice, and continued violence to be major concerns, however.

The target area of the survey was the city of Herat, lying at the center of

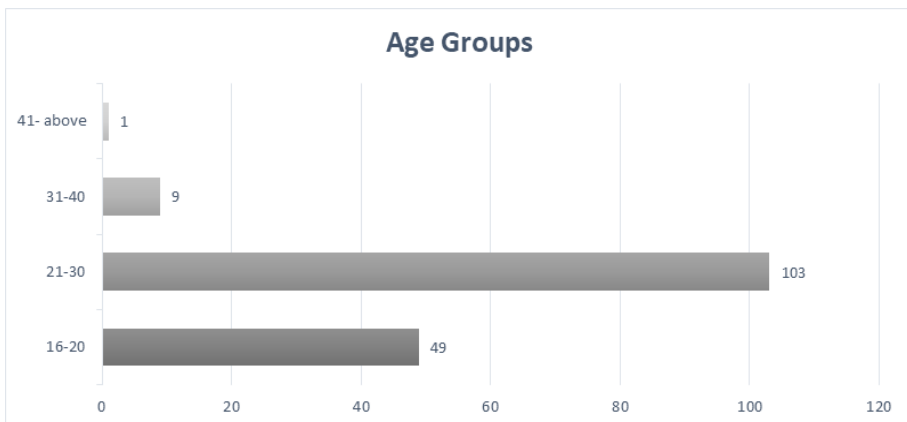
2. "Women in Afghanistan: the back story." Amnesty International UK. November 25 2014. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/womens-rights-afghanistan-history>

3. "A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2019." The Asia Foundation. 2019. https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019_Afghan_Survey_Full-Report.pdf. 199-230

Herat province, located in West Afghanistan on the border with Iran. The questionnaire was designed and distributed through online platforms to 160 respondents from 15 Police Department districts of Herat. The findings do not reflect the views of women living in rural areas and other districts of Herat. Given the fact that the survey had to be conducted online due to the Covid-19 lockdown, illiterate women also could not be reached. Thus, this survey does not represent uneducated women’s perspectives. This will also mean that this survey skews towards demographics that tend to be more protective of their new rights if going by the 2019 Asia Foundation national survey results (female, urban, literate, with access to the internet).

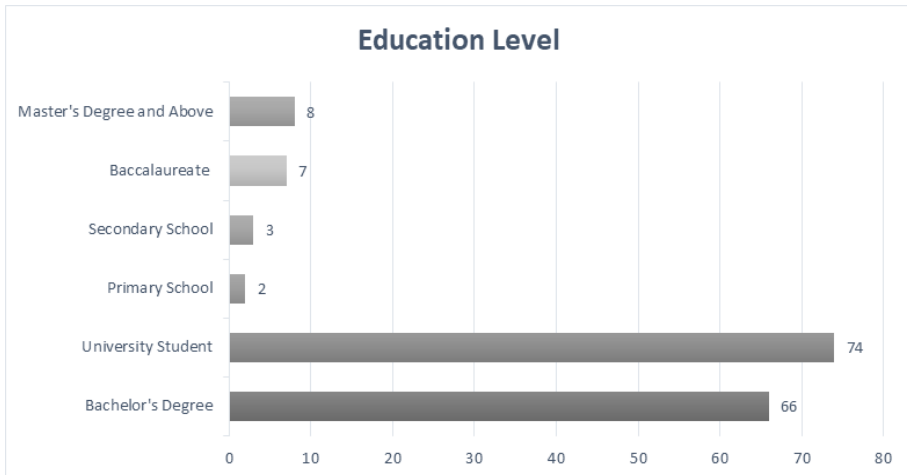
To provide context, the women responding to the survey already do not experience full equality or freedom under the status quo. Herat has some of the highest rates of violence against women in the country and some of the highest rates of suicide among Afghan women.⁴ While Herat does have a high rate of incident registration and prosecution compared to other provinces (according to 2012 UN numbers), it is also the province with the most prosecutions for “runaway” girls (girls fleeing their families) which is not an actual crime under either the Penal Code or Sharia. With this in mind, the anxieties expressed by Herat respondents towards a future with the Taliban speak volumes.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

