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DROPS

ORGANIZATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH
& DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Journal

WOMEN AND PUBLIC POLICY

ANALYSIS | REVIEW | RECOMMENDATIONS

Volume 7 • 2020-2022

Edited by

MARIAM SAFI & RAJESHWARI KRISHNAMURTHY

**CIVIL SOCIETY &
AFGHANISTAN'S
RECONSTRUCTION
(2001-2021):**

STRENGTHS & LIMITATIONS

Civil Society & Afghanistan's Reconstruction (2001-21): Strengths & Limitations

Edited by

Mariam Safi and Rajeshwari Krishnamurty



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DROPS WPPJ Vol. 7 • 2020–2022

Published in December 2023

Cover and back designed by OHSOBOHO India (www.ohsobohoindia.com)

Design by Vazha Publications

Address: Kabul, Karte 3, info@vazhapublication.com

JOURNAL

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Preface

On 8 March 2002, International Women’s Day was commemorated in the United Nations under the theme “Afghan Women Today: Realities and Opportunities” in recognition of the newfound hope after the first Taliban regime fell in 2001. Twenty-one years later, UN Women gathered with Afghan women leaders inside and outside of the country during the annual Commission on the Status of Women in New York. The progress and hopes of several generations of women have been dashed since the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban in 2021. The promises to Afghan women have not been kept. The international community’s commitment to gender equality faces an unprecedented test. Time will tell if the Member States of the United Nations will pass this test and uphold equality as a central tenet of the UN Charter.

The cascading edicts and decrees of the de facto authorities (DFA) put immense and unyielding pressure on women’s rights and their ability to survive. Forbidding movement, education, employment, access to health services and freedom expression are all designed to strip women and girls of their agency, dignity and aspirations.¹ And yet, we know that Afghanistan will only have a peaceful and prosperous future when the full energies and talents of women and girls in all their diversity are mobilized and supported.

The articles in this edition offer a snapshot of the breadth of Afghan women’s activism, thought leadership and scholarship. The analysis on thematic areas such as scouting, volunteerism, divorce, civil society, education and child labor show the depth of research, policy work and civil action undertaken by Afghan women in different sectors. These rigorous pieces are complemented by the personal narratives showing the impact of the multiple losses faced by girls, families and communities, as well as the collective loss faced by a nation that is being deprived of its leaders in all sectors from academia to sports to the military.

As a women, peace and security practitioner, I was particularly moved by the firsthand accounts of the peace process and intra-Afghan negotiations. Although

1. See UN Women Afghanistan. “Gender Alert No 4: Back to the 1990’s? Women’s rights under the Taliban.” 3 March 2023 https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/af-IWD2023_Gender-Alert-4-ss-020323.pdf

Afghanistan is perhaps the most extreme example, there are many accounts globally about how exclusive processes have failed to bring about enduring peace. Dr. Habiba Sarabi testified how women's voices were instrumentalized and ignored and how the underlying dynamics that caused this behavior contributed to the eventual outcome. Peace and equality are not distinct goals but rather intertwined objectives as both are underpinned by justice and freedom.

Member States, including the Security Council, neighboring countries, donors, and beyond, must redouble their efforts to reverse the current tragic trajectory of Afghanistan. Listening to women's voices and learning from their experience should be the first step taken by all decision-makers. I am so proud to engage with so many brilliant women from Afghanistan from many walks of life who refuse to give up their hopes and demands for a more peaceful and equal future. We in the international community must not and will not give up either.

Sarah Douglas

Deputy Chief, Peace and Security

UN Women

29 March 2023

Introduction

Nothing could have prepared Afghanistan's civil society for what transpired in the summer of 2021. Almost overnight, the whole landscape for civic spaces and civil society organizations (CSO) in Afghanistan was plunged into chaos as Kabul collapsed to the Taliban on 14 August 2021. A substantial community of civil society actors, human rights defenders, and members of the public were evacuated, and the young democracy they all worked so hard to build was replaced by an autocratic fascist theocracy.

A month prior to the fall, the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS) was busy, as it usually is at that time of the year, processing the second drafts of essays authored by Afghan women, including first-time writers, for the seventh volume of our flagship *Women and Public Policy Journal* (WPPJ). In retrospect, the theme of the seventh volume—'The Burgeoning of Civil Society Organizations in Afghanistan Post-2001: Achievements, Perils, and Promises'—seems ironic.

However, this was a theme we were keen to explore as we made a case for evidenced-based, and locally informed, policy actions that could address the mounting challenges we noticed stacking up against CSOs since the February 2020 US-Taliban deal, and the ensuing Intra-Afghan Negotiations (IAN) between the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and the Taliban. As a think-tank in Kabul, our activities were not limited to conducting research, surveys, and capacity-building programs. As co-founders of the Afghanistan Mechanism for Inclusive Peace (AMIP), established in 2020, DROPS also functioned as a bridge connecting the broader civil society to both negotiating parties in the IAN.

Through AMIP, our goal was to make the peace process and peace in Afghanistan significantly more inclusive by providing structured, impartial, and non-partisan forms of constructive interaction between the Afghan society at large and the negotiation table. In our engagements with CSOs through AMIP and the data we collected from all over the country through our BISHNAW initiative, we realized early on that the space for civil society voices was already shrinking. Local and international policymakers were viewing CSOs as more of an obstacle to peace

than facilitators of it. Moreover, targeted attacks on civil society actors, government interference in the CSOs' operations and activities, and the overall fatigue setting in among the diplomatic community in Kabul were all also making it increasingly difficult for CSOs to operate, leading to anxiety and frustration among civil society actors.

Here, it is worth noting that in times of turmoil, Afghanistan's CSOs have historically demonstrated resilience; and this continues to hold true. Many have continued to operate in complex environments, adapting to changing circumstances and innovatively finding ways to address the needs of the population.

CSOs in Kabul were acutely aware that civic spaces were shrinking and that decision-makers, both nationally and on the international stage were no longer listening to them. Nevertheless, they continued advocating for sustainable peace and those efforts, particularly those by women's rights defenders, made several important strides during this period.

However, no one had anticipated the complete collapse of the Islamic Republic or that the Taliban would seize control of the state as swiftly as they did. The Taliban takeover caused a paradigm shift in the landscape for civic spaces overnight, and brought significant implications with it for CSOs. These include restrictions on freedom of expression, impacting CSOs' ability to voice dissenting opinions or to advocate for human rights, particularly those of women and girls. CSOs focused on promoting gender equality in their activities were forced to shut down and many CSO staff and other activists had to leave the country or go into hiding.

Taliban edicts have also severely restricted women's rights and freedoms, banning women's education, employment, and mobility in all sectors except in healthcare, some gender-specific roles at security sector ministries (e.g., full body searches), and primary education. Even in these exempted areas, women's participation was implemented in an ad hoc manner, and made contingent on having a mahram ('eligible' close male relative chaperone) to escort them to and from their place of employment—something not all women have. Human rights challenges skyrocketed as freedom of speech, association, assembly, and the right to participate in public affairs—all of which are essential for civic engagement and CSOs—were banned.

Security risks also became a key concern for CSOs, particularly those that decided to continue their activities and advocacy underground. CSOs faced increased risks, including threats, intimidation, and violence, all of which individually and collectively impeded their ability to operate safely. Complicating matters further, aid and funding challenges also ensued as the international community reconsidered its support and funding for CSOs in Afghanistan due to sanctions and concerns about the Taliban's governance. All these issues combined to create severe impediments for CSOs. Against this backdrop, several CSOs were forced to cease operations, but not all. Some realigned their activities to focus on humanitarian delivery, an approach the Taliban commonly agreed with, while others kept their previous activities alive and carried them out quietly.

After August 2021, like many other organizations, DROPS too was forced to cease operations in Afghanistan. It had to contend with the rapidly changing political, economic, social, and security environment. We therefore reoriented our focus and prioritized digitizing all of our activities. By spring 2022, with operations established in Canada, DROPS recommenced its activities. This period, albeit immensely harrowing, also became an empowering phase in our organization's near-decade long history as we took stock of the changed reality in Afghanistan and transformed our approach in ways, we felt could continue contributing to building a just, pluralistic, and inclusive Afghan society.

The WPPJ is one such DROPS initiative which continues to partner with local female authors, building their critical thinking and research (methodology) skills, ensuring they have a platform to voice their concerns and solutions. Presenting a grounded and local lens, essays in every volume of the WPPJ explore key issues affecting the people of Afghanistan and offer concrete policy recommendations for (inter)national policymakers. Essays in this volume of the WPPJ explore the achievements of, and perils faced by, Afghanistan's civil society in areas including (but not limited to) promoting a culture of volunteerism, advancing women's inclusion in peace negotiations, ensuring women's access to education, and the legal dimensions of women's right to divorce.

Each essay critically examines CSO programs and their reception among beneficiaries, illustrating effective programs and identifying failed programs to derive lessons for the future. They also illuminate how acute challenges caused by corruption and lack of good governance, insecurity, and exclusionary models

of peace-building programs ultimately hindered the contextualization and sustainability of these initiatives over the last two decades. Taking the new landscape and challenges facing CSOs into consideration, each essay also offers concrete policy recommendations for the Taliban de facto authorities and the international community.

It is essential to note that the situation in the country is dynamic, and ongoing developments may further shape the impact of the Taliban takeover on CSOs in Afghanistan. Thus, it is essential to support CSOs based inside and/or outside the country as they reimagine, revitalize, and reengage themselves, to make the most of the knowledge and tools they built and honed over the last 20 years to meet the current needs of all the peoples of Afghanistan and bring about a transformation that could pave the way forward to a peaceful and pluralistic society.

The Taliban want to eradicate what was once a robust and active civil society, and erase its hard-earned achievements. This is what makes the 8th volume of the WPPJ and its thematic focus particularly relevant and timely. Perspectives and insights in these essays underscore why active consultations with Afghan think-tanks and CSOs are so crucial and why the continuation of locally grounded initiatives is vital.

Mariam Safi

Executive Director

Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies

March 2023

Editorial Comment

The WPPJ: An Outsider's Insider Perspective

By Rajeshwari Krishnamurthy¹

On one otherwise uneventful autumn evening in 2015, four friends from India, Austria, and the Netherlands gathered in a living room in New Delhi with their laptops and finite coffee. Three had volunteered to assist this author, who had been commissioned to edit an obscure new publication on short notice. In the 20 hours that followed, they verified, corrected, formatted, and (where necessary) transliterated over 500 references. Thus, by sheer happenstance, three individuals whose lives had no connection to Afghanistan, or to the Women Peace and Security agenda, had helped facilitate a crucial moment of an extraordinary journey that is now in its eighth year—the Women and Public Policy Journal (WPPJ).

Published annually by the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS), the WPPJ is a unique Afghan-led², Afghan-run initiative aimed at training and encouraging a wide spectrum of women across Afghanistan to conduct policy research and to enable their perspectives to inform policymaking in and on Afghanistan. It is Afghanistan's first—and till date, sole—peer-reviewed journal on Afghan public policy issues authored exclusively by Afghan women. To be sure, the WPPJ is one of several civil society initiatives that collectively formed the 'invisible' steel frame of Afghanistan's reconstruction between 2001 and 2021. Nonetheless, its journey offers lessons for current and future policymakers and civil society actors, a semi-personal account of which this comment presents.

1.Rajeshwari Krishnamurthy is Visiting Fellow (and former Deputy Director), Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies, New Delhi. She has edited the Women and Public Policy Journal since its inaugural volume.

2.The use of the term 'Afghan' is intended solely as a demonym.

A Contextual Overview

Each of the seven WPPJ volumes has featured analyses by women from a cross-section of Afghanistan's diverse society, ranging from seasoned experts and early-career professionals to novice researchers. Examples include serving members of parliament, mid to senior level officials, academics, (under)graduate students of social and/or natural sciences, grassroots activists, and private sector professionals. In many respects, each volume is a microcosm of diverse perspectives on its corresponding theme.

From the outset, WPPJ authors have tackled seemingly obvious yet deeply complex policy questions in their essays. In this volume for example, Palwasha Paiwandi's essay on women's divorce rights in Afghanistan is an excellent, easy-to-understand primer on one of the most complex, underdiscussed issues impacting gender equality and women's lived experience in the country. Approaching the issue from diverse vantage points, it deconstructs where the policy problem lies, its intersectional effects on women's lives, and ways to remedy the imbalance. By weaving discrete legal, sociological, and practical insights, it offers an actionably informative resource for experts and non-specialist stakeholders alike.

Fawzia Fazli's 2017 essay³ on legitimation aspects and structural elements of Afghanistan's peace process(es) is another example of strategic foresight, greater consideration of which could have helped reduce the inevitability of the events of August 2021. By critically examining the operative dynamics of peace negotiations, essential features of power-sharing arrangements, Afghanistan-specific variables, and comparisons with cases from other countries, it articulates how the (inter)national community could play a constructive role.

WPPJ authors contributed knowledge, and constructively applied competences refined in the process for other activities like higher education, policy related work, and advocacy. The team too gleaned crucial operational lessons every step of the way, adapting the process to better address the needs of its diverse authors and the contextual peculiarities that informed the entire experience. But back in 2015, this

3. Fazli, F. (2017). Peace Talks with the Taliban: Role of International Community. *Women and Public Policy Journal*, [online] 3, pp.25–39. Available at: <https://dropsafghanistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/WPPJ-3-Volume-.pdf>.

was easier said than done. The evolution of the WPPJ's operational practices thus offers transferable lessons in 'Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, Research, and Learning' for (inter)national humanitarian and development actions.

The Wppj Process: Evolution & Institutional Learning Curve

Structured training on policy research and writing for prospective authors was built into the process since its inception. However, the relatively ad hoc experience of Vol.1 underscored the need for a broader context-responsive strategy, especially to strengthen scientific temper and skill-development among authors, and for the long-term viability of the endeavor.

To illustrate, authors of Vol.1 had not been prescribed minimum or maximum essay lengths. Consequently, submitted essays ranged between 3000 and 9000 words in length, posing acute challenges during the editorial stage. Internal and external peer reviews had also been conducted as per best practices applied in conventional academic journals. However, the WPPJ is not merely a policy or academic journal. It is also a social innovation effort aimed at improving policymaking in and on Afghanistan by empowering Afghan women through research related skill-development.

This is an important distinction because conventional academic publications typically require prospective authors to possess demonstrable subject expertise and familiarity with research, analysis, and drafting practices. However, this journal's *raison d'être* is not merely to publish quality analyses. It is also intended to enable female researchers across Afghanistan—especially those with little or no prior experience and English language skills—to conduct critical inquiries and generate actionable insights for policymaking and implementation.

Thus, DROPS needed to ensure that every (novice) WPPJ author is equipped with the requisite competences. In practical terms, it called for more targeted training and guidance frameworks, simplified procedures, and sustained support throughout the process, including on fundamentals like development of research questions. In short, the context demanded an integrated research guidance and editorial framework that kicked in extremely early on.

Learning lessons is often easier than applying them, especially on an institutional level. Beyond values and commitment, the latter requires expectation management, clarity on the availability of resources, and an institution's honest assessment of its ability to sustain new operational changes. Taking cognizance of its strengths and limitations, DROPS applied what could be characterized as a 'continuous learning' principle, combined with a 'back to basics' approach. Procedural frameworks and editorial guidelines were updated and customized on a priority basis, for the authors as well as the team. Editorial and operational processes were also periodically revised to address the specific context of the Journal and those of its authors, building on lessons from current and preceding volumes.

Early-stage interventions were introduced to help authors develop stronger research questions, and to provide guidance on information gathering and critical examination of various perspectives (including their own). Matters like 'self-plagiarism' were included in training modules to appraise all (novice) authors on the significance of such details. Internal peer reviews, feedback cycles, and editing became multi-round processes, supplemented by additional need-based actions. Often, this entailed two or three-way translations across Dari/Persian, Pashto, and English due to language skill variations between (some) WPPJ authors and this author. Several of these calls had to be conducted on an ad hoc basis due to internet connectivity issues and/or other (logistical) dynamics that shaped the daily lives of authors based in various areas of the country and those of DROPS' staff themselves. For the team, another practical factor was that weekends in Afghanistan and those in many other countries do not correspond. This meant the WPPJ team had to remain flexibly available seven days a week, irrespective of where they were.

Over time, the process's long-term value addition for the authors became progressively apparent. For example, authors' ability to access and learn from senior experts received a boost. This is particularly relevant given how external peer reviews were conducted by seasoned scholars and practitioners both from Afghanistan and overseas. Authors' competences and individual achievements cannot be automatically credited to their WPPJ experience. Nevertheless, having been able to play a small part in their journeys and bearing witness to their growth has always been a privilege. For instance, some former authors went on to earn

research degrees from leading institutions like the University of Cambridge. Some entered public service at institutions like the election commission, ministries of defense and foreign affairs, and the office of the president. Many who already worked in the public sector when they authored their essays reported tangibly enhanced ability to deliver on their professional duties.

Outcomes & Lessons Learnt

In its fullness, the WPPJ process constitutes individual research supervision. This is not a typical feature of conventional journals but is essential for the WPPJ's context. The hands-on approach aided rigor, originality, and analytical depth of the essays, as well as actionability of policy recommendations.

In this regard, one of the most meaningful WPPJ outcomes is that of sustaining a research platform for those women who do not possess skills in non-native languages of Afghanistan like English, to express themselves. Policy-oriented perspectives of several such women from Afghanistan's diverse communities and regions were articulated in their own voices and made accessible to the (inter)national scholarly and policy communities. This is qualitatively different from the all-too-common experience wherein shortcomings in language skills double as barriers to inclusion, resulting in skewed insights and ill-suited policies.

Though modest in terms of scale, it nonetheless contributed towards making Afghanistan's indigenous knowledge base on governance more nuanced and representative. The diversity within the views of women from different walks of life called into question assumptions of homogeneity in women's perspectives. Their analyses also chipped away at echo-chamber effects and the disproportionately high weightage given by the policy community to Western experts, Afghanistan's urban elite, and/or diaspora. This is also a case in point for how access and context-responsive action is crucial for achieving genuine inclusion and parity, particularly in complex, multi-cultural contexts like Afghanistan.

Indeed, some of the most incisive analyses published in the WPPJ were authored by women with limited or no English language skills. For the WPPJ team, this further clarified the task: finding efficient methods to help women overcome structural barriers to have their voices heard. The 'continuous improvement' approach proved crucial in this regard. This was reinforced by the DROPS' founding logic, which

views women's agency, national knowledge ecosystem, and public interest governance in Afghanistan as the interconnected aspects they are. It helped set realistic goals, build operational agility, and undertake context-responsive actions for empowering women 'to become agents of the change they seek'.

Looking Back To Look Forward

Thus far, the WPPJ has featured a little over 70 authors. In terms of sheer numbers, its impact is not comparable to the monumental gains that were made in the broader domain of girls' education in Afghanistan. But the significance of the WPPJ's contributions lies not necessarily in the scale of its impact but in the details. The Journal is one of the many contributions of Afghanistan's civil society towards the country's reconstruction between 2001 and 2021, many of which are often obscured or overlooked. Its journey is one of several compelling examples of why sustained, context-responsive and locally grounded actions are indispensable for good governance and sustainable development cooperation. It has offered as much learning (if not more) for the team as the knowledge and skills the team was able to impart.

For many, WPPJ essays were their first ever experience with policy and/or academic research. Nevertheless, they consistently punched above their weight be it in the questions they investigated or the quality of their analyses. Their perspectives exemplify nuanced visions for their own futures and that of their country. Outcomes like these that were reinforced by steadfast capacity-building and nourishing of intellectual spaces are among the primary casualties of the international withdrawal from Afghanistan and the shambolic talks with the Taliban that ultimately led to the current crisis. Beyond core rationales like gender equality and consultative stakeholderism, the importance of actively soliciting and considering perspectives of women from all walks of life is evidenced in WPPJ authors' insights and policy recommendations, all of which stand vindicated by the events of 15 August 2021 and its aftermath. By not placing adequate emphasis on context-responsiveness in policies and actions, a hard-earned opportunity for improved prospects was systematically bungled. Afghanistan's future—especially those of women—has been shunted to a limbo, transformation out of which would likely prove as complex as its urgency.

