

# WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS:

a Case Study

September 2020

Shukria Azadmanesh and Ihsanullah Ghafoori



Afghanistan  
Research and  
Evaluation Unit

Research for a better Afghanistan





**Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit**

**Case Study**

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September 2020

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In 2018, AREU was awarded Best International Social Think Tank by Prospect Magazine.



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## Foreword

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is pleased to offer its respected audience with an interesting and very informative paper, *Women's Participation in the Afghan Peace Process: a Case Study*, generously funded by UN Women. This is a research-based paper aiming to understand the perceptions of Afghan women with regard to the peace efforts and their role in it. The paper brings case studies from four provinces in order to understand women's role in the peace process, limitations and barriers as well as their agency and coalition building.

The case study's findings indicate that a lasting peace is only possible where women's voices and views are included through the process. Therefore, women's participation in and support of the national peace efforts is vitally important. A quick review of literature reviewed in this paper, indicates that between 1990 and 2014 as many as 130 peace agreements were signed with only 13 peace agreements with women in a signatory authority. All agreements with women as participants at a signatory level were more durable than the agreements only signed by men. Additionally, the involvement of women in peace processes resulted in a stronger integration of human rights, transitional justice, national reconciliation, and subsequent women's involvement in the decision-making processes at the local and national levels.

The paper's findings indicate that women are prepared and willing to participate in the ongoing national peace effort. Women are determined to go beyond training and seminars related to peace that are frequently conducted by local and international organisations. Although important, such awareness raising and capacity development actions, limits the role of women instead of them taking part as equal participants in the peace process at leadership levels. Finally, looking at the past, numerous cases of women's participation in conflict resolution and peace negotiations have been highlighted by participants.

The paper looks at the women's participation in peace-building efforts from governmental and nongovernmental institutions.. "Governmental" here denotes an official component of government policy, namely, the High Council for National Reconciliation. "Nongovernmental" refers to networks and relationships established at both provincial and national levels to undertake conflict resolution and discussions over peace, such as jirgas and other councils that are not formally recognised by the government and that are not attached to governmental structures.

Most respondents believed that the role of women in the national peace effort was important, and thus demanded that the government and international supporters ensure there is a stronger role for women in this process.

Women's involvement in nongovernmental peace efforts has been significant. A range of activities took place including basic awareness about peace, direct talks with anti-government groups, establishment of nongovernmental local councils for peace, and women's participation in peace efforts and conflict resolution. Respondents reported cases of women participating in conflict resolution, specifically in cases related to violence against women and family issues. In addition, civil society, women's rights, and peace activists, alongside governmental officials such as female members of the High Peace Council (HPC) committee, have conducted a series of workshops, conferences, and advocacy programmes about women's participation in the national peace efforts.

I would like to thank the authors of this report, and anonymous peer reviewers for their significant contribution to the further enrichment of this paper and the researchers for their painstaking work despite challenges. I would also like to thank all the women and men respondents that allowed our researchers to gather insights about their lives and work and how they are making a positive change for the country. I hope this paper, as a reliable source of information and analysis, helps policy makers with developing realistic policies and addressing the identified issues that would see women engaged in equal and meaningful roles in the national peace effort underway.



Dr Orzala Nemat,  
AREU Director



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## Definitions

jirga	jirga is an informal body composed of elder, influential and educated people in a community which undertakes conflict and dispute resolution through arbitration.
nanawati	a form of regret, repentance or a combination of humility and apology over illegal or hostile actions conducted in the past and a demand for asylum.
malik	traditional village leader
ulema	religious scholars
civil society	CSOs, NGOs, charitable organisations, community groups, faith-based organizations, foundations, labour unions

## Acronyms

AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Right Commission
AWN	Afghan Women Network
CDC	Community Development Council
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DDA	District Development Assembly
DDR	Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration
DoWA	Directorate of Women's Affairs
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GIZ	German Development Agency
HCNR	High Council for National Reconciliation
HPC	High Peace Council
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NPP	National Priority Program
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
PC	Provincial Council
UN	United Nations
USAID	United State Agency for International Development
ZFD	Ziviler Friedensdienst

## Executive Summary

The issue of women's participation in Afghanistan's peace efforts has recently made the headlines due to women's struggle to be included in negotiations with the Taliban. Despite women having participated in national peace efforts in the past, for example through their presence in the High Peace Council established in 2011, their role remained largely symbolic and weak.

This study closely looks at the perception people have about women's participation in national peace efforts since the establishment of the High Peace Council, and to what extent this participation matters. It also closely examines the steps women have taken and the challenges they faced.

This case study presents the findings from 77 qualitative interviews with women and men, in Kabul, Bamiyan, Balkh, and Nangarhar provinces, selected to represent as widely as possible the Afghan population while ensuring the security of the research team. The provincial findings are presented separately, before a brief comparative analysis and a set of recommendations in conclusion. To understand the issue deeply, the qualitative data was collected through in-depth and semi-structured interviews with key informants, both men and women in the governmental and non-governmental organisations, and focus group discussions with women. Women with a political background and experience in peace-related issues were the main target of this study.

The study found that women's participation in the peace efforts is vital to sustain peace in Afghanistan, and that it requires an active role from the government and the international community in supporting women's seats at the table and their meaningful participation. Interviews reveal that so far the role of women has been mainly symbolic. However, women have found creative ways to maximise what they can do in the confines of the space where they operate. This includes basic awareness-raising about peace, but also engaging in direct talks with anti-government elements, the establishment of nongovernmental local councils for peace, and women's participation in peace efforts and conflict resolution primarily in cases related to family violence and violence against women and other family matters. Women's rights activists and civil society institutions conducted a range of workshops, conferences, and advocacy programs to promote women's participation in national peace efforts, positively highlighted by respondents.

The study also found that the main barriers to women's political participation was the profusion of society based violence against women, ideological barriers and cultural norms that have actively excluded women from political and social spaces and roles, male established and dominated political and social structures that confine women to symbolic positions, insecurity that adversely affects women's ability to move freely, and traditional barriers such as low levels of literacy and poverty. Arguments used against women's political participation are often religious, but findings from the interviews with religious scholars showed that there is no religious restriction to women participating in the peace efforts.

Many respondents expressed their fear and distrust about the Taliban and their concerns about the international community's lack of commitment toward women's rights and women's participation in the peace process. Regardless of participation in many platforms for peace, like the National Jirga for peace, women still lack meaningful participation, decision-making power, and equal rights as men benefit from.

