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Afghan Women's Achievements in the Security Sector Post-2001

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When the Taliban regime was in power in Afghanistan, they imposed severe restrictions on women, excluding women from nearly all spheres of life such as social, political, cultural, economic, and security. The US intervention in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks freed Afghan women from the severe Taliban-imposed restrictions, and steadily, women began to resume participation in various aspects of society with the help of the US and the international community. Article 22 of the new Afghan constitution, which was promulgated in 2004, guarantees equality for all citizens, men, and women.² This provides the legal foundation for women to participate in all spheres of society as equals to men, including in the security sector. While this has enabled substantial participation of women in the security sector, some challenges do still persist, as “in a conservative society like Afghanistan, where female participation in the public domain is not widely accepted, female presence in the security sectors remains taboo.”³

This essay explores the role of women in Afghanistan's security sector; analyzes how the post-2001 era has helped women participate in the

1. Mina Nowrozi holds an undergraduate degree in international and comparative politics from the American University of Central Asia.

2. The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan chapter2, Article 22.

3. Sabet, Zarifa. “Improving Female Participation in Defense and Security Institutions in Afghanistan,” Geopolitical Monitor, June 22, 2019, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/improving-female-participation-in-defense-and-security-institutions-in-afghanistan/>

sector; and how, despite challenges, women have made contributions in the security sector. Finally, this paper offers policy recommendations aimed at improving the role of Afghan women in the security sector.

The Need for Women's Presence in the Security Sector

Women comprise half of Afghanistan's society, and consequently, Afghan women's participation is essential for all sectors of governance, economic and other activities. It is especially vital in the security sector, given how security related issues are a key concern in the country. However, ensuring robust participation of women in this sector is still a challenging task, and women's presence in it continues to be taboo due to the conservative nature of the society.⁴ Normalizing women's participation in this sector depends partly on placing greater emphasis on increased participation of women in the sector.

Not only is equal access to participation in the security sector (or any sector) a legitimate right of Afghan women but it is especially necessary given how gender equality is a cross-cutting issue for the overall development of society. Women's inclusion in this sector will help bring more balance in a society that has been affected by the brutal male dominated system of the Taliban. Women's presence in the security sector helps institutions in this sector function better and in a more nuanced way. For example, on a practical level, while insecurity affects both men and women, due to some traditional and cultural barriers, most women do not feel comfortable reporting security incidents to male members of security forces. Women can communicate with women more easily. For instance, women are more likely to feel comfortable to report incidents of harassment and domestic violence to female police personnel than male officers.⁵

Similarly, women are needed in Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). When the armed forces have to carry out security operations in people's homes, under Islamic traditions, men cannot frisk

4. Sabet, Zarifa. "Improving Female Participation in Defense and Security Institutions in Afghanistan," *Geopolitical Monitor*, June 22, 2019, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/improving-female-participation-in-defense-and-security-institutions-in-afghanistan/>

5. "Situation of Women Employed in Defense and Security Sectors." *Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission*, Autumn 2017, p. 3. http://azil.rs/azil_novi/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Situation-of-Women.Employed-in-Defense-and-Security-Sector.pdf

women, or, when there are female victims of the operations, men are not allowed to touch women or interact with them. In circumstances like these, female personnel are necessary to handle the situation. Furthermore, in rural areas, women might sometimes have accurate and vital security information but are unlikely to speak to male strangers. Female personnel are needed in such cases to communicate with them.⁶ Moreover, there have been cases where some male drug traffickers were disguised in women's clothes, hiding drugs and weapons under their Burqas, but were nabbed when they were identified and arrested by female security personnel.⁷

Challenges Faced by Women in the Security Sector

Before the Taliban era, Afghan women served in the military and other security services for decades. For instance, the first group of women (six in total) joined the Afghan National Police in 1967. Their numbers were gradually increasing but began dropping during the civil war and dropped to zero during the Taliban period.⁸ In 1991, Col. Latifa Nabizada became Afghanistan's first Afghan female helicopter pilot.⁹ In the 1980s, Khatoon Mohammadzai became the first woman to be commissioned in the Afghan army, and was also Afghanistan's first female paratrooper.¹⁰ Even though the military and security services have tended to be considered a 'male domain', she also became the first female Afghan general in the post-Taliban period.¹¹

It is important to note that the Taliban was not the first entity to introduce or enforce gender discrimination in Afghanistan; they simply made the norms that has existed for centuries a key component of their governance system.¹²

6. Bryce, Hannah. "Could More Women Soldiers Make the Army Stronger?" BBC News November 27, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-41969817>

7. سند پالیسی: توانمندی زنان افغان در سکتور امنیتي. [Policy Document: The Ability of Afghan Women in the Security Sector]." Afghan Women's Network, (Kabul: AWN, June 2016), 2.

