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Strengthening Afghan Women's Participation in Peacebuilding

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Despite substantial achievements in the process of emerging from two decades of war and oppression, Afghanistan still has a long way to go before it achieves peace and stability. Of particular concern are the significant barriers that women continue to face vis-a-vis their full and meaningful participation in political and other national processes. The 2003 UN Commission on the Status of Women report on post-conflict peace building made a number of recommendations, including the need to ensure “gender balance in the composition of ... delegations in [peace] negotiations ... [and] adherence to gender balance in appointments to senior government administration and judiciary positions.” Women’s meaningful participation in every stage of the process is crucial for reconstruction and reconciliation efforts to succeed.

This essay examines some of the changes to women’s voices, leadership roles and presence in decision-making that have taken place in Afghanistan over the past two decades. To do so, it attempts to answer two questions: a) what are the enabling factors that amplify women’s voices, leadership roles and access to decision-making in Afghan political processes?; and b) what do we know about whether and how women’s voices, leadership roles and presence in decision-making roles within these processes indeed result in greater gender equality for Afghan women? To answer these questions, this study explores the role played by international actors in this regard and identifies lessons learnt.

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Overview

Contemporary Afghanistan is a useful case study for examining the growing demand for women's rights within a tribal, Islamic and modernising framework. Since 2001, women in Afghanistan have gained a share in political activities and political participation. For instance, Afghan women have taken part in creating legislation and in enforcing the rule of law. According to International IDEA, in 2018, 67 of the 248 members of the lower house of the Afghan parliament were women.² More women have access to health services, and laws have been promulgated to protect and promote women's rights.

But these hard-won gains are being steadily undermined by rising insecurity and persisting gender inequality. Over the past four decades, women and girls' interests in Afghanistan have been shaped by and have been at the mercy of the shifting dynamics of violent conflict. While indeed the progresses made in the post-2001 period is undeniable, these gains are under threat amid efforts by the Afghan government and the international community to engage the Taliban for a negotiated settlement to the conflict. There are legitimate concerns that gains made so far vis-à-vis women's rights in Afghanistan might be at a risk of dilution as a trade-off for an end to the conflict.

Existing Challenges Faced by Afghan Women

There are certain ground realities that must be factored in, while developing strategies to ensure women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing Afghan women is making themselves heard. Afghanistan's 2004 constitution stipulates that 25% of the members of parliament must be female. In 2013, the Afghan parliament quietly passed an amendment which reduced this to 20% for provincial councils. Women are also often ignored in key decision-making areas. In 2014, only four of the 25 cabinet ministers were women. Women comprise only nine of the 70-member High Peace Council, the institution tasked with negotiating with the Taliban, and have complained of being side-lined in major negotiation decisions. In 2015, a female judge was introduced as

2. "Gender Quotas Database | Country Data." Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/country-view/44/35>

a Supreme Court High Council Member for the first time in Afghanistan's history; but while this is an important milestone, there is still a long way to go before substantial gender parity is achieved throughout the judiciary.³

The current Afghan constitution guarantees women's equality before the law, the right to education and the right to work.⁴ However, laws introduced to protect women and their rights have come under attack over the years. In 2009, the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) law was enacted, criminalising several harmful traditional practices such as child marriage, forced marriage, beating and rape. In 2013, the Parliamentary Commission on Women's Affairs, civil society, and AIHRC brought the EVAW law to the parliament with the stated purpose of strengthening it. This process, however, resulted in many MPs rejecting some sections of the Law as "un-Islamic" and not compliant with Sharia. This debate negatively impacted what was already a weak enforcement of the Law across the country. In many instances where violence against a woman has been reported, the situation often continues to be 'resolved' by traditional practices of mediation rather than adherence to the EVAW law.

Women's rights and agency are further at risk due to rising insecurity. In a 2016 review of the annual civilian casualty figures, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) found a 37% increase in women civilian casualties in 2015, compared to 2014.⁵ In fact, on an average, over 24 women were killed or injured in conflict-related violence each week in 2015. In the preceding year's review, UNAMA interviewed 60 Afghan women whose civilian husbands had been killed or seriously injured in conflict-related violence. They found that "women who were left as sole income-providers for their households after the death or injury of their husbands experienced long-lasting social and economic consequences, with poverty forcing many women to give their daughters in marriage in exchange for debts or to take their children out of school often to work. Widowed women were often particularly vulnerable to other forms of violence and abuse from family and community members."⁶

3. Fitri, Khawaja Basir. "1st woman judge nominated to SC high council." Pajhokw Afghan News, June 18, 2015. <https://www.pajhokw.com/en/2015/06/18/1st-woman-judge-nominated-sc-high-council>