Nearly 40 million people, including an entire generation that was raised with the immeasurable cost of lives and labor, were summarily abandoned when the moment of reckoning came. Certified terrorists who prioritize violence, discrimination, and subjugation were afforded unprecedented concessions whereas grassroots civilians' perspectives were met with platitudes. 15 August 2021 did not just mark the collapse of a government or the return of a paradigm the world committed never to let happen again, 20 years ago. Thousands of youths, especially women, have been abruptly disenfranchised from their chosen futures. Many have been unable to complete their education and/or forcibly displaced. Safety concerns have compelled many others to resort to self-censorship. Intensified economic and socio-cultural pressures have rendered several people, especially women and everyone from minority communities, extremely vulnerable to grave harms. Even when the current situation does get resolved, it would still not make up for the precious years and prospects women in Afghanistan lose in the intervening period.

This is merely a snapshot of the magnitude of setback to which women in Afghanistan, the civil society, and the public at large have been subjected. And yet, despite grave risks and unprecedented disruptions imposed by the events of 15 August 2021, authors of the WPPJ's seventh volume have demonstrated exemplary commitment, determined to ensure their perspectives get due consideration. On an institutional level, DROPS' staff and well-wishers were also displaced as a direct consequence of the Taliban takeover and the Organization was forced to relocate operations overnight. Even so, DROPS' staff, including those who were eventually evacuated to temporary camps, pressed on with their work, coordinating across multiple time zones despite being steeped in uncertainty regarding their futures. These are some of the facts that make Vol.7 particularly special.

Afghanistan's post-2001 reconstruction was a formidable undertaking by the people of the country, in partnership with the world. To this author, that evening of autumn 2015 thus represents not just a human-interest anecdote but also a small reminder of how Afghanistan's civil society creatively navigated various pulls and pressures to empower women and rebuild the country. It takes a village to raise a child. But it takes much more than a village and a lifetime to rebuild social fabric and knowledge capital in a country that has experienced unrelenting conflict for nearly five decades.

Afghan Women's Right to Divorce: Legal Dimensions, CSO Support and Lived Experiences

By Palwasha Paiwandi¹

In Afghanistan, some of the main challenges obstructing advancements in women's rights and associated lived experiences include the prevalence of inequal conditions for women, and low levels of awareness among women regarding their rights and relevant national institutions. One of these rights is the right to divorce. In this aspect of personal life, a tremendous power disparity exists between men and women in the country. Beyond inequal legal provisions, prevailing cultural practices too have prevented women from exercising even those rights and protections that are guaranteed to them under Islamic law.

This essay attempts to illuminate the situation by taking a three-pronged approach. First, it examines legal provisions governing women's rights *vis-a-vis* divorce in Islamic law, and in Afghanistan's Civil Code that was in force from 2004 to 2021 (hereinafter, 'Civil Code'). Second, it contextualizes the role played by civil society organizations (CSO) in Balkh province towards enabling women's access to their rights in relation to divorce. Third, to illustrate the interplay among these factors, it summarizes experiences of women in Balkh province who sought divorce. To do so, this essay draws on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected between December 2020 and July 2021 through a combination of desk research and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with six CSOs. Similar interviews were also conducted with five women

1. Palwasha Paiwandi is a legal advisor specializing in gender justice programming and has substantive professional experience in supporting female victims of violence in Balkh province.

from Balkh province, two² of whose experiences are highlighted in this essay. Secondary data includes news reports and extant research on the subject

Overview

Both Islamic legal provisions and Afghanistan's Civil Code feature certain rights and protections for women *vis-à-vis* marriage and divorce. However, under both frameworks, only men enjoy the right to directly initiate divorce proceedings. Neither framework entitles women to an identical right. Women are only entitled to initiate divorce proceedings through two indirect procedures, albeit both *can* ultimately result in a divorce. Moreover, awareness of relevant laws and institutions remains low among women across the country, as does the availability of relevant support and women's access to it. These factors directly impact Afghan women's ability to exercise their rights. This is compounded by certain entrenched cultural mores, which too inhibit their agency to exercise their rights.

Nevertheless, between 2004 and 2021, institutions were established within and outside Afghanistan's state apparatus to help Afghan women access relevant support when facing divorce proceedings initiated by their husbands, and when they themselves sought to divorce their husbands. During this period, CSOs played an important role in enabling women's access to their rights *vis-à-vis* divorce and in raising awareness among women. However, CSOs also operated under considerable practical constraints, and women's state-of-affairs saw little improvement.

Women's Rights in Relation to Divorce in Islam

Islamic law features a degree of complementarity in the rights and duties prescribed for men and women *vis-à-vis* divorce. Divorce is censured in the Hadith and Islam considers divorce to be abhorrent and reprehensible, but nonetheless tolerates it under specific conditions.³ Inter alia, Imam Sadiq, a well-known 8th Century Islamic scholar also articulated processes,

2. To meet the prescribed length of the essay.

3. Surah Nisa', 4:20-21

rationales, considerations relevant to divorce.⁴ In the contemporary era, several Islamic countries, including (but not limited to) Bahrain, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Saudi Arabia have contended that Islam provides for equality between men and women.⁵

Broadly, Islamic law prescribes three approaches for divorce: *Talaaq* (divorce), ‘*Tafreeq*’⁶ (‘separation’ under four types of circumstances), and *Khol* (divorce in exchange for property). *Talaaq* is a direct divorce proceeding and can only be initiated by the husband. ‘*Tafreeq*’ and *Khol* are indirectly initiated proceedings leading to a divorce and can only be initiated by the wife. Given how provisions governing divorce in Afghanistan’s Civil Code are based considerably on Islamic law, ‘*Tafreeq*’ and *Khol* are the only options it offers for women in Afghanistan to initiate and attain divorce. The only exception is if the husband *delegates* ‘divorce power’ to his wife as prescribed in Articles 142 and 143 of the Civil Code. That said, ‘*Tafreeq*’ is applicable only in four specific circumstances, thereby limiting women’s ability to exercise this option. Conversely, *Khol* is applicable in a broader set of circumstances, making it a relatively more practical option for Afghan women seeking divorce; but it involves financial implications for women.

For instance, the ‘*Tafreeq*’ route can only be used when a deficiency arising from the husband prevents the wife from enjoying a normal life. The four categories of deficiencies are: defect (e.g., severe medical issues); harm (caused by the husband); non-payment of *Mehr* (somewhat akin to a dower);⁷ and prolonged absence of the husband (including prolonged

4. Surah Nisa’, 4:35

5. Anwar, Z., Rumminger, J. and Moussa, J. (2011). CEDAW and Muslim Family Laws: In Search of Common Ground. [online] Musawah, p.13. Available at: https://www.musawah.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/CEDAW-MuslimFamilyLaws_En.pdf

6. In this essay, ‘*Tafreeq*’ (with single quotes) is used as a catch-all term to denote all separation proceedings leading to a divorce that women are entitled to initiate based on four categories of shortcomings on their husband’s part. Afghanistan’s Civil Code (2004-2021) categorizes all four forms under ‘Separation’.

7. *Mehr* is an integral and mandatory component of an Islamic marriage contract. Specifically, it is money and/or assets that the groom commits to transferring to the bride and is thus an important instrument of financial security for married women. The precise sum/asset is mutually agreed upon by both sides prior to the marriage ceremony and is recorded as part of the Islamic marriage contract during the marriage ceremony. A wife is entitled to demand (and receive) from her husband the *Mehr* promised to her, at the marriage ceremony, and/or at any point during the marriage, and/or at the time of divorce, and/or as a basis to seek divorce. A ‘dower’ is perhaps the closest, well-known concept in non-Islamic contexts, if not an exact comparison.

prison term). Only the wife can initiate *‘Tafreeq’* proceedings, and a court that adjudicates whether the conditions for *‘Tafreeq’* have been met and whether to grant divorce. Under *‘Tafreeq’*, the wife is entitled to receiving the *Mehr* promised to her in the marriage contract.

Unlike *‘Tafreeq’*, the *Khol* option allows the wife to seek divorce for any reason, including where there is no deficiency arising from her husband. Crucially though, *Khol* only allows divorce in exchange for property and/or by forgoing and/or returning the *Mehr* promised and/or given to her. This makes financial implications a key decision-making factor for women seeking divorce under this option. Procedurally, *Khol* involves the wife ‘requesting’ her husband for a divorce and can be settled mutually. Only if the husband refuses to comply with the wife’s request does a court become involved, at which point, it becomes a divorce proceeding.

It is not feasible for all women to meet the financial implications that *Khol* involves. However, compared to *‘Tafreeq’*, the wider scope of *Khol’s* applicability makes it a relatively more practical option for Afghan women. Nonetheless, even though both Islamic law and Afghanistan’s Civil Code provide women the option of *Khol*, local mores in Afghanistan prevent women from exercising this option on a practical level. Since August 2021, similar Taliban-prescribed practices have entrenched these obstacles further.

Laws Governing Divorce in Afghanistan (2004–2021)

From 2004 to 2021, Chapter 2 of Afghanistan’s Civil Code provided the legal framework governing marriage, divorce, and their effects.⁸ On divorce, it covered rights and obligations for both spouses under four categories: Annulment/Recission (*Faskh*); Divorce (*Talaaq*); Divorce in Exchange for Property (*Khol*); and Separation (*‘Tafreeq’*) involving four sub-categories. Article 135(2) states that ‘divorce shall be declared, according to provisions of this law, by the husband or by a competent court upon the wife’s demand’. Article 142 entitles the husband to divorce his wife through a legal agent and to ‘delegate’ the power to divorce, to the wife

8. Civil Law of the Republic of Afghanistan, Official Gazette No. 353. (1977). Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a6f2bce4.html>.

herself. If the husband delegates 'divorce power' to his wife, Article 143 disallows him from revoking it after the wife accepts said delegated power.

A vast portion of Afghanistan's Civil Code is based on the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence. On the matter of women's rights vis-a-vis divorce, this iteration of the country's civil code did not deviate much from previous version that was in force before 1996 (i.e., before the first Taliban regime began). By and large, provisions of Afghanistan's Civil Code (2004–2021) reflected Islamic legal prescriptions regarding women's rights vis-a-vis divorce. For example, in both legal frameworks, marital regimes do not involve the 'community of property' principle, i.e., both spouses' assets remain separate throughout their marriage and upon divorce. Thus, under the Civil Code, the wife's assets were not automatically subject to division in the event of a divorce,⁹ irrespective of when they were acquired. For women, financial liability arises when they opt for *Khol*. For men, financial liabilities arise both during the marriage and upon divorce. For instance, they are obligated to pay Mehr during the marriage. They are also obligated to pay Mehr and alimony in an event of divorce (*Talaaq* and '*Tafreeq*' routes only).

However, only men enjoyed the right to directly initiate divorce (*Talaaq*) proceedings, whereas women had to jump through various hoops before getting a divorce. The very fact that men had an option to *delegate* 'divorce power' to their wife illustrates the structural gender inequality in divorce rights. If defect or harm are a woman's rationale for seeking divorce, '*Tafreeq*' places the onus on the woman to prove defect or harm and its effect on her life. Moreover, because the Civil Code (2004–2021) did not define 'harm', its interpretation remained at the mercy of judges, most of whom were male. In *Khol*, women are expected to pay for their release from the marriage, making it not only discriminatory but also a potent deterrent for women, many of whom find it simply unaffordable. Additionally, when women do manage to get a divorce, they lose many rights, including custody of their children.¹⁰ For instance, upon divorce, the custody of children transfers completely to their father when girl children turn nine, and boys, seven.

9. Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:229; and Surah Nisa', 4:20.

10. Articles 236–255, Civil Code

Though Afghanistan's Civil Code has its sources in Islamic law, customary law influenced its enforcement, particularly on family law matters.¹¹ This in turn resulted in a reduction in women's rights pertaining to marriage and divorce that they are otherwise entitled to under Islamic law. Between 2004 and 2021, this was the case even though Article 54 of the 2004 constitution categorically instructs the state to adopt measures for family life and well-being (especially those of women), to eliminate traditions contrary to Islam. Compounding these barriers is the fact that women who run away to escape problematic marriages are often arrested, convicted, and incarcerated on arbitrary charges like 'intent to commit' so-called 'moral crimes'.¹²

Thus, men's rights *vis-à-vis* divorce have remained much stronger than those of women even in the post-2001 period. Hamstrung by both structural and societal factors, several women seeking divorce have unwillingly remained in toxic, abusive marriages, even at the risk of violence or other problems.

CSOs & Women's Access to Divorce Rights: A Case Study of Balkh Province

In Balkh province — like in all other provinces — key challenges faced by women seeking divorce include familial barriers, traditional mores, structural and legal gaps, corruption, and low levels of literacy and awareness among women regarding their rights. Moreover, on a societal level, women seeking to exercise their right to divorce is considered shameful. Individually and/or collectively, these factors prevent women from exercising their divorce rights.

For women as well as the CSOs helping women, challenges to effective interventions also include persistent insecurity, interference by local powers (social or other forms), corruption, and low levels of public awareness

11. Family Structures and Family Law in Afghanistan: A Report of the Fact-Finding Mission to Afghanistan January – March 2005. (2006). [online] Max Planck Institute for Foreign Private Law and Private International Law, pp.8–10. Available at: https://www.mpipriv.de/1187092/mpi-report_on_family_structures_and_family_law_in_afghanistan.pdf. Also see: Wimpelmann, T. (2013). The Price of Protection: Gender, Violence and Power in Afghanistan. [PhD Thesis] Available at: https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/16802/1/Wimpelmann_3513.pdf.

12. UNAMA (2012). Still a Long Way to Go: Implementation of the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women in Afghanistan. [online] Available at: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/evaw_still_a_long_way_to_go_11dec12_final.pdf.

about women's rights. Particularly, insecurity and interference by local powers have created severe barriers to availability of legal aid and services for women. Women seeking divorce are often at risk of retributive violence (including death) at the hands of their matrimonial and maternal families.¹³ These circumstances have only worsened since 15 August 2021.

The numbers of CSOs in Balkh province who were helping women exercise their right to divorce were never high, even between 2001 and 2021. However, until August 2021, there were at least some CSOs that provided such crucial support. These included Women for Afghan Women (WAW), Developing and Educational Organization for Women (DEOW), the Afghanistan Independent Bar Association (AIBA), Afghan Women's Network (AWN), and Medica Afghanistan, to name a few. The nature of their services, reach, and success rates varied, depending on the size of the organization, type and sustainability of their funding models, and availability of technical and legal experts. Cognate factors included (but were not limited to) predominant socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions in the (sub)regions in which they operated, and as they related to the specific cases of women who sought their help.

To empower women, CSOs working on this issue carried out various activities such as provision of legal aid, capacity-building, advocacy, awareness generation, and gender mainstreaming. Until August 2021, Balkh province also had some support centers for women. Several CSOs operating in the province also offered legal aid and other forms of support free of charge. Surveys conducted as part of this study revealed that most CSOs that provided legal aid for women in Balkh province had female lawyers and legal advisors; some even had all-female legal advisor teams. By 2021, numbers of women in urban areas seeking divorce were comparatively higher than those in rural areas, including in Balkh

13. UNAMA/OHCHR (2010). Harmful Traditional Practices and Implementation of the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women in Afghanistan. [online] Available at: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/harmful_traditional_practices_english.pdf. Also see: UNAMA/OHCHR (2011). A Long Way to Go: Implementation of the Elimination of Violence against Women Law in Afghanistan. [online] Available at: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/november_23_unama-ohchr-joint-report-on-implementation-of-evaw-law_eng_1.pdf. Also see: UNAMA (2012). Still a Long Way to Go: Implementation of the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women in Afghanistan. [online] Available at: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/evaw_still_a_long_way_to_go_11dec12_final.pdf.

province.¹⁴ However, funding shortages placed severe limitations on many CSOs' ability to support women in need. The security situation also caused immense operational obstacles as it posed risks for women seeking assistance and for female CSO personnel (including legal advisors) helping them. Prevalent socio-cultural outlooks and practices have an equally deleterious effect.

Due to insecurity arising from various other forms of violence including terrorism, most women in Balkh also find it extremely difficult and risky to trust organizations that offer support for women. There is also no guarantee of protection for women's lives once they are divorced. Ultimately, most women who need help end up enduring hardships inflicted upon them by their matrimonial and/or maternal families, including physical and verbal abuse, and death. These effects can be gleaned from women's lived experiences summarized below.

Balkh Province: Lived Experiences of Two Women Who Sought Divorce

As part of research conducted for the essay, five women from Balkh province who sought divorce were interviewed. Two of their experiences are summarized below.¹⁵ Incidentally, both interviewees had sought assistance from CSOs, but the latter did not (and/or could not) oblige, citing capacity constraints.

Experience A

Not all institutions — including the Ministry of Women's Affairs — cooperated with her, even though she had overcome various familial and societal barriers to approach the courts and the Ministry. She was often told to put up with her circumstances and advised to do her husband's bidding. For example, when she approached the Ministry's office in Balkh province, she was given superficial advice and told to endure her situation. Instead of providing help, officials also blamed her for her circumstances. They also

14. Habib, M. (2015). Divorce Rights Still Elusive for Afghan Women. Institute for War and Peace Reporting. [online]

15 Sep. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/55fbc1a14.html>. Also see: Saber, S. (2009). Divorce Rate Spirals in Herat. Institute for War & Peace Reporting. [online] 18 Jun. Available at: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/divorce-rate-spirals-herat>.

15. To ensure the interviewees' safety, this essay only identifies them as 'Experience A' and 'Experience B'.

tried to dissuade her from divorcing her husband but did not consider how her life would be affected if she did not get a divorce. In her experience, various women's rights defenders and women's organizations too did not help her in the divorce process. "Every time I told them about this, they told me that the court is a supreme authority, and that they cannot provide help or cooperate in this regard," she said.

Experience B

Due to her husband's physical and verbal abuse, and narrowmindedness, she first sought help and support from her maternal family but did not get it. She ended up having to return to her matrimonial home due to prevailing customs in Balkh province. Upon her return, she faced another spate of violence. She did not trust the courts and felt the courts were unlikely to do justice to her because most employees at the courts were men, and she felt they were likely to support her husband. She was also concerned that she would end up losing her life in retributive violence. But she was determined to protect her children, and so she persisted. Eventually, she managed to liberate herself and her children by fleeing the country with them.

Conclusion

By considering women's rights *vis-a-vis* divorce under Islamic law and Afghanistan's Civil Code, and by examining its practical dimensions in Afghanistan, this essay shows that:

- a. Customary law and traditional mores severely obstruct Afghan women from exercising even those rights that they are entitled to under Islamic law.
- b. CSOs working to support women in Balkh province were able to generate awareness and provide legal support but only to a limited extent.
- c. State institutions were grievously deficient, influenced in no small part by the mindsets of personnel who held public offices.
- d. In terms of ensuring the safety of women seeking divorce and a safe environment throughout the process, there was a glaring lack

of sustainable solutions for all organizations to collaborate and act effectively, even before August 2021.

After 15 August 2021, under Taliban rule, a combination of Islamic jurisprudence and local Afghan traditions have governed the divorce related aspect of private life, with the latter taking precedence. Taliban rule has resulted in additional reductions to women's rights *vis-a-vis* divorce due to the group's discriminatory outlook towards women and their selective interpretation of Islamic law. This is compounded by the predominantly ethnic-Pashtun group's prioritization of customary law and practices found in Pashtun social codes, in an ethnically and culturally diverse country. Combined with the suspension of relevant national institutions and the impact on CSOs' operational capacity arising from the Taliban takeover and withdrawal of the international community, Afghan women's access to divorce rights and the support to which they previously had access, have become further limited.

Policy Recommendations

- The *de facto* authorities must respect and uphold Islamic legal provisions governing women's rights, including in relation to divorce. At present, councils established by the de facto authorities do not feature any women. This is discriminatory as well as counterproductive for governance. The de facto authorities must make their councils inclusive by including women from all ethnic groups. This is crucial for ensuring that the judiciary and other institutions of governance uphold and improve women's individual and other rights, including their rights *vis-a-vis* divorce.
- At present, lack of access to the justice system is a serious concern among Afghan women. In their engagements, the United Nations (UN) Assistance Mission in Afghanistan must apply pressure on the de facto authorities to reinstate and prioritize women's rights. The UN's mandate does not permit it to unilaterally create national justice sector institutions but various national and international CSOs are working on reinstating institutions that already existed before August 2021. These efforts should be supported and sustained.