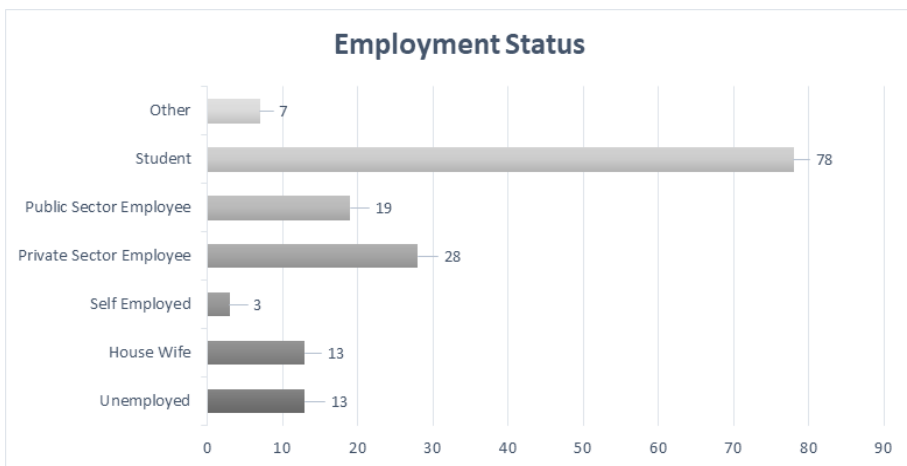


4. “Still a Long Way to Go: Implementation of The Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women in Afghanistan.” United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. December 2012. https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/evaw_still_a_long_way_to_go_11dec12_final.pdf

The largest group of respondents is people of ages 21-30 which constitute 64% percent of the respondents. It is followed by people aged 16-20 (30%) and then people aged 31-40 (5%).



The plurality of respondents are undergraduate university students making up 46% of the respondents. Women holding a bachelor's degree are 41%. The remaining 13% are women with a master's degree or above (5%), baccalaureate degree (5%), or primary/secondary studies only (3% combined).

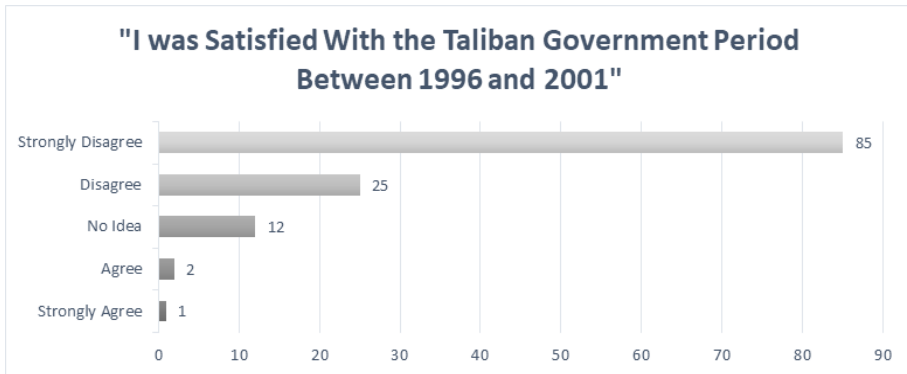


The majority of respondents are currently students in some capacity (49%). 17% of the respondents work in private/non-governmental sectors, 12% are

employed in the public sector. 8% are previously employed and currently unemployed women with the remainder being housewives and self-employed women. 4% of the respondents chose “other” .