A common belief exists among most of the respondents that positive steps to improve this situation would be to encourage and influence the government and the international community to support equal participation and authoritative decision making power for women in the national peace effort. Women represent an equal share of the country and the future, and national and international political actors need to recognise that women are not a minority group.

The paper presents practical and evidence-based policy recommendations based on the overall finding of this study for policymakers and other stakeholders that are engaged in the peace process.

#### **Afghan government:**

- It is recommended to work on a National Priority Program (NPP) on women's political participation with clearly defined goals and objective as well as resources and funding to address the challenges that women are facing across provinces, strengthening women's political participation at the national and sub-national levels, and seeking women's meaningful participation in the program design and delivery.
- The government should actively support women's meaningful participation in national peace efforts; guarantee no less than 33% women's involvement in the negotiation team; and select women who have a strong commitment toward all Afghans' rights and are not siloed or constrained to a single area such as women's rights. Women's rights is an area that should be raised by women and men and should not be left to women to advocate for alone.
- The government should involve women at the leadership level of the HCNR where they would have decision-making power. At least two of the deputies of the HCNR must be women.
- The government must be transparent and share key discussion points and components of the peace process and the progress that it is making to obtain the trust of the people and to get their buy-in toward the national peace effort.

#### **Independent women initiators:**

- Independent women initiators who are active in local peace efforts and peacebuilding should work together in a national political network to connect women from different provinces. By establishing a network, they should advocate and lobby at local and national levels for their participation and meaningful engagement in the national peace effort.
- The independent women initiators should have a broader connection with the international community to advocate and lobby for women's meaningful participation in the peace process, and with countries that have open connections with the Taliban.
- The national political women's network should not be project-based but should be a sustainable and durable political network to make women's role in the national peace efforts robust, transparent, and strategic.

**Civil society:**

- Civil society must sustain its efforts to hold the main parties to conflict accountable for any problematic position, including trading away of women's rights or diluting constitutional provisions in the name of peace.
- Civil society needs to advocate for the meaningful participation and inclusion of women in the national peace efforts without siloing women to women's rights alone.
- Civil society should work with each other and form alliances with peers instead of competing for exclusive inclusion in the national peace efforts. Civil society should actively play a role at different stages of peace process with issues related to disarmament, reintegration of fighters into communities, transitional justice, political integration, and ceasefires are discussed and ensures that women's concerns are addressed through out the process.
- Civil society should plug itself into existing and emerging mechanisms. It should also interact with the HCNR in varying capacities, such as mediators, negotiators, and experts on various issues under discussion. Some points where civil society can add significant value include but are not limited to disarmament, reintegration of fighters into communities, justice, political integration, and ceasefires. The involvement of civil society has the potential to shape the national peace efforts and flag risks that could endanger rights, communities, or the role of women in the country.

**International community:**

- The international community must recognize that women's representation in the peace process cannot be tokenistic, but must entail equal and meaningful participation where women preside over matters of strategic significance that go beyond the remit of women's affairs and where they have decision-making power.
- The international community should be vocal about its support for the inclusion of women's voices and women's rights in the peace process. They should make clear they would only support a peace that is inclusive of all groups in the Afghan society, starting with women.
- The international community should provide certain guarantees including the impartial monitoring of the peace process to ensure that women are not excluded from the process and have a meaningful role in it.
- The international community should ensure that parties to conflict respect the core principle of inclusivity, including women's active participation in the peace process and use different channels to ensure they are integrated into the discussions and have meaningful roles.

## Introduction

This case study is based on a research project funded by UN Women which aims to understand the perceptions Afghan women have of the National Peace Effort and of their role in it. Through this study, an attempt was made to further explore and understand the role women play or do not play, and why it matters. We look at the participation in the process itself, but also at the transition and post-negotiation process,<sup>1</sup> both in terms of governmental and nongovernmental participation.

Women's participation in and support of the national peace effort is crucial to ensure its effective implementation and sustainability: the sustainability of peace increases in countries where women's voices and views are included through the process.<sup>2</sup> Findings from literature indicate that between 1990 and 2014, 130 peace agreements were signed, with only 13 peace agreements with women in a signatory authority—all of which were more durable than the agreements only signed by men.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the involvement of women in peace processes resulted in a stronger integration of human rights, transitional justice, national reconciliation, and subsequent women's involvement in the decision-making processes at the local and national levels.<sup>4</sup>

This report found that women are prepared and willing to participate in the ongoing national peace effort, and they mention the importance of having followed training and seminars conducted by local and international organisations. Traditional religious arguments against women's participation in the national peace effort were further debunked by male and female religious scholars. Finally, looking at the past, numerous cases of women's participation in conflict resolution and peace negotiations have been highlighted by participants.

The research looks at the governmental and nongovernmental participation of women. "Governmental" here denotes a written component of government policy, namely, the High Council of National Reconciliation. "Nongovernmental" refers to networks and relationships established at both provincial and national levels to undertake conflict resolution and discussions over peace, such as *jirgas* and other councils that are not formally recognised by the government and that are not attached to governmental structures.

Most respondents believed that the role of women in the national peace effort was important, and thus demanded that the international community and the government give them a role. However, under the governmental structure for the peace effort, very little has been done. Despite relatively improved security and an increase in women's participation in decision making, women still lack a substantial role in the political processes and in the national peace efforts.

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- 1 Jana Krause, Werner Krause , and Piee Branfoec. 2018 . *Women's Participation in Peace Negotiation and the Durability of Peace*. Journal Article, Political Science , University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam : Taylor & Francis Group, LLC © 201, 2. Accessed May 28, 2019. doi: DOI: 10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386.
  - 2 GIZELIS, THEODORA-ISME. 2009. "Women Empowerment and the United Nation Peace building." *Journal of Peace and Research* 506. Accessed 26 November 2019. doi:https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8924/a6ce0aa012c48fff82dba7b734c1f8124659.pdf.
  - 3 Jana Krause, Werner Krause , and Piee Branfoec. 2018 . *Women's Participation in Peace Negotiation and the Durability of Peace*. Journal Article, Political Science , University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam : Taylor & Francis Group, LLC © 201, 2. Accessed May 28, 2019. doi: DOI: 10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386.
  - 4 Kathleen Kuehnast, Manal Omar, Steven E. Steiner, and Hodei Sultan. 2012. *Peacebuilding Efforts of Women from Afghanistan and Iraq*. Special Report, Washington, DC: UNITED STATES INSTITUTE of PEACE. Accessed April 05, 2020.