- The international community must support domestic CSOs in carrying out sustained, country-wide awareness campaigns to educate the masses on the rights guaranteed to women under Islamic law. Doing so is crucial for women to be able to make informed decisions. Such campaigns are equally essential for generating awareness among men to ensure that they do not obstruct women from exercising the rights to which they are entitled under Islamic law.

The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Promoting a Culture of Volunteerism in Kabul

By Fariba Nazari¹

In the last two decades of the Afghan republic, civil society organizations (CSO) extensively promoted social and political volunteerism. However, analysis on the effectiveness of CSOs' efforts to promote a culture of volunteerism among Afghan youth is not yet comprehensive. This essay attempts reduce this gap by examining whether their efforts proved effective in promoting a culture of volunteerism among youth in Kabul.

To that end, this study relies on both quantitative and qualitative data gathered through an online survey, and in-depth interviews with five CSOs based or headquartered in Kabul. The virtual survey was conducted in April 2021. 62 respondents featuring a 50:50 ratio of males and females participated through digital and social media platforms (mainly e-mail and Facebook). The average age of the respondents was 25; the youngest was 19, and the oldest was 32. A majority of the respondents were university students, most of whom were based in Kabul. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted primarily in April and May 2021. Interviewed organizations were led by young volunteers, including university students and/or recent high school graduates.

VOLUNTEERISM & AFGHANISTAN

Volunteer work can be understood as the independent and measured will of an individual to help individuals and the community or to get involved in an activity for the general good of a community.² Thus, volunteerism

1. Fariba Nazari holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in International Relations from the American University of Central Asia and the OSCE Academy respectively.

2. Omoto, A.M., Snyder, M. and Hackett, J.D. (2010). Personality and Motivational Antecedents of Activism and Civic Engagement. *Journal of Personality*, 78(6), pp.1703–1734.

can have social, political, and/or religious motivations.³ It encompasses various types of engagements of social, political, and/or religious nature, driven by a range of values, and implemented by civil society groups.⁴ Omoto, Snyder and Hackett (2010) articulate volunteerism as featuring six⁵ characteristics:

- Being voluntary and based on free will
- Providing service for a cause or to others
- Having specific time and interest to help others
- No expectation of reward or punishment
- Help provided is sought by the recipients
- Involvement of agencies and organizations

Relying on this framework, one can trace examples of political, social, and religious voluntary activities in Afghanistan's context. As for political volunteer work, there are several examples of youth political activities within political parties in the post-2001 period. One prominent example is 'Afghanistan 1400', a new, youth-founded political-civil movement that emerged in 2012. Social volunteerism, however, is an integral part of Afghanistan's society and culture. Historically, local *shuras* (councils) have played a leading role in facilitating solutions for community needs on various issues like education, poverty, and community dispute resolution, thereby demonstrating voluntary commitment toward social development. Other instances of volunteerism can be seen in activities like building schools and mosques. These are also examples of *hashar* — which is a traditional Afghan concept entailing voluntary collective effort by the community to maintain community services and infrastructure.⁶ Voluntary work based on religious motivations comprise another type of voluntary activism in Afghanistan. For example, provision of voluntary services during Muharram and the Islamic holy month of Ramadan are highly common and widespread.

3. Ibid.

4. Panwar, A. (2013). An Introduction to Civil Society. *International Journal of Engineering and Management Research*, [online] 3(5), pp.112–113. Available at: [https://www.ijemr.net/DOC/AnIntroductionToCivilSociety\(112-113\).pdf](https://www.ijemr.net/DOC/AnIntroductionToCivilSociety(112-113).pdf).

5. Snyder, M. and Omoto, A.M. (2008). Volunteerism: Social Issues Perspectives and Social Policy Implications. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 2(1), pp.1–36.

6. Ahmad Hewad, R. (2020). 'The importance and significance of voluntary activities in Afghanistan'. *Afghan News*. [online] 15 Apr. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3mkrArm>.

Promoting a Culture of Volunteerism Among Youth in Kabul: The Role of Five CSOs

To assess CSOs' contributions and impact in promoting a culture of volunteerism among youth in Kabul, this section profiles five CSOs in Kabul and examines them on the following aspects: years of operations; motivation(s) for establishment; fields of activity; numbers of volunteers/members; modes of volunteerism; primary beneficiaries; and sustainability.

	Organization & Founding Year	Motivation for Establishment	Area of Activity	Primary Beneficiaries	Volunteers/ Members
1	The Rahila Foundation. 2018	In memory of Ms. Rahila Rafi, who was killed in a terrorist attack in Kabul.	Library resources and spaces, capacity-building programs, scholarships, and consultancy.	Youth, and university students	20 volunteers
2	Afghanistan's New Generation Organization. 2010	To empower Afghan youth.	Civic engagement and advocacy, citizen journalism, social inclusion, and capacity-building.	Youth, and university students	170-250 volunteers
3	Afghanistan Youths Social and Educational Organization. 2012	To support educational programs for youth.	Democracy and human rights.	Youth	100 volunteers (approximate)

4	Influential Women and Youths Green Home. 2017	To provide a safe space for youth and women to foster sustainable societies through holistic approaches.	Sustainable development through environment conservation, respect for diversity, women's economic independence, and prevention of discrimination.	Women, youth, and university students	2000 members
5	ArtLords. 2014	To facilitate social transformation and behavioral change.	Arts and culture, and voluntary work.	Society, and artists	50-60 volunteers, depending on the program. Active in 27 Afghan provinces

Opportunities: Commonalities in Interest and Motivations

Motivations that spurred the establishment of these five CSOs are diverse. Nevertheless, these CSOs have developed and supported the community as their common goal, regardless of the factors that gave cause for their founding.

The Rahila Foundation (TRF) came into existence following a heinous terrorist attack in Kabul that killed 48 high-school students, including Ms. Rahila Rafi. Her family and friends decided to use funds reserved for her funeral ceremony to build a library instead. Initially, TRF's objective was to serve the community by providing educational resources and a safe space for visitors who were predominantly students. Community support and donations soon stimulated an expansion in its activities. Up until the Taliban seized power in August 2021, TRF served as a library, a 'mini-land' of education, and opportunity (such as scholarships), thus building capacity and providing resources and support to disadvantaged students.

The Afghanistan's New Generation Organization (ANGO) also stated that it sought to help Afghan youth because they constitute a majority of the country's population. The ANGO was founded by a group of young adults to serve the youth and the broader community. The ANGO pursued its aims through diverse activities. This included citizen journalism, to help Afghanistan's youth better express themselves through media and communication tools and skills. The ANGO's civic engagement activities include community programs, capacity-building, and social inclusion work where it strengthened social harmony. It began as a Kabul-based non-government organization (NGO) in 2010, and steadily expanded its activities to several provinces, featuring a network of over 250 volunteers between 18–25 years of age at the last count.

The Influential Women and Youths Green Home (IWYGHO) — also known as Khane Sabz (Green Home) — had three focus areas, organized institutionally under its Social and Cultural, Economic, and Environment departments. According to the IWYGHO's founder, Khane Sabz was founded to provide a space with a friendly and intimate environment for women and youth to exchange views and ideas. Similarly, the founder of the Afghanistan Youths Social and Educational Organization (AYSEO) stated that the Organization was committed to developing capacity-building programs for youth. The AYSEO was founded in 2012 and has since conducted numerous educational programs, including workshops and trainings on civil society, public speaking, debating, civic engagement, leadership, and other skills. It also led a debate club that prepared young debaters for national and international competitions.

ArtLords is another well-known CSO whose stated goal is to foster social and cultural change by “employing the soft power of art and culture as a non-intrusive approach.”⁷ A product of part-time commitment of its three founders, ArtLords's goal is to illustrate untold stories through art, colors, and creativity, to give a fresh and positive image to things that normally lack it. In doing so, ArtLords “has been involved in some important messaging through their work on various aspects of society including fighting corruption, environment, and vaccine and social distancing,” to

7. ArtLords. (n.d.). Who We Are. [online] Available at: <https://artlords.co/about>.

name a few.⁸ Unlike other CSOs, ArtLords has seven offices across the country, and official representations in 27 provinces. Their works have given a new face to capital.

All five CSOs discussed above were established to help Afghanistan's youth. Some, like the TRF, were founded following tragic incidents, but are nonetheless committed to bringing positive change and transforming the lives of Afghan youth. Founding members of most of these CSOs have substantial experience and a background in voluntary work. Another common thread that connects these CSOs is that most of their members are either high school graduates or in the early years of tertiary education. These organizations have helped youth find their career paths and to gain first-hand practical experience. This resonates with the findings of the survey of youth in Kabul, in which 91% of the respondents said they have voluntary work experience and that they had served in different capacities (see Figure 1).

CSOs & Volunteerism in Afghanistan

Though respondents of both the survey and the interviews agreed that CSOs have played a considerable role in promoting the culture of volunteerism in Afghan society, neither category of respondents believed CSOs' efforts have produced substantial impact. Only 36% of the respondents believed that CSOs have been able to effectively promote volunteerism, and 13% believed otherwise (see Figure 2). Interestingly, over 50% of the survey respondents were undecided in their views. However, this could represent a variety of factors, including the possibility that those respondents had not yet seen or even heard of proper promotion of volunteer work.

8. ArtLords. (2021). Interviewed by Fariba Nazari. 8 Feb, Kabul.

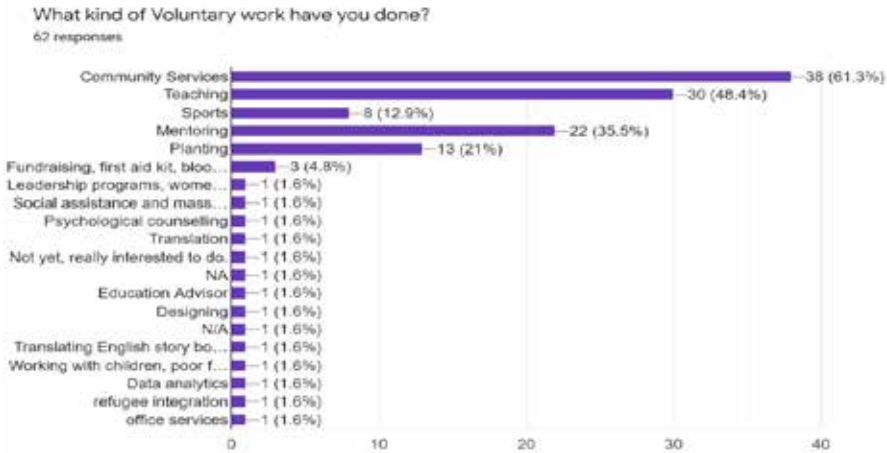


Figure 1: Nature of volunteering experience

On the other hand, one of the activists interviewed for this study contended that four decades of war has destroyed everything, including the “social fabric,”⁹ which includes a sense of social responsibility. In that sense, it is possible to consider that it takes time to rebuild those affected layers of active civic engagement by the citizens. However, voluntary involvement in political movements and parties, as well as in religious activities is vibrant in Kabul. Major political parties like the Jamiat-e-Islami party and Hezb-e Wahdat party have youth wings, and most political parties claim youth support for their cause.

The concept of interdependence¹⁰ as human nature could be considered as one of the factors driving such movements. Similarly, people step up to contribute in the aftermath of catastrophes like natural disasters. For example, the August 2020 floods in Parwan province caused immense loss of lives and property. In response, residents of neighboring villages and people from across Afghanistan offered help. These are occasional instances during which individuals’ motivations for volunteering include pleasing God to achieve inner peace and/or salvation on account of good

9. Anonymous (civil society activist). (2021). Interviewed by Fariba Nazari. 14 Mar, Kabul.

10. Procter, I. (1980). Voluntarism and Structural-Functionalism in Parsons’ Early Work. *Human Studies*, 3(4), p.333.

deeds. In both cases, the idea of civil society movements and groups exists in Afghanistan. However, its manifestations in informal or traditional/non-Western formats are easier to discern. Thus, perhaps it is the modern-day, formalized and/or Western conceptualizations of volunteerism and civil society that might be absent in Afghanistan's context.

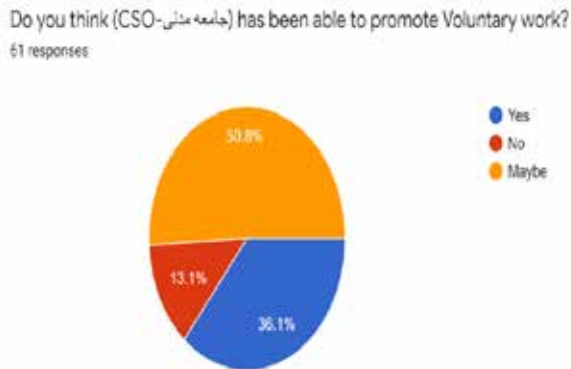


Figure 2: Perceptions of CSOs' ability to promote volunteerism

Although most (over 83%) of the survey respondents agreed that CSOs play an important role in promoting a culture of volunteerism in Afghanistan, many also argued that CSOs have not been very promising in delivering results. In response to a question on evaluating CSOs' promotion of volunteerism in their projects, most respondents acknowledged that CSOs have promoted positive changes including in education and social empowerment but also highlighted that CSO's efforts did not have an impact on promoting volunteerism *per se*.

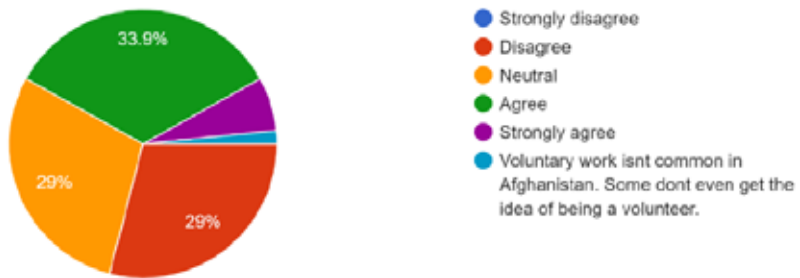
Conversely, representatives of some NGOs argued that hundreds of NGOs have worked for youth development throughout their projects. The fact that youth engage in certain civic engagement programs suggests they are learning and contributing. To the question on CSOs integrating voluntary engagement of youth in their activities, most respondents contended that in the post-2001 period, CSOs have been active but not truly independent.

Their activities are dependent on the nature of funding, which is typically temporary. These factors have negatively impacted CSOs' reputation.¹¹ Nevertheless, the existence of for-youth and by-youth organizations and associations in Afghanistan is an undeniable reality.

Figure 3: Perceptions of volunteerism's prevalence in Afghanistan

Is voluntary work common in Afghanistan?

62 responses



Structural & Practical Challenges to CSO-Led Volunteerism in Afghanistan

CSOs' inconsistent and donor-driven nature of work has affected the reputation of NGOs and civil society activism in Afghanistan. Several studies examining NGOs between 2001 and 2021 show that most organizations were entirely dependent on donor funding. Likewise, some interviewees rejected the idea of volunteer work promoted by CSOs because of their donor-driven nature. Further investigation into this dynamic could help clarify why conventional volunteer work is not too common in Afghanistan.

As Figure 3 shows, just over 33% of the survey respondents believed volunteer work is common in Afghanistan, whereas 29% did not. An interviewee with over a decade of activism experience in Afghanistan defined the ideal role of CSOs as informed and active citizens. A CSO

11. Anonymous (civil society activist). (2021). Interviewed by Fariba Nazari. 9 Mar, Kabul. Also see: Nemat, O.A. and Werner, K. (2016). The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Good Governance in Afghanistan. [online] Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, p.24. Available at: <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/gdc/gdcovop/2017332094/2017332094.pdf>.

representative also pointed out that sometimes, volunteers' efforts are abused by organizations who use them as foot soldiers in projects without any sustainable outcomes.

Moreover, between 2001 and 2021, the government's indifference and reluctance towards CSOs were also among the factors leading to a 'loose' civil society sector in Afghanistan, affecting the overall culture. Laws and regulations governing non-profit organizations needed considerable attention to help improve the situation. An interviewee highlighted that some good policies had indeed been formulated but that they had remained on the paper and never implemented. Most of the interviewed CSO representatives were dissatisfied with the government's attitude towards CSOs. Some even criticized the authorities for restricting the scope of their work.

Conclusion

Data published by Afghanistan's National Statistics and Informational Authority shows that around 63% of the country's population is below 25 years of age.¹² Despite nearly two decades of international humanitarian aid flow and programming by thousands of local and international NGOs, Afghan youth have not been properly involved in the social and civic structures of the country's society. Nevertheless, efforts by CSOs like the ANGO, IWYGHQ, ArtLords, TRF, AYSEO, and many others have been changing the *status quo*. Several volunteers were learning and contributing to the wider community through these organizations. However, CSOs' reliance on temporary projects has overshadowed the significance of volunteerism as an integral part and value of societal life. Modern or formal concept(s) of volunteerism have not found a place in Afghanistan, yet. Much as the donor-driven nature of CSOs' work is to blame for why voluntary social work is not yet commonplace, the government's lackadaisical attitude was also a key factor disincentivizing youth from taking an interest in such activities.

12. Akseer, T., Hayat, K., Keats, E.C., Kazimi, S.R., Maxwell-Jones, C., Shiwan, M.S., Swift, D., Yadgari, M. and Yousufzai, F.A. (2019). Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People. [online] The Asia Foundation, p.50. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/survey-afghan-people-afghanistan-2019>.

Policy Recommendations

- The de facto authorities must support and promote youth volunteerism_particularly by women and girls. The de facto authorities must do so by enabling and creating safe civic spaces for women and girls to conduct community development programs, including (but not limited to) educational and literacy initiatives, awareness campaigns, and social support activities.
- Local CSOs in Afghanistan should integrate social volunteerism in their activities to encourage social volunteerism beyond existing experiences lodged in cultural and/or religious frameworks as well.
- Harness national capacity for national and public interest. The UN, EU, international NGOs, and the wider international community must fund and support local community development initiatives. Find practical, non-exploitative ways to weave volunteer work by youth into such activities. A substantial portion of such volunteer work could also represent vocational training, which can in turn enable national capacity development.

Afghanistan's Scouting Experience: Enduring Through Conflict, Working Towards Peace

By Mina Sharif¹

For most outsiders, the past few decades in Afghanistan have mostly been synonymous with conflict and poverty. This holds true on several levels; but there was another reality few had the opportunity to witness in its fullness: expanding civil spaces, volunteerism, and community service. One such example is Afghanistan's nearly 100-year-old scouting program, which has endured through almost five decades of war, steadfast in its commitment to youth empowerment and public service. Few know of it, its work and legacy typically obscured by larger political headlines. Nonetheless, it remains one of the country's oldest civic institutions. Crucially, it is not a byproduct of the post-2001 era—the period to which the growth of Afghanistan's civil society is often unfairly attributed. Thus, its impact and resilience offer timely insights for youth empowerment and community service, especially in Afghanistan's context.

To extrapolate those lessons, this essay considers the significance of Afghanistan's scouting program for the country's past, present, and future, by examining its evolution, impact, and resilience. The first section contextualizes the history of Afghanistan's scouting program in relation to the history and features of the global scouting movement. The subsequent sections discuss the program's evolution through key periods in the country's history, its contributions, and the challenges it endured. The post-2021 context is briefly summarized in the penultimate section, followed by actionable policy recommendations to aid the scouting program's continuation in the current context.

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In-Context: Scouting & Afghanistan

With 63.7% of its population younger than 25 years of age,² Afghanistan is a country with a substantial youth bulge. Its youth embody prospects for significant (in)tangible demographic dividends, including hope for peace and prosperity in the country, especially in the 21st century. The Afghan scouting program has contributed impactfully in this regard, both in the past and present. Throughout its history, it has encountered numerous challenges resulting from multiple, successive politico–security transitions. Nonetheless, the program has endured even in the most trying of times and despite repeated and extended loss of its official status.³

Born in the UK in the early 20th century, the global scout movement currently features over 170 national scouting organizations (NSO) worldwide, with the World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM) functioning as their global nodal body.⁴ Scouting was initially designed for boys aged 11 through 15, subsequently expanding to include girls. Scouting is intended and designed as youth-oriented frameworks for fostering civic-mindedness, and practical skills via outdoor activities. Historically, however, Afghanistan’s scouting programs have prioritized community service. Thus, their thrust has been slightly different as compared to activities like map-reading etc. that are typically associated with scouting in most countries.⁵

Importantly, Afghanistan’s experience with scouting is nearly as old as the scout movement itself, commencing less than 25 years after the first scout association was formed. The two also share an (indirect) historical link: as a cavalry officer of the British Army in 1880, the global scout movement’s founder had charted maps of Kandahar’s Maiwand battlefield after the British troops’ defeat in a pivotal battle of the second Anglo–Afghan War.⁶

2. UNFPA Afghanistan. (n.d.). [What We Do] Young People. [online] Available at: <https://afghanistan.unfpa.org/en/node/15227>.