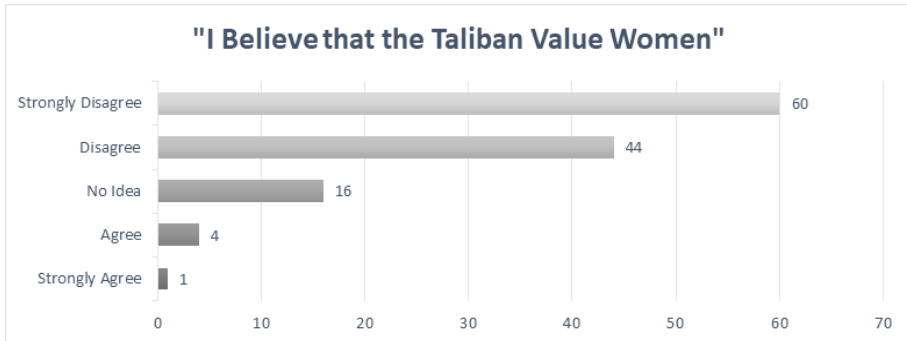
Study Findings and Data Analysis

Women’s General Attitude Toward the Taliban



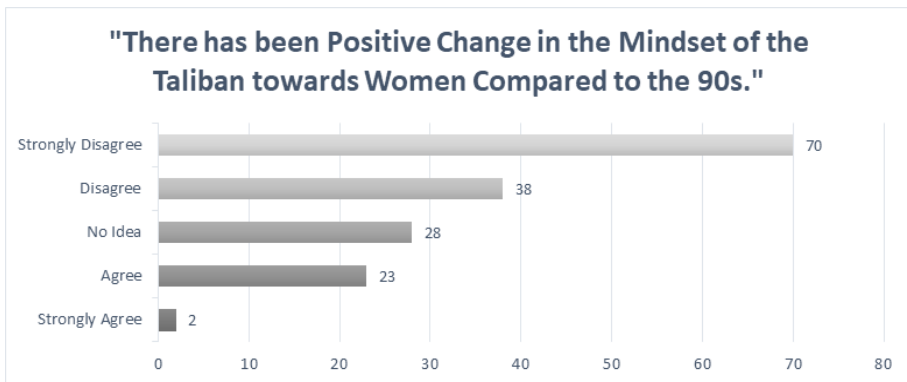
Respondents were asked whether they had been satisfied living under the 90s Taliban regime or not. 88% of respondents disagreed, with 68% strongly disagreeing. If asked to elaborate, they particularly objected to the fact that women were not allowed to go school, were forced into underage marriage and subjected to very harsh punishments among other issues. Only a very small number of respondents (3%) reported satisfaction with the 90s Taliban’s regime and 9% of respondents had no specific answer to the question.

The next question examined what respondents felt their place would be in a contemporary Taliban-run society. The respondents were given five options to express their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statement: “I believe that the Taliban value women”.



83% of respondents opposed the statement and the majority of this opposition showed strong disagreement. 4% of respondents believe that the Taliban value women. Most of this 4% of respondents were also satisfied with the period of Taliban rule in the 90s. 13% of the respondents did not know how to answer the question.

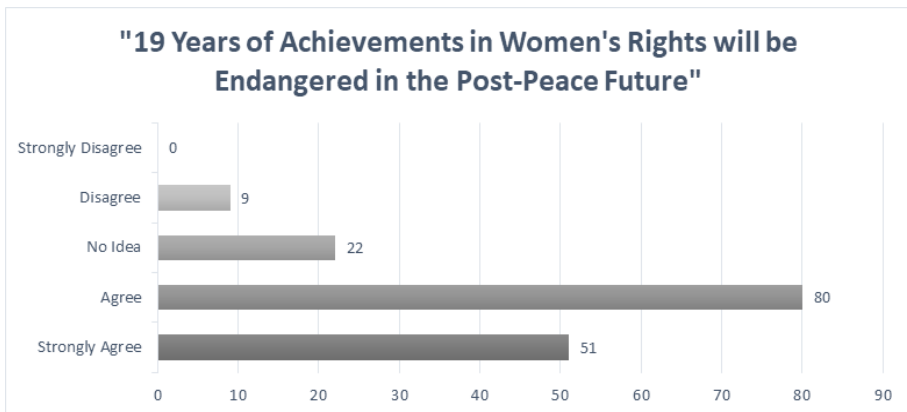
Peace talks with the Taliban created a new debate around whether the Taliban have changed their previous position toward women to a more moderate and positive stance. The next chart looks at how believed such claims are by the respondents of Herat.