8. "Situation of Women Employed in Defense and Security Sectors." Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Autumn 2017. p. 12. http://azil.rs/azil_novi/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Situation-of-Women.Employed-in-Defense-and-Security-Sector.pdf

9. Jones, Sophia. "The Many Dangers of Being an Afghan Woman in Uniform." The New York Times, October 05, 2018. [nytimes.com/2018/10/05/magazine/afghanistan-women-security-forces.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/magazine/afghanistan-women-security-forces.html)

10. Izazullah. "Afghan Army Seeks to Recruit More Women." Salaam Times April 03, 2017. https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2017/04/03/feature-01

11. Craig, Jill. Sorosh, Hikmat. and Seerat, Samsama. "Afghan Women Work to Increase Military Presence." Voice of America, March 23, 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/afghan-women-work-increase-military-presence>

12. Kouvo, Sari. and Levine, Corey. "Who Defines the Red Lines? The Prospects for Safeguarding Women's Rights and Securing Their Future in Post-Transition Afghanistan." The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict, Oxford University Press 2018, p. 487.

The Taliban's imposition of misogynistic principles caused tremendous damage to women's progress in all sectors, especially the security sector. The Taliban's ideology furthered normalization of gender discrimination and devaluation of women's abilities and social contributions. Consequently, even two decades since the fall of the Taliban regime, women continue to suffer from the Taliban's legacy, and it is a big challenge for women to be in the military or police forces. The major challenges women face include:

Harassment: Countrywide, harassment is one of the major challenges Afghan women face in almost all types of workplaces, be it public or private, and is a deterrent to their participation in social affairs. Due to widespread occurrence of harassment, families are less likely to 'allow' their female relatives (wives, daughters etc.) to work in any public or private offices, particularly where they need to work with men.¹³ According to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), Afghan women face the following the categories of harassments:

- **Verbal Harassment:** This involves the use of sexually suggestive words, sexual offerings, comments on the appearance and clothing choices of a person, lewd humor, sarcastic speech and other sexual expressions.
- **Non-verbal harassment:** This involves winking, leering, lewd glances and sexual gestures.
- **Physical harassment:** This involves touching a woman, forcibly holding her hands, touching with shoulders, getting close to the woman's body etc. without consent.¹⁴

AIHRC studies have found that 13.20% of the women in ANDSF, 20.40% in the Afghan National Police (ANP), and 18.30% in the ANA experienced sexual harassment.¹⁵ These numbers show that harassment is a huge challenge to women's participation in the security sector, to the extent that it even causes women to quit their jobs.

13. Duncan, Dennis. "Sexual Harassment Law Passes Afghan Houses." DAI, January 05, 2017. https://dai-global-developments.com/articles/law-to-criminalize-sexual-harassment-passed-by-afghan-parliament-awaits-presidents-approval?utm_source=daidotcom

14. "Situation of Women Employed in Defense and Security Sectors." Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Autumn 2017. p. 20. http://azil.rs/azil_novi/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Situation-of-Women.Employed-in-Defense-and-Security-Sector.pdf

15. Ibid

Illiteracy and Conservative Norms: Col. Latifa Bayat, Deputy Director in the Ministry of Interior's Gender Unit, said "Our customs do not allow women to work in the police force. Women have no access to education."¹⁶ Traditional and conservative norms that discriminate against girls is another big impediment for Afghan women. Even today, many Afghan families prioritize their sons over their daughters.¹⁷ Consequently, those families do not value their daughters and wives and do not believe in them and do not count on their abilities. Under the prevailing conservative norms in Afghanistan, social duties are allocated based on gender. The security sector is considered the domain of men and it is often assumed that women are not capable of carrying out military operations, even though these capabilities ultimately depend on training. Consequently, there is a correlation between lower numbers of women in the security forces and women's limited and/or low access to education and career opportunities. Even training within security institutions is insufficient because most of the trainings are short-term. Short-term training allow is insufficient to build women's capacity and professional skills. Short-term training also results in fewer opportunities for promotions.¹⁸