3. World Scout Bureau (2021). World Scout Conference Resolutions 1920 - 2021. [online] World Organization of the Scout Movement, p.57, p.81, p.83, p.178. Available at: https://members.scout.org/sites/default/files/library_files/1920-2021%20WSCConf%20Resolutions%20and%20Index%20EN.pdf?iframe=true.

4. World Organization of the Scout Movement. (n.d.). Scouting’s History. [online] Available at: <https://www.scout.org/who-we-are/scout-movement/scoutings-history>.

5. Mayne, E. (2007). 35,000 flock to join the Afghan Scouts. The Telegraph. [online] 12 Aug. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1560122/35000-flock-to-join-the-Afghan-Scouts.html>.

6. Kiernan, R. (1939). Baden-Powell: For Boys of All Ages. London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., pp.17–23.

Scouting in Afghanistan: A Contextual Timeline

Scouting in Afghanistan formally commenced in 1931 with the establishment of the *Anjuman-i Kashafan*,⁷ as its national nodal association.⁸ In 1947, it was dissolved by the government after misunderstandings over scout campfires led to allegations of fire worship.⁹ A decade later, it was re-established as the Afghanistan Scout Association (ASA),¹⁰ and was admitted as a WOSM member in 1964.¹¹ With the active support of Afghanistan's then monarch King Zahir Shah, the ASA grew rapidly and featured around 36,000 members (male and female) from across the country at its peak. This was short-lived, however, as the ASA was disbanded after the 1978 *coup d'état*. Some scouting activities that continued sporadically also ceased after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.¹² The ruling communist regime was quick to attempt misusing scouts for political interest — including by coercing scout troops and leaders for policing. By 1981, the ASA had lost its WOSM membership.¹³ Thereon, unable to operate properly till the end of the first Taliban regime in 2001, the ASA never qualified for regaining its WOSM membership for nearly 32 years.

During the post-2001 years, scouting in Afghanistan grew in numbers, activities, and impact thanks to joint efforts by national and international actors.¹⁴ Efforts to revive scouting commenced almost immediately after the new transitional government was established in 2002, albeit with relatively limited success until around 2008–09. In 2004, the World Scout Bureau, through its Asia-Pacific Support Center, initiated visits of

7. Roughly translates to 'association of' 'explorers'/'discoverers'/'scouts' in Persian.

8. Ministry of Information and Culture [Republic of Afghanistan] (1974). Afghanistan Republic Annual 1974. [online] Kabul: Department of Publicity of Afghanistan, pp.260–261. Available at: <http://afghandata.org:8080/xmlui/handle/azu/6958>.

9. Gallagher, M. (2012). Chairman's Notes: November/December 2012. [online] Scout and Guide Stamps Club. Available at: <https://www.sgsc.org.uk/chairnote/chairnote326.htm>. Also see: St. George Saunders, H. (1948). *The Left Handshake: The Boy Scout Movement during the War 1939-1945*. London: Collins, p.132.

10. 'Da Afghanistan Sarandoy Tolana' in Pashto

11. World Scout Bureau (2021). World Scout Conference Resolutions 1920 - 2021. [online] World Organization of the Scout Movement, p.57. Available at: https://members.scout.org/sites/default/files/library_files/1920-2021%20WSCConf%20Resolutions%20and%20Index%20EN.pdf?iframe=true.

12. Magnier, M. (2013). For Afghan Scouts, 'Be prepared' takes on a new meaning. Los Angeles Times. [online] 13 Jun. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2013-jun-13-la-fg-afghanistan-scouts-20130614-story.html>.

13. Ibid. World Scout Bureau, p.83.

14. World Organization of the Scout Movement (2020). Afghanistan rejoins the World Scout Movement. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/WOSM.OMMS/videos/afghanistan-rejoins-the-world-scout-movement/472504540312490/>.

Scout Leaders from the around the region to Kabul, to collaborate with Afghanistan's Ministry of Education. With funding and practical support from the UN and Afghanistan's reconstituted Ministry of Education, scouting resumed. The Afghanistan National Scout Organization (ANSO) was instituted as the country's NSO, which went on to regain Afghanistan's WOSM membership in 2020.¹⁵ By 2007–08, the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) had integrated scouting in its national education strategy.¹⁶

To catalyze the revival of scouting programs, around 2008, the GIROA enlisted a Kabul-based, international non-government organization (NGO) called the Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Support to Afghanistan (PARSA), which had been operating in the country since 1996. The result was 'PARSA Afghan Scouts', support for which gradually followed in the form of small grants and practical support from diverse (inter)national sources, including the WOSM. PARSA-led reinforcement for the revival began with efforts to set up scout troops at two orphanages in Kabul, which resulted in two troops (one male and one female). A more comprehensive rebuilding of the scouting program followed in 2010, which produced approximately 700 active scouts at orphanages in Kabul and Ghor provinces within a year.

Collaboratively, the Ministry of Education, the ANSO, and PARSA approached schools and (private and government-operated) orphanages to assemble scout troops comprised of eligible and interested children. These children were recommended either by community elders or by PARSA. The ANSO and PARSA worked in close coordination throughout this period and within a decade, the country had scout troops in all 34 provinces, totaling around 11,000 active scouts (nearly half of whom were girls)¹⁷ and 600 trained scoutmasters across all provinces.¹⁸ PARSA managed around

15. Ibid. World Scout Bureau, p.178

16. Ministry of Education of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2007). National Education Strategic Plan for Afghanistan 1385-1389. [online] pp.50–55, pp.105–106. Available at: <https://neqmap.bangkok.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/National-Education-Strategic-Plan-for-Afghanistan.pdf>.

17. Instead of learning how to build a campfire, Afghan Scouts learn how to avoid mines. (2016). Agence France-Presse/The National. [online] 24 Jul. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/instead-of-learning-how-to-build-a-campfire-afghan-scouts-learn-how-to-avoid-mines-1.169455>.

18. Tyson, A.S. (2021). They found hope in Afghanistan. Now they strive to preserve it. The Christian Science Monitor.

2300 scouts in orphanages and community centers, and approximately 8000 more were managed by the Ministry of Education through schools. By 2012, Afghanistan's first scout training facility had also been realized.

Contributions & Impact

Community service is an essential component of Afghanistan's scouting programs, whose scope includes a host of activities like planting trees, carrying out essential repairs at orphanages, neighborhood clean-ups, garbage collection facility installations, solar panel installations, library donations, providing sanitation packages for hospital patients and prison inmates, and collaborating with police personnel to paint traffic signs, to name a few.¹⁹ Scouting offered an opportunity for Afghan children to learn things they did not (or could not) at school, and especially so in those areas where schools did not offer scouting programs. Scouting programs placed considerable emphasis on their mental and physical health, and their interaction with the community. Focused action on these aspects of life offers substantial tangible and intangible benefits. For instance, it aids character building, and vocational and leadership skills to direct recipients of such support, and (in)directly benefits those around those recipients.

Scouts consistently left lasting impressions on the communities they served, leading by action and service. In Kandahar for example, scout troops visited small schools outside the city center and carried out essential repairs in classrooms, cleaned school furniture, and delivered donated school supplies. They were equally proactive in raising grassroots awareness on the benefits of service and protection of towns and cities through acts of kindness and attention to the environment. For example, they delivered public lectures across the country, distributed fabric bags, and encouraged the use of reusable products and materials.²⁰

Afghan scouts' community service activities have been well received, particularly in those regions of the country that have seen little or no benefit

[online] 28 Sep. Available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2021/0928/They-found-hope-in-Afghanistan.-Now-they-strive-to-preserve-it>.

19. PARSA Afghan Scouts Program. (n.d.). About [Scouting Activities]. [online] Available at: <https://www.afghan-scouts.org/about/>.

20. Omari M.J. (2022). Interviewed by Mina Sharif. 2 July, Online.

from the international donor community or the national government's promise of support for education. In an interview, former Scout Troop Leader Jawad Omari explained, "we have adults or even children from communities approach us and say they'd like an opportunity to develop a scout troop in their community. They recruit other children, and we train a local troop leader and provide uniforms and supplies as needed to conduct their activities."²¹

Challenges Between 2001 & 2021

The post-2001 revival of Afghanistan's scouting program was not without challenges, most of which still persist. To illustrate, the ANSO's 'National Strategic Plan 2020-2023' for its 'Vision 2030' identified 10 challenges: inadequate numbers of Scout Leaders; low levels of public awareness regarding scouts' activities; lack of proper implementation of the Afghanistan National Youth Policy;²² lack of scout centers for scouting units; funding shortages; inadequate commitment among trainers; "relative financial support;" lack of coordination among trainers; lack of requisite intra-ANSO communication; and lack of management in scouting activities'.²³

Moreover, scout troops routinely encountered apprehensions from local communities, for a variety of reasons. For example, their uniforms generated suspicions as to whether the program intended to aid foreign influence in their communities. This was because scout uniforms share some features (such as neckerchiefs) with uniforms of the 'Komsomol'²⁴ — a Soviet youth organization loosely modelled on the scout movement — whose members propagated communist ideologies in Afghanistan in the 1980s.²⁵ Confusion arising from the program's name also fed these

21. Omari M.J. (2022). Interviewed by Mina Sharif. 2 July, Online.

22. Afghanistan National Youth Policy. (2014). [online] Office of the Deputy Ministry of Youth Affairs, Ministry of Information and Culture. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/media/2196/file/afg-publication_youth-policy.pdf%20.pdf.

23. Afghanistan National Scout Organization (2020). National Strategic Plan 2020-2023. [online] pp.7-8. Available at: https://members.scout.org/sites/default/files/library_files/ANSO-%20BOOKLET-%20VISION%202030.pdf.

24. Short for 'Kommunisticheskiy Soyuz Molodyozhi', which translates to 'Communist Youth League' in English.

25. Farmer, B. (2012). Scout movement targeted by suspicious Afghan extremists. The Sydney Morning Herald. [online] 22 Oct. Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/world/scout-movement-targeted-by-suspicious-afghan-extremists-20121022-281gj.html>. Also see: Nunan, T. (2016). Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.151.

concerns, since scouts are informally referred to in Pashto as *Sarandoy*.²⁶ This was due to the fact that during the communist-rule era, ‘Sarandoy’ had also been the name of an interior ministry-run paramilitary agency that featured large numbers of voluntary recruits in its ranks.²⁷

Clerics and other conservative figures were also highly critical. “There was an instance in a village near the city center in Herat. We were stopped from carrying on with our work because religious leaders had become suspicious of our appearance. There are several similar instances, and we had to be patient and understanding. It was our job to remain transparent about our work and ease their worries. This is how we gained the trust of the communities,” Omari recounted.²⁸

Sustainability of funding was also a challenge. Financial support came in relatively small bursts, mostly via official and individual donors from within and outside Afghanistan. Typically, scouting programs in other countries collect membership fees. However, this was never a feature of Afghanistan’s scouting programs because many scouts hail from marginalized communities, and such fees stand to price them out of participation.²⁹ On the flipside, this context-responsive approach also meant Afghan scouting remained dependent on (non-)financial support from government and private donors, resulting in limitations on their capacity to expand reach, activities, and impact.

Challenges & Resilience: Post August 2021

The August 2021 collapse of the IRA made the ANSO’s WOSM membership vulnerable again. The collapse was compounded by severe humanitarian challenges and operational constraints resulting from the Taliban takeover and the withdrawal of international development aid to Afghanistan. Despite these multi-dimensional challenges, Afghan scouting has managed to remain active.

26. Short for Da Afghanistan Sarandoy Tolana, the ASA’s name in Pashto.

27. Oliker, O. (2011). Mol and KhAD Security Forces During the 1980s. In: Building Afghanistan’s Security Forces in Wartime: The Soviet Experience. [online] Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, pp.25–35. Available at: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1078.pdf.

28. Omari M.J. (2022). Interviewed by Mina Sharif. 2 July, Online.

29. Omari M.J. (2022). Interviewed by Mina Sharif. 2 July, Online.

In the immediate aftermath of the collapse, scouting activities and engagement were initially redirected to emergency response efforts. PARSА-led fundraising efforts resulted in the creation of an emergency fund to support scout troops in marginalized communities, and troop leaders who were abruptly rendered unemployed. A camp for internally displaced persons was also established on PARSА grounds. Families hosted at these camps were provided with essential supplies kits that included tents, electricity, water, mattresses, pillows, blankets, and sanitary napkins, as well as food packs that included dried milk, formula, and diapers. Three cooked meals were also provided daily, along with childcare facilities, and activities for children.

Alongside emergency response, Afghan scouts have continued some of their standard activities like food package distribution, garbage collection, and cleaning of schools and public university campuses. These activities have also been approved by the *de facto* authorities.³⁰ This demonstrates how Afghan scouting is striking a delicate balance to adapt to the current paradigm without prejudice to its motto of public service.

Conclusion

Scouting in Afghanistan has endured nearly five decades of war, and its post-2001 revival is a testament to its impact potential. Its post-August 2021 resilience is also due primarily to the strength, passion, and the spirit of volunteerism of its youth members. Leading by action and example through their service, Afghanistan's scouts have consistently delivered context-sensitive support for communities across the country, empowering them in the process. Their resilience inspires confidence, but it is also a disquieting reminder of the circumstances that demand it. For instance, the Taliban's gender-discriminatory policies isolate and disenfranchise girls, preventing them from participating as equals in scouting and community service activities. Girls' visibility is already on the decline in the ANSO's recent activity updates, communications, and digital platforms. It would be in the *de facto* authorities' interest to sustain scouts as a resource of

30. Bernton, H. (2022). Washington woman returns to Afghanistan to continue aid mission in nation stalked by hunger. The Seattle Times. [online] 1 Jan. Available at: <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/washington-woman-returns-to-afghanistan-to-continue-aid-mission-forge-ties-with-taliban/>.

volunteer support for communities across the country. However, a repeat of the communist era experience — such as forced deployment of scouts for policing — is also a risk the present situation runs.

Policy Recommendations

- The *de facto* authorities must, as priority, allocate and disburse funding via the Ministry of Education for training Scout Troop Leaders. Afghan scouts have a long and reliable track record of community service, supplemented by public trust hard earned through their contributions. In the prevailing humanitarian situation, optimally harnessing national capacity for public interest is crucial. Afghan scouts — male *and* female — can help mitigate some of the core strains communities across the country are currently experiencing.
- The *de facto* authorities should lift barriers and enable girl scouts to continue serving their communities. Serving fellow citizens is their right. Moreover, girl scouts are better placed to access and help women and girls in different parts of Afghanistan, since prevailing socio-cultural norms often call for gendered support systems.
- Afghan scouts — male *and* female — must be enlisted to facilitate humanitarian aid delivery operations. Their participation should be structurally integrated into operational frameworks for aid delivery. With their direct access to and existing work in orphanages and local communities across the country, they are a cadre of skilled youth with relevant experience vindicated by public trust. Their contributions will prove beneficial for efficient aid delivery, and for public services that have deteriorated since August 2021. Commencing with those orphanages from where some of the scout troops were first recruited would be a good starting point for a pilot phase.

Disclosure & Statement of Competing Interest/s

The author has reported the following information regarding her affiliation(s) with the subject(s)/organization(s) discussed in this essay: The author has previously been affiliated to PARSА, including as a producer for PARSА's Voice of Afghan Youth TV/Radio program.

Eliminating Child Labor in Afghanistan: The Need for Multi-Dimensional CSO Engagement

By Shegofa Ahmadi¹

Child labor is widespread in Afghanistan due to a variety of reasons, foremost of which are rampant poverty and the protracted conflict that is now in its fifth decade. Though the state-of-affairs underwent some improvement between 2001 and 2021, it nonetheless proved insubstantial. Moreover, the situation has deteriorated precariously since the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan in August 2021.

This essay examines the persistence of child labor in Afghanistan to identify solutions for reducing and eliminating it in the post-2021 context. To do so, the essay begins with a brief overview of domestic legal (2004-2021) and practical dimensions relevant to child labor and Afghanistan's international legal obligations in this regard. Building on this, the subsequent section discusses how the disconnect between legislation and enforcement played out in practice between 2004 and 2021. This is followed by a discussion on how greater involvement of civil society organizations (CSO) is crucial for protecting and improving the rights of children in Afghanistan. The essay concludes with policy recommendations for eliminating child labor and for improving children's rights in Afghanistan's post-2021 context.

Overview & Legal Dimensions

Poverty is a key factor causing and enabling child labor in Afghanistan. Most children engaged in child labor in the country do so to help support their families to survive. However, although widespread poverty is a potent

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enabler of child labor, it is neither a standalone problem in the country, nor the sole factor responsible for child labor. For instance, Afghanistan is currently experiencing the fifth consecutive decade of a conflict that has consistently hamstrung socio-economic progress and enabled widespread corruption in public sector service delivery as well as the labor market in general. Poverty and protracted conflict typically entrench and multiply each other's effects, and Afghanistan's experience is no different. Thousands of Afghan children work long hours and in servile ways to provide for their families. It is the only way through which they are able to survive in an environment characterized by rampant insecurity, poor socio-economic conditions, and limited opportunities for self-development and/or upward mobility.²

However, labor laws that were in force in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2021 prescribed 18 as the minimum age for employment. Afghanistan's Labour Law also completely outlawed engaging children aged 14 and below in gainful employment.³ It did permit children between the ages of 15 and 17 to be engaged in gainful employment, albeit in a limited way and subject to the following conditions:

- The work they would do will not pose them any harm.
- They are not employed for more than 35 hours per week.
- The work they do represents a form of vocational training.

Thus, between 2004 and 2021, Afghanistan's Labour Law did outlaw child labor and entailed specific provisions governing employment of minors. Beyond domestic laws, between 2004 and 2021, Kabul also became party to international treaties that prohibit and/or restrict recruitment of children.⁴ For example, in April 2010, Afghanistan ratified two key international treaties related to child labor: the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 182 (1999) on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, and

2. Hernandez, E. (2019). 10 Facts About Child Labor in Afghanistan. The Borgen Project. [online] 24 Oct. Available at: <https://borgenproject.org/10-facts-about-child-labor-in-afghanistan/>.

3. Labour Law [2007]. Official Gazette (Extraordinary Issue) No. 914, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Articles 13, 31, and 120 [online] Available at:

<https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/SERIAL/78309/97771/F333797777/AFG78309%20English%202.pdf>.

4. UN Treaty Body Database (n.d.). Ratification Status for Afghanistan. [online] Available at:

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=1&Lang=en.

ILO Convention No. 138 (1973), on the Minimum Age of Employment. These supplemented the 1989 United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) that Afghanistan had ratified in 1994, the UN CRC Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (ratified in 2002), and the UN CRC Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict (ratified in 2003).

Legislation vs Enforcement

Despite these domestic laws and international legal obligations, child labor has persisted rampantly in Afghanistan,⁵ including in extremely hazardous industries sectors like mining. In fact, according to recent data, a quarter of children in Afghanistan between the ages of 5 and 14 are employed in jobs that are hazardous to their health and wellbeing.⁶ Moreover, according to a Human Rights Watch report,⁷ armed insurgent groups like the Taliban operating in Afghanistan have been recruiting children in their ranks since mid-2015. This is in direct violation of the international prohibition on the use of child soldiers. The same report also highlighted how in Kunduz province, the Taliban increasingly used *madrastas* (Islamic seminaries) to provide military training to children between the ages of 13 and 17, many of whom were then deployed in combat roles.⁸

Children's rights are human's rights, irrespective of their age, race, gender, wealth, and birthplace. These rights are enshrined in international law in the UN CRC, which recognizes that all children must be treated fairly, equally, and with dignity. State signatories to the UN CRC are required to meet children's basic needs and help them achieve their full potential. Central to this is the acknowledgement that every child has fundamental rights. These include the rights to life; survival and development; protection from violence, abuse, or neglect; education that enables them to fulfil their potential; be raised by or have a relationship with their parents; and express

5. Shuja, A. (2016). 'They Bear All the Pain' Hazardous Child Labor in Afghanistan. [online] Human Rights Watch. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/15/they-bear-all-pain/hazardous-child-labor-afghanistan#_ftn6.