68% of respondents believe that there has been no positive change in the mindset of the Taliban toward women and that they have the same mindset as in the 90s. However, 15% of respondents think the new generation of Taliban recognize more rights and freedoms for women in

society. Interestingly, 60% of the latter group of respondents had previously indicated their belief that the Taliban does not value women and almost all of them condemned the 90s Taliban period. Changes in the statistics of this chart compared to previous charts may be the result of recent debates on the legitimacy of peace talks with Taliban. It may also very well be that this overlap could be due to a belief the Taliban improved somewhat but not enough to be seen as truly valuing women overall.

Besides these two groups of respondents, 17% of women do not have a specific answer. In the previous question, 71% of this group expressed that the Taliban does not give importance to women yet here they seem uncertain about positive changes in the behavior of the Taliban toward women.



The chart above shows respondents' choices when asked to state their attitude toward the statement "I believe that 19 years of achievements in the area of women rights will be endangered in the post-peace future".

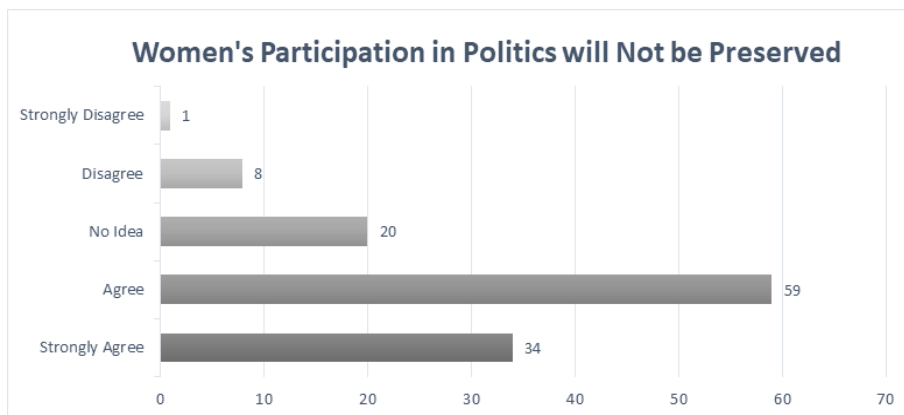
The chart shows that almost 80% of the respondents agree with the statement though the plurality goes to the "agree" rather than "strongly agree" category. This combined "agree" group is comprised of 89% of all student respondents, 79% of public servants, 78% of private sector employees, 77% of the unemployed and 68% of the self-employed with each category constituting 44%, 10%, 13%, 6% and 1% of the whole "agree" group respectively. 95% of this group in a future question stated that they feel fear towards a joint future with Taliban. Furthermore, most among this group

believes that women’s right to freely commute (89%), right to education (92%) and right to work (93%) will be violated (see further on for more detail on these questions).

Only 6% of respondents disagree with the statement. This same group believes women’s rights will be protected even after a deal with the Taliban. Like the “agree” group, the majority of the “disagree” group believe that basic rights will be violated — women’s right to freely commute (60%), right to education (70%) and right to work (77%). This group includes students, public and private employees along the same proportional ratio.

Meanwhile, 14% of respondents have no idea about what will happen to the achievements of women. A majority of this group (68%) provide the same answer when asked whether the situation will get worse after return of the Taliban.