4. The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Article 25.

5. "Afghanistan Annual Report 2015, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict." UNAMA, February, 2016. https://www.baag.org.uk/sites/www.baag.org.uk/files/resources/attachments/unama-protection-of-civilians-annual-report-2015-final_0.pdf

6. Ibid

Another obstacle Afghan women and girls face is their restricted role in society. Afghan girls face many challenges to completing their education, including early or forced marriage, shortage of female teachers, prohibitive education costs etc. The grim security situation also prevents many parents from sending their daughters to school. For some Afghan women, restrictions begin at home, where they have no say in decisions affecting their lives or their family's needs. Others struggle against social and cultural norms that hinder their movement and activities outside their homes. Very few women enjoy the financial, social and psychological benefits of meaningful employment. This is problematic not only for Afghan women but also for the economic development of the entire country.

Afghan Women at the Negotiating Table: Opportunities and Challenges

Democracy can only be ensured through full participation of women in the political process, especially in a country where women comprise at least 48% percent of the population.⁷ As a recent panel discussion held by the Conservative Friends of Afghanistan on 16 July 2020 showed, Afghan women's rights activists and international NGOs legitimately fear that women could be excluded from the peace process, and that women's rights might be traded away, and in turn be undermined by the decisions of the new government.

A recent study by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute showed that women's inclusion and meaningful participation in peace processes is central to ensure a gender perspective in peace processes.⁸ Women's inclusion in a peace process is not necessarily limited to direct representation at the negotiating table alone. There are a variety of layers, levels and modes of participation in peace processes that can help increase women's inclusion. As the SIPRI report articulated, "[t]hese range from direct representation, consultative mechanisms, commissions and high-level problem-solving workshops, to public decision-making and mass action." Furthermore, a peace process is more likely to be successful and

7. "Afghanistan Demographics." Worldometer. <https://www.worldometers.info/demographics/afghanistan-demographics/>

8. Cobar, José Alvarado, Bjertén-Günther, Emma, and Jung, Yeonju. "ASSESSING GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN PEACE PROCESSES WITH APPLICATION TO THE CASES OF COLOMBIA AND MINDANAO." SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, November 2018. <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/sipriinsight1806.pdf>

lasting when a combination of modes of inclusion are introduced throughout the process.

This is in line with another study published in the *International Interactions* journal, which demonstrated that collaboration between female delegates and women civil society groups contributes to higher implementation rates of agreement provisions.⁹ Those linkages are seen in many cases, such as in Papua New Guinea, UK/Northern Ireland, El Salvador and Guatemala. This outcome has special implications for Afghanistan given how Afghan women in the post-Taliban period have engendered active collaboration among women civil society groups.

Prior to the ongoing Intra-Afghan Negotiations, women in Afghanistan had been represented in peace talks between the government and various armed groups in different ways. For example, in 2010, the High Peace Council, comprised of nine women (out of a total of 70 members) including two on the Executive Board, created broader communication networks with women's groups, civil society, gender focal points and girl's schools around the country.¹⁰

Provincial peace councils and the Afghan Women's Network (AWN)—a network of over 125 organizations—have also served as consultation mechanisms to lead local peacebuilding efforts, raise public support for the process, and to broker deals for the reintegration of former combatants.¹¹ A recent example was in early 2019, where the AWN gathered opinions from a broader constituency in a document titled *Afghan Women Six Point Agenda for Moscow Peace Talks*, thereby bringing together women from urban and rural areas of Afghanistan as well as the diaspora.¹²

That said, in the journey up to 2019, gains made for women's rights had not translated into opportunities for women to participate in the peace

9. Krause, Jana. Krause, Werner, and Bränfors, Piia. "Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace." *Journal: International Interactions*, August 10, 2018. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386>
10. "Gender Brochure." High Peace Council of Afghanistan. http://hpc.org.af/english/images/Media/PdfFiles/HPC_Gender_Brochure_English.pdf

11. "Recommendations on Afghanistan's Reconciliation, Reintegration, and Transition Processes." The Institute of Inclusive Security & Afghan Women's Network. http://awn-af.net/editor/uploads/files/2090_recommendations_on_afghanistan_s_reconciliation_reintegration_and_transition_processes.pdf

12. "Afghan Women Six Point Agenda for Moscow Peace Talks." Afghan Women's Network, February 04, 2019. http://awn-af.net/index.php/cms/press_detail/1500/12

process.¹³ For example, in the 23 rounds of talks between 2005 and 2014, women were present at the table only two occasions:¹⁴ the 2010 talks in the Maldives (comprising 9% of the delegates),¹⁵ and the 2011-2012 talks in France (comprising 10% of the delegates).¹⁶ When officials from over 25 countries gathered for the Kabul Process in February 2018, an Afghan-led peace conference, women remained underrepresented.¹⁷ Given that a combination of different modes of participation is a positive factor for the quality of peace, inadequate representation of women in the formal peace process could undermine any effort to achieve sustainable peace in the Afghan context.