6. Hernandez, E. (2019). 10 Facts About Child Labor in Afghanistan. The Borgen Project. [online] 24 Oct. Available at: <https://borgenproject.org/10-facts-about-child-labor-in-afghanistan/>.

7. Afghanistan: Taliban Child Soldier Recruitment Surges. (2016). Human Rights Watch. [online] 17 Feb. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/18/afghanistan-taliban-child-soldier-recruitment-surges>.

8. *Ibid.*

opinions and be listened to.⁹

Yet, between 2004 and 2021, at least 25% of Afghan children between the ages of 5 and 14 were part of the labor force— in violation of domestic laws that set 15 as the absolute minimum age for employment.¹⁰ There is limited comprehensive, reliable data on the numbers, demography, or circumstances of Afghan children employed in hazardous forms of work, which the ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor defines as “work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.”¹¹

Several factors contributed to this state-of-affairs.

On a legal level, even though Kabul ratified the UN CRC in 1994, its provisions were not¹² formalized and integrated into domestic legislation until 2019.¹³ Moreover, problematically, ‘children’ and ‘minors’ are defined differently in various Afghan laws that were in force between 2004 and 2021.¹⁴ Due to the hybrid nature¹⁵ of Afghanistan’s legal framework (2004–2021), their interpretations were not uniformly applied either, and often depended on the context, which in turn produced legal and practical consequences.¹⁶

9.[Explainer] UN Convention On The Rights Of The Child. (2011). [online] Save The Children. Available at: <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/childrens-rights/united-nations-convention-of-the-rights-of-the-child>. Also see: Convention on the Rights of the Child [A/RES/44/25]. [online] Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/80135?ln=en>.

10. Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2010-2011: Final Report. (2012). [online] Central Statistics Organisation [Afghanistan] and UNICEF, pp.123–127. Available at: https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS4/South%20Asia/Afghanistan/2010-2011/Final/Afghanistan%202010-11%20MICS_English.pdf. Also see: UNICEF. (2020). Afghanistan Key Demographic Indicators [Cross Sector Indicators]. [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hdyaO8>.

11. ILO Convention No. 182 (1999) Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor. Article 3(d) [online].

12. [UNDP Press Release] Protecting Child Rights in Afghanistan - Human Rights Support Unit and UNICEF work with Afghan Government on Child Act. (2011). ReliefWeb. [online] 30 Sep. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/protecting-child-rights-afghanistan-human-rights-support-unit-and-unicef-work>.

13. Law on Protection of Child Rights [2019]. Official Gazette (Extraordinary Issue) No. 1334, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan [online] Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/media/3936/file/Law%20on%20Protection%20of%20Child%20Rights.pdf.pdf>.

14. Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Branch (FUNDAMENTALS) (2018). Training manual on child labour in Afghanistan. [online] International Labour Organization, pp.4–5. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--ed_norm/--ipecc/documents/instructionalmaterial/wcms_667934.pdf.

15. Afghanistan’s legal system (2004-2021) was based predominantly on Hanafi jurisprudence and customary law, but featured some common law principles as well.

16. Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Branch (FUNDAMENTALS) (2018). Training manual on child labour in Afghanistan. [online] International Labour Organization, p.5. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--ed_norm/--ipecc/documents/instructionalmaterial/wcms_667934.pdf.

For example, the 2007 Labour Law prescribed 18 as the minimum age for employment and restricted employment of those younger than 18 based on age-based reasoning. Meanwhile, the Penal Code (1976)¹⁷ defined a ‘minor’ as being a child between the ages of 7 and 13 years¹⁸ — decoupling legal definitions of childhood and age-based majority/minority. On the other hand, the Juvenile Code (2005) defined children as “juveniles under 18 years of age,” organized under three age-based sub-categories for determining criminal responsibility.¹⁹ The 2017 Penal Code defined a child as being a person below 18 years of age.²⁰

When compared to legal complexities, practical issues posed greater challenges to reducing and eliminating child labor in Afghanistan, simultaneously compounding the effects of legal shortcomings. For instance, after the fall of the first Taliban regime in 2001 and the subsequent promulgation of Afghanistan’s new constitution in 2004, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA)²¹ was the primary institution responsible for enforcing labor laws. However, the Ministry had limited resources for enforcement and accountability activities, such as workplace inspections. To illustrate, even as recently as 2016, MoLSA had only 28 labor inspectors, all of whom were based in Kabul and made few (if any) inspection trips to the country’s 34 provinces.²² Moreover, not only did the labor inspectors not have much authority to impose penalties for violations, child labor (forced or otherwise) was not adequately criminalized under Afghan law for long time, including where it concerned commercial sexual

17. The 1976 Penal Code was reinstated under the terms of the 2002 Bonn Agreement and remained in force for over a decade since then.

18. Penal Code [1976]. Official Gazette No. 347, (Islamic) Republic of Afghanistan. Articles 70-73 [online] Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/105007/128265/F-1121082442/AFG105007.pdf>.

19. Juvenile Code [2005]. Official Gazette, No. 846, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Articles 4 and 5. [online] Available at: <http://www.asianlii.org/af/legis/laws/jlcojn846p2005032313840103a495/>.

20. Penal Code [2017]. Official Gazette (Extraordinary Issue) No.1260, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Article 93 [online] Available at: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=105003.

21. MoLSA was restructured and renamed as the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD). This essay uses ‘MoLSA’ to refer to both MoLSA and MoLSAMD.

22. Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Branch (FUNDAMENTALS) (2018). Training manual on child labour in Afghanistan. [online] International Labour Organization, p.75. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--ed_norm/--ipec/documents/instructionalmaterial/wcms_667934.pdf. Also see: Shuja, A. (2016). ‘They Bear All the Pain’ Hazardous Child Labor in Afghanistan. [online] Human Rights Watch. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/15/they-bear-all-pain/hazardous-child-labor-afghanistan#_ftn6.

exploitation of children.²³ When lacunae were remedied, such as in the case of criminalizing *bacha bazi* under the 2017 amendments to the Penal Code,²⁴ those remedies existed more in letter than in spirit or enforcement.

Resource constraints accounted for only a part of the problem. Lack of coordination within the state apparatus also hindered effective enforcement of labor laws. Because child labor and associated dimensions span multiple sectors, both cooperation and coordination across a range of ministries are crucial for enforcing relevant laws. The lack of coordination in Afghanistan's mining sector offers a useful example of its practical consequences. For instance, Afghanistan's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MoMP) held sole authority for regulating the mining sector. But MoLSA did not have any mechanism for detecting and/or preventing child labor in this sector. Additionally, in situations where the MoMP shut down an unlicensed mining operation, it was deficient in structural knowledge, resources, and coordination for referring any children employed in such mines to MoLSA for necessary social welfare support like health checks, psychological counselling, or educational assistance.²⁵

Systemic corruption and malpractice posed additional, major challenges to protecting children's rights and to countering child labor and exploitation. For instance, several government officials — particularly those in local and national level law enforcement — have been complicit in crimes proscribed under the ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor. One such type of crime in which there is substantial evidence of public officials' complicity is sexual exploitation of underage boys with commercial and/or non-commercial intent.²⁶ System-level deficiencies also enabled abuse of power, thereby affecting accountability. A prominent, recent example is the arbitrary detention and abuse of two civil society activists who exposed a pedophile ring that sexually abused over 500 boys in six public schools

23. Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2020). 2019 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Afghanistan. [online] US Department of Labor. Available at: https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2019/Afghanistan.pdf.

24. Penal Code [2017] [Official Gazette (Extraordinary Issue) No.1260], Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Article 653 [online] Available at: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=105003.

25. Ibid.

26. Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2020). 2019 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Afghanistan. [online] US Department of Labor. Available at: https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2019/Afghanistan.pdf.

in Logar province.²⁷

The Significance of CSO Involvement for Protecting Children's Rights in Afghanistan

The legal and practical dimensions of upholding children's rights and eliminating child labor in Afghanistan discussed in the preceding sections demonstrate why active CSO involvement is crucial for formulating, enforcing, and auditing child labor and child rights related laws and policies. For instance, had there been a robust national framework for partnering with CSOs to coordinate the rescue and rehabilitation of at-risk children, the MoMP's shortcomings would not have hindered child laborers in the mining sector from receiving the psycho-social, medical, and educational care they would have needed.

By mid-2016, there were approximately 50 national and international non-government organizations (INGO) working on child protection and welfare services across Afghanistan.²⁸ But even as of 2019, there was no institutionalized framework for including CSOs in policymaking processes, especially those pertaining to child rights. In the absence of meaningful participation of CSOs that have first-hand, and grassroots knowledge of specific glitches in translating laws and policies to measurable lived experiences, those laws and policies end up as paper tigers. Moreover, such a siloed approach is not only inadequate but also counter-productive for tackling a complex²⁹ issue like child labor, one which has multiple intersectional consequences, particularly for female children and those from minority communities.

Conversely, when robust, active, and meaningfully engaged throughout the policy lifecycle, CSOs can hold states to account on upholding children's rights and can advocate for positive change in children's favor in policies, laws, programs, and budgets. CSOs also advocate, raise awareness, and build top-down and bottom-up capacity on child rights across sectoral divides. In many countries, CSOs help deliver basic services for children

27. Shalizi, H. (2019). After U.S. pressure, Afghanistan frees activists who exposed sex abuse. Reuters. [online] 27 Nov. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-afghanistan-activists-idUKKBN1Y115W>.

28. Ibid.

29. Sim, A. (2009). [Briefing Paper Series] Confronting Child Labour in Afghanistan. [online] Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4a26585e2.pdf>.

and double as watchdogs to ensure that children have equal access to services, opportunities, and protections. Equally, organizations run for and by children are particularly important for empowering girls and boys as active civic actors. Such associations help children share their experiences and take joint action on issues affecting them.

Conclusion

Between 2001 and 2021, the unabated persistence of child labor in Afghanistan was a result of lackadaisical policy attitudes; inadequate and/or delayed policies; legal and capacity gaps; and overlooked structural obstacles hindering effective enforcement. This state-of-affairs was further exacerbated by widespread insecurity and lawlessness, which in turn impeded national and international NGOs from operating in remote areas of the country where children working in hazardous conditions are typically found. Unsurprisingly, the already grim situation deteriorated severely after the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan in August 2021, with approximately 1 million children now estimated³⁰ to be engaged in labor, including in hazardous industries. Any meaningful change to this situation will need a comprehensive, cross-sectoral partnership, reinforced by a multi-dimensional strategy and focused, long-term commitment.

Policy Recommendations

- Coordination gaps between CSOs and the government were among the key obstacles to upholding children's rights and eliminating child labor. In the current context, the de facto authorities must collaborate with CSOs to jointly develop and enforce a comprehensive monitoring mechanism for sectors where child labor is rampant. Those found employing children should be arrested, and the rescued children should be transferred to the care of relevant CSOs for rehabilitation.
- Afghanistan remains a party to the UN CRC and related international legal instruments. The international community must apply pressure on the de facto authorities to uphold Afghanistan's commitments

30. Afghanistan: A fifth of starving families sending children to work as incomes plummet in past six months. (2022). Save the Children International. [online] 14 Feb. Available at: <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/afghanistan-fifth-starving-families-sending-children-work-incomes-plummet-past-six-months>.

vis-a-vis eliminating child labor as per its legal obligations. Major factors enabling child labor include lack of educational opportunities, and of meaningful socio-economic incentives for parents to keep their children in school. The de facto authorities should not only reopen all schools, especially secondary and higher secondary schools for girls, but also cooperate with the UN and (inter)national CSOs for providing socio-economic incentives like school meals.

- The UN and the international community must efficiently operationalize the 'Humanitarian Plus' principle. To simultaneously tackle child labor, incentivize girls' education, and multiply aid impact, the UN and cognate bodies could adapt elements of Brazil's successful Bolsa Familia scheme to Afghanistan's post-2021 context. Aimed at poverty alleviation through social innovation, Bolsa Familia was a conditional cash transfer initiative that linked children's education and healthcare to cash aid disbursement for parents. Given how several people in Afghanistan currently depend on cash-based assistance for survival, such a template could potentially entail earmarking at least a portion of food aid for children to be provided as meals in school; and where viable and not prejudicial, cash aid for their parents could be linked to school attendance and/or similar actions. Formulating and operationalizing such an initiative will require considerable cross-sectoral and inter-agency coordination, especially across UNAMA, UNICEF, and FAO; but such coordination can also help reduce duplication of aid efforts.

The Role of CSOs in Advancing Women's Inclusion in the Intra-Afghan Negotiations

By Zainab Hassanpoor¹

This essay discusses civil society organizations' (CSO) efforts to promote women's inclusion and participation in various tracks of the 'intra-Afghan negotiations' (IAN) held between the Taliban and the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA). In doing so, this essay also attempts to assess the efficacy of those efforts, and the challenges that CSOs faced in the process. To that end, this essay relies on in-depth interviews² with five women's rights activists and civil society representatives in Kabul who were directly involved in these efforts. Insights from these interviews are supplemented by data from secondary sources including news reports, extant research, activity reports, and official statements by the CSOs.

Peace Talks: An Overview of Women's Inclusion

The US-Taliban negotiations are generally understood as having commenced in July 2018. However, based on some perspectives, the Afghan peace talks can be considered as having commenced in 2010, i.e., when the US changed its goal from that of a military victory to one involving a political settlement with the Taliban.³ A decade later, on 29 February 2020, the US and the Taliban signed an agreement,⁴ which paved the way for the IAN. Meanwhile, in 2015, the GIROA launched the first phase of its National Action Plan on the United Nations (UN) Security

1. Zainab Hassanpoor is a researcher and gender specialist. She holds a graduate degree in political science.

2. Conducted between April and July 2021.

3. Johnson, T.H. and Mason, M.C. (2009). Afghanistan and the Vietnam Template. *Military Review*, [online] LXXXIX(6), pp.2-14. Available at: https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20091231_art001.pdf.

4. Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America. (2020). [online] US Department of State. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Signed-Agreement-02292020.pdf>.

Council Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security. The Resolution provides a tool for women “to become equal participants at all negotiating tables, for the protection of women and girls during armed conflict, and for gender sensitivity in all UN missions including peacekeeping.”⁵

Yet, glaringly, women were largely excluded from the Afghan peace process overall, and particularly so during peace negotiations. Thus, promises and measures were outlined on paper, but in practice, women’s inclusion and participation in Afghanistan’s peace process was restricted. Against this backdrop, CSOs rallied to promote women’s inclusion and participation in these talks and processes, with efforts intensifying particularly around the IAN’s commencement.

In fact, Afghan women have been underrepresented in all the peace related meetings — formal and informal — in the past 15 years. One study found that, “[n]early eighty percent of Afghanistan’s past peace meetings since 2005 have left women completely out.”⁶ Women constituted only 26% of the total members of the High Peace Council,⁷ and 20% of the Provincial Peace Councils.⁸ Nonetheless, through government-appointed bodies, women “led local peace-building efforts, raised public support for the process, and informed the government’s negotiating positions and security operations.”⁹ A 2016 report by Oxfam found that during this period, “Afghan women took part only in 15 out of 67 (22 percent) exploratory meetings, formal and informal negotiations, and internationally backed consultations.”¹⁰ A 2020 study by Oxfam found that since 2018 — when the US entered into direct talks with the Taliban — “not one woman was included in the conversation; and consequently women’s rights were not

5. Hill, F., Aboitiz, M. and Poehlman-Dourbouya, S. (2003). Nongovernmental Organizations’ Role in the Buildup and Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(4), pp.1255–1269.

6. Kamminga, J., Boswinkel, L. and Göth, T. (2020). *Because She Matters: Ensuring women’s meaningful participation in peacebuilding in Afghanistan*. [online] Oxford: Oxfam GB. Available at: <https://www.cordaid.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2020/09/rr-because-she-matters-afghanistan-peacebuilding-150920-en.pdf>.

7. CFR Interactives (n.d.). *Afghanistan: Women’s Participation in Peace Processes*. [online] Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/afghanistan>.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. Kamminga, J., Boswinkel, L. and Göth, T. (2020). *Because She Matters: Ensuring women’s meaningful participation in peacebuilding in Afghanistan*. [online] Oxford: Oxfam GB. Available at: <https://www.cordaid.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2020/09/rr-because-she-matters-afghanistan->

mentioned in the resulting deal struck in February.”¹¹

When the IAN commenced in September 2020, the GIRoA’s 21-member delegation included four women, and the Taliban’s delegation included none. Moreover, even when included, women were largely only included as part of informal delegations for peace-related meetings, and those who were included were often the same set of women,¹² which in turn reduced the scope of representation. To bridge these gaps and to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the peace talks, CSOs sought to amplify voices of women from both urban and rural settings.¹³ The following section details the nature of these efforts, the extent of their effectiveness, and the challenges CSOs faced in the process.

CSO’s Efforts to Advance Women’s Inclusion & Participation in the IAN

CSOs have a long history of public interest activism in Afghanistan; some were active even during the first Taliban regime in the 1990s.¹⁴ They have contributed towards addressing a wide range of social, political, economic, and cultural issues in Afghan society. For example, they supported “the presidential and parliamentary election process by providing civic education programs throughout the country.”¹⁵ In more recent times, one of the issues in which CSOs have been actively involved is that of the Afghan peace process and women’s inclusion in it. CSOs’ efforts intensified as the process began gathering momentum in mid-2018, and more so as the IAN commenced in late 2020.

In this regard, CSOs took four inter-related approaches to ensure women’s inclusion and substantive participation, particularly in Track 1, Track 1.5, Track 2, and Track 3 talks and consultations. These formats of efforts

11. Nearly 80% of Afghanistan’s Peace Tables Exclude Women. (2020). Oxfam. [online] Sep. Available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/nearly-80-afghanistans-peace-tables-exclude-women>.

12. Ibid.

13. Yegana Z. (2021). Interviewed by Zainab Hassanpoor. 15 April, Kabul.

14. Safi, M. and Karokhail, M. (2020). For Lasting Peace In Afghanistan, The Process Needs Inclusion. Gandhara RFE/RL. [online] 5 Oct. Available at: <https://gandhara.rferl.org/amp/for-lasting-peace-in-afghanistan-the-process-needs-inclusion-/30876499.html>.

15. de Beers, A. (2009). [Civil Society Briefs] Overview of Civil Society Organization: Afghanistan. [online] Asian Development Bank. Available at: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28962/csb-afg.pdf>.

included organizing consultative events that culminated in declarations, cultivating advocacy networks, conducting surveys and studies on women's views on the peace process and their inclusion therein, and facilitating direct meetings between women and the negotiating teams.

