

A CRITIQUE OF AFGHAN WOMEN'S ROLE IN NATIONAL RECONCILIATION  
PROCESSES

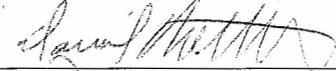
by

Shukria Dellawar  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Science  
Conflict Analysis and Resolution

Committee:



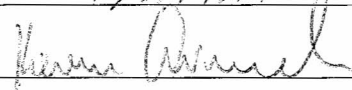
Chair



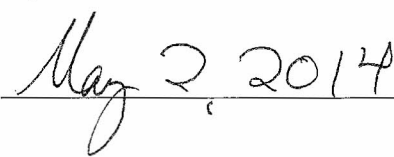




Graduate Program Director



Dean, School for Conflict  
Analysis and Resolution

Date: 

Spring Semester 2014  
George Mason University  
Arlington, VA

A Critique of Afghan Women's Role in National Reconciliation Processes

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at George Mason University

By

Shukria Dellawar  
Bachelor of Science  
George Mason University, 2006

Professor: Dr. Susan F. Hirsch  
School of Conflict Analysis & Resolution

Spring Semester 2014  
George Mason University  
Arlington, VA

Copyright 2014 Shukria Dellawar  
All Rights Reserved

## **Dedications**

Dedication: I dedicate this thesis to Hafiz, the sole inspiration for my academic pursuits in conflict resolution. This thesis is also dedicated to all Afghan women, may you transcend the challenges on your path.

## **Acknowledgements**

This project would not be complete without the help of many people. Let me begin by first thanking my committee chair Dr. Susan Hirsch. Thank you for all your patience, encouragement, and guidance. I could not have done this without you. I would like to also thank my committee members Dr. Daniel Rothbart and Dr. Sandra Cheldelin. I'm deeply appreciative of your time and guidance. Thank you so very much! I would like to say a special thank you to Julie Shedd and Lisa Shaw for best advising. A heart-felt thanks to my friends Kusuma, Amal, Younes, Shalene, Mikael and S. A. Rahim for your constant support. Last but not least, forever indebted to my brother Munir for his unconditional love and support. Thank you!

## Table of Contents

	Page
List of Tables.....	vi
Abstract.....	vii
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Literature Review.....	7
3. Role of Women in the National Dialogue on Peace and Reconciliation.....	25
4. Systematic and other Obstacles Facing Afghan Women.....	42
5. Significance of Women's Contribution and Implication on Peace Process.....	59
6. Conclusion.....	69
7. References.....	81
8. Biography.....	87

## **List of Tables**

Table	Page
1. Women's Participation in Peace Initiatives Compared to Men...	41

## **Abstract**

### **A CRITIQUE OF AFGHAN WOMEN'S ROLE IN NATIONAL RECONCILIATION PROCESSES**

Shukria Dellawar, M.S.

George Mason University, 2014

Dissertation Director: Dr. Susan F. Hirsch

This thesis critiques the role of women in the national reconciliation process in Afghanistan, and identifies the challenges in attempts to increase women's inclusion and the potential implications of having women serve mainly in symbolic roles. The analysis presented reveals key issues that continue to keep the national reconciliation dialogue male dominated. I further lay out key stakeholder grievances and root causes for ongoing violence towards women. This thesis explores the subject through two conflict resolution field theories, namely peace-building and gender empowerment, to compare and contrast the role of women in the peace process. By examining these approaches, the thesis sheds light on the reasons why women remain marginalized in the national dialogue of peace in Afghanistan.



The continued lack of women participating in the peace process could damage the intended goal of bringing a peaceful end to the Afghan conflict. I also explore some ways in which the process may be more authentic instead of politically expedient.

## **Introduction**

In the last three decades, the Afghan population has endured three decades of violence. An internal political strife in the 1970's was followed by the Russian invasion of 1979. This lasted a decade and following the withdrawal of the Russians, the country broke out in a civil war that paved the way for Taliban's rise to power.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the US Coalition went after the safe havens of Al Qaida. Since Bin Laden and many members of Al Qaida operated out of Afghanistan, Taliban came under intense scrutiny to hand over Bin Laden or face a military invasion. In the build up to the US military intervention in Afghanistan, one of the moral justifications given to topple Taliban was also their record of human rights violations, particularly Afghan women's rights.

Afghan women's rights violations neither began nor ended with the rule of Taliban. The Mujahedeen Commanders who fought the Russians later turned their guns on each other sending the country in a bloody civil war. This period has been documented with massive human rights abuses, affecting all of the Afghan population, with the brunt of it falling on Afghan women. The civil war ended with Taliban's rise to power, serving a further blow to human rights and specifically women's rights. Although women underwent the darkest phases of their history during Taliban regime, many challenges remain despite the establishment of a new government and an Afghan

Constitution that guarantees women's rights. Women continue to struggle both in the private and public sphere.

Since 2007, President Karzai has consistently offered talks with Taliban in order to bring the insurgency into the political fold. Due to this shift in policy, Afghan women and supportive domestic and international organizations have maintained pressure on the Afghan government with each consecutive year to assure women's voices are heard in the national reconciliation processes, and that women's rights presently guaranteed by the Afghan Constitution are not reversed.

Afghan women have made notable progress since the ouster of Taliban regime from power. Women have served their country in many roles including as parliament members, presidential candidates, journalists, teachers, doctors and nurses, entrepreneurs, and many other roles. Despite this progress, Afghan women fear that if they are not included in greater number and more significant roles in the Afghan reconciliation process, their hard-gained rights guaranteed in the Afghan Constitution may be sacrificed to strike a peace deal with Taliban.

This research is very important because in 2014, the majority of US troops are set to withdraw from Afghanistan. If a peace deal is not struck with Taliban before that date, Afghans fear there is a high likelihood that the country may fall back into civil war. Furthermore, Afghan women fear that the international community, in its efforts for a speedy exit out of Afghanistan, may not continue to insist as strongly on protection of

women's rights as it has over the last decade. As a result, women fear they will once again be marginalized in society for political expediency.

A great amount of literature and media has focused on highlighting the issue that women must be included in the national peace processes and that their voices are heard in negotiations with Taliban. Afghan women themselves continue to speak up regarding a greater role in the peace process, and many also voice that they agree a negotiated settlement is the only way to end the Afghan conflict, though it should not come at the cost of women's rights.

The purpose of this thesis was to examine the role Afghan women played in the national peace processes and what challenges and obstacles prevented greater inclusion of women. This thesis further highlights the potential implications and consequences of minimizing women in the peace process and provides some solutions.

### Research Questions and Findings

The primary questions this thesis tried to answer are: In what roles did women serve in Afghanistan's national reconciliation processes? What challenges remain in greater inclusiveness of women and what are the implications of these challenges on the peace process and women's rights? The findings of this research are noted below:

- Despite women serving in political roles, National reconciliation talks are still male dominated.

- There are cultural and socio-economic barriers to participation of women in the peace process

- The international community's approach to women's rights in a traditional society has at times hurt its own objectives of empowering women and often caused a backlash by many conservative actors in Afghan society

- Violence and insecurity remain a key challenge for women who are threatened with rape and murder when they speak up for women's rights.

- Taliban and other groups have misused Islam to somehow justify their extreme oppression of women. In fact they have gone against Islamic teachings by stripping away rights granted to women in Islam, particularly the right to educate and work.

### Research Design and Methodology

To answer the thesis question, I conducted a literature review to identify prior research done on why women are rarely included in the national peace initiatives. In addition to scholarly research, I also researched print media accounts on the subject, watched many interviews of Afghan female human rights advocates, and reviewed documentaries on women in Afghanistan. For the purposes of this thesis, a summary of my literature review and findings are provided. A more detailed summary and critical analysis arguing my findings and assessing women's role in various national peace initiatives are included in successive chapters. The research utilizes conflict resolution

field theories of peace building and gender mainstreaming to critique women's role (or lack thereof) in Afghanistan's national peace initiatives.

The thesis report presents how the socio-economic, cultural, and political challenges have minimized greater inclusion of women. I utilized material available in the library, policy work conducted in Afghanistan and US, and media accounts. The material was compared and contrasted using conflict resolution theories to explore the underlying causes of women's exclusion. Furthermore, I aimed to build upon existing research and recommend future areas of research.

The research methodology includes a literature review of conflict resolution sources, conference reports, UN and Human Rights Commission reports, and press accounts. From these sources as well as information on the web that can be corroborated, I extrapolated the number of women included in each peace process category and as to whether or not they were given leadership roles or lack thereof. My analysis also took into account the women's voices that were silenced through political intimidation, security and cultural boundaries, as well as threats from the insurgency and warring factions in Afghanistan.

Being a native of Afghanistan and fluent in both Dari and Pashto, I have a keen understanding of cultural and religious practices that were valuable to this research. I also led three fact-finding missions to Afghanistan as an Independent Political Analyst and Cultural Advisor, and conducted many interviews exploring issues related to Afghanistan's national reconciliation and women's rights. These interviews served as a

background for my understanding, but the thesis was mainly based on scholarly research and press accounts on the issue. In addition, I also had five years of print and social media analysis experience on Afghanistan and Pakistan. More recently, I had collaborated with the Center for International Policy on the Afghanistan Study Group project and explored policy issues relating to the country's peace processes. This background and professional experience was utilized in assessing the data collected and provided a critical analysis of the subject of women's role in the Afghan peace process.

In chapter two, a detailed literature review highlights the various causes for women's marginalization in Afghan society.

## **Literature Review**

This chapter reviews literature in three areas. It covers women's lack of participation in politics, the cultural and socio-economic barriers which hold women back in comparison to men, the role of the international community in empowering women, and the misuse of the Islamic tradition by extremists. The overall review of literature gives the reader a better understanding about the challenges women face in entering the political sphere and the complex political and cultural nuances that continue to pose as obstacles for Afghan women and the international community attempting to help empower women.

### **Women's Marginalization and Empowerment in the Political Sphere**

A review of contemporary Afghan history shows a gradual decline of human rights beginning with the revolution of Afghan Marxist/Leninist PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) in 1978, followed by the decade long Soviet occupation, leading to the Afghan civil war and Taliban rule, and ending with US-Coalition military intervention of 2001. All of these phases have adversely impacted human rights, particularly Afghan women's rights. These decades have affected every aspect of Afghan society as massive human rights abuses were recorded by international and local NGO's. Though the warring parties and the nature of the threats varied throughout the different phases of the conflict, women specifically became the target of



war time atrocities; gradually losing their freedom of movement, access to education, participation in the labor force, and contribution to civil society at large. Women's rights have been restored with the assistance of the international community since 2001. However, these rights are at best fragile and could be impacted with the set exit of US-Coalition troops in 2014.

Taliban's rise to power ended a bloody civil war, and initially most Afghans welcomed the change as residents of Kabul and other provinces were happy that the warlords had been contained by Taliban. Even as Taliban's "repression grew, men and women could still be heard saying that their family's newfound safety from the civil war's shells and rocket fire made it worth it. In the calculus of security-verses-rights, the absence of fighting and destruction meant more than the loss of some personal freedoms."<sup>1</sup> However, Taliban continued their extreme interpretation of Islam and Sharia Law, alienating both Afghans and the international community. Women suffered greatly under Taliban regime. Women were refused work and education, as well as freedom of movement without a male relative. Taliban's brand of Islam was so foreign to Afghans and Muslims across the world that:

...it appeared to denigrate Islam's message of peace and tolerance and its capacity to live with other religious groups. They were to inspire a new extremist form of fundamentalism across Pakistan and Central Asia, which refused to compromise with traditional Islamic values, social structures or existing state systems.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Steele, J. (2011). *Ghosts of Afghanistan: The haunted battleground*. London: Portobello Books.

<sup>2</sup> Rashid, A. (2000) *Taliban. Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale University Press. Pg. 2.

Taliban invented their own brand of Islamic Sharia interpretation and imposed it on both Afghan men and women. Men were not allowed to shave their beards and had to wear a cap on their head. Men were also banned from wearing western attire. Women were banned from work and school. They could not leave the house without a male member of the family. Wearing the *burqa* (full body veil) was mandatory for women in public. Women were also banned from receiving healthcare from men.<sup>3</sup>

Afghan women fear the return of Taliban in politics due to the treatment they received when Taliban were in power. Many women are afraid that the return of Taliban in national politics would see an end to the rights they've gained through the Afghan Constitution.<sup>4</sup> Even though many believe that national reconciliation is necessary to end the on-going violence and stabilize the country, they distinguish between their desire for peace and their rights being sacrificed in order to appease Taliban. Prominent Afghan women's rights activist Sima Samar was quoted saying in order to speed up the Afghan reconciliation process, rights gained by women in the last decade was in danger of being "traded off for short-term political gain."<sup>5</sup> Afghan women do not want their rights traded for political expediency.

---

<sup>3</sup> CNN. (2001, Number 14). Kabul Residents Relish New Freedoms. Retrieved from <http://www-cgi.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/11/14/ret.afghan.kabul/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> Graham-Harrison E., & Amiri M. (2013, June 19). Taliban peace talk plans lead Afghan women to fear loss of rights. The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/19/afghanistan-women-rights-taliban-peace-talks>

<sup>5</sup> Kumar, Sen Ashish. Taliban talks terrify Afghan women. 2012, The Washington Times. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/apr/17/taliban-talks-terrify-women/?page=all>

Taliban have softened their position on women's rights in recent years.<sup>6</sup> However, during their regime, their strict interpretation of Sharia Law affected women physically, psychologically, and socially. Even though historically Afghan women had enjoyed rights, safety and protection from harassment, the Taliban undid this tradition in the name of Islam and culture. Taliban implemented systematic discrimination against women which negatively impacted their education, access to healthcare services, capacity for income generation, and engagement in politics or civil society.<sup>7</sup>

Since the fall of Taliban, a lot of progress has been made to empower women in society. Women took part in the first Bonn Conference in 2001 which was convened following the US invasion of Afghanistan and the ouster of Taliban from power. At the Bonn I conference, delegates agreed on provisional arrangements which paved the way for the establishment of a democratic government.<sup>8</sup> The Afghan Constitution adopted in 2004 endorsed gender equality. There is a 25% quota of reserved seats in the Lower House of Parliament and a 17% quota of reserved seats in the Upper House of Parliament. Women have the right to vote in the elections process.<sup>9</sup> The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) was established, and MOWA adopted a National Action Plan

---

<sup>6</sup> Marai, S. (2012, August 12). Report, Paper reveals Taliban softening stance girls' education. *NBC News*. Retrieved from [http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2012/08/12/13241448-report-paper-reveals-taliban-softening-stance-on-girls-education?lite](http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/08/12/13241448-report-paper-reveals-taliban-softening-stance-on-girls-education?lite).