Lack of Law Enforcement: In the post-2001 period, Afghanistan has promulgated several laws to guarantee gender equality. Unfortunately, enforcement is extremely weak, and till date, patriarchal norms are practiced more than formal laws. In fact, patriarchy exists even among highly educated officials such as members of parliament. This is also why the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) has yet to be officially approved by the parliament since 2009. Consequently, women are being suppressed and violence against women has been increasing. In 2019, the Ministry of Public Health recorded 30,000 cases of violence against women in hospitals all around the country, which shows a 50% jump from the numbers recorded in 2018.¹⁹ The increasing trend of

16. Moetsabi, Titus. "Afghan Police Force Recruits Women to Fight Crime and Stigma." UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/ourstories/afghan-women-join-police-force.html>

17. Fahimullah. "Afghanistan: The Shame of Having Daughters." Institute for War and Peace Reporting, January 30, 2017. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/afghanistan-shame-having-daughters>

18. "گزارش سالانه خشونت علیه زنان در افغانستان." [Annual Report on Violence Against Women in Afghanistan]." Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, 2019. p. 4. [https://www.aihrc.org.af/media/files/AIHRCAnnual_Women_Report_\(2018-2019\).pdf](https://www.aihrc.org.af/media/files/AIHRCAnnual_Women_Report_(2018-2019).pdf)

19. "TOLONews 6pm News 08 March 2020." YouTube, Tolonews, March 08, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wx7l2deed3Q>

violence against women highlights the lack of enforcement of those laws. In a society where a large section of women face violence, discrimination, and unfair treatment despite the existence of laws and policies aimed at ensuring gender equality, non-discrimination, and elimination of violence against women, the security sector is not an exception. Lack of (or inadequate) law enforcement causes people to lose trust in the government and law enforcement mechanisms, which in turn discourages women from joining the security forces as well.

Women's Achievements in the Security Sector

Despite numerous challenges, the latest statistics of female forces in the security sector gives hope for more achievements. Progress has been slow, but it has been on an upward trend. The US, NATO and the Afghan government have been undertaking different measures to increase the numbers of female employees in the security sector. Some of these measures include budgetary allocations to increase the numbers of female forces and providing female advisors and trainers for women in security institutions. Between 2014 and 2016, the US spent approximately US\$ 160 million to support women in the Afghan security forces.²⁰

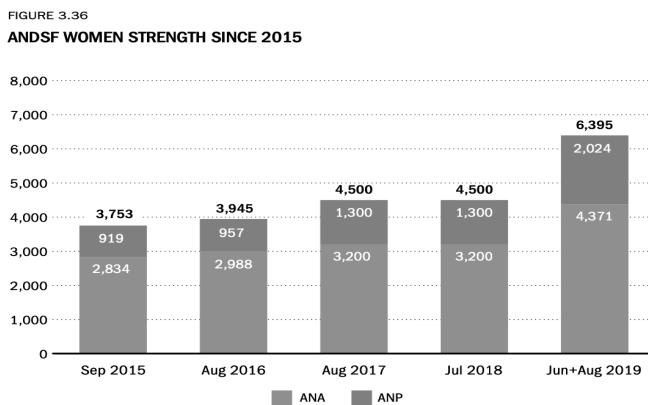
The Afghan government has largely pursued legal measures as the basic need. Article 22 of the current Afghan constitution guarantees equal rights for men and women. This is one of the legal grounds for equal access of women and girls to social services and rights to work in all public and private sectors, including security. The Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is another international measure that supports women's participation in the Afghan security sector without discrimination. In particular, Article 11 of the CEDAW obliges state parties to ensure women's rights to work and employment without discrimination.²¹ Afghanistan is bound by this treaty since it ratified it in 2003. Furthermore, the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) is another policy aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination against women and improving their human capital and

20. Jones, Sophia. "The Many Dangers of Being an Afghan Woman in Uniform." *The New York Times* October 05, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/magazine/afghanistan-women-security-forces.html>

21. Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against, Part 3, art 11.

increasing their inclusion in all aspect of life. Since harassment is one of the countrywide challenges that impede women from freely participating in most social activities, the Afghan parliament passed the Anti-Harassment Law in 2017. Since the negative effect of harassment is more perceptible in security sector, in October 2018, Afghanistan’s Ministry of Defense adopted the Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevent Policy.²²

All measures taken by the Afghan government, the US and other donor countries for women in the security sector aim to encourage and support their engagement in the military, army, police, and other security sector institutions. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction’s last quarterly report for 2019 found that the numbers of female members of the ANDSF had increased from 4,495 in 2018 to 6,395 in 2019.²³



Source: CSTC-A response to SIGAR data call, 9/19/2019; SIGAR, Quarterly Reports to the United States Congress, 10/30/2015, 10/30/2016, 10/30/2017, and 10/30/2018; SIGAR, analysis of CSTC-A-provided data, 10/2019.