A. Enabling Multi-Layered Consultations & Consultative Processes

To reach women in rural areas, CSOs launched a variety of events and conferences. At the Afghan Women's Network's (AWN) November 2020 Summit held collaboratively with the Afghanistan Mechanism for Inclusive Peace (AMIP), a group of female activists convened in Dubai. Here, a cross section of women from various Afghan provinces, Kabul city, and the diaspora deliberated on ways to "to reset and review the agenda for peace in Afghanistan."¹⁶ Through CSOs' efforts, direct meetings were also held with women in rural areas, to discuss issues related to the peace talks. Elaborating on outreach approaches, women's rights activist and former Member of the Kandahar Provincial Council, Maryam Dorani, said "we had an event for essay writing and poetry. We held campaigns for the peace process so that we can highlight women's roles in the society."¹⁷

Similarly, through joint efforts of the then Office of the First Lady, female members of the High Peace Council, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the AWN, and other female social activists, a Steering Committee was created to solicit women's opinions on peace from across all 34 provinces. These consultations took place from August 2018 to January 2019 and involved 15,000 women.¹⁸

B. Creating Advocacy Networks

To advocate for women's voices, CSOs also sought to create a broad-based mechanism to reach out to people all over the country, especially women. Highlighting AMIP's role during the IAN, the head of the Afghanistan Justice Organization, Lailuma Naseri, said "AMIP is a mechanism where 177 civil societies are members. AMIP works to create a network. It

16. Ibid.

17. Dorani, M. (2021). Interviewed by Zainab Hassanpoor. 1 August, Kabul.

18. Office of the First Lady, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. (n.d.). Afghan Women for Peace. [online] Available at: https://firstlady.gov.af/en/afghan_women_for_peace_peacebuilding-150920-en.pdf.

advocates with both sides. AMIP has direct access to the negotiation table and its network is expanding.”¹⁹ The AWN too has been active in its advocacy. She added that in the preceding two years, the AWN engaged foreign parliamentarians via e-mail. “In their campaigns and advocacy, they made it clear that their struggle was not ‘just’ for the protection of women’s rights, but rather for a sustainable peace that would not lead to an unravelling of the political system, would ensure that violence reduces if not ends, and would not curtail the rights and freedoms of large parts of the population.”²⁰

C. Providing Knowledge Support by Conducting Research & Surveys

Research is an important form of advocacy, and Afghan CSOs harnessed its potential too. Various CSOs conducted surveys and studies to articulate Afghan women’s perspectives on peace and to push for greater, more meaningful representation of women in the peace process. Researcher Mona Hossaini highlighted the value of research-based advocacy carried out by the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS), which also publishes the *Women and Public Policy Journal*. Detailing DROPS’ activities, she stated that it runs programs in seven provinces, specifically for women. She added that DROPS conducted research and surveys to seek women’s ideas on the peace process, and to ensure their representation on national and international levels.²¹

Similarly, in July 2021, the Afghan Analysts Network (AAN) published a report²² encapsulating the views and experiences of rural women on peace and war. In this study, AAN asked a wide range of women from rural areas in Afghanistan about their daily lives, the ways in which they were affected by the security situation in their region, their awareness and views of the ongoing peace process, and what they imagined peace would look like if it materialized. By providing evidenced-based findings and including the

19. Naseri L. (2021). Interviewed by Zainab Hassanpoor. 25 July, Kabul.

20. Ibid.

21. Hossaini M. (2021). Interviewed by Zainab Hassanpoor. 17 July, Kabul.

22. van Bijlert, M. (2021). ‘Between Hope and Fear. Rural Afghan women talk about peace and war’. [online] Afghanistan Analysts Network. Available at: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/special-reports/new-special-report-between-hope-and-fear-rural-afghan-women-talk-about-peace-and-war/>.

voices of women from all walks of life about peace and war, CSOs provided platforms for women to be heard and represented on a larger scale.

D. Facilitating Direct Meetings with Negotiating Teams

Due to facilitation provided by the CSOs, women had the opportunity to directly meet representatives of the Taliban, the GIRoA negotiating team, and the international community, in Doha, to discuss their ideas with them.²³ For example, an event, titled ‘Afghan Women’s Solidarity for Inclusive Peace’, was convened in Kabul city in April 2021. At this gathering, women from various provinces had the opportunity to meet a member of the GIRoA’s negotiation team. Women also had the opportunity to critique the (then) ongoing IAN and its weak representation of women. They also shared their concerns about the lack of meaningful participation of women, and their fears of losing their achievements and rights.²⁴

Naseri also highlighted how through AMIP’s efforts, two meetings were held with the Ministry of Peace, and two with the GIRoA negotiating team in Kabul. “Once our team members travelled to Doha and met with both sides’ delegates. There, they talked about women’s role in the peace process,”²⁵ she said. Such events and initiatives did not guarantee comprehensive representation of women or their meaningful participation in the peace talks. However, at the very least, they provided women with opportunities to access the negotiating table directly.

Challenges, Hurdles & Effectiveness

CSOs faced a variety of challenges on several levels. Due to negligible progress in the IAN, many among the public became critical of the peace process, and of CSOs’ activities on the peace process and women’s inclusion therein. Due to the unending war and its countrywide intensification in the summer of 2021, some people lost all hope for peace. Some even became irritated when asked about peace, citing the ongoing war in their villages.²⁶

The other problem was the lack of a specific network and program for

23. Yegana Z. (2021). Interviewed by Zainab Hassanpoor. 15 April, Kabul.

24. Author’s observations as an attendee.

25. Naseri L. (2021). Interviewed by Zainab Hassanpoor. 25 July, Kabul.

26. Hossaini M. (2021). Interviewed by Zainab Hassanpoor. 17 July, Kabul.

CSOs to connect with each other to coordinate. Highlighting the challenge, Naseri said “with AMIP, this is now possible. But AMIP on its own cannot reach remote areas. We also have funding problems to reach out to more CSOs and implement our programs.”²⁷ The GIROA’s non-transparency was another hurdle CSOs encountered. For instance, Dorani noted how they experienced a severe lack of information sharing by the government, resulting in tremendous confusion as to “where we should go and from where to start.”²⁸

Given all these challenges, on balance, CSOs’ activities cannot be considered wholly ineffective. Since CSOs are rooted within society and are more connected to the public and institutions relevant to the public, they proved more effective in reaching women and enabling them to voice their concerns and problems. Naseri emphasized that such advocacy by women and CSOs “turned the table into people’s benefit. Gatherings and meetings with foreign countries have been very effective. Research studies, gatherings, advocacy, and meetings with the international community, political leaders, and face-to-face discussions all have been impactful.”²⁹ Echoing these observations, Dorani said “I think where women have participated, they have had effective role... At least through these activities, women have made others understand that we are awake and monitoring the peace process. We observe and judge the decision they make.”³⁰

Conclusion

In August 2021, the Taliban overran Kabul and seized control of the state apparatus. Since then, women’s rights and freedoms have been systematically curtailed, and women have been actively removed from public and social life. In fact, as one of their first acts upon seizing power, the Taliban dissolved the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in September 2021 and it replaced with the ‘Ministry for Preaching and Guidance and the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice’. Women have been barred from employment, education, and a host of other rights and

27. Naseri L. (2021). Interviewed by Zainab Hassanpoor. 25 July, Kabul.

28. Dorani, M. (2021). Interviewed by Zainab Hassanpoor. 1 August, Kabul.

29. Naseri L. (2021). Interviewed by Zainab Hassanpoor. 25 July, Kabul.

30. Dorani, M. (2021). Interviewed by Zainab Hassanpoor. 1 August, Kabul.

activities. Such curtailment of women's rights and freedoms by the *de facto* authorities undoes not only those gains that CSOs made towards promoting women's inclusion in the IAN but also all their past achievements.

It is unsurprising to see no women in the all-male *de facto* authorities' structures because women's marginal inclusion in the peace talks already indicated this outcome. During the IAN, women's efforts and activities for ensuring meaningful participation were undermined and subverted. However, despite all the side-lining and the limitations women faced, they continued to fight for their rights. In this regard, CSOs played an important role in promoting women's inclusion and participation by making efforts in four different yet interrelated set of activities, i.e., organizing consultative events, creating advocacy networks, conducting research and surveys, and facilitating direct meetings between women and the negotiating teams. Though these efforts were highly valuable, ultimately, women's meaningful inclusion and participation remained a tall order goal.

Policy Recommendations

- The *de facto* authorities have ignored women and undermined their basic rights. They must bring women back into social and political life so that they continue representing those who have had limited access to social and political opportunities.
- CSOs have been an effective conduit for women and the public at large to voice their concerns, participate, and to be included in political and social affairs. Local CSOs must be supported to continue this representation and inclusion in society. Consistent institutional support, including (but not limited to) funding, is essential for this. Even the slightest drop in any aspect of support will immensely affect women's participation and lived experiences.
- At present, international sanctions pose some of the biggest challenges to local CSOs' ability to exist and operate. The international community must think laterally and innovate to formulate creative solutions for resuming and continuing funding support for national CSOs without prejudice to their legal obligations in relation to international sanctions.

- Create a tailored, accessible mechanism for women and the public at large to communicate with the international community. At present there are no structured communication platforms or mechanisms for women, CSOs, and the public at large to communicate their grievances and concerns to the *de facto* authorities or to the international community.
- Rectify the imbalance in public engagement. The international community speaks considerably more with the *de facto* authorities than with women, CSOs, and the public at large in Afghanistan's grassroots and mid-levels. This imbalance stands to marginalize women and local organizations. It also risks severely restricting their already curtailed access and platforms for expressing grievances. The imbalance will also afflict the international community with an inadequate grasp of the diverse ways in which life is affected in different parts of the country.

The Role of CSOs in Enhancing Women's Access to Education in Afghanistan

By Najia Alizada¹

Following the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, Afghan women's state-of-affairs witnessed a marked improvement. The education sector (primary, secondary, and tertiary) was one of the sectors that saw significant and tangible positive change between 2001 and 2021. A considerable portion of associated achievements were a result of various gender parity-oriented policy interventions and projects implemented by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), international organizations, as well as foreign and domestic civil society organizations (CSO).

This essay contextualizes the scale and complexity of efforts that went into producing such an outcome. Within this scope, it discusses CSOs' contributions towards improving girls' access to education in various urban and rural areas of Afghanistan. It begins by highlighting the scale of change that was achieved between 2001 and 2021. Afghanistan's civil society spectrum is contextualized in the following section. The subsequent section provides a brief overview of CSOs' contributions towards improving girls' access to education in the country. As an illustrative example, this section also summarizes the role and impact of the Afghan Women's Educational Center, an Afghan CSO whose interventions have tangibly helped improve girls' access to education since 1991. The concluding section briefly juxtaposes the gains of the past two decades against the Taliban-induced deterioration since August 2021. The final section offers actionable policy recommendations for improving women's access to education in the post-2021 context.

1. Najia Alizada is a National Area Coordinator at Samuel Hall and leads its Afghanistan office.
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=1&Lang=en.

Transformation in Girls' Access to Education in Afghanistan (2001–2021)

Back in 1975, girls constituted 14% and 11% of the total enrolment in Afghanistan's 3371 primary and 542 secondary schools respectively, staffed by 18,553 and 3,800 teachers respectively.² 64 of 1100 academic staff in higher education institutions were women; and by 1977, female students constituted 15% and 51% of the total enrolment at universities and non-university higher education institutions respectively.³ This trajectory was interrupted by the civil war that broke out in 1978, which was followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, subsequent civil wars, and finally, the first Taliban regime, during which women's agency was virtually snuffed out. By the time the Taliban regime was toppled in 2001, the country had experienced nearly 25 years of war. The education sector and girls' access to education were among the prime casualties of the conflict, with only an estimated 5,000 girls enrolled in schools in 2001.⁴

Post 2001, the GIRoA (from 2004), the United Nations (UN), the international community, and domestic and international CSOs made concerted efforts to rebuild Afghanistan's education sector and improve gender parity by enhancing girls' access to primary, secondary, and tertiary education. These efforts included substantial financial aid for improving the country's education sector and infrastructure, advocacy programs like the successful 'Back to School' campaign,⁵ and teacher training programs, to name a few. Moreover, Afghanistan's 2004 constitution guaranteed the right to education for all citizens, including at least nine years of mandatory education.⁶ In the post-2001 period, Kabul also ratified various relevant international legal conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,⁷ and the

2. Samady, S.R. (2001). Education and Afghan society in the twentieth century. [online] UNESCO, pp.36–45. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000124627>.

3. Ibid. pp.59–68

4. Jackson, A. (2011). High Stakes: Girls' Education in Afghanistan. [online] Oxfam. Available at: https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/file_attachments/afghanistan-girls-education-022411_4.pdf.

5. UNICEF hails start of Afghan school year, with girls let in for first time in years. (2002). UN News. [online] 25 Mar. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2002/03/30672-unesf-hails-start-afghan-school-year-girls-let-first-time-years>.

6. The right to education: What's at stake in Afghanistan? A 20-year review. (2021). [online] UNESCO. Available at: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_v11.pdf.

7. UN Treaty Body Database. (n.d.). Ratification Status for Afghanistan. [online] Available at:

Convention against Discrimination in Education.⁸ These efforts delivered significant results. Data published by the UN, GIRoA, and similar sources show that:

1. Within the first decade itself, there was a multi-fold rise in girls' enrolment in schools, with 2.4 million girls in primary education by 2011,⁹ compared to around 5,000 in 2001.
2. As of 2020, nearly 10 million pupils were enrolled in schools, of which 40% were girls.¹⁰
3. Total female enrolment in higher education institutions rose from a negligible number to 1,15,568 in 2020, representing 26% of the total enrolment.¹¹
4. Between 2011 and 2018 alone, female literacy nearly doubled, rising from 17% to 30%.¹²
5. Between 2007 and 2018, numbers of female teachers in schools rose from 39,539 (28%) to 81,191 (36%), denoting a 105% increase.¹³
6. The proportion of female academic staff at higher education institutions rose from 0% in 2001 to 16% in 2012.¹⁴
7. Numbers of schools rose from 6,000 in 2001 to at least 18,000 in 2018.¹⁵

8. Office of the Director-General (2021). Implementation of standard-setting instruments, Part I: General monitoring. [online] UNESCO. Available at:

https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378425_eng/PDF/378425eng.pdf.multi.page=11.

9. Jackson, A. (2011). High Stakes: Girls' Education in Afghanistan. [online] Oxfam. Available at: https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/file_attachments/afghanistan-girls-education-022411_4.pdf.

10. Wang, Y. (2021). Girls' Education in Afghanistan: Progress and Challenges. Network for International Policies and Cooperation in Education and Training. [online] 24 Sep. Available at: <https://www.norrag.org/girls-education-in-afghanistan-progress-and-challenges-by-yixin-wang/>.

11. UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2022). Afghanistan: Education & Literacy. [online] Available at: <https://uis.unesco.org/en/country/af>.

12. The right to education: What's at stake in Afghanistan? A 20-year review. (2021). [online] UNESCO, p.5. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378911>.

13. Ibid.

14. The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund. (n.d.). Improving Higher Education in Afghanistan. [online] Available at: <https://www.wb-artf.org/results/artf-stories/improving-higher-education-afghanistan-0>.

15. Wang, Y. (2021). Girls' Education in Afghanistan: Progress and Challenges. Network for International Policies and Cooperation in Education and Training. [online] 24 Sep. Available at: <https://www.norrag.org/girls-education-in-afghanistan-progress-and-challenges-by-yixin-wang/>.

8. Numbers of tertiary education institutions rose from seven in 2001 to 39 in 2021 (24 universities and 15 higher education institutes), and from 0 private universities in 2001 to 129 in 2021.¹⁶
9. Female participation in the Kankor Exam, Afghanistan's national entrance exam for admission to university education, rose from 1,000 in 2003 to around 78,000 in 2013.¹⁷

However, in addition to socio-cultural and cognate barriers to women's education, some operational pitfalls also persisted. A 2021 report by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) highlighted how even though "[g]overnment expenditure on education increased regularly to reach 3.9% of GDP in 2019," external aid represented "a large proportion of education expenditure, standing at around 49% in 2020."¹⁸ For example, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded the establishment of over 8000 community-based education and accelerated learning classes, thereby providing education for over 171,300 children, 53.3% of whom were girls.¹⁹

In Context: Civil Society in Afghanistan

In its 2001 Report on the World Social Situation, the UN described how "[t]he boundaries of civil society, often blurred, embrace activities of numerous organized as well as informal groups, united, however, by a common interest that is not adequately served by for-profit private entrepreneurial concerns or government at the local or national levels."²⁰ Thus, civil society includes a wide spectrum of non-governmental (NGO) and/or non-profit organizations ranging in size, nature, structures, and objectives. For example, it includes domestic and international NGOs of

16. Akhtar, F. and Ranjan, A. (2021). Afghanistan's Education Sector: Prospects Under Taliban Rule. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. [online] 11 Oct. Available at: www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5791.

17. Zirack, L. (2021). Women's Education: Afghanistan's Biggest Success Story Now at Risk. *The Diplomat*. [online] 1 Sep. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/womens-education-afghanistans-biggest-success-story-now-at-risk/>.

18. The right to education: What's at stake in Afghanistan? A 20-year review. (2021). [online] UNESCO, p.7. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378911>.

19. Bakshi, P. and Global Education Monitoring Report Team (2020). Unpacking inclusion in education: lessons from Afghanistan for achieving SDG4. [online] UNESCO, pp.17–18. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373690>.

20. Division for Inclusive Social Development (2001). 2001 Report on the World Social Situation. [online] UNDESA, p.9. Available at: <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/rwss/docs/2001/Intro&overview.pdf>.

all sizes, academia and research institutions, local/traditional councils, associations, informal volunteer groups.²¹

As of 2020, Afghanistan had over 7000 registered CSOs. Reports²² show that this number included over 1700 (registered) domestic NGOs, over 200 international NGOs, and over 5700 associations such as social organizations, foundations, and unions. Additionally, at least until August 2021, there were several informal, traditional, and unregistered civil society groups, including over 20,000 community development councils and village *shuras* (councils).²³ Between 2001 and 2021, registered CSOs included social responsibility organizations addressing issues such as women's rights, child rights, public participation in governance, education, and the environment.²⁴

The Role of CSOs in Enhancing Girls' Access to Education in Afghanistan

Between 2001 and 2021, both domestic and international CSOs made substantial contributions towards promoting gender equality in access to education in Afghanistan. These included quality improvement programs like training teachers in basic competencies; the development of a joint education management information system; and the dissemination of information on life skills and peacebuilding through a variety of channels, including radio broadcasts.²⁵

For example, Aid Afghanistan for Education (AAE) has operated in the country since before the first Taliban regime began. To mitigate the effects of the ban on girls' education during the first Taliban regime in the 1990s,

21. Nijssen, S. (2012). Civil Society in Transitional Contexts: A Brief Review of Post-Conflict Countries and Afghanistan. NATO Civil-Military Fusion Centre, p.2.

22. Inclusive and Sustainable Growth Assessment [CPS: Afghanistan, 2017-2021]. (2017). [online] Asian Development Bank, p.9. Available at: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/cps-afg-2017-2021-ga.pdf>. Also see: Nijssen, S. (2012). Civil Society in Transitional Contexts: A Brief Review of Post-Conflict Countries and Afghanistan. NATO Civil-Military Fusion Centre, p.2.

23. Ibid.

24. Seitz, H. (2017). CSOs in Afghanistan: How Civil Society Is Flourishing. BORGEM Magazine. [online] 27 Aug. Available at: <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/csos-in-afghanistan/>.

25. National Education Strategic Plan for Afghanistan 1385-1389 [2006-2010]. (2007). [online] Ministry of Education of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Available at: <https://neqmap.bangkok.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/National-Education-Strategic-Plan-for-Afghanistan.pdf>.

the AAE established five secret classrooms in Kabul and educated over 200 girls. After the Taliban regime was toppled in 2001, the AAE supported girls' access to education in Afghanistan through nine schools across five provinces, enabling over 3000 marginalized girls to attend school.²⁶ Meanwhile, through financial and non-financial forms of support, the USAID helped increase access to education for 3 million girls; improved school infrastructure in rural areas in 17 provinces; and helped develop 31 new university programs to link learning and labor market needs.

To further illustrate the nature of Afghan CSOs' interventions and their tangible results, contributions of the Afghan Women's Educational Center (AWEC) are summarized below.

The Afghan Women's Educational Center

Founded in 1991, the AWEC is a non-profit, national organization run by Afghan women. With a particular focus on women and children, AWEC's priorities pertain to increasing capacity and reducing vulnerability within neglected populations. In 1991, AWEC launched its first project by starting a community-based primary school for Afghan refugee children in Islamabad, Pakistan. Subsequently, following a request by the community, the school was expanded to offer high school education as well.²⁷ In the post-2001 period, AWEC's interventions took place primarily in Afghanistan, steadily expanding operations across the country. Headquartered in Kabul as it grew, by 2021, AWEC had sub-offices in nine provinces, and was implementing projects in 13 provinces.²⁸ During this period, it also broadened its education-oriented interventions to make them more holistic by including accelerated learning, literacy, professional capacity building and training, and rights and laws awareness programs.²⁹ Examples of AWEC's recent³⁰ interventions and their impact include:

26. Aid Afghanistan for Education (n.d.). About Us. [online] Aid Afghanistan for Education. Available at: <http://www.aidafghanistanforeducation.org/who-we-are/#About-Us>.

27. Afghan Women's Educational Center (n.d.). A Short History of AWEC. [online] Afghan Women's Educational Center. Available at: <https://awec.info/Home/about-us-2/>.