Women's involvement in nongovernmental peace efforts has been more significant. A range of activities took place including basic awareness raising about peace, direct talks with anti-government elements, establishment of nongovernmental local councils for peace, and women's participation in peace efforts and conflict resolution. Respondents reported cases of women participating in conflict resolution, specifically in cases related to violence against women and family matters. In addition, civil society, women's rights, and peace activists, alongside governmental officials such as female members of the High Peace Council (HPC) committee, have conducted a series of workshops, conferences, and advocacy programmes about women's participation in the national peace efforts.

Women respondents expressed their distrust of the Taliban's commitments regarding women's rights and women's participation in politics and other areas of the state. They feared<sup>5</sup> their rights may be bargained for some notion of peace with the Taliban and this fear goes back to the systematic oppression women have faced even before the Taliban established their regime. Many respondents still consider the era of Taliban as a dark time for them. It was a time where women were not considered as full members of society, where they lived a life full of restrictions and limitations. Similarly, women are doubtful of the national peace effort: they think that neither the Taliban nor the international community is truthful. Furthermore, despite having access to talks and negotiations, such as the Moscow peace talks, the Doha Peace talks, or the national *Jirga* for peace, women are not satisfied with their role in these efforts because their participation lacked meaningful decision-making power and, more importantly, equal weight as their male peers' participation. Respondents believe that women have to lobby: women activists want to establish a single and united women's network in each province to persuade the Afghan government and the international community to give them equal participation, i.e., with the same authoritative role as men have in the national peace efforts, including decision-making veto power.

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5 Peace Training and Research Organization (PTRO), *Unheard Voices: Afghan Views on the Challenges of the Peace Process*, (Kabul: PTRO, 2012), 35:

# 1. Methodology

In this research, the authors have used a qualitative method that includes in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants, both men and women, and focus group discussions (FGD) with women. In-depth understanding of the issue, sensitivity and trust-building were the main reasons for conducting semi-structured interviews. The FGDs were intended to stimulate discussion among the female participants and to identify both consensus and lingering disagreements about the topic. Furthermore, women who were engaged in politics and had experience with peace efforts were the prime target for this study. The interviews addressed two distinct areas: women's political participation in general, and women's participation in the peace process.

## 1.1. Selection of provinces and districts

Considering the geographical location, the security situation, and most importantly, the complex composition of ethnicities, four provinces were selected: Kabul, Nangarhar, Balkh, and Bamiyan.

**Kabul**, as the political capital and most ethnically diverse city, was identified as the key study area. The interviewees were mainly high officials, MPs, members of CSOs, and people working in the international community.

**Nangarhar**, a province where the security threat is high, was selected as it is typically a more conservative and religious region, with a large percentage of Pashtun residents. Although there are political parties, their role in the community is not clear. By contrast, local religious units are highly esteemed and have more authority in the overall governance of the province. In Nangarhar province, Behsood district was selected for data collection, as it was near Jalalabad city and relatively secure.

**Balkh** is a diverse and complex province religiously, ethnically, and politically. The politics of the province divides along party lines, with women's participation being particularly vibrant. As a result, it was a relevant choice to explore the role of women in the peace efforts there. In Balkh province, the study covered the Dehdadi district since it was relatively safe and close to Mazar city, which affects the role of women in political participation. This particular district was also the one with the highest number of schools for girls.

**Bamiyan** is one of the central provinces, still less developed and, to some extent, marginalised. However, in terms of women's political participation, the province is quite advanced and has been used as a hub of experiments for the government, with for example the first woman governor in the history of Afghanistan. In Bamiyan, based on our security assessment, the Yakawlang district was selected as both accessible and secure.

## 1.2. Respondent profiles

An in-depth discussion took place at the time of the respondent selection, with the agreement that both government and non-government employees would be approached for interviews. The purpose was to understand the extent of the work carried out by both the government and non-governmental organisations at the district and provincial level. For the selection of respondents, the research team used the snowballing sampling method for the study. In the governmental structure we identified organizations where women work and approached them directly. However, at the community level, we identified our respondents through snowballing sampling.



**Governmental:** Both men and women who work in the structure of government, such as police departments, governor offices, district officers, directorates of women affairs, provincial council, municipal officers, education directorates, public universities, and others, were interviewed for this study.

**Non-governmental:** The coverage area of the non-governmental organisations was more significant than that of the government, since we also covered respondents from CSOs, human rights commissions, research institutes, private universities, local media, and both TV and radio representatives.

In total, 77 interviews were conducted for this study, including eight FGDs, two in each province. The data collection for the study started in May 2019 and was completed in late October 2019. The respondents of the FGDs were women with different backgrounds, and were typically working women with either the government, CSOs or NGOs.

	Semi-structured interviews				FGDs
	Male		Female		
	Government	Private Sector	Government	Private Sector	
Nangarhar	2	2	8	8	2
Balkh	0	3	9	11	2
Bamiyan	1	3	8	7	2
Kabul	1	5	7	2	2
Total	4	13	32	28	8
Total	17		60		

FGDs = focus group discussions.

Source: Authors.

### 1.3. Limitations and challenges

A number of challenges were experienced during the data collection. While the most typical challenges included some difficulties in reaching senior officials due to their busy schedules, others included preparations for the presidential election, security issues, a lack of women respondents willing to participate, particularly for FGDs. At times, delayed correspondence from some governmental departments at the provincial level and senior officials added to the data collection timeframe. However, we were able to mitigate these challenges by drawing on personal contacts and requesting other government officials to give introductions to their colleagues which allowed these interviews to go ahead. While this situation caused a delay in data collection, it did not compromise the quality of the data.

## 2. Background

Before diving into the findings for each of the provinces, it is important to present some context that will be helpful throughout the report. This includes the role women have been playing in traditional decision-making processes; the role of *jirgas*, religion, and traditional or religious arguments in the same process; and the government's formal institutions supporting peace such as the High Council of National Reconciliation.

### Tradition, religious scriptures, and the role of women

Women have historically played a role in Afghan decision-making processes, mainly through the traditional *jirga* system, which are male-dominated but have had occasionally women participating with or without the support of male family members.<sup>6</sup> A common example is the participation of women in *nanawati*, a conflict resolution tradition where the whole family of a person accused repents and asks for forgiveness.<sup>7</sup> There, they play a role as the wife, mother or daughter of the person accused. The respect given to women presenting themselves to repent in the name of the accused often leads to a faster resolution of the dispute. Parallel to this, women have also, in cases, been the prime focus in *jirgas*, for example with respect for women's rights as a central part of the discussions.