<sup>7</sup> Rasekh, Z. & Iacopina V. (1998). Education, A Health Imperative: The Case of Afghanistan. *Health and Human Rights*. Vol. 3, No. 2. Published by Harvard School of Public Health.

<sup>8</sup> Peter, T. (2011, November 29). Afghanistan's Bonn Conferences. 4 things you need to know. *Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved from: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-Issues/2011/1129/Afghanistan-s-Bonn-Conference-4-things-you-need-to-know/What-was-the-first-Bonn-Conference>

<sup>9</sup> Cortright, D & Persinger, S. (2010). *Afghan Women Speak. Enhancing Security and Human Rights in Afghanistan*. Kroc Institute for International Peace. University of Notre Dame.

for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) with the goal of “eliminate discrimination against women, develop their human capital, and promote their leadership in order to guarantee their full and equal protection in all aspects of life.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Afghanistan is also a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).<sup>11</sup> These gains cannot be underestimated given the last three decades of violence and insecurity in Afghanistan, where women have endured the greater burden of rights violations.

The current Afghan Constitution adopted in 2004 gives women the same equal status that men enjoy (Article 22), the right to an education (Articles 43 and 44), access to employment (Article 48) and the right to hold political office (Article 84).<sup>12</sup> In addition, having ratified CEDAW makes the Afghan government responsible for the safety of women entering public office. Nevertheless, there remains a wide gap between the rights on paper and actual implementation of the law to ensure women’s rights. Recently, there has been a string of attacks against women in public office and the government has not been able to curtail the mounting attacks. In addition, several warlords and fundamentalists are running for office in April 2014 Presidential election and these figures hold the same views on women’s rights as Taliban.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). (2008) National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan. Afghanistan Ministry of Women’s Affairs. Retrieved from [http://www.unifem.org/afghanistan/docs/pubs/08/NAPWA/English/NAPWA\\_Intro.pdf](http://www.unifem.org/afghanistan/docs/pubs/08/NAPWA/English/NAPWA_Intro.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Cortright, D & Persinger, S. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. (2010). Afghan Women Speak. Enhancing Security and Human Rights in Afghanistan. University of Notre Dame.

<sup>12</sup> The Constitution of the Islamic State of Afghanistan (n.d.). The Embassy of Afghanistan, Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://www.embassyofafghanistan.org/page/constitution>

<sup>13</sup> Nordland, R. (2014, February 7). Taliban and Government Imperil Gains for Afghan Women, Advocates Say. *New York Times*.

Afghan women participated in both the first and second Bonn Conferences, hosted by Germany to ensure a governmental and security transition. Afghan women also participated in the Loya Jirgas, a traditional grand assembly of Afghan elders which convenes on occasion to discuss and resolve matters of national urgency. Nine women also serve on the High Peace Counsel, a body of the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program which was set up by the President to initiate dialogue with members of Taliban in an effort to end the hostilities with anti-government forces. Despite women's participation in all these national peace initiatives, they are rarely in leadership roles and the conversation continues to be overwhelmingly male dominated, just as it is other areas of the Afghan socio-cultural context.

Even though the Afghan government and international community have taken great strides in the last decade to end violence and restore human rights in Afghanistan, reality on the ground remains dire. Afghan women continue to suffer from a host of issues including rape, domestic abuse, child marriages, drug related abuse, religious extremism, and honor killings. Women in high profile positions and women's rights activists are particularly targeted and threatened with gang rape and murder in attempts to keep them marginalized. A Human Rights Watch report warned that "violence against women undermines the already-perilous state of women's rights...calling for segregating women and girls in education, employment, and in public, raises questions about the

government's commitment to protecting women.”<sup>14</sup> The withdrawal of foreign forces has created an atmosphere of political maneuvering which could potentially compromise women's rights.

A report released in 2005 by The Afghanistan Justice Project, an independent research and advocacy group, documents war crimes in Afghanistan from 1978 to 2001. The report details massive human rights violations which include massacres, disappearances, summary executions, indiscriminate bombings, rocketing, torture and rape. Despite decades of violent crimes both from within Afghanistan and external forces, there has been no serious effort to bring perpetrators of crimes to justice by the Afghan government or the international community.<sup>15</sup>

A different era began with the US-Coalition intervention which ousted Taliban. Afghan women have gradually regained their rights. At the same time, due to Afghan and foreign military intervention and counter-attacks by Taliban and Al Qaida members, Afghans continue to suffer from insecurity. In this climate, the gains for both human rights and women's rights remain fragile in Afghanistan.

#### Cultural and Socio-Economic Barriers to Greater Inclusion of Women in the Peace

##### Process

---

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2014) Report, Afghanistan. Afghans feel enormous anxiety as the 2014 deadline for withdrawing international combat forces from Afghanistan looms, and powerbrokers jockey for position. Retrieved from <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/afghanistan>

<sup>15</sup> The Afghanistan Justice Project (2005) Casting Shadows: War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity: 1978-2001.

There have been improvements in women's progress over the last decade. These improvements include an increase in girls attending schools, women in the workforce, women attending universities and receiving scholarships for study abroad, and female representation in politics. Additionally, a Women's Ministry has been established to promote women's progress.<sup>16</sup> However, as important as this progress is, it is still relatively fragile and could easily reverse once foreign forces exit the country and the development dollars begin to dwindle.

Afghan women are impacted by one of the lowest literacy and poverty rates in the world. In Afghanistan, a person is considered educated if they can read and write. This is due to a high illiteracy rate among the population. The country's overall literacy rate is 28 percent. Only 12 percent of women are considered literate compared to 43 percent of men. The literacy rate is even more dire in rural areas where 75 percent of the population lives. Only 7 percent of women and 35 percent of men have basic reading and writing skills.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the Afghan government estimates that nearly 42 percent of all Afghans live below the poverty line. Another 20 percent who are slightly above the poverty line are considered at risk for potentially falling below the poverty line.<sup>18</sup>

A study conducted by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit points out some of the challenges to women's economic empowerment. Despite efforts in the last

---

<sup>16</sup> Abirafeh, L. (2009). *Gender and international aid in Afghanistan: The politics and effects of intervention*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. Volume 7.

<sup>17</sup> Colt, N. (2012, November 20). Afghanistan's Journey to Literacy. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ned-colt/afghanistans-journey-to-literacy\\_b\\_2164918.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ned-colt/afghanistans-journey-to-literacy_b_2164918.html)

<sup>18</sup> Rural Poverty Portal (2014, April 22) Rural Poverty in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Retrieved from <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/afghanistan>

thirteen years to empower women economically, many women across Afghanistan do not have access to job opportunities, they lack professional experience, are often paid lower wages compared to men, and are less educated than men. Furthermore, even when women are qualified for jobs, they are often not supported by their families who often discourage them from working.<sup>19</sup> These challenges are further exacerbated by security challenges across the country and threats from the insurgents.

There are some women who are economically empowered in Afghanistan, but that has rarely translated into political empowerment due to certain traditional and cultural norms, lack of education, and continued violence. Economic empowerment has not spread across the country, particularly to rural areas. Therefore the gap between the empowerment of urban and rural women remains wide. There are no functional institutional channels for permeating the rights given under the constitution for women, and transforming economic empowerment into political empowerment.

In fact, many economically empowered women fall in greater danger for personal security as they get threats of rape and murder by criminals who demand money or warlords and insurgents who want to minimize their influence. Empowered women who speak up against miscreants become bigger targets and often have to travel with security.<sup>20</sup> As long as the rule of law is not implemented in cases where women's rights are violated, the economic empowerment of women alone cannot safeguard them from

---

<sup>19</sup> Ganesh et al. Synthesis Paper. Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan 2002-2012. Published November 2013. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.

<sup>20</sup> Donati, Jessica and Andalib, Mostafa. High profile attacks on women in Afghanistan undermine right's campaign. Reuters. August 13, 2013.



both domestic abuse and other security threats caused by criminals, warlords, fanatics, and insurgents.

Afghans suffer from a huge lack of workforce capacity. This is due to three decades of continued violence and insecurity, in which education and skills training took a back seat. Some of the challenges for the international community in empowering women continue to keep the focus on the basics, such as poverty alleviation, education, and skill-building.

Most Afghan women do not have the capacity to work for the empowerment of other women, as there is a wide gap between educated women in the cities versus rural areas. Political participation of women still needs more support and development, as well as rule of law that protects women's safety so prominent Afghan women in cities can engage with rural area women.

Another factor that has hurt women's rights is the system of kinship in Afghanistan. Many prominent women's rights leaders are not given the positions that are allotted to women associated with prominent families or powerful politicians.<sup>21</sup> The few symbolic slots for women in the public arena are reserved for women who do not necessarily represent their female constituents. Women who come to power based on kinship ties are easily swayed to pay lip service to women's causes. These women's loyalty often stays with those whom gave them the positions. When women are given

---

<sup>21</sup> Gosh-Ahmad, H. (2003). A History of Women in Afghanistan. Lessons Learned for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrows: Women in Afghanistan. Journal of International Women's Studies. Volume , Issue 3, Article 1.

power based on kinship, they often remain silent on issues of women's rights that matter most.

### International Community Role and Approach to Women's Empowerment

After conducting a three year study in over 30 countries, including Afghanistan, over a span of three years and reviewing over one thousand projects, CARE International found that:

Too often agencies focus at the micro-level and short-term, supporting individual women or small-scale community initiatives without fostering linkages to wider economic, social or political structures or processes that could enable sustainable change. Interventions focused on a limited aspect of women's lives and livelihoods, and failed to grapple with the economic, social, political and cultural dimensions, which affect their rights in a more holistic fashion.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, to empower women the international community needs to focus on long-term aid and incorporate women's participation and peacebuilding into development programs that address women's source of revenue, healthcare, their family and community needs. In the absence of more comprehensive approaches, Afghan women "acquire neither the means, nor the confidence, nor the necessary community acceptance to voice their concerns and input to the peace process."<sup>23</sup> NGO's that raise Afghan women's economic status in consideration of other factors that impact women's life are likely more successful in achieving their objectives.

---

<sup>22</sup> CARE International. (2010). From Resolution to Reality, Lessons learned from Afghanistan, Nepal, Uganda on women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance. Retrieved from <http://www.care.org/newsroom/specialreports/UNSCR-1325/CARE-1325-Report-Women-Peace-Participation.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Afghanistan expert Nancy Dupree has warned that development programs implemented by foreigners who spend too much money and expect swift results are unproductive. Dupree called for longer-term commitments by the international community for sustainable development.<sup>24</sup> Even though many international development programs “for women have been criticized as short-term, symbolic, and poorly planned, Afghan women NGOs are reliant upon foreign funds.”<sup>25</sup> Despite limitations in implementing programs to empower women, the international community has helped raise women’s status in Afghanistan over the last decade.

Afghanistan is largely a patriarchal society which poses great challenges for the international development community to implement projects that empower women politically in the district, provincial and national level. One of the key challenges is that international NGO’s lack access to Afghan women, particularly where violence is more widespread. Often their staff cannot go to insecure areas to monitor the progress of projects, hurting their ability to improve programs. Even local Afghan NGO’s have to be careful when operating in rural areas due to backlash by conservative elements in society. A research study conducted by the Kroc Institute for International peace studies cautions that increased insecurity, widespread dissatisfaction with the Afghan government, and foreign military presence has created a “strong backlash against the women’s rights discourse. Viewed as a countercultural, Western intrusion by many Afghans –both men and women—the gendered strategies of the U.S. led intervention have created challenges

---

<sup>24</sup> Dupree, N. (2010, March 1). Involving Afghans for Success. World Bank.

Retrieved from <http://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/involving-afghans-success>

<sup>25</sup> Cortright, D & Persinger, S. (2010) Afghan Women Speak. Enhancing Security and Human Rights in Afghanistan. Kroc Institute for International Peace. University of Notre Dame.

for many women, who have been the targets of threats and attack because of their perceived association with Western interests.”<sup>26</sup> Due to these perceptions, female human rights activists are often threatened for betraying Afghan social norms and working with foreign NGO’s.

A study by development expert Emilie Jelinik found that Afghanistan is one of the most dangerous countries for NGO’s to operate in. The security situation has gotten increasingly worse on a yearly basis and many aid workers have been killed, kidnapped or threatened. Furthermore, Jelinik highlights that in certain areas of the country, NGO services cannot reach the population. The foreign military presence is very vivid and aid workers are “compelled to share operational space with the military, affecting how NGOs are perceived locally and raising difficult issues of independence, neutrality and impartiality.”<sup>27</sup> NGO’s deal with difficult and diverse social and political realities in different regions of Afghanistan and their programs cannot be applied universally, requiring adjustment of programs to specific local regions a necessity. Quick delivery of services is often a demand from international donors even while the situation on the ground remains challenging for NGO’s to reach the targeted beneficiaries.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Jelinek, E. (2009, March) NGO Relations with the government and communities in Afghanistan. Humanitarian Exchange Magazine. Issue 42. Retrieved from <http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-42/ngo-relations-with-the-government-and-communities-in-afghanistan>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

It must also be noted that after the ouster of Taliban, the international community pumped what is considered an unprecedented amount of aid for Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup> This significant aid increase created and lured in countless nongovernmental organizations. Researcher Orzala Ashraf Nemat points out that the motives of these nongovernmental organizations varied as “some showed a fierce dedication to support change” and others were searching for “economic opportunities.”<sup>30</sup> The latter type of NGO’s has been largely responsible for hastily implemented projects that are not sustainable when foreign aid begins to dwindle.

#### Abuse of the Islamic Tradition for Politics

Since the Soviet invasion, various political groups mixed with extreme religious ideologies have dictated women’s roles. At times women’s rights were advanced, and other times these rights were retracted. Taliban were not the only group that curtailed women’s rights, though they were one of the most extreme. Many Mujahedeen Commanders that fought the Soviets in the eighties later turned on each other, leading to a brutal civil war in the nineties. These warlords had already done considerable damage to women’s rights for two decades before Taliban came to power. The violence and devastation left by the Soviets, and continued by Mujahedeen Commanders-turned-warlords, created the ripeness in Afghanistan for further exploitation with the rise of

---

<sup>29</sup> Sledge, M. (2014, January 30). Watchdog Warns of Corruption as \$1 Billion in USAID Flows to Afghanistan. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/30/usaid-afghanistan\\_n\\_4696465.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/30/usaid-afghanistan_n_4696465.html)

<sup>30</sup> Nemat, O. A. (2011). *Afghan Women at the Cross-Roads: Agents of Peace—Or its Victims?* The Century Foundation. Pg. 18

Taliban to power.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Taliban's brand of Islam was so foreign that even the Ayatollahs of Iran condemned Taliban for "defaming Islam by confusing it with medieval obscurantism."<sup>32</sup> Taliban mostly grew up in refugee camps during the decades of war and violence and they mostly lacked a serious education.