28. Annual Report[s] (2013-2019). Afghan Women's Educational Center.

29. Organization Profile. (2011). [online] Afghan Women's Educational Center. Available at: <https://awec.info/AWECPDFFiles/Profile.pdf>.

30. Annual Report (2019). (2020). [online] Afghan Women's Educational Center. Available at: <https://awec.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Annual-Report2019.pdf>.

- **‘Education Can’t Wait’**: This project sought to provide education for vulnerable children in Paktika province who did not have access to schools or education. The project covered approximately 5448 students, of which 3674 were girls, and included IDPs, returnees, and those already based in the local community. Co-implemented by AWEC as part of the Afghanistan Consortium for Community-based Education and Learning (ACCEL), in 2019–20 alone, this project resulted in nearly 70% enrolment of girls in community-based education, accelerated learning programs, and pre-school classes. It also resulted in the recruitment of a near equal number of female teachers in nine districts and featured the first training and learning circle for female teachers in the province.

- **‘Women Empowerment through Enterprise Development’**: This project was implemented in Balkh province in 2018–19 and focused predominantly on the dairy sector. Under this project, AWEC trained a total of 521 female and male entrepreneurs in business relevant skills like literacy and numeracy; basic accountancy; business management; and dairy processing. Two self-help groups (SHG) were also established. By applying their newly gained knowledge and by harnessing the potential of their SHG networks, beneficiaries (especially women) were able to increase their sales and daily dairy production. Some even managed to save around Afs. 4000 each month. Some beneficiaries of the project invested their increased savings in cognate business activities like pickle and jam making as well.

- **‘Gul Makai Network’**: This project was implemented in two districts each in Kabul, Nangarhar, and Parwan provinces. It sought to reduce girls’ dropout rates in schools, and to assist re-integration of female school dropouts in formal education. Under this project, AWEC established coordination hubs, community *shura* clusters, and advocacy groups in 2019. These collective efforts swiftly began showing results. For example, in 2019 alone, 53 female school dropouts were successfully re-integrated into higher secondary

education across all three provinces.

- **Anna's Educational Center (AEC):** The AEC was established by AWEC in 2005, in collaboration with educator Anna Hacker.³¹ Based in Kabul, AEC interventions seek to improve street children's access to education and employable skills. The Center also provides similar support for older vulnerable women who find themselves in comparable circumstances. As a direct result of the Center's activities, in 2019 alone, 50 dropouts were reintegrated into Kabul's public schools, and 75 women successfully completed courses in literacy and numeracy, and vocational training in tailoring skills.

Conclusion

Women have been the most affected demographic under the Taliban regime, be it during the 1990s or in the current situation (i.e., since 15 August 2021). In both instances, women's experiences have been characterized by deprivation of fundamental human rights, confinement to the four corners of their homes, and egregious degradation in social mobility. After the collapse of the first Taliban regime, Afghan women's access to education witnessed remarkable progress due to concerted efforts by the GIRoA, the international community, and CSOs. However, the task was not yet complete. Large numbers of girls in Afghanistan have continued to face multiple barriers to education, arising from various socio-cultural, socio-economic, and security related circumstances and/or practices.

Even prior to 15 August 2021, comprehensively achieving equal access to education needed several more decades of consistent efforts; and the situation has worsened precariously since then. Upon seizing power in 2021, the Taliban promptly banned girls' access to education. Consequently, around 850,000 of 1.1 million school aged girls are being denied access to education, and thus, their fundamental rights. Collaborative efforts by CSOs and the international community are vital now more than ever. Specifically, remedying this backslide requires concerted, cross-sectoral efforts, one in

31. Hayat, M. (2019). The Mountain Whisperers. *Afghanistan Times*. [online] 16 Dec. Available at: <https://www.afghanistantimes.af/the-mountain-whisperers/>.

which CSOs' active involvement is crucial. This essay demonstrates its need and significance by contextualizing the gains made between 2001 and 2021 vis-à-vis girls' access to education, and CSOs' contributions in this regard.

Policy Recommendations

- The *de facto* authorities must respect the entire spectrum of women's rights and immediately reopen girls' schools of all levels across the country, as well as eliminate all barriers to women's education. Women and girls constitute nearly 50% of the country's population. Between August 2021 and August 2022, Afghanistan's GDP shrunk by 2.5% (US\$ 500 million) as a direct consequence of prohibitions imposed by the *de facto* authorities on women's education and participation in society. Afghan women's participation in society is crucial for the country's development and for improving the humanitarian situation.
- Women and girls must be entitled to and able to study and work in any field of their choice. Curricula should not be restricted or limited in any way. CSOs must have a substantial say in academic curriculum development. Prior to August 2021, CSOs used to assist the government with improving academic curricula to bring them closer to meeting international quality standards. This practice must continue unconditionally.
- The *de facto* authorities should lift barriers and create a conducive environment for domestic CSOs to resume educational activities for women and girls that can supplement conventional educational programs like in schools and universities. For women, these activities include literacy, numeracy, digital and language skills, upskilling, and career guidance to name a few. For girls, these activities also include digital skills, and educational counselling to name a few.
- The international community and Afghan women's rights activists based outside the country must institute a bridge to engage directly with women's rights activists inside the country. Such a mechanism will not only enable multi-level advocacy coordination in service of

reopening of girls' schools and the full spectrum of women's rights but also prove beneficial for gleaning what women in the country want and how the international community can help them in context-responsive ways.

- Given the prevailing economic crisis and banking sector constraints, the international community must look beyond rigid, technical and/or bureaucratic requirements to create and/or adopt innovative mechanisms to provide funding support and technical assistance to national CSOs working on girls' education in the country.

An Interview with Dr. Habiba Sarabi: “Peace Requires Long-Term Processes”

By Mariam Safi¹

In this interview,² Dr. Habiba Sarabi³ reflects on the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan’s (GIROA) unsuccessful attempt to negotiate peace with the Taliban; her tenure as a member of the GIROA’s negotiating team; and her first-hand observations of the process’s strengths and weaknesses.

1. Could you tell us what transpired at the negotiation table in Doha during the 15 days that preceded the fall of Kabul in August 2021?

In one of his recent interviews, Afghanistan’s former President Hamid Karzai correctly stated that the GIROA was not meddling in the peace process but that it had created a type of a situation that was inconducive for the talks to move forward. For example, from the time the talks commenced, President Ashraf Ghani’s administration was calling for the Taliban to join the Republic. But the Taliban did not want to budge from their demand of establishing an ‘Islamic Emirate’, even in the slightest. No one was compromising on their position, and this led to a stalemate. In the final 15 days, the Taliban did not wish to come to the negotiation table as they were making significant territorial gains inside the country. On the other hand, the GIROA continued refusing to budge from its stance despite witnessing various provinces fall to the Taliban. By not compromising, the

1. Mariam Safi is the Executive Director of the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS), and the Editor-in-Chief of DROPS’ flagship Women and Public Policy Journal.

2. Responses have been edited for length and clarity.

3. Dr. Habiba Sarabi is a hematologist, humanitarian, and a senior politician. In a career spanning nearly 40 years, she has served in various capacities, including as Afghanistan’s Minister of Women’s Affairs; Minister of Culture and Education; and Deputy Chair of the High Peace Council, to name a few. She became Afghanistan’s first female provincial governor when she assumed charge as the Governor of Bamian Province in 2005.

GIRoA prolonged this stalemate.

Meanwhile, sensing a need to induce some change capable of breaking the stalemate, the US decided to convene a group of elders from Afghanistan who could negotiate with the Taliban and thereby circumvent the Republic's negotiation team. This group of elders included former President Hamid Karzai, Chief Executive Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the GIRoA's Chief Negotiator Masoom Stanekzai, and possibly, President Ghani's former Chief of Staff Abdul Salam Rahimi. I am not certain as to who else was part of this cohort. It is plausible that President Ghani would have wanted someone he trusted to be part of this group, but I am not sure who it could have been. The US had planned to organize a meeting between this group of elders and Taliban Co-founder Mullah Baradar at the April 2021 Istanbul Conference that was ultimately cancelled. The US had also drafted an agreement, which it had hoped the two sides would sign at this meeting. The Taliban got wind of these plans, and set three conditions⁴ for their participation:

- 'The conference should be short'.
- 'The agenda should not include decision-making on critical issues'.
- 'The Taliban delegation should be a low level one'.

Moreover, the Taliban were not only making considerable territorial gains but had already also received a withdrawal date from the US and NATO forces. Consequently, they did not see the need to sign a power sharing agreement. When they realized that they would be asked to sign an agreement, they kept stalling, and eventually refused to partake in the Istanbul Conference. And thus, the stalemate continued.

In the final days in the run up to the fall of the Republic, the US made another attempt to bring this small group of elders to Doha to hold talks and possibly sign an agreement with the Taliban. It was never clear to us as to whether it was the same agreement I mentioned earlier, or a new one. I believe the agreement that had been reached among Karzai, Abdullah,

4. Khan, T. (2021). VOA Exclusive: Taliban Attach Conditions to Istanbul Conference Participation. Voice of America. [online] 25 Mar. Available at: https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia_voa-exclusive-taliban-attach-conditions-istanbul-conference-participation/6206197.html.

Stanekzai, and Rahimi — which was not shared with us — may have stipulated President Ghani's immediate resignation, and the formation of a transitional government. However, it was too late. We realized this during the 11 August 2021 Troika Plus⁵ meeting in Doha, from which Dr. Abdullah departed, feeling very discouraged. The GIROA negotiation team was also quite discouraged by that point.

2. Why Did Dr. Abdullah Feel Discouraged?

At that meeting it became apparent that the US wanted to wind up the process, and in doing so, was supporting the Taliban. Another major issue was Qatar and its Foreign Minister's Special Envoy for Counterterrorism and Mediation of Conflict Resolution, Dr. Mutlaq Al-Qahtani. It seemed to me that Dr. Al-Qahtani was supporting the Taliban. I sensed this on two different occasions. The first was during the Troika Plus meeting. As he was leading the discussions, it became obvious to us in the Republic's negotiating team and to Dr. Abdullah that the process was not being managed properly. As a result, Dr. Abdullah became quite discouraged. The second instance occurred weeks before the fall of the Republic. Dr. Al-Qahtani had convened a meeting in his office and had invited both negotiation teams to discuss and agree on a mediator. This meeting came about after the Republic's negotiation team and President Ghani's office jointly wrote to the Qatari authorities, requesting a mediator. At the meeting in question, Dr. Al-Qahtani came across as rather passive aggressive and told us that we had to jointly agree on a mediator, failing which the matter would not move forward. He was aware that the Taliban had refused to do this in the past. When they again refused to budge even after intense discussion, I felt that it gave Dr. Al-Qahtani a convenient pretext to take the matter off the table for good.

3. What Was the Situation in Doha During Those Final Hours When the Taliban Were Closing in On Kabul?

The Taliban were not negotiating with the Republic's team, and all of us in that team truly fell into a state of mourning. We had all thought and

5. Upadhyaya, N.P. (2021). Troika plus meet in Doha; imminent fall of Kabul? People's Review. [online] 11 Aug. Available at: <https://www.peoplesreview.com.np/2021/08/11/troika-plus-meet-in-doha-imminent-fall-of-kabul/>.

were waiting for the delegation of elders led by former President Karzai to arrive from Afghanistan and hopefully put an end to the situation that was unfolding in the country. Simultaneously, we were also waiting for President Ghani to address the nation to see if he would provide guidance to the public and/or submit his resignation; but he did neither. Had an agreement been reached, I think it could have paved the way for a transitional government under which all institutions could have been retained, temporarily governed by Afghanistan's 1964 constitution until a new constitution was developed. I cannot speculate on the type(s) of situation(s) that would have unfolded if President Ghani had resigned. It is difficult to estimate whether the Taliban would have signed an agreement in those final hours even if President Ghani had resigned. By that point the Taliban had almost completely seized control of the whole country and really did not see a need to agree to a transitional government.

4. What Would Have Been Different Today, Had President Ghani Resigned, And This Agreement, Signed?

I do not believe it would have made much of a difference because the Taliban had already strengthened their grip across the country, and all the provinces had collapsed. However, in hindsight, had the Istanbul Conference taken place, there might have been some hope for the creation of a transitional government, and pressure could have been applied on the Taliban to do so. But this is why Mullah Baradar did not attend that meeting. Thus, in those final hours leading up to the fall of the Republic, President Ghani's resignation may not have made much of a difference.

5. What Key Factors Do You Believe Led to The Failure of The Intra-Afghan Negotiations?⁶

The first was the February 2020 Doha Agreement between the US and the Taliban. The GIRoA was not part of it. The second was the announcement of the US's troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. The third is a combination of external factors like the 2020 US presidential election and the March 2021 Moscow Conference to name a few. The Taliban used the US election as an excuse to delay conducting negotiations till the results were

6. The Intra-Afghan Negotiations commenced on 12 September 2020

announced. Meanwhile, the Moscow Conference and similar events gave the Taliban an excuse to avoid the negotiating table for weeks at a stretch. These external factors not only prolonged the process but also bought the Taliban time. The fourth was the location of the talks. Doha should not have been chosen as the venue for conducting the negotiations because the Taliban had support, opportunities, and resources that Qatar had provided them. Being in Doha thus gave the Taliban an upper hand during the negotiations.

6. Was The Republic's Negotiation Team Strong Enough?

It was a strong team and did not have any shortcomings in any area of expertise. However, unfortunately, the chief negotiator constantly withheld information from the rest of the team. He also did not convey the reality of what was taking place in Doha, to the GIRoA. For example, he did not share with Kabul the truth about how hardened the Taliban's stance had become and how uncompromising they were, or about the role Qatar was playing. I believe he did not have the courage to admit to President Ghani that he had been unsuccessful in his efforts to convince the Taliban to compromise, and that therefore he did not share the truth about the developments in Doha.

7. Was The Republic's Negotiation Team Involved in The Development of the 'Afghanistan Peace Agreement' That Was "Leaked" In March 2021?

Yes, the Republic's negotiation team was aware of this draft proposal. At the time, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad's team had wanted to present it at the Istanbul Conference. The draft agreement developed by the US envisaged the creation of a 'Peace Government of Afghanistan' for a transitional period until power was transferred to a regular government following the promulgation of a new constitution and national elections. The creation of an *Ulema Shura*/High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence was also envisaged to help prepare the new constitution and to guide all national and local government structures.⁷

7. [Discussion Draft] 'Afghanistan Peace Agreement'. (2021). [online] ToloNews. Available at: <https://tolonews.com/pdf/pdf.pdf>.

This draft agreement was a summary of the RAND Corporation version⁸ that had come out in 2019 before the Intra-Afghan Negotiations commenced and before the Republic's negotiation team was created. Khalilzad sent the draft agreement to the Republic's negotiation team to solicit views. He also sent a copy to President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, among others. An updated draft was shared with the Taliban after incorporating all the views. When the Taliban saw the document, they rejected it.

8. Did Civil Society Organizations Have an Impact on The Peace Process?

Civil society actors had a significant impact on the Republic's negotiation team. They also had an impact on the chief negotiator, and most importantly, on the international community. Unfortunately, they had no impact on the Taliban, who not only ignored the civil society's views but also acted in a contrarious manner. The only group that had some impact on the Taliban was a group that included Norway, Germany, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. This group functioned as a peace supporting group of sorts, and the Taliban tended to listen to them.

9. Several Local Institutions in Afghanistan Facilitated Civil Society Representatives' Visits to Doha to Meet with The Taliban. The Goal Was to Demonstrate How Much Afghanistan's Society Had Changed in The Past 20 Years and To Persuade the Taliban to Be More Conciliatory and Mindful of These Changes. However, Looking Back, One Can See That These Meetings Did Not Have an Impact. Some Even Feel That These Meetings Gave the Taliban More Legitimacy. In Hindsight, Do You Believe It Was Important for The Civil Society to Have Interacted with The Taliban? Looking Back, Would You Advise the Civil Society Do Things Differently?

It was necessary to meet with the Taliban. Indeed, the intra-Taliban divisions we see today existed back then as well. For example, the Doha-based Taliban were slightly more moderate compared to other Taliban leaders who were based elsewhere and held all the decision-making powers. The civil society did a great job. But to be honest, even civil

8. Miller, L.E. and Blake, J.S. (2019). Envisioning a Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Afghanistan. [online] RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2937.html.

society groups showed no willingness to compromise. They were always presenting the Republic's negotiation team with red lines like women's rights, and the protection of the constitution and the Islamic Republic, to name a few. We needed to hear these red lines. But we also needed to hear from them about alternative solutions to those red lines that would be most acceptable to them, so that we could present those at the negotiating table if we hit a stalemate on those other demands. For instance, we used to ask civil society actors to tell us what alternatives could be proposed to the Taliban if they did not agree to joining the Republic. The civil society did not have a 'Plan B' and were stuck only on their red lines. When we as the Republic's negotiation team would present this to Khalilzad — who was acting as the mediator between the two negotiation teams — he would ask us what we were willing to compromise on. We did not have an answer to that question.

10. If We Could Do This All Over Again, What Should Civil Society Do Differently?

We started everything in a rush. Experiences from other peacebuilding contexts show that achieving peace requires long-term processes as it needs both bottom-up grassroots efforts, and top-down political efforts, which must eventually meet in the middle. If top-down efforts do not match bottom-up efforts and if the needs of citizens, particularly those in rural areas, are not reflected, then the processes would not be successful. In our case, most of the advocacy was done by civil society actors who grew up in urban areas. It would be prudent for civil society to reach out to those in rural areas and gather their perspectives, opinions, challenges, and demands, so that equal emphasis and effort is placed on both bottom-up needs and wants as well as top-down aspects.

11. Since 2018, Afghanistan's Civil Society Had Been Advocating for The Ghani Administration to Foster a National Consensus on The Peace Process but This Never Happened. Instead, A Loya Jirga Was Convened, Which Is Not the Same as Building a Countrywide Consensus. Why Was This the Case?

Not only did we not have a national consensus, but there was no consensus

among political leaders either, due to their self-centered, power-seeking goals. This was a key factor that led to the events of 15 August 2021. Like I mentioned earlier, peace processes normally take time to produce lasting outcomes. However, we rushed our process, and the Roadmap for Peace⁹ put forth by President Ghani is a case in point. He wanted to solidify his electoral victory and then through that process, apply pressure on the Taliban to accept a political settlement.

12. In 2018, A Women's Movement for Peace Emerged in Afghanistan in Response to The Us-Taliban Talks. Do You Believe the Women's Movement Had an Impact?

The women's movement and their advocacy had a significant impact at the beginning of the peace process, and on the discussions regarding women's participation in the Republic's negotiation team. For example, their influence led to the Ghani government committing to the inclusion of women in the negotiation team. However, we often also witnessed President Ghani's administration instrumentalize the women's movement when it suited them and sideline it when it did not. When closed-door and back-channel meetings were held with the Taliban's negotiation team in Doha, the leadership of the GIROA's negotiating team ignored us female team members. This was despite them telling us that our presence in Doha was crucial as it reflected how gender inclusive the Republic was. Women's mobilization also led Khalilzad to make several visits to Kabul to meet with women's groups in the country. All this was a result of the women's movement and civil society organizations. But as I mentioned earlier, their advocacy did not have an impact on a key party to the talks— i.e., the Taliban.

9. Shalizi, H. (2021). Afghan leader proposes peace road map in three phases - document. Reuters. [online] Apr. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-afghanistan-peace-idUSKBN2BR0EG>.

Book Excerpt

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

By Nahid Shahalimi¹

The following excerpt² is the introductory chapter of ‘We Are Still Here: Afghan Women on Courage, Freedom, and the Fight to Be Heard’, a compendium of essays featuring reflections and insights from 13 impactful women from Afghanistan, edited by Nahid Shahalimi. Recounting her lived experience in the introductory chapter, Shahalimi captures the essence of the highs and lows the 13 authors — and countless others — navigated in their diverse paths towards breaking glass ceilings and empowering fellow women in Afghanistan. DROPS has not edited the excerpt for content or language.

Title: We Are Still Here: Afghan Women on Courage, Freedom, and the Fight to Be Heard

Edited By: Nahid Shahalimi

Publisher: Penguin Canada

Place: Toronto

Date: 16 August 2022

Language: English

Hardcover: 192 pages

ISBN-10: 0735246009

ISBN-13: 978-0735246003

1. Nahid Shahalimi is an activist, filmmaker, artist, and author. Her first book, *Where Courage Bears the Soul*, was published in 2017.