In many communities, women have played a significant role in conflict resolution,<sup>89</sup> leading to their views and participation being better accepted, including by religious authorities. For instance, an example mentioned both in the literature review and by respondents is of a prominent and well-known woman in Khost province, Maldara, who repeatedly challenged her male counterparts and showed that relevant participation can be accepted in a *jirga*.<sup>10, 11</sup>

Religious arguments are the main tools used to limit women's ability to engage with *jirgas* and with other more formal political participation forums.<sup>12</sup> Interviews with religious authorities, both men and women, however, tend to debunk these reluctances: according to them, there is no clear evidence in religious texts that prevents women from participating in peace and conflict resolution efforts. On the contrary, these religious scholars evoked examples of the role women can and did play.

One example mentioned from the scriptures takes place after the Hudibia Peace agreement, when the Prophet PBUH ordered his companions to shave their hair and sacrifice an animal, but they were reluctant to obey his orders. The Prophet's PBUH wife, Umme Salma (May Almighty Allah be pleased with her), convinced him to lead by example instead of ordering his companions. When the Prophet

6 Mohammad Tariq Osman. 2008. "The Tribal Security System (Arbakai) in Southeast Afghanistan." *Crisis States Research Center* 04. Accessed 11 25, 2019. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csrc-occasional-papers/OP7-Tribal-Security-System-in-South-East-Afghanistan.pdf>

7 Hassan M. Yousufzai & Ali Gohar. 2005. *TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING PUKHTOON JIRGA*. Case Study, Peshawar: JUST PEACE INTERNATIONAL. Accessed 11 17, 19.

8 APPRO. 2019. *Fragility and Making Peace: Rights of Afghan Women and Peace with the Taliban*. Research Report, Kabul: Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization, 49. Accessed 11 15, 2019. <http://appro.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-05-01-Fragility-and-Making-Peace-Rights-of-Afghan-Women-and-Peace-with-the-Taliban-1.pdf>

9 Jenny Lorentzen, Nana Alassane Toure Bassirou Gaye. 2019. *Women's Participation in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali*. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 16. Accessed 11 20, 2019. <https://www.prio.org/utility/DownloadFile.ashx?id=1812&type=publicationfile>

10 Interview, UNN-WPPD-Kabul-15092019

11 Mohammad Tariq Osman. 2008. "The Tribal Security System (Arbakai) in Southeast Afghanistan." *Crisis States Research Center* 04. Accessed 11 25, 2019. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csrc-occasional-papers/OP7-Tribal-Security-System-in-South-East-Afghanistan.pdf>

12 Jenny Lorentzen, Nana Alassane Toure Bassirou Gaye. 2019. *Women's Participation in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali*. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 16. Accessed 11 20, 2019. <https://www.prio.org/utility/DownloadFile.ashx?id=1812&type=publicationfile>

PBUH did so, all his companions started shaving their hair and sacrificing their animals as well.<sup>13</sup> This example, among many others, illustrates the respect that the Prophet PBUH had toward his wives, by following her advice. Their role is often as an advisor or a positive influence, through their role as a mother, a wife, or a daughter.

These two examples illustrate the broader literature, and was confirmed by religious scholars interviewed: there is nothing in Islam that justifies keeping women limited to the house, yet religion remains the most-used argument to limit any activities outside of it.

Women do have a role in the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), but like in other fields their role and participation is mainly symbolic. In many places, women have been elected as members of the Community Development Councils (CDC), but without any authoritative role in decision making.<sup>14</sup> In some cases, women can play a more important role when they have a close affiliation with the head of a male CDC or other elites in the villages. Thus, many women during interviews expressed their dissatisfaction with their role in the CDCs. Furthermore, limited access to resources and cases of corruption of women's CDC or CDC headed by women failed in the provision of development projects in their localities.<sup>15</sup>

### The Afghan government's institutions for peace

Looking at Islamic script, traditional practices, and international guidelines such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the Government of Afghanistan has developed its National Action Plan 2015-22: "[T]he Afghan Government is committed to ensure women's representation at all levels of decision-making, with particular focus on women's role in the national peace effort in 34 provinces and acknowledge that durable peace and stability in Afghanistan requires the participation of women in political and social life."<sup>16</sup> The Government of Afghanistan has shown a commitment to women's rights and provided a venue for them to participate actively in public and political affairs. This commitment has however not been reflected in the current peace effort.

In terms of peace support mechanisms, in 2011, the government of Afghanistan established a High Peace Council (HPC), with offices in each of the 34 provinces. The goal of the HPC was to work towards integrating the anti-government elements into a peace process. To this end, members of the council conducted numerous meetings with Jihadis (combatants against the Soviet troops), Ulema, and women. According to HPC reports, the council organised several events highlighting the role of women, and how to utilise their role in the national peace effort.<sup>17</sup> However, as a result of lack of coordination within the government and people's dissatisfaction with its work, the president issued a decree dissolving the secretariat of the High Peace Council and handing its authority to the State Ministry of Peace in 2019.<sup>18</sup>

The current national peace effort is focussed on the Taliban and not on other anti-government groups. Other groups such as the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) are not engaged in this process for the reason that ISKP have no intention of participation in the peace effort, are an internationally sanctioned terrorist organisation, and also as the government does not consider them to be an effective opposition are some of the grounds for their exclusion from the peace effort.

13 Rahman, Gawhar. 1980. *Politics in Islam*. Mardan: Tafhimul Quran. Accessed 10 26, 2019. <https://www.ketabton.com/bookfile/825>.

14 AREU, Dr. Lena Ganesh at. 2012. *Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan, 2002 - 2012. Situational Analysis*, Kabul: AREU

15 AREU, Echavez, Chona R. 2012. *Does Women's Participation in the National Solidarity Programme Make a Difference in their Lives? A Case Study in Kabul Province*. Case study, Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.

16 Afghanistan National Action Plan (NAP) July 2015.

17 Council, High Peace. 2017. *Bimonthly Report 20th Sep-30th Nov 2017*. Activities Report, Kabul: Executive Secretariat for Peace and Reconciliation Process.

18 Tolonews. 2019. *Tolonews*. July 27. Accessed 11 17, 2019. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/president-ghani-dissolves-high-peace-council>.