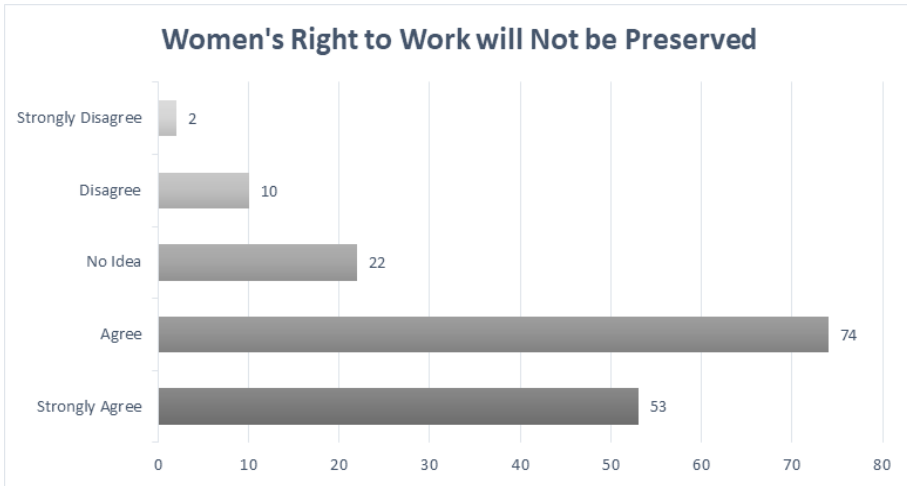
Women’s Political Share and Participation in Decision Making



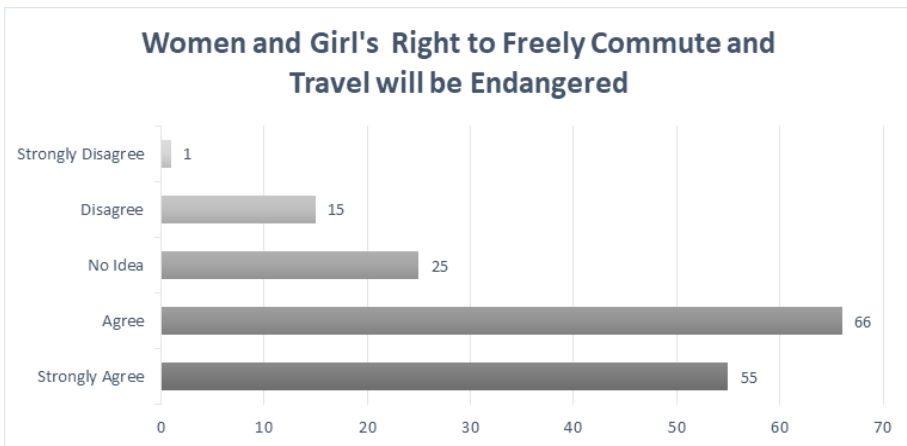
In terms of women’s political participation and involvement, respondents were asked to what extent they agree with the claim that women’s current political share of power and political participation will be saved in the post peace government. As shown above, 76% of respondents say that the political rights of women will be violated after the peace agreement. Recall that in the 2019 national survey, women’s political participation was broadly supported (but not in leadership positions) so a rollback of such rights would not be considered acceptable.

By contrast, a minority (8%) think that women’s rights in political decision making and participation will be preserved after a peace agreement. 16% are undecided on the issue.