The exclusion of women in the peace processes has serious repercussions for women's rights in the post-conflict/settlement period. This risk is especially high in Afghanistan's case because women's rights are often at risk already. Shortcomings in women's inclusion, representation and meaningful participation in the peace process will therefore run the risk of reinforcing gender inequality and injustice. Including women at the negotiating table and during consultations beyond the formal talks is a necessary step towards lasting and legitimate peace in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

At present, efforts aimed at achieving peace in Afghanistan are largely dominated by men, but women have been making inroads in this regard. In fact, women's roles have been changing steadily, as underscored by their aspirations for greater participation in the public space and their growing visibility in a largely restrictive society. However, women's greater access

13. Chonghaile, Clár Ní. "Taliban peace talks a threat to women's rights in Afghanistan, Oxfam warns." *The Guardian*, November 24, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/nov/24/taliban-peace-talks-a-threat-to-womens-rights-in-afghanistan-oxfam-warns>

14. "Afghan women frozen out of peace talks, in danger of losing gains made since fall of the Taliban." Oxfam International, November 24, 2014. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/afghan-women-frozen-out-peace-talks-danger-losing-gains-made-fall-taliban>

15. "Afghan peace talks in a holidaymakers' paradise." *BBC News*, November 23, 2010. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11811285>

16. "Behind Closed Doors." Oxfam Briefing Paper, November 24, 2014. https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp200-behind-doors-afghan-women-rights-241114-en.pdf

17. "Afghan women frozen out of peace talks, in danger of losing gains made since fall of the Taliban." Oxfam International, November 24, 2014. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/afghan-women-frozen-out-peace-talks-danger-losing-gains-made-fall-taliban>

to decision-making roles within parliament has had a limited impact on gender equality. Informal norms still determine the outcome of formal processes, and it is largely men who control these processes. When women control them, they tend to be individual women with their own political ambitions, which generally overrides any concern to promote gender equality.

Policy Recommendations

- Ensure that women's rights are prioritised at future donor and Senior Officials Meetings on Afghanistan, including violence against women, women's participation in the police forces, and women's participation in all levels of peacebuilding efforts.
- Provide accessible long-term funding for Afghan civil society, especially those with proven experience and expertise on working for women's rights, agency, inclusion etc.
- While the inclusion of men is essential to any effort to address patriarchy and reshape norms, values, roles, and expectations, it is necessary to overcome the current constraints through the creative use of technology that enables women to engage more. Simple efforts, such as creating and fostering online and offline community groups to work in the peace-making and peacebuilding sphere may be effective as first steps. Such communities can be created through moderated groups on Facebook and other social media platforms; and via facilitated discussions on women in peace-making and peacebuilding in traditional and non-traditional spaces where women actively gather.
- Afghan media should project positive and encouraging images of credible women leaders, not only by developing profiles of women leaders in politics, business, and civil society but also by embodying their value in media programs, such as by increasing the role of women in serious political analysis programs.
- Active sourcing and presenting of women's perspectives in televised and other media-based discussions related to both violent extremism

and peace-making should be encouraged. Within this content development and engagement effort, it is important to factor in women who are caught on the violent extremist side or who live in areas restricted by violent extremist groups. The idea of creating formal and informal opportunities for women on the countering violent extremism side to engage with women associated with violent extremist actors could help enlarge this space. This effort could take the shape of non-media events involving women of public stature and activists engaging women who are in the violent extremist orbit.

- Women's empowerment activities must be actively pursued in rural areas. Civil society organizations must keenly engage with religious groups and thought leaders. Relatedly, the international community needs to understand that religious thought will continue to be a more important organizing and legitimizing principle for the people of Afghanistan than UN resolutions and declarations. Such engagement must move beyond lip service and quick fixes to more sustained engagement and dialogue with men generally as well as with religious and traditional leaders.
- As the space and need for countering violent extremism activism grows, attention should be paid to enhancing the visibility of leading activists in peacebuilding so as to inspire and invite imagination. Developing greater knowledge of comparative case studies in other countries, and highlighting inspirations from relevant situations where women have played influential and effective roles in steering communities away from extremism and toward peace, are essential for impact.
- It is essential to depolarize the flow of information and recognition of challenges and resolutions from the current urban versus rural setting to a more interactive engagement between the two spheres. This will require bridging the urban-rural gap and initiating engagement in urban settings for activists from rural areas while also encouraging urban activists to reach out directly to rural Afghanistan.