## Update on the peace talks

The data collection for this paper was conducted in 2019, before major changes in the government peace negotiation structure took place. In May 2020, the HCNR was established based on a political agreement that President Ashraf Ghani and Dr Abdullah Abdullah signed. Dr Abdullah Abdullah was selected to and leads this council. The council will have five deputies, two are male and three others have yet to be selected.<sup>19</sup> Since the HCNR emerged from a political agreement and is a body that the Stability and Convergence political team designed, more political parties are involved in this council. A woman politician who is also a women's rights activist had this to say about the HCNR:

*It was a plan which Dr Abdullah Abdullah suggested to president 1 year ago to make a council of national reconciliation that all ethnic elites, leaders of former Jihadi parties and some other influential people of the society should be members of council. At that time, due to political issues, it was rejected. As the plan was rejected, the government held a national consultative peace Jirga, so based on Jirga's suggestion the government established a state ministry for peace. As you know, the ongoing political issue put the intra-afghan peace talks into a deadlock, so finally, after the agreement between President Ashraf Ghani and Dr Abdullah Abdullah established the high council of national reconciliation.<sup>20</sup>*

Another woman politician noted:

*The High Council of National Reconciliation, which will be led by Dr Abdullah Abdullah, and has a consultative role. This council will consult the negotiator team to talk with the Taliban. It means, HCNR will give the redline of the negotiation to the negotiator team.<sup>21</sup>*

Observing the structure, goals and responsibility of the HCNR raises questions about the role of women in this council. Since this council is consisting of all political *jihadi* parties, a concern will come on the issue of women's role and participation in national peace efforts. As all political parties are male-led, a woman politician and women's rights activist made the following observation:

*It seems that still President Ashraf Ghani and Dr Abdullah Abdullah have a disagreement on division of power, and women's participation in peace is not their priority. The main focus [is] on ethnic, regional, and political participation of parties. If they assign a woman in a key position in this council, it will be based on issues that I mentioned, not based on women's participation in peace efforts.<sup>22</sup>*

Another woman politician added:

*Since Afghanistan has a traditional society, and leaders of all political parties are men, it makes the role of women weak. Though the women are lobbying and trying to force the president to introduce at least two women as deputies of the HCNR, I am not optimistic about it. Maybe, one of them would be a woman. Though it is not clear yet.<sup>23</sup>*

19 <https://8am.af/the-full-text-of-the-rich-political-agreement-between-ghani-and-abdullah/>

20 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-11062020

21 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-13062020

22 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-11062020

23 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-13062020

A former candidate for parliamentary election said there are concerns among women regarding their role in the HCNR:

*Women had a role in peace efforts, but their roles were not meaningful. Thinking about the High Council of National Reconciliation, our critique is that two of the deputies of the council should be women. As we see that two deputies of Dr. Abdullah are men, and it seems that President Ghani will also introduce men as three other deputies. Based on reports from the media such as BBC, I see that people who were engaged in war are members of the High Council for National Reconciliation such as Hekmatyar and others. Up to now, we can't see representatives of women, and victims of war (civil society). We are worried about it. It makes us disappointed. It is just mentioned that women and youth will be part of the reconciliation, but it is not mentioned in which level.<sup>24</sup>*

The strong impact of political parties on the HCNR has made women's role fragile in national peace efforts. The validity of this agreement is until the end of the current government.<sup>25</sup>

The Taliban's ideology regarding women is another concern. Based on Sirajuddin Haqqani's article in the *New York Times*,<sup>26</sup> the Taliban are not interested in the legal, social and political role of women. As mentioned later in the paper, Haqqani writes about women's rights quite vaguely.<sup>27</sup> This situation gives peace a narrow definition of "the end of war" and does not look at peace as a situation where women have access to all their legal, social and political rights.

Because of the government's ambiguous stance on women's rights and the Taliban's disregard for human rights, women's rights activists are increasingly worried that their rights would be compromised under the name of peace. One activist and gave their thoughts on the precarious situation concerning women's rights:

*The situation has made us worried, since the USA is not interested any more in women's rights issues in Afghanistan. So we have to make our own strategy, one we have to find men supporters in the government, and women should come together from around the country and mobilize to advocate for women's active participation in national reconciliation. We need this mobilization, because some people believe that advocating women's rights and women's participation is a demand of a few women in cities, but I believe that women in every corner of the country want and would like to have access to equal rights in a peaceful environment. Women's mobilizing and advocating will be a push up on the government, and I am sure it has a big effect. We, the women call on President Ghani to appoint two women deputies from the five deputies of HCNR.<sup>28</sup>*

To sum up, women's rights activists and politicians believe that mobilising and advocating is one of the most effective ways to get the attention of national and international actors on women's active and meaningful participation in the HCNR. Recently, AWN sent an open letter to five women leaders in the international community. The letter discusses the opportunity for women in the national peace efforts and stresses that women should have the equal right to speak and be active and have meaningful involvement, and also emphasises the fear they have of women's rights being undermined for peace.

24 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-12062020

25 <https://8am.af/the-full-text-of-the-rich-political-agreement-between-ghani-and-abdullah/>

26 Haqqani, Sirajuddin. 2020. *The New York Times*. March 20. Accessed June 22, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html>.

27 Haqqani, Sirajuddin. 2020. *The New York Times*. March 20. Accessed June 22, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html>.

28 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-13062020

### 3. Findings from provinces

#### 3.1. Nangarhar

Nangarhar is one of the oldest sacred spots in Afghanistan, and has been since the arrival of the Buddhist religion; it is still considered one of the most religious provinces. Since its establishment in 1507 as a trading route for the Mughal Empire and military base to India for Durrani,<sup>29</sup> Nangarhar has been a showpiece of culture and art that has attracted pilgrims. In recent years, peace and local resolution efforts have been complicated by the establishment of ISKP fighters in the province even though the extent of their influence has reduced significantly.