2. Excerpted from *We Are Still Here: Afghan Women on Courage, Freedom, and the Fight to Be Heard* edited by Nahid Shahalimi. Copyright © 2022 Nahid Shahalimi. Published by Penguin Canada, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited. Reproduced by arrangement with the Publisher. All rights reserved.

Introduction

By Nahid Shahalimi

For as long as I can remember, we have not had time to mourn. One disaster has succeeded another. We have lost loved ones, our homeland, our freedoms, and our hopes. Now an entire nation and its youth are being denied what they require to even feed themselves and their families.

My Afghan friends and I do not have time to mourn because we want to help those who remain in our homeland and give voice to those who go unheard and may never be heard again. Radical repressive forces are now at work in Afghanistan, and this is of significant concern to all people of the world, but especially to women. Although Afghanistan is physically distant from Germany, which I call home today, radical ideas know no borders.

It is only by telling you about the past that you can truly comprehend what we once had and what we have repeatedly lost. And what we have lost once again with the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021.

My first trip back to Afghanistan in 2011, on Ariana Afghan Airlines, was twenty-six years after my family and I fled our beloved homeland. There were years when it was not possible to travel to Afghanistan, especially from the 1980s to 2001, because it had become too dangerous. My mother, who had visited Afghanistan before 2011, and subsequently more often than I did, joined me on the trip. I was very excited. Over the past three decades, I had dreamed of what it would be like to return to my native land, but I could not imagine what my arrival would feel like in reality. To my surprise, there were many exiled Afghans on the plane — both men and women. Why were they going back to Afghanistan? Was this also their first flight back? These were questions I would have liked to ask the passengers. My fashionably dressed Western seatmate was twenty-five years old, born in Germany of Afghan parents, and had just completed her master's degree. Apparently, she wanted to see her fiancé, whom she had met at a large Afghan family gathering that is so common. It was her fifth trip to the country, and she had not a trace of fear.

I was overcome with a sense of belonging, and a feeling of happiness coursed through my entire body. I didn't realize how much I had longed for that feeling. For the first time, I understood what it meant to have a birthright. Among the other Afghans on the plane, I was not an outsider. We spoke one language, and I was on my way home at last. I not only wanted to see and visit the country of my birth after so many years, but I wanted to return to help: to get involved in building social and artistic projects, to advise, document, and report. Above all, I wanted to support women whose situations I could relate to and best empathize with. My destiny had always been clear; since I was twelve years old, I had longed to go back home.

I was lucky to live a few carefree years of my childhood in my country during times of peace and unity. When Mohammed Zahir Shah (1914-2007), the last king of Afghanistan, was overthrown in 1973, everything changed for my family. This overthrow ushered in the demise of our peaceful and united coexistence, at least as far as the forty years before the coup were concerned. The Soviet-backed communist government of the day was overthrown in 1978, and in December 1979, the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, believing it could control the country. The Soviets became embroiled in a war with Afghan religious freedom fighters, also known as the mujahideen. The United States of America then stepped in, supporting the mujahideen with money and weapons. Afghanistan became the sad scene of a proxy war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, with various other actors (such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran) also fighting for their interests and against the West. Over a million Afghans and about fifteen thousand Soviet soldiers died. When the Soviets left in 1989 after ten years, we did not have time to mourn the dead. A civil war followed between 1992 and 1996, in which another 1.5 million people lost their lives.

In the early 1990s, after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban movement emerged in northern Pakistan; the word *taliban* means "students" in Pashto, one of the official languages of Afghanistan along with Dari. Upon assuming power, the Taliban pledged to restore peace and security in Pashtun areas along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, as

well as to enforce its own strict interpretation of Sharia, or Islamic law. It is thought that the movement originated from the harsh forms of the Sunni Islam religious Madrassas (religious schools) heavily funded by Saudi Arabia.

Because of the bloody civil war, the Taliban gained strength, and in 1995 and 1996 it introduced a radical and anti-human form of Islam promoted by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. News that reached us in Europe then took on a new quality of terror.

Between 1996 and 2001, the Taliban terrorized Afghanistan and made no secret of its disregard for women. During that time, everything that could be considered joyful was banned: music, dance, sports. Women were only allowed to work in the health sector, and that was only because the mortality rate of women and children, especially in childbirth, had skyrocketed. Education for women was banned. Today, the rate of illiteracy among women in Afghanistan is still the highest in the world, especially in relation to the literacy rate of men. Education has proven to be an effective means of lifting both women and their families out of poverty, but that proved inconvenient to the Taliban.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on the U.S. changed the world. Two passenger planes hijacked by bombers were flown directly into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, reducing the buildings to rubble. Two more hijacked planes set course for the nation's capital. One of those planes crashed into the Pentagon, and another crashed in an open field. Nearly three thousand people died. The terrorist network al-Qaeda and its Saudi Arabian leader, Osama bin Laden, who was hiding under Taliban protection in Afghanistan (and later killed in Abbottabad, Pakistan in 2011), claimed responsibility for the attacks. U.S. president George W. Bush declared a "War on Terror." Among other things, this war was intended to rid Afghanistan of al-Qaeda and Taliban networks. The fall of the Taliban in late 2001 brought us hope for a new beginning.

Although it was seldom reported by international media, Afghanistan changed as a new, young and dynamic generation came of age. In the years that followed, girls and women reclaimed many of their freedoms and

rights. We truly believed there was a bright future ahead for them, free from the burdens of Taliban rule. In 2003, the new government even ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which obligated all thirty-four provinces to make gender equality part of their legal framework. It was not unusual for women to become ambassadors, ministers, governors, and members of the police and security forces. In 2009, a new law was introduced to prevent forced underage marriages and violence against women. At the same time, a promising democratic system began to take shape, and women from all corners of Afghanistan became increasingly active members of the country's social, political, and economic life.

As of August 15, 2021, there is little hope. The images on television and social media were like a slap in the face to me, and to everyone who feels connected to Afghanistan. The pain and shock were and are overwhelming.

The Taliban took control of the country under the watch of a stunned public. With control of the country, the Taliban took control of the fear of the people. Women did not dare to walk the streets, and those who aspired to education, participation, and personal freedom were safe only at home, as were those who worked for the allied forces and relied on the protection of those alliances. The images of the local forces attempting to reach Kabul airport in droves in August 2021 made headlines around the world. So did the news that men and women, old and young, could no longer leave the country. There were desperate attempts to reach neighbouring countries (Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Iran), but most borders were initially closed. The Taliban's inability to feed more than 38 million people means that Afghans are prisoners in their own country and dependent on world hunger aid. In addition, there is a risk of renewed civil war, sparked by radical currents from the Islamic State (ISIL), which carries out attacks and aims to gain influence and power in the country.

While there have been nationwide protests by the population, even some initiated by women — and one of those women has her say in this book — the protests are life-threatening acts. The punishments for participating in them are draconian and the methods of punishment medieval. The Taliban, for instance, has been known to beat demonstrators and reporters with

whips and cables. When I hear about these protests on Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, and through other channels, I hold my breath, fearing the worst.

I remember very different years that seem like a distant utopia to me today. I was born in 1973 into a family where it was normal for a girl to attend school and university and later to take up a profession as a teacher, doctor, or scientist. Although the countryside has always been more conservative, in the cities men and women worked in the same offices and attended the same lectures. Those who did not want to wear a Chaderi, the blue full-body Afghan burka, or a veil were not forced to do so by law. In the streets of Kabul, the capital, young women wore short skirts. I have photographs of my mother and her friends presenting themselves in the latest Parisian fashions. Conservative Islamic values and liberal currents coexisted peacefully.

During my first eleven years of life, I enjoyed a privileged lifestyle. My family lived in a stately villa. My father, Abdul Hakim Shahalimi, had been a highly respected political figure before he retired from active political life in the late 1960s.

In 1981, my father passed away, and almost overnight our lives changed radically.

My father died because the communist government refused to let him leave the country for an operation that could only be performed abroad. They made that decision because he was not a communist. Not only were we in opposition to a political system, but the considerable fortune my father left to his wife and daughters became a threat to us. Women did not have the same rights as men even in those good times, and without a brother— that is, without a male representative— we were not worth much, except in men's fantasies that perhaps one day we would become attractive, docile wives. Some family members who were close to communism and who aspired to positions of power in the country, as well as others who claimed power and wealth for themselves, stole everything we owned. My mother was only twenty-six years old at the time, and when faced with threats of murder or the kidnapping of her four children, she decided to secretly flee to Pakistan

with the support of my grandparents. We couldn't take anything we once held dear with us. I understand the experience — or rather the trauma — of being displaced and having to leave everything behind: not just belongings but close family members and, above all, a place I called home.

In Pakistan, my mother worked hard to support us. In addition to being a talented seamstress, she had a natural talent for building things. She designed clothes for women in the neighbourhood and sewed Pakol hats, which were worn by the mujahideen and also popular with Afghans.

My mother, above all, wanted us to be educated. Education was also the most important thing among many of our Afghan acquaintances inside and outside the country. Despite this, homeschooling was the only option because we were the daughters of the renowned Abdul Hakim Shahalimi, who had led several ministries and became ambassador to several nations during the reign of the Shah of Afghanistan. In reality, we were political refugees and the heirs of the Shahalimi fortune left behind.

I hated our new life. In Pakistan, we had to wear huge veils that covered our entire bodies, and we hardly ever left our small apartment. We longed to leave, and we felt great relief when our immigration permits to Canada were finally approved.

When I stepped onto Canadian soil in my second home, Montreal, on a frosty December day — December 12, 1986, to be exact — my life as a refugee was finally over. I immediately sensed that Canada would open up unimagined opportunities for me, and it did. Thanks to the incredible will of my mother, we were able to start a new, free life. Canada gave us a second chance. My sisters and I were accepted into an inclusion program that was among the best in the world. Our schooling was excellent, and we were all able to attend university.

During my studies, I played a lot of sports; my passion was volleyball. In my family, there have always been a lot of sports enthusiasts. Afghans love sports. One of my aunts was a very talented basketball and table tennis player and enjoyed martial arts; another was passionate about badminton. Some relatives, especially in Kabul and later in Montreal, had made begrudging remarks about the fact that women in our family played

sports. However, it was my grandfather who encouraged his daughters and granddaughters to do so. He was one of many progressive men who found ways for their daughters and wives to be educated and to participate in sports, despite the conservative forces meant to prevent them. During my travels through Afghanistan as an adult, I saw many girls who were supported by their fathers or brothers to do something they otherwise would not have had access to. They flourished and beamed with happiness as they rode on bicycles or skateboards. Sports gave me strength, self-confidence, and freedom, and in war-torn Afghanistan, sports give women hope, self-confidence, self-worth, and body positivity.

Since first returning to my homeland in 2011, I have travelled there several times a year and met a great many women who courageously and fearlessly pursued their goals and who were true visionaries. In 2014, I decided to seek out inspiring Afghan women to interview them. I had heard many impressive stories that I wanted to share.

Over the course of nearly four years, I flew every two months to Kabul and to remote regions under sometimes challenging conditions. The women I interviewed ranged in age, social class, and ethnicity. Some had grown up in fundamentally different ways, some in the countryside, some in the city, and some in refugee camps. Such camps for internally displaced persons have existed for decades. According to the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, “Afghans make up one of the largest refugee populations worldwide. There are 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees in the world, of whom 2.2 million are registered in Iran and Pakistan alone. Another 3.5 million people are internally displaced, having fled their homes searching for refuge within the country.”

The women I met were proof that there was legitimate hope for a better future. With great perseverance, these women went their ways despite resistance and death threats—and in doing so, opened up new opportunities and paved paths for other women. They are great role models.

I met conductors Negin Khpalwak and Zarifa Adiba during one of my trips; they presided over Zohra, one of the first all-female orchestras in the world, when they were both under twenty years old. The orchestra has performed at

some of the most prestigious venues across the globe, including the World Economic Forum in Davos, in 2017. It is now well known throughout the world. Adiba told me then, “We have a responsibility to rebuild this country. Afghans must not leave Afghanistan for a better future elsewhere.” In the meantime, however, they too have left their country. When I spoke to them, they could not have imagined that there would again be a time without music, without instruments, and without singing.

The artist Shamsia Hassani, Afghanistan’s first female graffiti artist, who taught in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Kabul University and who is now a successful artist worldwide, has also left the country. Art on public walls and façades as an expression of joy, free will, political courage, or even resistance will no longer exist.

I spoke with the young military pilot Shaima Noori, who confidently wore red lipstick, about women in the Afghan army. She described herself in the interview in a determined way, simply daring to be herself. Unfortunately, I was unable to find out how she is doing or where she is now, but I can say for certain she will no longer take off from an Afghan airfield as a pilot.

Today, I can watch only the past competitions of the impressive female Afghan athletes on YouTube. Some young athletes are still in the country and are in hiding, unable to practise their sport — be it soccer, basketball, volleyball, cycling, or skateboarding. I can only hope that they have found shelter and will survive.

I was also impressed by my meeting with Dr. Sharifa Yadgari, one of the very few psychotherapists in the country at that time who treated mental illness. In a country of severely traumatized people, including many women who are now more likely than ever to suffer from mental health issues, she was a beacon of hope. Now, whether she will be able to work in her field again remains uncertain. In 2017, she told me, “I also remember times as a child when I had no shoes, no school bag, and often not even pencils and notebooks. But I knew I had to make it, not only for my family and myself but also to be able to contribute to life in our community.”

During my visits, there were moments when I survived only by a lucky accident. On December 11, 2014, I was invited to an event hosted by

the Institut Français in Kabul. However, a day before that, I received confirmation for an interview with Maryam Durani, who had opened the first internet café for women and who ran Merman Radio in Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold in southern Afghanistan. I flew to Kandahar instead of going to the event in Kabul. Through this last-minute change of plan, I dodged a deadly suicide bombing at the Institut Français.

In 2017, my book *Where Courage Carries the Soul* was published. It was based on these journeys and conversations, and wherever I spoke about it, the event was sold out. The interest of the audience was huge, and interestingly, not only women came but also young men, including some with Afghan roots. They were glad to hear about women who had built something for themselves and their communities under such adverse conditions.

Yet the news about the 2018 negotiations between the Taliban and the U.S. in Doha, Qatar, should have startled us. Everyone—politicians, diplomats, negotiators—should have known that women would have nothing to look forward to, because not one woman sat at the negotiating table. The later invitation of a few was a purely symbolic act; no provision had been made to endow them with influence or power. What did the Taliban say in response to the questions posed during this round of negotiations about schooling, vocational training, and employment for girls and women? Did anyone ask them? As of today, girls will only be allowed to attend school until the age of twelve. Even then, the representatives of the U.S. and its NATO allies could have—indeed, should have—taken vulnerable people out of the country. Did they seriously believe that the Taliban would respect human and women's rights?

The new regime has removed women from the upper levels of the administration; women's voices are banned from the radio; women can no longer appear on TV; mirrors in offices and other buildings have disappeared or been painted over; barbershops and beauty salons have been closed; women can no longer travel long distances (over seventy-two kilometres) without a male family member accompanying them. The colours, the beauty, and the diversity are supposed to disappear, though Afghanistan is rich in colours. Our traditional clothes are colourful. We will not see them

anymore. Even our flag has disappeared; instead, the colourless black-and-white flag of the Taliban flies. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was closed in September 2021 and replaced by the Ministries of Prayer and Guidance and the Promotion of Virtues and Prevention of Vice—morality police under the control of a Taliban minister. And, of course, the entire cabinet was made up of men. In the government of this “Islamic Emirate,” no women were wanted or permitted. During an interview conducted in March 2022, one of the ministers even went so far as to say the only two acceptable places for a woman are at home or in a graveyard. The fact that some of the new rulers are among the world's most wanted terrorists is part of the irony of history.

In September 2021, *Time* magazine published its list of the one hundred most influential people of the year. Under the category of “Leader,” it recognizes Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, one of the founders of the Taliban movement in 1994; he is described as “revered as a charismatic military leader and a deeply pious figure.” As I read the write-up, my body flooded with the same excruciating fear and pain that I had felt in the weeks after the Taliban took power on August 15, 2021. At first, I thought it was a hoax. Someone must have hacked *Time*'s server. It just couldn't be, I thought to myself. Being included on the *Time* 100 list is an honour, a tribute; it is celebrated with a gala event in New York. It is inconceivable that the editors of the magazine could act in such a disrespectful way. They explicitly give these one hundred chosen people credit for changing the world, regardless of the consequences of their actions, and in so doing they insult Afghan women— and all women and girls around the world. Afghanistan continues to bleed. Self-expression is scarce. Journalists who criticize the new regime are subjected to whips and lashes. Is that considered impactful? Is that considered influential? Is that why this representative publication of the Western world, the so-called democratic world, chose to honour a Taliban leader as one of the hundred most influential individuals on Earth? Ultimately, his greatest accomplishment has been winning the war that defeated the most powerful countries in the world.

Over four decades of war and violence, as well as corruption and ethnically motivated hatred, have battered Afghanistan with extreme poverty and

instability and traumatized its people. Nevertheless, the years that the U.S. and its allies were in the country — at least in the cities, which promised greater security, and sporadically in the countryside — gave an entire generation a sense of freedom and provided new opportunities for many girls and women.

The girls and women in my first book who embodied this awakening and a new vision of our country's future inspired all of us. But today anyone who is a visionary and proclaims her visions aloud puts herself in grave danger. As I write this, I wonder — as do all those who have their say in this book — whether we will hinder our own work and compromise our livelihoods with the words we say. There is still a need to censor ourselves for fear of being denied the support we all sometimes need for our work. Many Afghans who are committed to their country and to its women are forced — as I am — to remain politically correct in their language. Fundamentally, we do not adhere to the etiquette of the systems established for women — and this is true even in the so-called democratic countries of the world.

Working on *We Are Still Here* has been emotionally challenging. But when I spoke with these women, we shared and supported each other through the emotional, mental, psychological, and physical challenges we had encountered. For many, in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban's takeover, sleep was often out of the question. While there are those who managed to escape the country, many are still waiting to be rescued. You simply cannot imagine the fear when every day a shocking news story pulls the rug out from under your feet. Nevertheless, working on this book gave me the strength to believe in the future again. We have found strength in solidarity and in sharing with each other.

In the conversations that follow, women sometimes break taboos as if they have nothing to lose. We all agree that their achievements, made with great sacrifice and commitment, have not been in vain. We will not abandon the twelve-year-old girls who wish to continue their education, nor the female university students who had hoped to graduate, and certainly not the girls who are threatened by forced marriage.

No, we will not be silent and we will not remain in shock. We are still here!

We must be heard. My appeal to you, dear readers of this book, is:

Listen to these women. See them. See their commitment to freedom and to their rights. See them in a new light. They are not victims. They never were.

They do not need regrets; they need a platform, support, and solidarity. Invite them to participate and bring them into your conversations. There are so many experts talking about us and our country. You can get first-hand knowledge from Afghan women. Afghanistan's women have proved time and time again how strong, resourceful, resilient, and forward-looking they are.

This time around, we will not be silent, for we are still here!

ABOUT DROPS

The Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS) is an independent, not-for-profit, policy-oriented research institution committed to strengthening the values and experiences of inclusivity, pluralism, and good governance in Afghanistan, through knowledge creation and knowledge application. We firmly believe that strong, contextually grounded, (policy) research institutions are crucial for fostering environments conducive for conflict-affected states' sustainable transition from war to peace. This principle informed DROPS' birth in Kabul in 2014 and has been our North Star ever since. It also guides our Toronto chapter, which was established in 2021. In line with this principle, we believe public interest policy dialogue, healthy state-citizen engagement, public-private partnerships, and good governance can only be achieved by nourishing intellectual spaces and indigenous research that are bottom-up, locally rooted, and representative of all voices in the society—especially those of women and girls. DROPS' work is thus two-pronged: evidence-based research that provides policymakers with alternative, actionable solutions for national and sub-national issues; and intellectual and operational reinforcement for translating insights to context-responsive policies and implementation. Through gender-disaggregated and gender-sensitive data, policy relevant analyses, and tailored trainings on critical thinking and research methodologies, DROPS serves to ensure that people remain at the center of all developmental efforts in Afghanistan, while simultaneously empowering them to become agents of the change they seek.



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