What is most noteworthy is that some of the most brutal commanders that were involved in the Afghan civil war of the nineties were used by the United States after the attacks of September 11, 2001 to defeat Taliban, and following the fall of Taliban, were given prominent positions in the Afghan government.<sup>33</sup> These figures are documented human rights violators, and they have also instituted measures to curb women's rights. In 2003, a warlord in Herat province banned boys and girls from going to school together. Because most teachers were male, this resulted in many girls dropping out of school. In other areas of the country, warlords have enforced that women be accompanied by a male member of the family; otherwise they would be subjected to harassment about their travels.<sup>34</sup>

Educated Afghan women can distinguish between their Islamic rights verses cultural and communal norms, disguised under the banner of religion. In Islam, women are given the rights to property inheritance, divorce, dowry upon divorce, and education.

---

<sup>31</sup> Rashid, A. (2000). Taliban. Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia. Yale University Press. Pgs. 105-109.

<sup>32</sup> Cole, J. (2008). The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan. The Taliban, Women, and the Hegelian Private Sphere. Harvard University Press. Pg 118.

<sup>33</sup> Grono, N. (2012, February 1). Afghanistan's Injustice System.

Retrieved from [http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/02/01/afghanistans\\_injustice\\_system](http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/02/01/afghanistans_injustice_system)

<sup>34</sup> Zalman, A. (2004) Afghan Women Assert Their Human Rights in the Context of Islam, Not in Opposition to it. The Women's Review of Books, Vol. 21, No. 5. Women, War and Peace. Pg. 20-21.

The responsibility of their livelihood is placed on the shoulders of men. In the case of Afghanistan and other Muslim countries where rights of women are denied, it is due to “pre-Islamic patriarchal ideologies existing in a particular society, combined with the lack of education and ignorance that construct the Muslim women’s position.”<sup>35</sup> In times of war and violence, it is often women who end up suffering from male-dominated fundamentalist rules. It is important to note that women’s status in Afghanistan or any other Islamic nation as anything “less than” men have nothing to do with Islam. Asma Barlas, a scholar on Islam and women’s rights, has researched the Quran and its teaching on gender and defends Muslim women’s rights through Islam itself:

As many recent studies reveal, women’s status and roles in Muslim societies, as well as patriarchal structures and gender relationships, are a function of multiple factors, most of which have nothing to do with religion. The history of Western civilization should tell us that there is nothing innately Islamic about misogyny, inequality or patriarchy. And yet, all three often are justified by Muslim states and clerics in the name of Islam.<sup>36</sup>

What remains even more serious for Afghan women is their lack of education. As Barlas points out, even though Muslim women remain at the receiving end of “oppressive misreadings” of the Quran, very few question this because of their own lack of education and study of the Quranic teachings.<sup>37</sup> In 2003, forty-five Afghan women gathered to write a document that emphasized their rights in Islam. This effort was made prior to the

---

<sup>35</sup> Dr. Shorish-Shamley, Z. (2014, April 12). Women’s Position, Roles & Rights in Islam. Afghanistan Online. Retrieved from: <http://www.afghan-web.com/articles/womenrights.html>

<sup>36</sup> Barlas, A. (2003). “Believing Women” In Islam. Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran. University of Texas. Texas Press. pg.29.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

implementation of the new Afghan Constitution. Women felt it necessary to interpret Islamic Law in defense of their rights, and not in opposition to it. This effort was successful as the new Afghan Constitution assured women equal rights to men.<sup>38</sup>

In the last three decades of violence, women and girls who are widowed, orphaned, unwed, and in extreme poverty circumstances have been greatly marginalized due to changing political structures. Since the fall of Taliban in 2001, women have regained their rights as equal citizens under the Afghan Constitution. At least the goal has been set, and the international community and the Afghan government, along with local Afghan NGO's, have taken gradual steps to empower women. An example of civil society groups working to empower women in Afghanistan is the Asia Foundation. This Foundation has worked with many stake-holders since 2003 in promoting women's rights in the context of Islam. They have partnered with several ministries in Kabul, Kabul University and religious scholars, and community and tribal elders.<sup>39</sup> The Asia Foundation's approach takes into consideration working with locally established mechanisms to improve women's rights.

Due to continued insecurity and the growing strength of Taliban insurgency, warlords, and hardliners are likely to manipulate the vacuum of power as foreign forces exit, and boldly dictate women's role in society. This is precisely why Afghan women fear the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country. They do not believe that the

---

<sup>38</sup> Zalman, A. (2004, February). Afghan Women Assert Their Human Rights in the Context of Islam, Not in Opposition to it. *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 21, No. 5. Women, War and Peace. Pg. 20-21.

<sup>39</sup> The Asia Foundation. (2011, November). *Women's Empowerment Programs in Afghanistan*.



central government is strong enough yet to protect them from any backlash from elements in society that do not want to break the status quo on women.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> International Crisis Group (2014, October 2013) Women and Conflict in Afghanistan. Asia Report.

## **Role of Women in the National Dialogue on Peace and Reconciliation**

In reviewing most of the national initiatives designed to achieve security and stability in Afghanistan, the one constant factor is either very low or an extremely negligible participation of women. Women were either excluded, or participated in smaller numbers, or more or less participated “symbolically.” When all these national initiatives are reviewed, the participation rate regarding the number of men versus the number of women leading these initiatives is disproportionate. It is important then to look at each national initiative separately and assess the role of women.

Since 2001, several national initiatives were undertaken in efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and bring an end to the insurgency. The Bonn I conference was held following the ouster of Taliban in 2001. This was followed by the Emergency Loya Jirga, which convened to elect a Transitional Government in Kabul in 2002. This Jirga was followed by another in 2003 that debated a newly proposed Afghan Constitution. With Taliban insurgents continuing to fight despite their ouster from Kabul, an Afghanistan National Independent Peace and Reconciliation Commission (also known as Programme Tahkim Sulh) was established in 2005 to reach out to all fighting factions in an effort to reconcile them with the central government. This effort was followed by the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program in 2008. It did not bear the desired outcome and led to the 2010 London Conference in Afghanistan in which President

Karzai proposed direct talks with Taliban to end the escalating conflict. The National Consultative Peace Jirga in 2010 followed the London Conference in which Afghans debated terms and conditions of potential negotiations with Taliban. Since the majority of Afghans want national reconciliation, a High Peace Council was also established in 2010, an offshoot of the 2008 Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration program. The participation of women in each of the peace initiatives mentioned above will be assessed in the following sections of this chapter.

### BONN I – 2001

After the 2001 US-Coalition military intervention in Afghanistan which ousted Taliban from power, the first Bonn conference was convened in Germany to establish an interim Authority to govern Afghanistan until a Loya Jirga would be convened. The Bonn I agreement called on a Loya Jirga to be convened in eighteen months, tasking it with the development of a new constitution using the framework of the 1964 Afghan Constitution.<sup>41</sup> Loya Jirgas have traditionally been convened in Afghanistan to debate and resolve matters of national urgency.

The Bonn I meeting was a critical juncture in which the international community and Afghan power-brokers met to decide on who will be in charge of the country's affairs during an Interim Authority.

---

<sup>41</sup> United Nations. (2013, August 11) The Peacemaker. Report. Retrieved from <http://peacemaker.un.org/afghanistan-bonnagreement2001>

Out of the 23 Afghan delegates who attended the Bonn Conference, only two were women. There were other female observers present at the Bonn Conference but not as delegates.<sup>42</sup> Out of 24 positions designated for the Interim Authority, only one went to a woman. Dr. Suhaila Seddeqi was appointed to lead the Department of Public Health, and the post of Vice-Chair and Women's Affairs was given to Dr. Sima Samar.<sup>43</sup> Both women were instrumental in helping women and girls receive an education and training in healthcare services before and during the reign of Taliban. Now a prominent women's rights activist, Dr. Sima Samar has paid considerable contributions educating girls in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, home-schooling many women during Taliban rule in Afghanistan, and providing healthcare for Afghans as a trained physician.

Although there was no regulation to include women in the interim government, there was intense international demand and pressure for the inclusion of women in the next government. This was precisely the case in 2001 because the US Coalition had militarily intervened not only to remove Taliban and Al Qaida from Afghanistan, but the war was also sold to the Western public on the moral pretext that Afghan women needed to be "liberated" from Taliban.<sup>44</sup> At this early juncture of US intervention in Afghanistan, the United States had little choice but to put a few women in power to make the case that, indeed, Afghan women had been "liberated" from their oppressors. I will come back to this point later in the conclusion of the thesis.

---

<sup>42</sup> Grenfell, L. (2004). "The Participation of Afghan Women in the Reconstruction Process." Human Rights Brief 12, no. 1 (2004): pg. 22-25.

<sup>43</sup> United Nations. (2013, August 11) The Peacemaker. Report. Retrieved from <http://peacemaker.un.org/afghanistan-bonnagreement2001>

<sup>44</sup> Kolhatkar, S. & Ingalls J. (2006). Bleeding Afghanistan. Washington, Warlords, and the Propaganda of Silence. Seven Stories Press. Pg. 170.

The biggest accomplishment for women during the Bonn conference was that the agreement recognized the importance of women's rights due to the suffering they had undergone for over two decades beginning with the Russian invasion of 1979 until Taliban's regime. It was agreed to establish a Women's Ministry which would look after the needs and progress of women in Afghanistan. Designating a Ministry to look after women's rights and progress was a first step in acknowledging that women needed to be represented in the future of the country.

#### Emergency Loya Jirga – June 2002

Following the establishment of an Interim Authority, an Emergency Loya Jirga was set up to elect a Transitional Administration in Kabul. This Loya Jirga was critical as it was to decide on the transitional government in Afghanistan. The transitional government would then be responsible for drafting a new Constitution and paving the way for the first democratic presidential election.

The participation of women in the Emergency Loya Jirga was decided in advance at the Bonn I conference. Approximately 2,000 delegates attended the Loya Jirga. The UN reports that roughly 200 women participated in the Emergency Loya Jirga.<sup>45</sup> That in itself was an accomplishment given Afghanistan's history of excluding women from national decision-making processes. However, despite women being present in a considerable number, there were many reports of women's harassment and sidelining by

---

<sup>45</sup> United Nations. (2002) Women Peace and Security. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/eWPS.pdf>

warlords who came uninvited to the Jirga.<sup>46</sup> Even though the Emergency Loya Jirga “tried to ensure women’s participation...warlords and commanders dominated the conversation, drowning out the voices of women.”<sup>47</sup>

One of the accomplishments for the women who attended the Emergency Loya Jirga was creating a network of 45 female delegates who would look after female delegate representation and preparedness for the next Loya Jirga, which would be held in 18 months.<sup>48</sup>

It is important to note that the Emergency Loya Jirga was considered flawed by many male and female delegates. Many delegates wanted the Transitional Authority to be free of warlords and to put former King Zahir Shah back into power. However, they were left stunned as the former King was sidelined and appointments of the Transitional Authority included several warlords. Many male and female delegates claimed that the appointment of President Hamid Karzai and his cabinet was pre-decided and that the convening of the Emergency Loya Jirga was a show only to give legitimacy to an illegitimate government. Even though the “Bonn agreement and the rules of the Loya Jirga entitled us to choose the next government freely, we delegates were denied anything more than a symbolic role in the selection process.”<sup>49</sup> This selection of appointees held

---

<sup>46</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2013, July 9) Afghanistan: Loya Jirga off to a Shaky Start.

Retrieved from <http://www.hrw.org/news/2002/06/12/afghanistan-loya-jirga-shaky-start>

<sup>47</sup> Grenfell, L (2004). "The Participation of Afghan Women in the Reconstruction Process." Human Rights Brief 12. Pg. 22-25.

<sup>48</sup> UN Study. (2002) Women, Peace and Security. United Nations Publication. Pg. 63

<sup>49</sup> Zakhilwal, O. & Niazi A. (2002, June 21). The Warlords Win in Kabul. *The New York Times*.

little legitimacy for many delegates because decisions had been made prior to convening of the Jirga.

The gathering was an experiment in which “the microphone was controlled so that the supporters of the interim government dominated the proceedings.”<sup>50</sup> Critics of warlords were called “traitors” of Islam and silenced. The fundamentalists “circulated a petition denouncing Women’s Affairs Minister Samar as ‘Afghanistan’s Salman Rushdie.’”<sup>51</sup> As a result, the appointment of the Women’s Affairs Ministry was delayed by Karzai for a later date in order to appease the hardliners. A leading women’s rights activist who wished to remain anonymous told the *New York Times* that due to the threat of violence by warlords and their supporters, women could not express their views. She also added that today they are safe at the Jirga but asked “who will protect us if we continue to express our views and fight for our rights?”<sup>52</sup>

#### Constitutional Loya Jirga – December 2003

The Constitutional Loya Jirga of 2003 was convened in Kabul to debate and adopt a proposed draft Constitution. The total number of delegates invited was 502, of which 100 were women. The number of women present at this Jirga was higher because during the Emergency Loya Jirga, forty-five female delegates formed a network that worked hard to make sure women would be better represented in the Constitutional Loya Jirga.

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Zakhilwal & Niazi. (2002, June 21) The Warlords Win in Kabul. *New York Times*.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Many of the women were harassed and intimidated by the more violent factions and were not allowed to voice independent opinions. Some women complained that no female delegates were selected to chair any of the committees; women were not even leading the committees that discussed women's rights and human rights in the Constitution.<sup>53</sup> The international community considered the Constitutional Loya Jirga as a landmark improvement due to the high number of women delegates that were present compared to the 2002 Loya Jirga. However, in terms of substantive leadership on women's issues and other pressing issues regarding the future of Afghanistan, women's voices remained in the background.<sup>54</sup>

In what became a historic moment for Afghans, a young female delegate named Malalai Joya asked permission to speak. During the three minutes granted to speak by the Chairman of the Jirga, she condemned the presence of warlords and criminals responsible for massive human rights violations against the Afghan people. Before her three minutes were up, she was silenced and nearly escorted out as many warlords and their supporters raised their voices calling her indecent names.<sup>55</sup> For the remaining days of the Jirga, the central government provided Joya with extra security to ensure her safety. Joya stated in her speech that the warlords should be tried in court and not given a

---

<sup>53</sup> Oates, L. & Helal, S.I. (2013, July 26) At the Cross-Roads of Conflict and Democracy, Afghanistan's Constitutional Loya Jirga. Pg. 26. Retrived from <http://dspace.cigilibrary.org/jspui/bitstream/123456789/20581/1/At%20the%20Cross%20Roads%20of%20Conflict%20and%20Democracy%20Women%20and%20Afghanistans%20Constitutional%20Loya%20Jirga.pdf?1>

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*, pg. 24.