Women’s Right to Work and Active Presence in Society

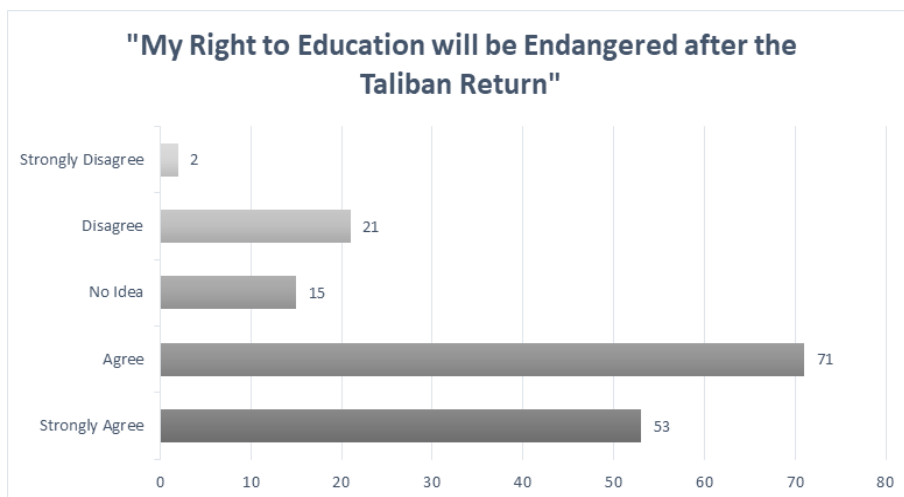


The chart above demonstrates that 79% of all the respondents support the view that women’s freedom to independently earn income in the public sphere will not be preserved in the post-peace future. By contrast, 7% of the respondents believe a peace agreement will not bring change to the status quo. The right to join the formal labor market is especially dear to the demographic categories that dominate this survey (young and urban) according to the Asia Foundation survey.



As for the ability to travel and commute, the majority of the respondents believe it will no longer be safe and that there will be similar restrictions as in the Taliban period of the 90s. Meanwhile, 10% of the respondents say that the right to commute freely will not be violated after a peace deal. Half of this group indicated that the right to work will not be endangered while 31% of this same group thinks that the right to work be violated.

Women's Right to Education



Respondents were asked to indicate the level of their agreement with the following statement: "I believe that my right to education will be endangered after the Taliban return." The statistics suggest that 77% of interviewees think women will be deprived of education. Compared with past questions, nearly all of the "agree/strongly agree" group believe that right to work, travel, and political participation will also be endangered. 57% of this group are university students and 28% are employed with a bachelor's degree. 19% are neither employed or students.

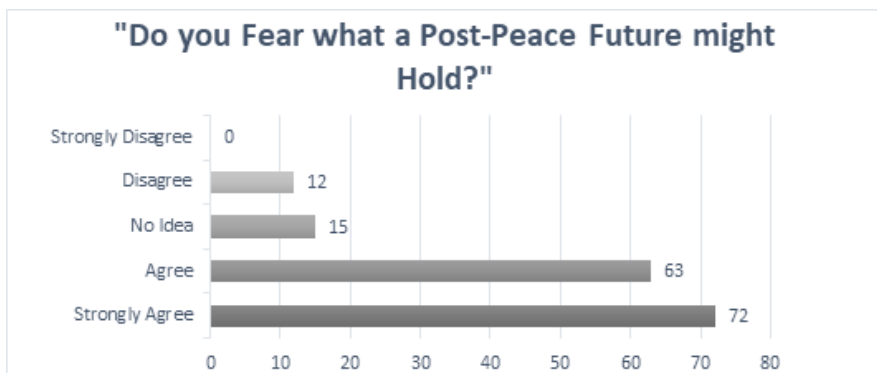
By contrast, 14% believe in a scenario where the right to education will be protected after the peace agreement with Taliban. 57% of this group are employed either in the private sector or public services and have a bachelor's degree, master's degree or higher. It may be that having reached a high level of educational achievement, they are more concerned with their right to

work. In any case, it is a confidence that runs counter to the rise in Taliban attacks against girl schools throughout the country (unless they believe this anti-girls education stance will cease after a deal).⁵ The high degree of educational and professional achievement of respondents in this category in any case is notable.

Only 9% of the respondent selected “no idea” in this case, demonstrating a greater level of certainty among respondents one way or another on this question.

Women’s General Perspective towards a Post-Peace Future

In the last part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to present their general stance toward a post-peace future. The next question will assess whether women feel fear when they think of a joint future with the Taliban or not. The responses were as follows:



As is obvious from the chart, the majority of respondents (84%) agrees or strongly agrees they feel fear about the post-peace future. Far less women do not report fear (7% with no one in the “strongly disagree” category). 9% of the respondents have “no idea” concerning the future.