As a result of this long history of religious virtues, religious scholars hold dominant positions in Nangarhar. Religious leaders are not just men: there are also hundreds of women with degrees in religious study. Based on a report of Pajhwok News agency, in 2018, 2,000 women were studying in different faculties of Nangarhar University, including Sharia Law.<sup>30</sup> This interest in women studying is not limited to Sharia Law: the number of female students in school in Nangarhar province is important, with 257,232 female students enrolled in 2018, representing 36% percent of the total.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, women's formal political participation remains limited in this society. Most are not involved in economic and political activities at all, with a few prominent exceptions such as Angiza Shinwari, a provincial council member who campaigned for women's rights and women's issues, but was assassinated by an armed group in February 2015<sup>32</sup>, or Amina, a professor at Nangarhar University, a provincial council member, and a strong advocate for women's rights, who have both played a vibrant and lively role in the politics of Nangarhar along with some other MPs from Nangarhar.<sup>33</sup> Beyond this lack of formal political participation, women have been present in nongovernmental peace negotiations. In the past, women in several cases played the role of final decision makers and obliged both sides to accept the final decision.<sup>34</sup> Traditionally, then, women did have a role in nongovernmental peace efforts, albeit a limited one.

In this section, the findings from Nangarhar are elaborated in detail, with respect to people's perception of the peace efforts.

#### Peace definition

Throughout history, many battles were fought in Nangarhar. While it is true that some people, mainly elites and power holders, can benefit from the ongoing conflict, peace remains the priority of ordinary people and of the government. As a result, efforts both governmental, through the former High Peace Council, and nongovernmental, through local peace councils, were continuing to stabilise and secure Nangarhar province. These local peace councils remain a hub for local conflict resolution, again following the lead of religious scholars.

At the time of data collection, there was not one accepted definition of peace, with male and female respondents having different understandings of it:

29 Jackson, Ashley. 2014. *Politics and Governance in Afghanistan: the Case of Nangarhar Province*. Case study, London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium Overseas Development Institute. Accessed 11 17, 2019. <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/53a7d2c34.pdf>.

30 <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/03/29/number-girl-student-surges-nangarhar-university>

31 Afghanistan-Statistical-Yearbook-2018-19

32 <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2015/03/10/angiza-shinwari-succumbs-injuries-kabul>

33 Jackson, Ashley. 2014. *Politics and Governance in Afghanistan: the Case of Nangarhar Province*. Case study, London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium Overseas Development Institute. Accessed 11 17, 2019. <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/53a7d2c34.pdf>.

34 Hassan M. Yousufzai & Ali Gohar. 2005. *TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING PUKHTOON JIRGA*. Case Study, Peshawar: JUST PEACE INTERNATIONAL. Accessed 11 17, 19.



*[To] live in a place where people have a healthy life, have access to education and job, a place where there [are] no suicide attacks and people do not have any anxiety and eliminate poverty is called a peaceful environment and place, and it is also called a peace.<sup>35</sup>*

*When everyone can get their rights and get benefit from all services then we can say it is peace now.<sup>36</sup>*

*Peace is something that all people in the country should live in calmness. Women should have their rights, the right to get education, the right to wear what they like, and they should be able to go anywhere such as parks for picnics as men [do].<sup>37</sup>*

The recurrent themes mentioned while defining peace were women's rights, absence of conflict, right to work, access to education, development, and elimination of poverty<sup>3839</sup>. Other points mentioned included calmness, the right to wear clothes of one's choice, going to the park for picnics and bazaars for shopping without any fear. This shows that merely the lack of violence and suicide attacks is not peace: men and women need to exercise their rights and opportunities.

### Women's role in the national peace effort

The data show that women respondents for the study in Nangarhar want to engage in the peace efforts. Though there are women in the High Council of National Reconciliation, these members only have a symbolic role. As a result, women respondents working in CSOs and other fields emphasise having direct involvement in the peace efforts.

*Women should take part in the process, and they have to be involved directly in the peace efforts. From my point of view, men should not fight for women's rights, and men should give a chance for women to participate in the peace efforts and get their right.<sup>40</sup>*

*I did not see a vivid role of women in these peace efforts; therefore, we are not optimistic about it. Second, we did not have an essential role in the peace efforts. Those women who went to this peace negotiation, their participation was only symbolic. So, for such participation, we are not interested.<sup>41</sup>*

Similarly, from a religious perspective, several women and men respondents talked about the fact that they consider themselves entitled to a role in the peace efforts. They provided historical and religious examples where women either had a direct or supportive role in the peace efforts.<sup>42</sup> Most of the respondents considered there to be no religious limitations on women participating in the peace efforts and dialogue. Furthermore, they said that culture and tradition have also permitted women to take part in both governmental and nongovernmental peace efforts. In practice, the reality is different from what the respondents were saying about women's participation in the national peace effort. Thus, the stated positions are not translated into practice, which helps to explain the low numbers and their lack of meaningful participation in any national peace efforts.

35 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-24062019

36 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-2062019

37 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-15062019

38 Declaration of Afghan women's National Consensus for peace, 28 Feb 2019. <https://twitter.com/AfgWomen4Peace/status/1101361388881133570/photo/4>

39 Ruttig, Thomas. 2019. Afghanistan Analysts Network. April 15. Accessed July 19, 2020. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/women-and-afghan-peace-talks-peace-consensus-gathering-left-afghan-women-unassured/>

40 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-18062019

41 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-24062019

42 Rahman, Gawhar. 1980. *Politics in Islam*. Mardan: Tafhimul Quran. Accessed 10 26, 2019. <https://www.ketabton.com/bookfile/825>.

*But women have the right to be part of the peace negotiation. We have many examples in Islamic literature where women have the role of supporter in the peace efforts, or they were part of the process. So, religiously women can be part of the peace efforts, and there is no limitation for them.<sup>43</sup>*

To have a significant role in the national peace efforts, some women have been demanding that the government and the international community make them part of the peace efforts. Some qualified women will comparatively be better representatives of women in the national peace efforts, and many respondents favored women's participation as they had a dread of male representation. However, even when you have women in senior roles, they can be overlooked when it comes to decisions, as in the case of Habiba Sarabi who, in her role as deputy chairperson of HPC (2016-17), held an important position, but nonetheless learnt about decisions after they had already been made by her male peers.<sup>44</sup> This example is elaborated in the Kabul section of the paper.