<sup>55</sup> Strong, G. (2007, September 29). Courage under Fire. *The Guardian*.



role in the future of the country. In response to her defiant speech, some angered supporters of the warlords called her a “communist.”<sup>56</sup>

It became evident for delegates and Afghans following the events of the Loya Jirga that warlords could take the microphone, express their views and are eligible to become ministers in the government. But when a woman stands up and speaks against the attendance of warlords (even though she did not name any specific individual), she is intimidated and silenced. In such an intimidating environment, how could other women raise their voices? Female delegate Sa’era Sharif defended Joya stating that most women stood by her, thereby, preventing Joya’s expulsion from the Jirga. Defending Joya’s controversial remarks, Sharif diplomatically asserted that “Malalai might have experienced bitter miseries as a woman and the elders in the session should have understood this.”<sup>57</sup> Afghans hold mixed views about Malalai Joya’s speech. Some Afghans respect Joya for her courage in standing up against the inclusion of warlords at the Jirga, others say she did not use diplomatic tact to address the issue and her actions adversely affected the cause of women’s rights in Afghanistan.<sup>58</sup>

Afghanistan National Independent Peace and Reconciliation Commission, also known as  
Programme Tahkim Sulh or PTS – 2005

---

<sup>56</sup> Samadar, R. (2003, December 23). Outspoken Joya in Defiant Mood. Institute for War and Peace Reporting.

<sup>57</sup> IRIN. (2003, December 19). Interview with Loya Jirga Delegate Sa’era Sharif. IRIN. Humanitarian News and Analysis. Retrieved from: <http://www.irinnews.org/report/21436/afghanistan-interview-with-loya-jirga-delegate-sa-era-sharif>

<sup>58</sup> Persard, S. (2013, October 25). A Woman Among Warlords: An Interview with Malalai Joya. *The Huffington Post*.

PTS was established through a presidential decree in May 2005 and was headed by Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, a conservative religious scholar. The commission's purpose was to address the critical need for national reconciliation. The Commission was tasked with reaching out to former warring factions and Taliban insurgency in efforts to "restore the lost trust and damaged national unity" and "end inter-group armed hostilities, resolve unsettled national issues, and facilitate healing of the wounds caused by past injustices, and take necessary measures to prevent the repeat of the civil war and its destruction."<sup>59</sup> PTS had established offices in 12 provinces and was co-led by a religious leader and a tribal elder in efforts to engage fighters back to civil society or bring them to the political fold. PTS has been credited for bringing 7106 insurgents to the peace process, 30% of whom surrendered their weapons. Additionally, PTS ensured the release of 763 prisoners who pledged not to go back to fighting.<sup>60</sup>

There was not a single female representative in any official role in the Peace Commission. All regional offices and the Kabul headquarters of the Peace Commission were led by men. This is mainly because the Commission was tasked with directly engaging with insurgents and convincing them to lay down their arms. Within the context of an extremely conservative and Islamic society, it would be unthinkable to send women to engage with fighting factions. Also, in this particular scenario, it would not be feasible to put women in danger by risking their security to engage in negotiations with fighters that have yet to reconcile with the government.

---

<sup>59</sup> Afghanistan National Independent Peace and Reconciliation Commission. *Home*. Retrieved from <http://www.pts.af/>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

Press accounts do not detail women's reaction to being excluded from this process.

#### The London Conference on Afghanistan - January 2010

By 2010, the Afghan government and Coalition forces had come to the understanding that the insurgency could not be defeated by military means alone. The International London Conference on Afghanistan was convened to discuss how to proceed with negotiations with Taliban. It was a one day conference in which 70 countries gathered to discuss the challenges of governance, security and negotiations with Taliban. At this juncture, Afghan women remained concerned that negotiations and reintegration of Taliban fighters into society do not come at the cost of hard won rights post-Taliban era. Women fear that if Taliban come back to power, their hard-earned rights might get taken away.<sup>61</sup>

The attendees of the conference agreed on a phased transition to Afghan forces taking the lead in military operations and a “two-tier peace process in which Taliban foot soldiers will be lured out of the battle with jobs and rural development, and Taliban leaders will be invited to talk peace.”<sup>62</sup> The Afghan government and the international community have come to the conclusion that a political settlement should be pursued

---

<sup>61</sup> Mayer, C. (2010, January 29). London Afghanistan Summit Glosses over the Cracks, *Time Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1957537,00.html>

<sup>62</sup> Borger, J. (2010, January 28). Afghanistan Conference sets out plan for two-tier peace process. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jan/28/afghanistan-london-conference-analysis>

with the Taliban since Afghan and Coalition forces have not been able to defeat Taliban militarily.

A small delegation was led by President Karzai and no female delegates were included. *Time* magazine quoted one Afghan woman who stated that when she was lobbying for women to be represented in the London conference, she was told “this isn’t ladies’ business, this is about security.”<sup>63</sup> At this stage, even though progress had been made with women’s participation in past conferences, they were omitted from the London conference. Nevertheless, since US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was present at the conference, she took the lead to announce an action plan which would be focused on women’s security issues, education, healthcare, and economic development. Clinton further stated that the offer for peace talks with Taliban would not risk women’s rights. She elaborated that the hard-won gains by Afghan women would not be subject to change as one of the preconditions for talks is acceptance of the current Afghan Constitution which protects women’s rights.<sup>64</sup>

At the conclusion of the London Conference, it was decided that the Afghan forces would begin taking the lead in security operations and gradually allowing the phased out departure of foreign forces. Additionally, the Afghan government would launch an initiative to bring Taliban insurgents to the political fold and the international community would assist in funding this measure for peace-building.

---

<sup>63</sup> Mayer, Catherine, London Afghanistan Summit Glosses over the Cracks, *Time Magazine*, January 29, 2010.

<sup>64</sup> Clinton, H (2010, January 18). Hillary Clinton’s Remarks at the London Conference, Video and Text. Retrieved from <http://still4hill.com/2010/01/28/3245/>

## The National Consultative Peace Jirga - 2010

The National Consultative Peace Jirga convened in Kabul in June 2010 with 1600 delegates representing all sectors of Afghan society including parliament members, provincial councils, religious clerics, tribal elders, civil society organizations and Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan as well as Afghan women. The Jirga was convened to decide on how best to reach out to Taliban insurgency and bring about lasting peace in Afghanistan.<sup>65</sup>

With the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program failing to bring in a large number of insurgents to put down their arms and join the government, the Afghanistan Consultative Peace Jirga decided to also set up the High Peace Counsel which would work to make sure more insurgents join the peace process and discontinue fighting the Afghan government and foreign forces.

Approximately 20% of the Jirga delegates were women. Since negotiations with Taliban would directly affect Afghan women's rights, Afghan female activists and civil society leaders lobbied for women's inclusion months before the actual Jirga took place. This effort was remarkable as women were not only present at the Jirga, but they were

---

<sup>65</sup> UN Mission, Afghanistan. (2010, June 6). The Resolution Adopted at the Conclusion of the National Peace Consultative Jirga. Retrieved from <http://www.afghanistan-un.org/2010/06/the-resolution-adopted-at-the-conclusion-of-the-national-consultative-peace-jirga/>

present in visible numbers. At the onset of talks to include women, only 20 women were going to be included.<sup>66</sup>

Despite their presence, a few women still expressed disappointment regarding the chosen female delegates and appointees to the Jirga. A prominent Afghan women's rights activist and lawyer, Najla Ayubi, criticized the hand-picked selection of women in the Jirga stating that these women "cannot present a strong voice for half of the Afghan population since the majority of them are not political activists or aware of the law and their rights — a merely symbolic presence." Furthermore, a female delegate from Herat province expressed frustration that women were "intentionally" not placed in leadership positions, and this proves a perception held by men that women are not strong leaders."<sup>67</sup>

Even though, at the planning stages of the Jirga, not a single woman was appointed to any leadership role, by the second day of the Jirga the demand by women for female representation was so intense that female delegate Najla Zewari was appointed as a deputy chairwoman to represent the women in the Jirga.<sup>68</sup>

Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP-2008) and High Peace Council

HPC 2010 - Present

---

<sup>66</sup> Scheller, B. A. (2010, June 10) Not Only There But Really Present, Women Resist Effort to Marginalize them in the Peace Jirga. Retrieved from <http://www.af.boell.org/web/Democratization-258.html>

<sup>67</sup> Mashal, M. (2010, June 44). Afghan Jirga, Debates over leadership and Afghan Women, *New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/04/afghan-jirga-debates-over-leadership-and-the-role-of-women/?\\_r=0](http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/04/afghan-jirga-debates-over-leadership-and-the-role-of-women/?_r=0)

<sup>68</sup> Scheller, B. A. (2010, June 10) Not Only There But Really Present, Women Resist Effort to Marginalize them in the Peace Jirga. Retrieved from <http://www.af.boell.org/web/Democratization-258.html>

The Afghanistan High Peace Council which consists of sixty-nine members appointed by President Hamid Karzai was established to negotiate with Taliban. Of the sixty-nine members, nine are women.<sup>69</sup> The council was first chaired by Burhanuddin Rabbani until he was assassinated in 2011, representing a serious blow to the reconciliation process. The membership of the High Peace Council includes some formal Taliban figures as well as warlords. This was a serious sticking point for women and many prominent Afghan women raised their voices against several appointees but to no avail.

The reintegration and reconciliation plan does not address concerns of the women of Afghanistan, the sector of Afghan population that feels they have the most to lose in a political settlement if their rights are sacrificed due to the security crisis and quick deals made with Taliban. Most female activists believe that even the minimal achievements can be compromised if women continue to serve in symbolic roles when it comes to peace negotiations.

#### BONN II - 2011

The Bonn II conference held on December 2011 had two main objectives: a) the transition of Afghanistan to a sovereign state with greater political responsibilities and security; b) the next phase of transformation and development with the cooperation of its

---

<sup>69</sup> Arghandiwal, M. (2012, March 22). Women on Afghan Peace Council Say they are Sidelined. *Reuters*. Retrieved from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/22/us-afghanistan-women-idUSBRE82L0FP20120322>

international partners.<sup>70</sup> As such it was an important step forward and critical to Afghanistan's future and somewhat central to the peace process.

The international community along with the Afghan women's NGO networks and the UN brought intense pressure on the Karzai government to give women a strong voice in the Bonn II conference. The original decision of the government was to bring in women as civil society delegates and not give them too much say in the process. Afghan female activists continued their call for women's inclusion. At the end, the Afghan government only allowed two women to come in as part of the civil society delegation. Women's voices in the peace process were again minimized.<sup>71</sup>

The conference included 33% female delegates. Only two were given a chance to attend, and one was given just three minutes to speak to civil society and women's issues. Selay Ghaffar, an executive director of Humanitarian Assistance for Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA), was one of the two civil society representatives selected to speak at the international conference on Afghanistan in Bonn.

After assessing the various peace processes since 2001, it is evident that women were included in the peace processes at different junctures. The international community's insistence to include women helped to an extent over the years. Also,

---

<sup>70</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2011, October 20) Key Conference Sidelining Women, Donors Should Insist on Women's Full Participation

Retrieved from <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/30/afghanistan-key-conference-sidelining-women>

<sup>71</sup> Guardian. (2011, December 6) After the Bonn Conference, What Next for Afghanistan's Women.

Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/dec/06/bonn-what-next-afghan-women>



Afghan women have consistently demanded their rights and many female human rights activists have kept up the pressure on the government. However, as the Afghan government sees an imminent foreign forces drawdown by the end of 2014, the goal of a political settlement with the Taliban has become an even bigger priority. In this scenario, the Afghan government has begun to view women's inclusion in the peace processes as a less important agenda item.

### Women's Participation in Peace Initiatives Compared to Men

National Peace Initiatives	Timeline	Total number of Participants	Number of Women	Leadership Women	Role
<b>Bonn I</b>	12--2001	23 delegates (total participants 60)	2 (total participants 6)	2	
<b>Emergency Loya Jirga</b>	06--2002	1500	220	1	
<b>Constitutional Loya Jirga</b>	12--2003	502	100		
<b>Programme Tehkim Suhl (PTS)</b>	05--2005	Led by men	0 (no mention of female participation)	0	
<b>National Consultative Peace Jirga</b>	06--2010	1600	175-336 20% women	0	
<b>London Conference</b>	01-2010	Small male delegation led by President Karzai (number unknown)	0	0	
<b>Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP)</b>	06—2010, 07--2010	Led by men	Women consulted in the peace Jirga	0	
<b>High Peace Council</b>	10--2010	69	9		
<b>Bonn II</b>	12--2011	39	11 33%	Only 1 woman given 3 minutes to speak	

## **Systematic and other Obstacles Facing Afghan Women**

This chapter will highlight a host of challenges that continue to keep women outnumbered in the national peace-building initiatives. In the first section of this chapter, I will examine the factors which hold the Afghan government back from fully supporting women. The following four sections will address the impact of a patriarchal environment on women, security and mobility challenges, socio-economic challenges, and capacity issues.

This chapter aims to provide a deeper understanding of the impediments to women's greater inclusion in the peace-building initiatives. A better understanding of the issues may assist the international community and NGO's working on women's rights in their efforts to implement more sustainable solutions.

### **Underlying Reasons why the Afghan Government is not Prioritizing Women's Rights**

Afghan society may be a rare example of a nation where “during the last century kings and politicians have been made and undone by struggles relating to women's status.”<sup>72</sup> In recent years, Taliban's oppression of women has continued to make international headlines. However, less known are the other facts of Afghan history in which other actors, both state and anti-state, have either come in defense of women or

---

<sup>72</sup> Ahmad-Ghosh, H. (2003, May) A History of Women in Afghaistan, Lessons Learnt for the Future, or Yesterdays, or Tomorrow. Women in Afghanistan. Journal of International Women's Studies, Volume 4, Issue 3. Article 1.

fought against women's progress in society. The injustices committed against women during the 1990's Afghan civil war are no less than the oppression of Taliban against women. In the last decade, Afghan "women came to symbolize to Western military powers a justification of war" to liberate women from the grips of Taliban.<sup>73</sup> In order to better understand the Afghan government's lack of willingness to take political risks in advancing women's rights, a cursory review of past efforts on women's rights is presented below.