In 2015, there were a total of 3,753 women in the Afghan security sector. In 2019, the numbers increased to 6,395. This is a promising increase, especially given the wide range of social, cultural, and traditional barriers

22. “Report to Congress: Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan” Department of Defense, June 27, 2019, p. 29, <https://cutt.ly/Ptxjmbq>.

23. “Report to The United States Congress,” SIGAR, no 45, 2019. pp 84-86. <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/12/2002156816/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING-SECURITY-AND-STABILITY-IN-AFGHANISTAN.PDF>

that women face. However, these numbers are still far below the goals that the Afghan government and NATO had set in 2010. At that time, they had set the goal of increasing the numbers of female ANDSF members to 10% of the total force strength by 2020.²⁴ Realizing the slow pace of women's enrolment, in 2015, the government changed the benchmark for the next 10 years to 5000 females in the army and 10,000 females in the police force by 2025.²⁵ Among the women in the security sector, some women are in higher ranking positions. For example, Khatol Mohammadzai is the first woman in Afghanistan to attain the rank of a general.²⁶ Major Safia Ferozi is another woman who is working in the Afghan Air Force. She is the second female Afghan pilot in the post-Taliban era, after Nelofer Rahmani.²⁷

Conclusion

Prevailing socio-cultural and structural barriers pose several deterrents to Afghan women's participation in different spheres of life. Afghan women's participation in the security sector has been especially challenging since military services and army operations are often considered a male domain. Nonetheless, at present over 6000 women are employed in the Afghan security forces—over 4000 female personnel in the Afghan National Army and over 2000 in the Afghan National Police. Overall, this number is low, but given the context, it is a positive achievement.

Policy Recommendations

- The primary issue that needs to be addressed is people's mindsets. Several measures need to be taken to normalize women's participation in the security sector. These could include:
 - a) Developing a series of TV programs and advertisements that treat the security sector as equal to any other profession, such as medicine, businesses, or politics.

24. Zawulistani, Jawad. "A Battle of Several Fronts: Afghan Women in the Security Forces." *The Diplomat* May 01, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/a-battle-of-several-fronts-afghan-women-in-the-security-forces/>

25. Jones, Sophia. "The Many Dangers of Being an Afghan Woman in Uniform." *The New York Times*, October 05, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/magazine/afghanistan-women-security-forces.html>

26. Craig, Jill. Sorosh, Hikmat. and Seerat, Samsama. "Afghan Women Work to Increase Military Presence." *Voice of America*, March 23, 2018 <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/afghan-women-work-increase-military-presence>

27. "A Short Documentary of Afghan Female Army" YouTube, TOLOTV, February 28, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1citQvCPlqA>.

- b)** Advertising the successes of the women who are already in the security sector, to encourage other women to join.
 - c)** Engaging with religious figures and other entities influential in Afghan society. The government must develop a policy for the Ministry of Interior to register all the Mullah's who give sermons in mosques and make sure they all are educated. The government could ask them not only to stop promoting misogynistic principles but also to encourage the families to be supportive of their sisters, wives and daughters' participation in all spheres, especially the security sector.
- The other key issue that needs to be addressed on a priority basis is the inadequacies in law enforcement. This can be achieved by:
 - a)** Implementing all laws and policies aimed at gender-equality and well-being of women earnestly.
 - b)** The principle of non-discrimination must be enforced strongly. Women must be treated as equals to men within institutions; they must have access to all facilities, equipment and training as men.
 - c)** The anti-harassment policy must be implemented rigorously.
 - d)** Accountability mechanisms as well as mechanisms facilitating access to justice must be institutionalized.
- The Defense Ministry should hold long-term training for female personnel who newly join the security sector. It will be more helpful to enhance their skills and capacities.