*We have to pave the path for women to take part in the peace efforts; we have many qualified women who can be a better example to participate in the peace efforts. Once a female becomes a part of the national peace efforts, in this case, I am sure we can reach an agreement. If not a completed peace, at least to have a ceasefire be the primary goal.<sup>45</sup>*

*Women should be a part of this dialogue, and women should be directly involved. When we have professional people in the national peace effort, they will have a better understanding of the situation, and this can lead the process to the right decision.<sup>46</sup>*

In summary, women fear losing their rights in the peace process, as the Taliban are not in the favor of women's rights. Therefore, all respondents considered the role of women in the national peace efforts to be essential as they are also part of the nation and victims of war. Furthermore, women remember the era of the Taliban when they were not able to go out or have access to their fundamental rights. Part of this stems from women fearing losing their fundamental rights to education and work, and are firmly not in favor of men representing women. Despite an historical lack of women's awareness and knowledge of the process, and male domination of society, as well as socially ingrained obstacles, there are no explicitly religious or cultural barriers to women participating in the peace efforts; therefore, women are asserting their right to engage with it. However, many respondents in Nangarhar talked about how women had not had a visible role in the peace efforts so far and were disappointed with the government's efforts to promote their role. Despite the fact that women are involved in local conflict resolutions through nongovernmental structures, bringing them into the national peace efforts will make their presence visible. In addition, women's participation in conflict resolution and the national peace effort differs by region: for instance, people in Khost province take their disputes to local *jirgas* where women are key members<sup>47</sup>. While most *jirgas* do not have women members, some do<sup>48</sup>. Finally, there are rare instances of women whose decision power is stronger than men, like the example of Maldara, but such instances are not the norm.<sup>49</sup>

43 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-16062019

44 Women's Rights, Gender Equality, and Transition: Securing gains, moving forward 2013, AREU

45 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-19062019

46 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-18062019

47 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Kabul-08092019

48 Mohammad Tariq Osman. 2008. "The Tribal Security System (Arbakai) in Southeast Afghanistan." *Crisis States Research Center* 04. Accessed 11 25, 2019.

49 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Kabul-15092019



## Governmental mechanisms

Under the governmental structure for the peace effort, the established entity was the High Peace Council, members of which conducted several meetings in Nangarhar with Jihadi, Ulema, and women about how to reach an agreement. However, due to lack of coordination and planning, the government was not pleased with its activities and function, and the people did not see any positive steps being taken. Respondents in Nangarhar had very little to say about HPC and most were not familiar with it, with the following statements reflecting the majority of respondents' views:

*I have no idea about them. Because the peace council was not [very] functional, and their activities were limited to the governmental level. Thus, ordinary people have no idea about them.*<sup>50</sup>

*I don't know, there was just a peace council and had a representative, and I have no more information.*<sup>51</sup>

*There was a peace council; we have not seen any positive step from this council for peace. They were wasting their time and resources.*<sup>52</sup>

Besides having only a basic awareness of its existence, people do not know about the HPC and its activities at the provincial level. This shows that the council failed to reach the local people. Even though many respondents mentioned the monthly formal meetings with the council, people were still not satisfied with their function. Many female respondents also spoke about the female members in this council, including the head of the Directorate of Women's Affairs (DoWA). Yet, the role of these women in the peace council was limited to participation in the workshops and seminars as guests. Though they have also participated in meetings conducted within the governmental structure, NGOs or civil societies, the respondents did not see a concrete effort for peace in the province.

## Nongovernmental mechanisms

Regarding the nongovernmental approaches for peace, several steps have been taken. For instance, civil societies are very active in this regard. They have organized many workshops and seminars at the university level where not only governmental employees are involved but also students and teachers. The participation of students and people from communities might have a bigger impact on the peace efforts, but it is not clear whether the nongovernmental mechanism could feed or plug itself into governmental efforts. Furthermore, in some of the districts and villages of Nangarhar province, ordinary people had direct approaches to talk about the peace with the anti-government forces. As these talks occurred through nongovernmental mechanisms organized by communities, they have had limited influence on the national peace effort.

*Civil society has started a program recently; mostly university students are involved in this program. They discuss different issues like political and social. It is something like a workshop and training, and the focus is on political and social issues including the peace effort.*<sup>53</sup>

*On the other hand, some people in the community try to work for peace and encourage anti-government elements to come to a peace dialogue. Nevertheless, they are people from communities, and they do not have authority, so no positive changes took place in the peace effort.*<sup>54</sup>

50 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-FGD-15062019

51 Interview, Jalalabad-UNW-WPPD-18062019

52 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-FGD-15062019

53 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-17062019

54 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-19062019

A group of religious leaders, both male and female, wanted to further boost national peace efforts, and established the ‘Social Council for Peace Consolidation’ composed of 500 members, of which 107 are women. This council has branches in other provinces like Herat, Kabul, and Kunduz. The purpose of this council is to engage in both local dispute resolutions and in the political peace efforts. However, due to limited resources, they have failed to make contact with anti-government forces, although they indicated that they have the capacity and acceptance to make these contacts. Although this council has not been utilised thus far, it presents an opportunity for the government to employ its resources when approaching the anti-government element. Furthermore, the involvement of this council has the potential to support the peace effort from a religious perspective. A member of the Social Council for Peace Consolidation noted:

*I, along with other Ulema, have composed a council by the name of “Social Council for Peace Consolidation.” The purpose of this council is to resolve local and small conflicts at the provincial level. In total, we have more than 500 members, including 107 females across the country. Most of the members are Ulema and religious scholars. However, we have minimal activities. For this Council, we have only two offices. Our activities are limited to the local level. We have registered this Council with [the] government and other relevant sectors like security, court, PC, religious affairs, and the Justice Department. We solve only domestic conflicts and bring peace among the local people. Due to a lack of resources, we are not able to expand our activities to provincial and national levels. When we resolve any conflict, we file the dispute and submit one copy to the court and one copy to security personnel and keep one copy with us.<sup>55</sup>*

The members of this council approach both sides and discuss issues related to peace. After listening to the different sides, the council encourages each party to forgive each other and bases this advice on Islamic scripture, which highlights the rewards of forgiveness and the rights of the perpetrator and the defender. Once both sides agree with the council’s recommendation, a final decision is reached and the case is settled. Following the agreement reached, copies of the signed agreement are distributed to the court and security personnel; the council keeps the third copy for its record.

In this council, women have been playing a role in the peace effort. In some cases, particularly those involving women, female members of this council were active and supported men in conflict resolution. They were able to take a lead role in severe cases where the opposition was unable to reach an agreement, and to directly participate in the Jirga.<sup>56</sup> However, only women who are considered by elders as having experience in cultural traditions and Islamic values have their consent to participate in Jirgas in this way, as one respondent described:

*The council that we have composed, women have a vivid role in that council. They are directly participating in those cases where women are the victim of the conflict.<sup>57</sup>*

*When peace dialogue took place among men, it became impossible to reach an agreement. In such a case, a woman without informing both sides of the case were joining these dialogues. Once the woman entered the dialogue, for the respect of that women, the people in peace dialogues were saying that, Aos Toor Sary Jirga ta Raghla, Aos Bayad Sola workro (now a female has joined the Peace dialogue or Jirga, for her respect we should have peace now) both sides were making the agreement as soon as possible.<sup>58</sup>*

55 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-16062019

56 Hassan M. Yousufzai & Ali Gohar. 2005. *TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING PUKHTOON JIRGA*. Case Study, Peshawar: JUST PEACE INTERNATIONAL. Accessed 11 17, 19.