Modernization and women's rights was strongly undertaken by King Amanullah from 1919 to 1929 following the Anglo-Afghan wars. Amanullah was the first King to introduce "co-education and the attempt to remove the veil from women and to ask all the Afghans in Kabul to wear western clothes."<sup>74</sup> The King also introduced the first Constitution in Afghanistan and women were discouraged from wearing the veil and the power of religious clerics was minimized. However, due to these speedy reforms for which the cities were ready but the vast rural areas of Afghanistan were not, Amanullah was overthrown. Amanullah wanted Afghanistan to catch up with the "technological progress of the West, but did not appreciate that this advancement was based on long-term economic and social developments, while his reforms of a social and cultural nature needed time, a sound economic and educative basis, and the support of the populace if

---

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Misdaq, N. (2008). *Political Frailty and External Interference*. Routledge. Pages 98-99.

they were to be realized.”<sup>75</sup> Amanullah was temporarily successful in advancing women’s rights.

Under the ten-year reign of Amanullah Khan as Emir and King, many social changes were introduced to modernize Afghanistan. These changes included education for both boys and girls, freedom of the press, and advancement of women’s rights. King Amanullah established the Family Code law which abolished child marriages and enforced judicial permission for individuals involved in polygamy, and created the first constitution which gave women and men equal rights under the law. Furthermore, the King also granted women the right to choose their own spouse. King Amanullah Khan’s wife, Queen Soraya, was also a strong believer in women’s rights and used her power and influence to educate girls, open a women’s hospital, and also establish a magazine for women. During this era, women enjoyed great freedom and advancement, particularly in the cities. However, due to the fast pace of change in the cities which did not match the development and education of Afghans in rural areas, the King was forced into exile as angered conservative tribes rose in defiance of his speedy modernization.<sup>76</sup>

Following Amanullah’s exile to Italy, Habibullah Kalakani came to power in 1929 for approximately nine months. Kalakani was an illiterate man deeply influenced by religious clerics and tribal conservatives. He was not able to accomplish much during his reign and was shortly executed by General Mohammad Nadir, and the monarchy was restored. King Nadir Shah came to power after Kalakani’s assassination. The new King

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Langary, S. A. (2010). *Afghanistan in Diaspora, Their Stories of Adversary, Freedom, and Success*. AuthorHouse.

retracted most of the rights given to women under King Amanullah Khan and ordered courts to follow Sharia law instead of secular law. He replaced secular schools with religious schools. He banned girls from education and made wearing of the burqa mandatory for women in public. He was assassinated after three years, and his son Zahir Shah took over the throne in 1929.<sup>77</sup>

King Zahir Shah remained in power for 40 years. King Zahir Shah was more cautious, and having learned from his predecessors he gave women rights gradually, which did not create rebellion from conservatives during his rule. Under King Zahir, Afghan women gained the right to vote, work, and receive an education. Many women married by choice and did not wear the burqa. Girls received higher education and graduated from universities.<sup>78</sup>

King Zahir Shah, while in Italy for an eye surgery, was ousted through a bloodless coup by his cousin Daud Khan. Daud declared himself the first President of Afghanistan, ending the monarchy for Afghanistan in 1973. President Daud Khan did not impose the burqa on women and banned child marriages. He set the minimum age of 16 for girls' marriages and established laws against forced marriages. Women enjoyed relatively more freedom and rights in the cities but the advancement of women's rights did not spread to the rural areas. President Daud Khan was assassinated with most his family members in

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

the palace by the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1978.<sup>79</sup>

After some infighting within PDPA during the Saur Revolution, Noor Mohammad Taraki took over the Kabul government in 1978. Taraki continued expanding women's rights from the Daud Khan era. He opened 600 schools for boys and girls. He banned dowry and gave women the right to choose their husbands. Women were also encouraged to be involved with legislative and policy issues. Taraki also changed the curriculum in schools and universities revising it to incorporate Marxist ideology. However, these drastic changes were not popular across Afghanistan, particularly in tribal and rural areas. The tribes and conservatives revolted against these and other social changes as foreign elements of Marxism and communism grew more prominent.<sup>80</sup>

Taraki's rule was also marred with assassinations, disappearances, and rapes of thousands of Afghans who did not agree with his Marxist ideology. Taraki was assassinated by his own party member Hafizullah Amin. The PDPA leadership era was marred by violent attacks against those who posed the slightest dissent against their role and countless innocent civilians. Names of the missing and the dead of this era are still being released. Taraki and Amin found "enemies everywhere, including in its own ranks, and immediately launched a pre-emptive wave of arrests and secret executions, detaining individuals and indeed whole families, including children, whom they thought threatened

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

the new regime.”<sup>81</sup> The Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and placed Babrak Karmal, another communist leader of the PDPA, in power. At that time, the country was under Russian occupation with the Soviets backing the communist leadership and the United States and Pakistan supporting opposition Afghan forces fighting for freedom from communist rule.<sup>82</sup>

The Soviet occupation lasted until 1989. During this decade, women had some basic freedoms only in Kabul and other cities where the Russians had control. However, nearly two million Afghans were killed and another five million displaced during the ten year occupation. Russian forces had adopted a “deliberate policy of bombing villages, massacring civilians and executing captured guerrillas” while thousands of Afghan political prisoners could not be traced.<sup>83</sup> While some women who worked with the communist regime enjoyed freedoms, most women across the country witnessed their rights become a casualty of war. This era left countless numbers of Afghan men and women prisoned, killed, tortured and displaced.

The Russians withdrew in defeat in 1989 leaving behind the Najibullah regime. The Najibullah regime encouraged women to work and receive an education. However, due to other internal political issues, the Najibullah regime lasted for three years before he was killed, and a power vacuum in Kabul led to Mujahideen factions fighting each other. Afghanistan fell into a bloody civil war with over 50,000 people killed in Kabul

---

<sup>81</sup> Clark, K. (2013, September 26). Death list published. Families of disappeared end a 30 year wait for news. Afghanistan Analysts Network.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ewans, M. (2002). Afghanistan – A Short History of Its People and Politics. New York. Harper Collins.



and much infrastructure destroyed, as the anti-communist Mujahideen groups fought each other for the control of the capital. From 1992 to 1996, women's rights were curtailed. Kabul cinemas were ordered shut. TV broadcasting was censored, and female anchors were banned. Women also had to wear a head-scarf in public. Massive violence unfolded as Mujahideen groups turned on each other with indiscriminate shelling and bombing of the capital. This security crisis paved the way for the rise of Taliban.<sup>84</sup>

Taliban rule pushed women into their homes and out of the public sphere. Massive human rights violations of all Afghan civilians have been documented during their reign, and women specifically were treated like second-class citizens. Women were not allowed to work or go to school. This was the darkest phase of history for Afghan women as they became nearly invisible unless they were accompanied by a male in public.<sup>85</sup>

What is most noteworthy is that some of the most brutal commanders that were involved in the Afghan civil war of the nineties were later used by the United States after the attacks of September 11 to defeat Taliban. Following the fall of Taliban, these warlords were given prominent positions in the Afghan government, which has remained a point of contention for Afghans.<sup>86</sup>

Since late 1970's, there has been a consistent push back against women's rights in Afghanistan from elements within society. Political groups mixed with extreme religious

---

<sup>84</sup> Steele, J. (2001, September 27). 10 Myths About Afghanistan. *The Guardian*.

<sup>85</sup> Rashid, A. (2000). Taliban. Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia. Yale University Press.

<sup>86</sup> Gould, E. & Fitzgerald P. (2010, March 18). Lets not Forget that the Warlords were Brought into the Afghan Government by the Bush Administration in 2001. *The Huffington Post*.

ideologies have dictated women's role in society overshadowing moderate voices in Afghanistan.

Notably, the post-Taliban decade is not the first time Afghans have tried empowering women. In the 1920's and 1970's, strong support was given to educate women, remove forced veiling in public, and engage women in all spheres of life. However, it was met with strong backlash by conservative rural area tribes and religious clerics who felt that traditional family structures and Islamic and cultural practices were being eroded by the central government in Kabul. The rural areas had not caught up with the educated elites of the cities, and thus the attempts for reform failed and led to the downfall of a monarchy in the 1920's and the Afghan communist party in the 1970's.<sup>87</sup> Previous historical attempts to promote women's rights in Afghanistan failed because the speed at which change was implemented, only the cities were prepared. The rural areas remained ill-prepared causing backlash from tribes and conservative elements within society.

The Karzai Administration recognizes how former Kings and Administrations before have been toppled over swift changes on women's rights issues and is walking a fine line to avoid giving political oxygen to the tribes, conservative elements, powerful warlords and religious clerics that can easily rally together in over-throwing the government for abrupt changes to the status quo of women, combined with other issues of contention such as corruption. Therefore, the Kabul government has been cautious in

---

<sup>87</sup> Ghosh, H.A. (2003). A History of Women in Afghanistan, Lessons learned for the Future, Yesterdays and Tomorrows, Women in Afghanistan, Journal of International Women's Studies Vol. 4 #3.

allowing just enough women in policy making circles to curb international pressure, but not so much that the issue of swift progress in changing women's rights becomes a rallying point for anti-government forces, warlords, tribes, and religious clerics threatening the central government. The Afghan government acknowledges that the society as a whole is still ill-prepared for drastic change on women's rights, particularly in the vast rural areas where development and education have not caught up to urban centers.

The Afghan Ulema (Religious clerics) have also called on the Afghan government to do its best in securing peace with Taliban and not put any preconditions on the process, including any preconditions on women's rights. This is a major impediment for the government to push for a stronger role for women in the peace process.

#### Patriarchal Society and Misuse of Islamic Tradition by Extremists

In Afghan society, based on traditional and cultural values, men are held responsible for the protection of women. During times of insecurity, this becomes particularly prevalent, as men feel their honor is challenged if anything happens to their female family members under their watch. Afghan men feel responsible for protecting women from falling victim to violence, such as rape or murder. Therefore, men become exceedingly protective of women, often leading to women being confined to the relative safety of their homes. Such protectiveness restricts women to only interacting within their familial circles, thus, leading to marginalization from society.

Due to strict traditional practices, even empowered and educated women sometimes remain in the shadow of their husband. A great example of this is the First Lady of Afghanistan, Zinat Karzai, who recently underscored the reality in Afghanistan as to how acceptable it is to be seen in public. She stated that after decades of violence, Afghanistan must work “gradually” to improve conditions for women and “work in line with our culture and traditions.”<sup>88</sup> Zinat Karzai stays away from public view as many conservative Afghans still believe that it is shameful for other men to see their wives.

It is important to understand that patriarchy in Afghanistan is based more on tribal customs than on the Islamic tradition. In fact, many tribal practices and traditions run counter to Islamic tradition.<sup>89</sup> Muslim scholars see the tribal code, *pashtunwali*, to be in contradiction with Islamic Law. *Pashtunwali* is a code of honor among Pashtun tribes, and often takes precedence over Islamic Law in areas where it is practiced.<sup>90</sup>

One of the ways civil society and the Afghan government have failed to deliver is in promoting an understanding of the rights given to Muslim women under Islamic Law. An effort in this area would have helped women’s rights and prevented condemnation by anti-government forces that call any agenda for progress of women a foreign intervention and anti-Islamic. This missed opportunity to educate both genders on women’s rights in Islam or Islamic societies has left an open space for radical forces in society to dictate

---

<sup>88</sup> BBC. (2013, March 17). Zinat Karzai, Afghanistan’s “invisible” First Lady. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21699353>

<sup>89</sup> Abirafeh, L. (2009). Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan, The Politics and Effects of Intervention. McFarland. Page 24.

<sup>90</sup> Toor, A. (2014). Why are Customary Pashtun Laws and Ethics Causes for Concern? Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved from: <http://csis.org/blog/why-are-customary-pashtun-laws-and-ethics-causes-concern>

women's role. This vacuum of information that could have been filled with appropriate teachings of Islam and rights granted to women has been filled by insurgents and radical forces in society who misconstrue Islamic teachings for their own political and ideological agendas.

### Women's Personal Security and Mobility

The women who have run for public office or are active in the political sphere in Kabul often have body guards or family members that provide protection. Their mobility is limited due to constant threat from insurgents, warlords, and conservative elements in society that threaten women for taking part in politics. The more prominent a woman is, the more she needs security. A great example of this is parliament member Fawzia Koofi. Koofi receives regular death threats and travels with security. She survived a 2010 assassination attempt in which one of her body guards were injured.<sup>91</sup>

During my fact-finding trips to Afghanistan, I noted that when it comes to crimes against women who live in rural areas, these issues are also not taken to the local police but rather solved through community leaders and the jirgas, which are male-dominated. Women are not given representation in these traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution, but are represented by their male relatives who seek justice on their behalf.

Unless women have strong family backing and connections to powerful figures in Afghanistan, they mostly refrain from running for political office or taking part in

---

<sup>91</sup> McBain, S. (2013, December 18). Fawzia Koofi, the Female Politician that wants to Lead Afghanistan. *The New Statesman*. Retrieved from <http://www.newstatesman.com/2013/12/just-ticket>

national initiatives where there is a high likelihood that their security will be at risk. A publication by The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit on women who successfully ran for parliament or provincial council seats reports that women encountered fewer security challenges because they had “good access to financial resources, ties to a powerful family or a political party, and—often most importantly—a strong relationship with a given community or other constituency of voters.”<sup>92</sup> Women that had this type of support were almost always successful in their bids for political office.

Women are not only exposed to violence from the fighting factions in Afghanistan but also from domestic abuse. The Afghan human rights watchdogs have documented countless cases of domestic abuse and drug-related abuse. Women are beaten by their husbands or other relatives and are either unaware or afraid to pursue their legal rights. Issues such as domestic violence, under-age marriages, and honor killings remain the dominant forms of violence against women. These localized forms of conflict still rely on feudal and tribal mechanisms of resolution, under which women are under-represented and marginalized.