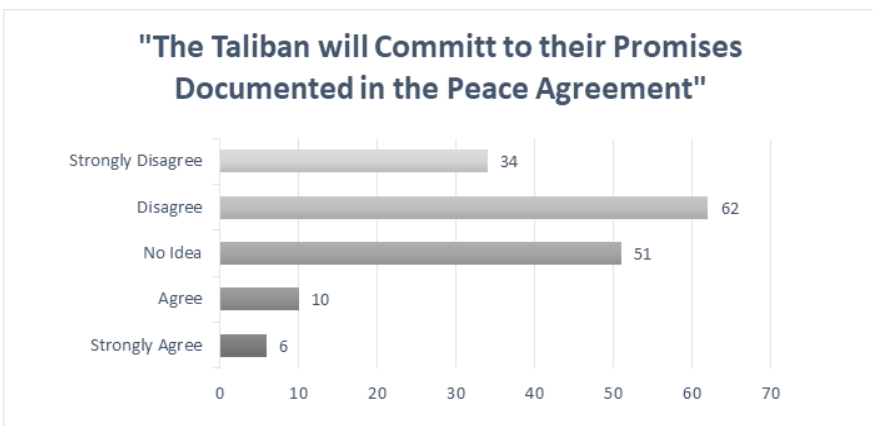
To find a clear and general root of the fear and the insecurity that respondents feel, they were asked some follow-up questions. In the next question, respondents indicated their thoughts on this statement: “I believe that women’s situations will get worse in a post-peace future”.

5. A Survey of the Afghan People. 199-230



The pie chart above suggests that 70% of respondents agree with the statement. Only 7% of respondents disagree. Meanwhile, 23% of the respondents answered “no idea”, a far larger proportion than the previous question. It may be there is greater certainty around whether or not they fear the future but not enough certainty to definitively say whether that stance is warranted.

In this last follow up question, respondents reacted to the following statement: “I believe that the Taliban will remain committed to their promises documented in the peace agreement.”



69% of the respondents do not see the Taliban committing to a negotiated agreement even in the case where they accept women’s rights and freedoms

at the negotiation table. The statistics from previous questions demonstrate that almost all among this group of respondents believe that women's rights will be endangered after the Taliban return to society including rights to education, work, political participation or free commute.

On the other side, 10% of respondents count on the promises of the Taliban if they accept women's rights in the peace agreement. 31% of the respondents answered "no idea". Looking at the previous questions, 67% of the latter group believes that the Taliban do not value women and 50% of them stated that there was no positive change in the attitude of the Taliban toward women. It can perhaps be implied that a large number of women are still unsure of whether or not a peace deal will bind a Taliban they see as definitely hostile to women.

Conclusion

This study examined and analyzed the attitudes and perceptions of women in the city of Herat towards a future where the main parties of the conflict—the government and the Taliban—agree on a permanent ceasefire and peace as a result of negotiations. The findings of this study demonstrate that women are not optimistic towards such a future in terms of the preservation of their current rights and many actively fear a potential integration of the Taliban into society and possibly even the government. The majority of them believe that the current Taliban hold the same extremist ideology against women as they did in the 90s. Based on the findings of this survey, respondents fear that the result of a peace deal would be a repetition of the previous Taliban regime in which women did not have equality or freedom. According to the majority of women who responded to the questionnaire, the Taliban should not be taken at their word if they accept women's rights at the negotiation table. Bear in mind, such fears and anxieties come from women living in a region that is already difficult for women. These survey results from the women of Herat are a sign that the end of open conflict will not be seen as the end of an extremist threat that has the potential to worsen an already bad situation for women and girls.

Policy Recommendation

- The government of Afghanistan, particularly, the negotiating team, must not treat women's rights as a bargaining chip during the negotiation phase.
- Afghan women and women's rights activists should define red lines around what they will not negotiate in the peace process. This will require a united stance to firmly advocate these values.
- The international community should use all their financial and diplomatic leverage in support of women's rights and to safeguard the achievements of the last 19 years. This includes setting women's rights as a pre-condition for support and assistance to Afghanistan.