Afghan officials appear increasingly willing to compromise women’s rights to appease Taliban. In an op-ed in the *Guardian*, a leading Afghan women rights activist, Wajhma Frogh, wrote that “the idea of subsuming women's rights so that the war can end has come in formal and informal talks between some parliamentarians, government

---

<sup>92</sup> Lough et al. (2012, March). Women’s Participation in Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections. Synthesis Paper. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. Pg. 1.

officials and is also reported to be part of cynical discussions among some of the international diplomats in Kabul gatherings.”<sup>93</sup> She further stated that many Afghan women activists are concerned over the Afghan government beginning to sound like the Taliban. Frogh also warned that the Afghan Peace Jirga also established a commission to review prisoner cases, but since the judicial system is not strong in Afghanistan and the commission is politically inclined, there is a high likelihood that criminals who violated women’s rights may be released from prison. This includes offenders who “threw acid in the faces of girls in Kandahar, those who assassinated the senior police officer (female), Malalai Kakar, and those militants who continue to target girls' schools.”<sup>94</sup>

Although women have equal rights under the Constitution, the weakness lies in implementation of laws that protect women. This neglected area of gender rights protection requires serious consideration by the Afghan government. It also requires greater advocacy efforts from civil society, and the international community. Without this, any local initiative will run into challenges. Therefore, strengthening the enforcement of rule of law by engaging with both men and women on how to achieve their rights remains critical.

### Socio-economic Challenges

A 2012 statistical survey jointly conducted by the Afghanistan Statistical Organization and Afghan Women’s Ministry concluded that the “low socio-economic situation of women and girls in Afghanistan presents a serious challenge to human

---

<sup>93</sup> Frogh, W. (2010, June 23). Afghan Peace Process Offers Little Hope for Women. *Guardian*.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

development. They are among the worst off in the world, both in comparison to Afghan men and to women of most countries. Their situation is particularly poor in the areas of health, human rights, economic productivity, education and literacy, and public participation in leadership and politics.”<sup>95</sup>

Many foreign aid organizations hold the common misconception that empowering women economically will directly lead to political empowerment. The automatic assumption that economically empowering a woman will lead to a change in how society views her is still a long way off in Afghanistan. Although women across the provinces feel that earning a living has helped them gain confidence and in some cases, respect, it has not in any way begun to change how others view them. This is especially so in the more conservative and tribal areas of Afghanistan, where women are still not even physically visible in public.

Simply empowering women financially is not enough, particularly when there are security challenges and the absence of rule of law to protect women. The objective must be to direct women towards using their new-found economic benefits to the overall advantage of their families and communities by providing them with the knowledge and space to do so.

Development interventions aimed at women, especially economic interventions, need to include male family and community members to be able to allow the women to

---

<sup>95</sup> The Central Statistics Organization of Afghanistan. (2010). Women and Men in Afghanistan 2011. Retrieved from [http://cso.gov.af/Content/files/Last%20HANDBOOK%20ON%20WOMEN%20AND%20MEN%20IN%20AFGHANISTAN\\_JUNE%202012%201.pdf](http://cso.gov.af/Content/files/Last%20HANDBOOK%20ON%20WOMEN%20AND%20MEN%20IN%20AFGHANISTAN_JUNE%202012%201.pdf)



access various forms of economic opportunities and to prevent backlash. This is especially pertinent in areas that are more conservative than others and those prone to violence.

Many Afghan women are exposed to different forms of violent conflict, even in the cities where women are visible going to work or attending school. Some economically-empowered women often face bigger threats to their security than women who are staying within the confines of their households. Criminal gangs and extremist groups often target women with power and money, sending them death threats and gang rape threats to prevent women from mainstream civil and political participation.

In Afghanistan, human rights violations affect both men and women. Financial security alone cannot be the vehicle for prevention of human rights and gender-based conflict. For nearly three decades, Afghan women's rights have been denied either by the government in charge or by male family or community members. During Taliban rule, women were forbidden to work, seek medical attention from male doctors, and forced to wear a burqa and have a male accompany them outside the house. After Taliban rule, the Afghan Constitution has guaranteed equal rights to both men and women. This has resulted in visible improvements in the country, but the progress is still in its infancy and much more needs to be accomplished before Afghan women can participate more equally in the public sphere.

Development programs which aim to empower women economically do not necessarily result in political empowerment. To advance women's progress in politics,

interventions must be complemented with an adequate provision of social services (e.g., education/health/capacity) as well as political and human rights awareness. Economic empowerment alone is not enough to increase women's participation in the politics and nation-building.

### Capacity and Education

Added to the chaos of insecurity, Afghan women also face capacity challenges due to high levels of illiteracy, under-developed workforce training, and lack of inclusion in national level decision-making and marginal representation in all sectors of society.

In regions where women's freedom of movement is limited either due to conservative traditional practices, insecurity and/or poverty, women have little or no knowledge of their basic rights.

Contrary to popular belief, many Afghan women do stand up for themselves when they know their rights. Therefore, whether in the cities or in rural areas, it is important during the project implementation phase to consider the needs of the area and to design projects that address the issues of that particular target region. Often, aid is not properly coordinated and projects are not sustainable because locals were not consulted at the design and implementation phases.

As highlighted in this chapter, Afghan women continue to face a host of obstacles that need to be overcome gradually. They have started to make gains in the last decade, but there is much more to be accomplished to sustain these gains overtime. Added to this

is the fact that international donors keep demanding women's inclusion without really understanding all the challenges Afghan women face systematically and otherwise.

For the last thirteen years, the international community, Afghan women's rights activists and civil society leaders have come together to advance women's progress in Afghanistan. Despite their continued efforts, many challenges remain blocking greater progress. These challenges include the Afghan government's lack of will to take bold measures in advancing women's rights. Even though women have been given equal rights under the Constitution, these rights are not implemented and women are often challenged due to security issues. Added to this are socio-economic disadvantages, illiteracy, capacity issues, and the challenges that come with living in a patriarchal society. Although the foundation has been laid out in terms of having equal rights under the law, Afghan women are still far behind as far as enjoying equal rights in practice.

## **Significance of Women's Contribution and Implication on Peace Process**

This chapter will explore what women did accomplish by being included in the national dialogue on peace and security and what they might have accomplished had there been greater inclusivity. There were opportunities that did not get fully utilized to allow women to support the peace process, because women consistently found themselves undermined in peace initiatives and were pre-occupied with sustaining the rights they had gained.

This chapter will review women's contribution to peace-building and the significance of their contribution to the national reconciliation process. This chapter will also assess how the Afghan government missed opportunities to engage women more fully in the peace processes and how that has negatively impacted peace-building measures.

### **Women's Positive Contribution to Peace-Building**

Over the last decade, Afghan women have contributed significantly to society. Despite widespread discrimination against women in society, Afghan women have served in many capacities in contributing to peace. Women in the cities with more education and means for livelihood have net-worked with women in rural areas. They have worked together to empower women voters across the country. Women have risked their lives to promote human rights protection for all Afghans. They have defended women's rights in parliament, become active civil society leaders, joined the national police and army, owned and led businesses, and provided healthcare and education to name a few.

The Bonn I agreement in 2001 called for the establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was given the task of advancing women's progress in Afghan society. The Ministry was instrumental in promoting women's rights at several junctures, including Article 22 of the national Constitution which gave women "equality in rights and duties." Afghan women also mobilized to get the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women ratified.<sup>96</sup> Afghanistan signed CEDAW in 2003 and agreed to revisit Afghan laws and make them consistent with CEDAW.

During the Constitutional process in Afghanistan, women across the country networked to work together in mainstreaming gender equality. This also cultivated ethnic unity as majority ethnic groups of Pashtun and Tajik women worked closely with minority Uzbeks so that their spoken language would be considered an official language in regions where it is spoken. This served to bridge the gap on ethnic discrimination, as women worked together in resolving issues that affected them. Afghan women have served "as valuable allies in efforts to recognize and manage the country's ethnic conflicts."<sup>97</sup>

Women have spoken out against extremists and denounced warlords and a culture of impunity. They have helped bring to the forefront of national politics issues related to equality, freedom of expression, justice and democracy.<sup>98</sup> As a result of women's active

---

<sup>96</sup> National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA 2008-2018) pg. 5

<sup>97</sup> Anderlini, S. N. (2007). *Women Building Peace, What They Do, Why it Matters*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. Pg. 137

<sup>98</sup> Anderlini Naraghi, Sanam. *Women Building Peace. What They Do, Why it Matters*.

role in parliament and the workforce, female voters have increased and presidential candidates seek endorsement by women's groups.<sup>99</sup>

In the area of human rights, prominent Afghan women fought to promote and protect the rights of all Afghans. Dr. Sima Samar, who was in charge of the Women's Ministry during the transitional government phase, was later appointed to lead the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission. In this role, she served to promote transitional justice and enhance the education of Afghans on human rights, women's rights and children's rights.<sup>100</sup>

In Afghanistan, many women have risked their lives and refused to be victims and have consistently spoken out against human rights violations. Afghan women in politics and active civil society leaders have raised their voices in support of democracy, freedom of the press, and consistently condemned extremism. They have also strongly condemned warlordism and a culture of impunity. Additionally, women have been leading advocates of education, healthcare and development.<sup>101</sup>

Due to the conservative culture in Afghanistan, it is considered inappropriate for men to perform security searches on women or to question the female household members when hunting down insurgents or looking for criminals. It is acceptable when it is done by a woman. Recognizing this need, Afghan women have been recruited to serve

---

<sup>99</sup> Hodge, Natan. Afghan Candidate Seeks Backing of Women, Young. The Wall Street Journal. November 13, 2013.

<sup>100</sup> Anderlini, S. N. (2007). Women Building Peace, What They Do, Why it Matters. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. pg 137

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. pg 128, 141

in the police force, army units, and also as security search officers for females. Their recruitment has helped capture criminals, as they are able to question the women. Women search officers have also been recruited for airports to perform security searches on female travelers. Even the US Marines have recruited and deployed Afghan women to assist with the US Marines “in order to reach local women when units are out on patrol.”<sup>102</sup> However, this positive contribution also leaves them vulnerable, because they are easy targets by hard-liners in society.

Many women in Afghanistan make a difference in the daily lives of their families without ever garnering support or recognition. Despite the ongoing conflict and presence of foreign military and insurgent attacks, women continue to serve in traditional roles as peace-makers. This includes women “caring for the sick and the elderly, and sustaining and ensuring the survival of their families. Even in refugee camps, women shoulder the responsibilities of others.”<sup>103</sup> Despite women being targets of sexual assault and domestic abuse, they still continue to “give voice to civilians silenced by atrocities...women are often left to handle the trauma and violence that come home with men whose lives have been devastated by war...women provide the continuity that enables families and communities to heal and move forward...they are claiming their place as major stakeholders and active agents in resisting war, building peace, and defining security on their terms.”<sup>104</sup> Women continue to play an active role in rebuilding the lives of their

---

<sup>102</sup> Kuehnst et al. (2001) *Women & War, Power and Protection in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. United States Institute of Peace Press. Pg. 9.

<sup>103</sup> Anderlini, S. N. (2007) . *Women building Peace, What They Do, Why it Matters*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 2007. Pg. 8.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

families and communities, even if the societies they live in do not always recognize their contribution.

Despite violence being on the rise, women continue to make significant progress in Afghanistan. An October 2013 assessment by the International Crisis Group on Afghan women and conflict reported that “40 per cent of all schoolchildren are girls. Women are more than 27 per cent of parliament. They are in the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and are lawyers, entrepreneurs, journalists and civil society activists.”<sup>105</sup> The report also highlighted that women’s legal status in Afghanistan had improved and that gender equality was now ensured by the Constitution. The adoption of Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) law and the establishment of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs along with the National Action Plan for Women (NAPWA) are all major accomplishments. However, the report also warned that the progress achieved so far is fragile, and the implementation of the laws to protect women are weak and as the Afghan government engages in talks with Taliban, women’s progress is at risk of being compromised.<sup>106</sup>

In the last two elections, women have also voted in greater numbers and have even run for the post of the President. This is a very significant contribution as it gives young women and girls across the country hope in their future.

### Significance of Including Women in Peace Negotiations

---

<sup>105</sup> International Crisis Group. (2013, October 14) Women and Conflict in Afghanistan. Retrieved from <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/252-women-and-conflict-in-afghanistan.aspx>

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.



In active conflict zones, peace negotiations are often dominated by men. Afghanistan is no exception to the rule. Carrying a gun should not be a pre-requisite for having a seat at the negotiating table, as so often happens. Perhaps it's equally or more important to place people at the table that of delegates who seek to build peace, including women.<sup>107</sup> Since Afghan women were severely affected by Taliban rule of the past, it is imperative that their voices be heard at the negotiation table.

Policy makers in Afghanistan and their international allies continue to adopt measures on the national front without seriously considering the impact on women. Broad policy decisions that affect the whole population are generally made by men. The absence of women from policy circles means that issues that affect women often do not get weighty consideration. Issues such as rape, domestic abuse, mass displacements and women-headed households deserve greater consideration. These issues are important to women yet are often neglected by policy makers. In Afghanistan both “domestic and even international policymakers argue that long-term security and counterinsurgency efforts depend on winning the support of the warlords, traditional leaders, and even Taliban figures, whom we cannot afford to alienate through an over emphasis on women’s rights and protection.”<sup>108</sup>

Despite compelling evidence that women’s inclusion in peace-making would lead to a more positive outcome, policy-makers are often slow to change the existing status-

---

<sup>107</sup> Kuehnast, K., Gender and Peacebuilding: Why Women’s Involvement in Peacebuilding matters. US Institute of Peace, Global Peacebuilding Center. Retrieved from: <http://www.buildingpeace.org/think-global-conflict/issues/gender-and-peacebuilding>

<sup>108</sup> Kuehnast et al. (2001). Women & War, Power and Protection in the 21st Century. United States Institute of Peace Press. Pg 117.

quo. This leads to the unfortunate scenario of many women becoming disappointed or disillusioned with existing governmental and institutional systems. More importantly, every individual has a right to express their view on issues that affect their future, be it men or women. It is irrelevant then if women's participation impacts a process positively or negatively. Men who impact the process either negatively or positively are not subjected to the same level of scrutiny as women are for sharing their perspectives.<sup>109</sup>

According to a statistical survey published in 2012 by the Afghanistan Statistical Organization, women make up 45% of the Afghan population.<sup>110</sup> It is imperative, for the nation's progress, to have almost half of its population involved in nation-building. Risking women's progress will seriously jeopardize Afghanistan's ability to use its full workforce capacity in building a stable and prosperous Afghanistan.

By sidelining women, the peace process is often jeopardized. Afghan women represent nearly half of the population. If half the population is sidelined in negotiations, they are less likely to support the process. This is why Afghan women keep raising objections, because they fear their own rights getting sacrificed, if they are not properly represented in the negotiations.

UN Resolution 1325, which was adopted in October 2000, identifies the disproportionate impact of war and violence on women and children and emphasizes the fact that women have historically been left out of the national peace dialogues.

---

<sup>109</sup> Anderlini N. S. (2011). *Women Building Peace: What They Do, Why it Matters*. Lynne Rienner publishers.

<sup>110</sup> The Central Statistics Organization of Afghanistan (2012). *Women and Men in Afghanistan 2011*.

International law obligates the Afghan government to assure that women are “key actors in peace talks and all aspects of post-conflict reconstruction... It is only with women’s active participation that a lasting peace can be established.”<sup>111</sup>

Issues of war and peace are too messy and complex to be left to one gender alone. Both the Afghan government and society at large need to understand what women can bring to the table and how they can impact the process positively. The status quo about women in politics will not change unless Afghan men themselves support Afghan women in the process, and break away from discrimination against women.

### Missed Opportunities

Since the ouster of Taliban, the past thirteen years have been critical for Afghan women to regain their rights and participate in national politics and peace-building initiatives. This decade was a critical juncture during which Afghan women would have been more likely to put their weight and support behind the peace initiatives, if they did not have to worry about protecting their own rights and had the government given them proper representation. Instead however, most female human rights activists continued to raise alarms, fearing that their rights would be jeopardized if they did not have a seat at the negotiations table.

“No peace without justice” is the slogan from leading Afghan women’s rights organizations. Some women went as far as saying that they will “reject” any negotiations

---

<sup>111</sup> Hassan, P. (2010, May 12). The Afghan Peace Jirga, Ensuring that Women are at the Peace Table. United States Institute of Peace. Peace Brief 29.

with Taliban if they are not represented in the process. Human rights specialist Jamila Omar said that if women are participants in any peace process then the “government of Afghanistan should stop it. They don’t have the right to play with the rights of women in Afghanistan or get the peace talks by the cost of undermining the women in the country.”<sup>112</sup>

Women’s rights activist Wajhma Frogh pointed out that traditionally Afghan woman elders of Pashtun tribes have come together and mitigated conflicts among tribes. Women in Afghanistan could have served much more strongly to meet community needs, because they have not been part of past atrocities, they have not been warlords, they did not take part in the civil war and they remain independent of committing atrocities against other Afghans and therefore they can be effective at conflict resolution. Women in emerging roles such as civil society leaders and parliament members can also be effective at conflict resolution.<sup>113</sup> Unfortunately, women have not been given leading roles in peace processes to fully exercise their potential in bringing about peace in their country. Afghanistan remains a largely patriarchal society in which men dictate politics. Added to this are fundamentalist elements that believe in imposing their extremist ideology about the role of women in society.

What is consistently missed by the Afghan government is that women could have served to facilitate national peace initiatives instead of feeling left out of the process and

---

<sup>112</sup> Multiple Exposure: Afghan Women HRDs, 2014 and Beyond – Part 1 [Video file] Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nU6B2XQ12hc>

<sup>113</sup> Multiple Exposure: Afghan Women HRDs, 2014 and Beyond – Part 2 [Video file] Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfcynOPRhDI>

calling on the international community to insist on women's rights as a condition to peace with Taliban. The insistence of women's inclusion in peace processes was more strongly demanded by the international community than the Afghan government itself. This miscalculation has led to the dismissal of women's role in the peace process, because Taliban and other hardliners in society feel that this is imposed by foreigners on Afghans.

## **Conclusion**

### Challenges Post 2014

With the withdrawal of international forces in 2014, Afghan women are facing another juncture in history when the nation's stability [or peace] is hanging in the balance. Many are concerned that they may lose gains they have made with the help and presence of the international community and US coalition forces. With the majority of foreign forces scheduled to withdraw by the end of 2014, Afghan women will face major challenges in maintaining the progress they have made in the last 12 years. Analysts who are familiar with the Afghan conflict believe that it is very likely that future negotiations with Taliban would potentially ignore gender issues and reverse women's progress.<sup>114</sup>

### Security

Women's rights activist Wajhma Frogh highlights the security challenges that human rights defenders in Afghanistan continue to encounter. While working on a case of violence against women that involved a warlord, her home was broken into to intimidate her so that she would stop bringing attention to the case. After this incident, she went to the National Security Chief to report the incident and she was told: "You know what Wajma, just learn to become silent....Just learn to become silent because you have a very

---

<sup>114</sup> Kuehnst et al. (2001). *Women & War, Power and Protection in the 21st Century*. United States Institute of Peace Press. Pg. 4.

loud voice and that's something that makes you vulnerable.”<sup>115</sup> Frogh was dismayed at the response she received from the Chief and lost faith in security personnel to provide her protection against threats to her safety.

Another leading scholar and women's rights activist Palwasha Hassan pointed out that the threats are not coming from Taliban alone. She said often difficult to know who is responsible for the threats because often they are anonymous. Hassan said she has received direct and indirect threats. For example, the *Ulema Shura* (Islamic Scholars) can issue a statement against a human rights defender and claim that the individual has violated Islam and charge him/her with blasphemy. She said the Ulema Shura wields a lot of power and even the President is afraid to defend women when it comes to the Ulema Shura allegations. Hassan further emphasized that threats can also come from figures inside the government and even parliament members who wish to maintain the status-quo on women's rights.<sup>116</sup> In these types of cases, women are left to fend for themselves and are open targets to hardliners.

Afghan female parliament member and women's rights activist, Shukria Barakzai expressed concern to a journalist over the treatment of women in parliament by their male counterparts. Barakzai said she heard a male parliament member during a general assembly state that “parliament is not a place for women, your time is up here, you must

---

<sup>115</sup> Multiple Exposure: Afghan Women HRDs, 2014 and Beyond – Part 1 [Video file] Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nU6B2XQ12hc>

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

not pursue this fight for women rights.”<sup>117</sup> Barakzai also added that “the rhetoric around women’s issues has changed, and conservative members of society and parliament are once again feeling safe to verbally attack women publicly... and the Afghan government isn’t doing anything about these kinds of public threats and attacks on women. It is almost as if they agree with the conservatives.”<sup>118</sup> If the Afghan government continues to ignore the campaign by hardliners in Afghanistan to sideline them, it will adversely impact women’s rights.

### Parliament Quota and Constitutional Rights could be Slashed

The Chief of the Independent Human Rights Commissioner, Sima Samar welcomes talks with Taliban but warns against risking women’s rights. She tells a *New York Times* journalist that one of the biggest accomplishments of women is under threat as conservative elements and hard-liners in Afghan society see the withdrawal of foreign forces as an opportune time to push women out of the main-stream and point to women’s progress as a the result of a foreign-imposed agenda.<sup>119</sup>

A quota system enacted in 2005 assured women 68 out of 249 seats in parliament and reserved one fourth of provincial counsel seats for women. This quota has been tremendously helpful in keeping women visible in politics. Afghan women have pushed

---

<sup>117</sup> Kazem, H. (2013, June 8). Afghanistan: Women in parliament receive threats – from fellow lawmakers. Christian Science Monitor. Retrieved from: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2013/0608/Afghanistan-Women-in-parliament-receive-threats-from-fellow-lawmakers>

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Trust Women Conference (2013). In Conversation with Sima Samar. [Video file] Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gL0Ngp6\\_VrE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gL0Ngp6_VrE)



for legislative measures that protect women's rights. It has also helped women mobilize voters and expand their experience in the political sphere. However, this gain is very fragile, as an effort in 2012 was made to drop the law that assured women one fourth of the provincial council seats. Women learned about this and fought for the law to be re-enacted. However, the quota was then dropped to twenty percent representation instead of the one fourth that was originally in place.

#### Political Timing in the Country

Afghan women view the withdrawal of US forces in 2014 as a dangerous situation in the absence of a signed Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with Afghanistan. So far President Karzai has refused to sign the agreement asking the United States to prioritize reconciliation with Taliban. At the same time, there is a Presidential election underway, and many of the leading candidates have teamed up with former warlords. Neither Taliban nor some of the controversial figures running for the presidency in 2014 provide much hope for Afghan women. Many of the leading "11 candidates for president are dominated by warlords and fundamentalists who share Taliban's view that women should never be allowed out of their homes."<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, if the BSA is not signed with Afghanistan and US decides to pull out completely, it will affect international donors who will follow suit.<sup>121</sup> If the BSA does get signed, it would ensure that a minimum level of US forces would remain in Afghanistan to assist the

---

<sup>120</sup> Nordland, R. (2014, February 7). Taliban and Government Imperil Gains for Afghan Women, Advocates Say. *New York Times*.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

country through a political transition and donors would continue to support the development of Afghanistan.

Thus far, the international community and donors have provided the most support for Afghan women. However, the aid given to Afghanistan has not come with accountability. The international community can make aid dependent on women's continued and sustained progress. The international community needs to stay invested in the progress of women and insist that development dollars given to Afghanistan meet certain benchmarks of progress. Additionally, Afghan women across the country need to be involved in the process to adjust initiatives to the varied circumstances in both rural and urban areas.

### Key Findings and Towards the Future

In conclusion, through the study of Afghan history, current events and documented cases of female participation in public life, political reconciliation and peace process, we were able to reach several tangible conclusions. Women participation remains largely symbolic despite being the segment of Afghan society that has been most marginalized during the last three decades of violence in Afghanistan. A decade after Taliban rule, women's voices are still barely heard in the national dialogue. The preceding discussion in this thesis has established that socio-economic, cultural, security, and political challenges have minimized greater inclusion of women.

In reviewing the many peace process initiatives undertaken since 2011, women have participated in the national dialogue in very small numbers compared to men and

are often given very little space to exercise real power. By excluding women, the Afghan government and the international community have effectively undermined the peace process where women's input could have brought about a more nuanced outcome, which would have been representative of the society as a whole.

More research needs to be undertaken to study the role of women in national peace initiatives, their contribution, and how empowering women politically can impact the stability of the nation. Studies that look at new approaches to empower Afghan women within the Afghan context are of utmost importance.

One cannot deny that Afghan women have made some progress since the ouster of Taliban regime from power. Women now serve as parliament members, presidential candidates, journalists, teachers, doctors, nurses, entrepreneurs, and in many other roles. However, these hard-earned rights can be swiftly reversed under the current political uncertainty. This cycle has played itself out multiple times during the course of Afghan history. Afghan women have experienced freedoms and exercised their rights as citizens at different junctures of their history (e.g. during the reign of more progressive monarchs). However, these advancements were always reversed when the country faced internal instability, foreign invasions, and backlash from conservative elements in a society ill-prepared for change.

Efforts exerted since the fall of Taliban have yielded much progress. Women took part in the first Bonn Conference in 2001. The Afghan Constitution adopted in 2004 endorsed gender equality. The current Afghan Constitution adopted in 2004 gives women

the same equal status that men enjoy (Article 22). Nevertheless, there remains a wide gap between the rights on paper and actual implementation of the law to ensure women's voices are heard. One of the biggest accomplishments for Afghan women over the last decade is the adoption of ERAW, CEDAW and the NAPWA. However, all these accomplishments are now at jeopardy, including the equal rights given under the Afghan constitution as hard-liners within Afghan society are pointing at this progress as a "western-imposed" agenda on Afghan women.

On the cultural level, Afghanistan follows a strict kinship system that undermines the meritocracy in female representation. Many qualified female leaders are excluded from positions of power, because such roles are reserved for prominent families. In addition, political groups mixed with extreme religious ideologies have dictated women's role in Afghan society and overshadowed moderate voices.

Additionally, it is clear that the Afghan government is very cautious and guarded when it comes to advancing women's rights. It has also failed in its role to educate society about rights granted to women in Islam and to implement the laws which protect women. This failure has been exploited by extremist and radical groups who define women's role in society through violence. The result is the predominance of an extremely radical interpretation of Islam, even after the toppling of Taliban regime and the adoption of a new Constitution that is supposed to guarantee the protection of women's rights.

Afghan women generally do not have knowledge of their rights, particularly in rural areas. Rights-awareness and education for both genders on Islamic and

Constitutional rights are necessary to empower the society as a whole. Though there is little doubt the situation for women in Afghanistan remains precarious, there have been improvements since the fall of Taliban regime. An increasing number of girls now have access to education, as 2.7 million girls attend primary school in Afghanistan today, whereas there were virtually no girls attending primary school in 2001. Un-Islamic and poor cultural practices that harm women need to be prevented through education for both genders. Religious clerics that have good understanding of Islamic laws should be encouraged to educate men in mosques and emphasize women's rights in Islam. More educational programs through radio and TV can also serve to promote understanding and awareness of women's rights.

Authentic development approaches that take into account the complex historical dynamics, cultural and traditional practices and needs of the community are bound to be more successful in Afghanistan. Close coordination with locals is a necessary component for successful development projects in Afghanistan which serve to empower women. Involving men in women's empowerment programs can create more sustainability and reduces suspicion towards international aid organizations and any backlash towards women.

With the international presence winding down in Afghanistan, there are serious concerns about the country's stability as a whole, and women's security in particular. Many Afghan women fear that with the Afghan government holding talks with Taliban, and their voices not being represented, or severely underrepresented, that their rights will

once again be sacrificed to appease the insurgents into the political fold. Once again, Afghan women can become collateral damage on the path to peace. This is not an inevitable course as women's rights do not need to be sacrificed or propped up every time power is changed in Afghanistan. This trend can only be reversed if women are given the proper seat at the table to negotiate the terms of their existence in their own country.

No peace can be durable without participation of almost half the nation's population. By engaging women, and allowing them to speak to their own needs and realities, a dialogue between Afghan women and other stakeholders would serve to break this pattern. It is exactly the nature of the dialogue that changes parties' positions. Afghans and the international community need to educate themselves on the complexity of the challenges facing women, and refrain from compromises that sacrifice women's rights for political expediency.

There is a misconception both in Afghanistan and the west that women are against negotiating with Taliban. As part of any political negotiations, parties cannot adopt an all or nothing approach. Engaging Taliban does not automatically lead to curtailing women's rights altogether. There is this constant misperception that Afghan women do not want peace with Taliban. Women, of all groups in Afghanistan, realize that in the absence of peace, their lives are most compromised. A political settlement to end the fighting is a necessity for all segments of the population. Afghan women want peace, they just don't want it at the cost of their rights, and they should not be asked to sacrifice their well-being to ensure negative peace.

It is a moral and political imperative to allow women greater participation in political life. Women have access to TV, internet, cell phones, so they have sources of information that they previously had no access to. These new technological tools are widely used in Afghanistan, particularly the cell phone and the internet, and Afghan women are being connected to the rest of the international community. Extremists can no longer shelter women from information and impose their will on them as they did in previous phases of Afghan history. It is getting increasingly difficult for anti-women's rights groups to keep women isolated. Afghan policy makers and powerful figures should learn that it is best to engage with women themselves and explore potential solutions to end the gender discrimination and assure Afghanistan a more sustainable peace that all of its population can support.

Afghan women may be victims of several injustices, but they are also survivors and active participants in society. There are a number of women, known and unknown, who have risen to the challenge of their circumstances and stood up for their rights, even under the threat of harsh familial, community, and societal threats to their safety. Some women have even lost their lives in the process. Many have accomplished a great deal even under the rule of Taliban. They have either home-schooled themselves or taught other women the skills they knew. They have created their own opportunities. If they were not allowed to go to work, they have found ways to work within the confines of their homes using whatever resources at their disposal.

If the Afghan government and the international community have learned anything about Afghan women in the last decade, they should know that their quest for inclusion is unwavering. Based on universal laws practiced around the globe and religious entitlements granted and guaranteed by Islam for centuries, it is essential that Afghan women are given their proper place in society. This does not mean that all cultural, traditional practices must be abandoned. Quite the opposite, religion has served a source of protection for Afghan women over the centuries. The idea is to empower religious tolerance by empowering moderate religious leaders and promoting religious discourse that is inclusive.

Another reality in Afghanistan is that women's progress is viewed as a threat by conservatives and hardliners in society. To some conservatives, it is too much of a threat to their own power positions to allow women to be full participants in society. They know that, when a woman is educated, she can no longer be subjugated. In fact, she will begin to rise to the challenge of change and demand her rights. This is precisely where the patriarchal practices are threatened. But Afghan women need to learn their Islamic rights, because in Islam, every believer is encouraged to gain knowledge, both man and woman. Stakeholders must think of Islamic values as a unifying force in Afghanistan by deconstructing the extremist ideology militants use to subjugate women.

Unfortunately, this more tolerant brand of Islam has been highly undermined through the empowerment of religious hardliners. The quick push-back against women's rights in parliament indicates the type of people that were empowered post-Taliban rule.



It has become clear that warlords and their supporters are no different than Taliban. Once they realized the Western powers are leaving, they have promptly and publicly adopted the same hostile policies towards women and their rights.

It is important for the international community invested in Afghanistan and for Afghans both to recognize that empowering women in society so that they can take leading roles in peace building initiatives will require more than symbolic inclusion as numbers to justify women's presence. While the presence of women is improvement over no presence at all, much more has to be done to tap into the potential of female leaders. Afghans themselves would have to encourage the empowerment of women by recognizing the positive role they can play in stabilizing their nation, and the urgency of the task, as the international community will not remain in Afghanistan for long.

## References

- Abirafeh, L. (2009). *Gender and international aid in Afghanistan: The politics and effects of intervention*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.
- Afghanistan National Independent Peace and Reconciliation Commission. *Home*. Web resource: <http://www.pts.af/>
- Afghanistan Women's Ministry (2008, May 19) National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan: NAPWA 2008-2018.
- Ahmed-Ghosh, H. (2003). A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future Or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4(3).
- Anderlini, S. N. (2007). *Women building peace: What they do, why it matters*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub.
- Arghandiwal, M. (2012, March 22). Women on Afghan Peace Council Say they are Sidelined. *Reuters*. Retrieved from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/22/us-afghanistan-women-idUSBRE82L0FP20120322>
- Barlas, A. (2002). "Believing women" in Islam: Unreading patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- BBC News (2013, March 17) Zinat Karzai, Afghanistan's 'invisible' first lady. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21699353>
- Borgen, J. (2010, January 28). Afghanistan conference sets out plan for two-tier peace process | World news | theguardian.com. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jan/28/afghanistan-london-conference-analysis>
- CARE International. From Resolution to Reality, Lessons learned from Afghanistan, Nepal, Uganda on Women's Participation in Peacebuilding and Post-conflict Governance. CARE International Publication (2010). Retrieved from: <http://www.care.org/newsroom/specialreports/UNSCR-1325/CARE-1325-Report-Women-Peace-Participation.pdf>
- Clark, K. (2013, September 26). Death list published. Families of disappeared end a 30 year wait for news. Retrieved from Afghan Analysts Network website:

<http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/death-list-published-families-of-disappeared-end-a-30-year-wait-for-news>

Clinton, H (2010, January 18). Hillary Clinton's Remarks at the London Conference, Video and Text.

Retrieved from <http://still4hill.com/2010/01/28/3245/>

Cole, Juan R.I. (2008) *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan. The Taliban, Women, and the Hegelian Private Sphere.* Harvard University Press.

Colt, N. (2012, November 20). Afghanistan's Journey to Literacy. *The Huffington Post*.

Retrieved from:

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ned-colt/afghanistans-journey-to-literacy\\_b\\_2164918.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ned-colt/afghanistans-journey-to-literacy_b_2164918.html)

Cortright, D & Persinger, (2010) *Afghan Women Speak. Enhancing Security and Human Rights in Afghanistan.* S. Kroc Institute for Peace Studies. University of Notre Dame.

Multiple Exposure: Afghan Women HRDs, 2014 and Beyond – Part 1 [Video file]. (n.d.).

Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nU6B2XQ12hc>

Multiple Exposure: Afghan Women HRDs, 2014 and Beyond - Part 2 [Video file]. (n.d.).

Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfcynOPRhDI>

Donati, J., & Andalib, M. (2013, August 13). High profile attacks on women in Afghanistan undermine right's campaign. Reuters.

Dr. Shorish-Shamley, Z. Women's Position, Roles & Rights in Islam. *Afghanistan*

*Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.afghan-web.com/articles/womenrights.html>

Dupree, N. (2010, March 1). Involving Afghans for Success | End Poverty in South Asia.

Retrieved from <http://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/involving-afghans-success>

Ewans, M. (2002). *Afghanistan: A short history of its people and politics.* New York: HarperCollins.

Frogh, W. (2010, June 23). Afghan Peace Process Offers Little Hope for Women.

Guardian. Retrieved from

[http://www.unifem.org/afghanistan/docs/pubs/08/NAPWA/English/NAPWA\\_Intro.pdf](http://www.unifem.org/afghanistan/docs/pubs/08/NAPWA/English/NAPWA_Intro.pdf)

- Ganesh et al. (2013) Synthesis Paper. Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan 2002-2012. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.
- Ghosh, HA. (2003) A history of Women in Afghanistan, Lessons learned for the Future, Yesterdays and Tomorrows, Women in Afghanistan, Journal of International Women's Studies Vol. 4 #3.
- Graham-Harrison E., & Amiri M. (2013, June 19) Taliban peace talk plans lead Afghan women to fear loss of rights. The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/19/afghanistan-women-rights-taliban-peace-talks>
- Grenfell, L. (2004). "The Participation of Afghan Women in the Reconstruction Process." Human Rights Brief 12, No. 1.
- Grono, N. (2012, February 1) Afghanistan's injustice system. AFPAK. Retrieved from [http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/02/01/afghanistans\\_injustice\\_system](http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/02/01/afghanistans_injustice_system)
- Hassan, P. (2010, May 12) The Afghan Peace Jirga, Ensuring that Women are at the Peace Table. United States Institute of Peace. Peace Brief 29.
- Helal & Oates (2004) At the Cross-Roads of Conflict and Democracy, Afghanistan's Constitutional Loya Jirga. Retrieved from <http://dspace.cigilibrary.org/jspui/bitstream/123456789/20581/1/At%20the%20Cross%20Roads%20of%20Conflict%20and%20Democracy%20Women%20and%20Afghanistans%20Constitutional%20Loya%20Jirga.pdf?1>
- Human Rights Watch (2013, July 9) Afghanistan: Loya Jirga off to a Shaky Start Date. Retrieved from <http://www.hrw.org/news/2002/06/12/afghanistan-loya-jirga-shaky-start>
- Human Rights Watch. Key Conference Sidelining Women, Donors Should Insist on Women's Full Participation. Web resource: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/30/afghanistan-key-conference-sidelining-women>
- IRIN Asia (2003, December 19) AFGHANISTAN: Interview with Loya Jirga delegate Sa'era Sharif. Retrieved from <http://www.irinnews.org/report/21436/afghanistan-interview-with-loya-jirga-delegate-sa-era-sharif>
- International Crisis Group (2013, October 14). Women and Conflict in Afghanistan. Retrieved from <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/252-women-and-conflict-in-afghanistan.aspx>

- Jelinek, E. (2009, March) NGO Relations with the government and communities in Afghanistan. Humanitarian Exchange Magazine. Issue 42 Retrieved from <http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-42/ngo-relations-with-the-government-and-communities-in-afghanistan>
- Kazem, H. (2013, June 8) Afghanistan: Women in parliament receive threats – from fellow lawmakers. Christian Science Monitor. Retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2013/0608/Afghanistan-Women-in-parliament-receive-threats-from-fellow-lawmakers>
- Kolhatkar, S., & Ingalls, J. (2006). Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, Warlords, and the Propaganda of Silence. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Kumar, S. A. (2012) Taliban Talks Terrify Afghan Women. The Washington Times. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/apr/17/taliban-talks-terrify-women/?page=all>
- Kuehnst et al. (2001) Women & War, Power and Protection in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Labott et al. (2010, January 28) Afghan Conference Sets Deadline for NATO Handover. *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/01/28/uk.afghanistan/>
- Langary, S. S. (2010). Afghanistan in Diaspora, Their Stories of Adversary, Freedom, and Success. AuthorHouse.
- Lough et al. (2012, March). Women's Participation in Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections. Synthesis Paper. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.
- Marai, S. (2012, August 12). Report, Paper reveals Taliban Softening Stance on Girls' Education. NBC News. Retrieved from: <http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/news/2012/08/12/13241448-report-paper-reveals-taliban-softening-stance-on-girls-education?lite>
- Mashal, M. (2010, June 4). Afghan Jirga, Debates over leadership and Afghan Women, *New York Times*.
- Mayer, C. (2010, January 29). London Afghanistan Summit Glosses over the Cracks, *Time Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1957537,00.html>

- McBain, S. (2013, December 18). Fawzia Koofi, the Female Politician that wants to Lead Afghanistan. *The New Statesman*. Retrieved from <http://www.newstatesman.com/2013/12/just-ticket>
- Misdaq, N. (2008). *Political Frailty and External Interference*. Routledge.
- Moosa, Z. (2011, December 6). After the Bonn Conference, What Next for Afghanistan's Women. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/dec/06/bonn-what-next-afghan-women>
- Nemat, O. A. (2011). *Afghan Women at the Cross-Roads: Agents of Peace - Or its Victims?* The Century Foundation.
- Nordland, R. (2014, February 7). Taliban and Government Imperil Gains for Afghan Women, Advocates Say. *New York Times*.
- Peter, T. (2011, November 29) Afghanistan's Bonn Conferences. 4 things you need to know. Christian Science Monitor. Retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-Issues/2011/1129/Afghanistan-s-Bonn-Conference-4-things-you-need-to-know/What-was-the-first-Bonn-Conference>
- Rasekh, Z. & Iacopina V. (1998). Education, A Health Imperative: The Case of Afghanistan. *Health and Human Rights*. Vol. 3, No. 2. Harvard School of Public Health.
- Rashid, A. (2000) *Taliban. Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale University Press.
- Rural Poverty Portal. (2014) *Rural Poverty in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*. Retrieved from <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/afghanistan>
- Samadar, R. (2003, December 23). Outspoken Joya in Defiant Mood. Institute for War and Peace Reporting.
- Scheller, B. A. (2010, June 10). Not Only There but Really Present, Women Resist Effort to Marginalize them in the Peace Jirga. Retrieved from <http://www.af.boell.org/web/Democratization-258.html>
- Steele, J. (2011). *Ghosts of Afghanistan: The haunted battleground*. London: Portobello Books.
- Steele, J. (2001, September 27) 10 Myths About Afghanistan. *The Guardian*.
- Strong, G. (2007, September 29). Courage under Fire. *The Guardian*.

- The Afghanistan Justice Project (2005) *Casting Shadows: War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity: 1978-2001*.
- The Asia Foundation. (2011, November). *Women's Empowerment Programs in Afghanistan*.
- The Central Statistics of Afghanistan (2012) *Women and Men in Afghanistan 2011*. Retrieved from [http://cso.gov.af/Content/files/Last%20HANDBOOK%20ON%20WOMEN%20AND%20MEN%20IN%20AFGHANISTAN\\_JUNE%202012%201.pdf](http://cso.gov.af/Content/files/Last%20HANDBOOK%20ON%20WOMEN%20AND%20MEN%20IN%20AFGHANISTAN_JUNE%202012%201.pdf)
- The Constitution of the Islamic State of Afghanistan (n.d.). The Embassy of Afghanistan, Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://www.embassyofafghanistan.org/page/constitution>
- Thomson Reuters Foundation. (2013, December 18) *In Conversation with Sima Samar: Trust Women Conference 2013*. Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gL0Ngp6\\_VrE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gL0Ngp6_VrE).
- Toor, A. (2014). *Why are Customary Pashtun Laws and Ethics Causes for Concern?* Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved from <http://csis.org/blog/why-are-customary-pashtun-laws-and-ethics-causes-concern>
- United Nations. (2010, June 6) *Afghanistan UN Mission, The Resolution Adopted at the Conclusion of the National Peace Consultative Jirga*. Retrieved from <http://www.afghanistan-un.org/2010/06/the-resolution-adopted-at-the-conclusion-of-the-national-consultative-peace-jirga/>
- United Nations. *Bonn Agreement. Peacemaker*. Retrieved from: <http://peacemaker.un.org/afghanistan-bonnagreement2001>
- United Nations (2002). *Women Peace and Security*. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/eWPS.pdf>
- Zalman, A. (2004) *Afghan Women Assert Their Human Rights in the Context of Islam, Not in Opposition to it*. The Women's Review of Books, Vol. 21, No. 5. Women, War and Peace. Pg. 20-21
- Zakhilwal & Niazi. (2002, June 21). *The Warlords Win in Kabul*. *New York Times*.

## **Biography**

Shukria Dellawar was born in Kabul and grew up in Northern Virginia. She attended George Mason University, where she received her Bachelor of Science in Conflict Analysis & Resolution in 2006. She then received her Master of Science from George Mason University in 2014. Ms. Dellawar is an independent analyst.