57 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-16062019

58 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-19062019

*We have many stories of women participating in the peace efforts. In those cases where men cannot reach an agreement, without informing the male, women were taking part in the Jirga, and for her respect, men expedite the council and accept the decision of women.<sup>59</sup>*

Peace is a comprehensive issue that includes legal matters but also rights, justice, reconciliation, sustainability, restoration and healing, particularly in the context of Afghanistan. Due to the importance of religion in Afghanistan, particularly for the Taliban, respondents thought that women participating in the peace effort should be known as those who practice Islamic values, have an in-depth understanding of local culture, and know the formal framework of the peace process. Although respondents stated they were ready to have women involved in the national peace effort, they also noted that women would have to meet certain high standards in terms of education, religious values, and contextual knowledge. By contrast, such standards and requirements for men would be different and applied less stringently, as other factors including social standing, patriarchy, and power would influence who gets to be involved in what capacity. The expectations and requirements for men and women are dissimilar, even though respondents agreed that women should be part of the national peace effort.

### Short life story of women involved in the peace process

Gul Bano (name changed to protect her identity) is one of many active women in Nangarhar province. A social worker, she was a member of the District Development Assembly (DDA), and Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) council in her district. She is involved in different programs organized by NGOs, such as awareness about health, education, and elections, and she has become a prominent woman in public affairs. Her responsibilities have expanded her social connection to other provinces like Kunar. During her career, she has faced several issues, like discrimination and threats from local people, and she still has to deal with different people opposing her work like *Maliks* (traditional village elders) and some religious leaders in her community. During her working career, she has also engaged in conflict resolution such as land disputes and a murder case, as she stated:

*In our neighborhood, two boys fight with each other, one was injured, and the second killed accidentally. A conflict between these two households arose. The family of [the dead] boy intended to take revenge from the family of the wounded boy. The family of the injured boy came and asked me for help. It took a long time; somehow, I have managed to resolve the conflict. My approach for this conflict resolution started from the female member of the family. I have many discussions with their female members of the family, and finally, I have content[ed] them; it was an accident. Therefore, the role of women in conflict resolution is very positive and can change the whole dispute or conflict in a positive way.<sup>60</sup>*

The approach that she used for the conflict resolution cited above involved discussions with both the families. Although the discussions took a longer duration, the support of Gul Bano proved to be critical in convincing the family of the deceased that it was an accident. She resolved the conflict by bringing both families together, which meant that the family of the accused repented for the tragic loss of the other family's son and this resulted in the victim's family forgiving the accused person and his family. As the families successfully settled their conflict, there was no need for government's interfere.

The common argument against women's involvement in conflict resolution or other areas of public life is that they do not have the capacity of taking responsibilities in society. Gul Bano's story is one example among many others challenging this perception.. Through different workshops and seminars, she has built her capacity and skills related to participation in public affairs. Through her social work activities, she became a powerful person who can resolve disputes, despite the threats

59 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-FGD-15062019

60 Interview, UNW-WPPD-22062019

that she has faced. While a woman's willingness to engage in public affairs despite the challenges is mainly a personal process, one common positive factor was participation in training, workshops and seminars, which helped empower women. This example illustrates that there are women who have the capacity of resolving serious conflict among individuals alone. Thus, such instances demonstrate that women have played vital roles in conflict resolution, which would counter men's arguments that they lack experience or should be denied from participating at a higher level.

### **People's perception of women's role in the national peace efforts**

Although women have participated in workshops, seminars, and training and were taught about peace in schools, they do not consider such engagements to be sufficient to enhance their role in the actual peace efforts.

There have been suggestions to involve women directly in talks with the families of anti-government forces to engage with them and encourage them in participating in peace efforts. To that end, many respondents have indicated that the selection of women with an Islamic background would be essential for this initiative.

Respondents, both male and female, indicated that women can take part in any political issues and decision-making, and therefore, that women's participation in the decision-making and peace effort should increase. They added that women who have both contemporary and Islamic knowledge will be good candidates for taking part in the peace process.

*We talk about peace with the Taliban, and we want women to be involved with, so we should create a situation where women directly talk with females or women of the Taliban. We have to tell them that in war we women will suffer more<sup>61</sup>*

*Those women who want to take part in the peace effort; they should have excellent Islamic understanding. They should know the value of women in the Islamic script, including the role of women in the Afghan culture.<sup>62</sup>*

Both the government and civil society must take their approaches to increasing women's awareness of the peace effort beyond seminars, workshops, and training, since only limited numbers of women have access to them. Many respondents were indeed not even aware of the current national peace efforts, and of the status of women's participation in these efforts. Those women who received training are well prepared for and eager to engage in door-to-door awareness-raising about the national peace effort in Nangarhar province, particularly as it pertains to female members of the families of anti-government elements.

*They should be directly involved in the peace effort and peace dialogue. Another way is, we should send these women to the families of opposition and anti-government families. Where they can discuss peace with the female of the anti-government family. These experience[d] women should give awareness to the local people about peace and the importance of peace.<sup>63</sup>*

In conclusion, respondents across the study in Nangarhar believed that women could play a stronger role in the peace effort, and that their involvement with the families of anti-government forces could pave the path for longstanding peace.

61 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-22062019

62 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-24062019

63 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-16062019

## Steps women have taken for peace

In both governmental and nongovernmental structures, women have played a role in the peace efforts and in conflict resolution. Though their role in the governmental structure was largely symbolic and limited to participating in workshops and seminars, they had the opportunity to be more involved in nongovernmental structures, such as local councils. Women in nongovernmental structures had a greater role compared to state-led or organised structures, but their broader role in the former was still constrained by what men decided their roles would be or could be in conflict resolution:

*We had no council/shura before; just now there is a council that I have become a member of, Afghan Women Network and civil society activists in this province established this council. Apart from the membership of some council, no other engagement exists for women in the peace effort in Nangarhar province.<sup>64</sup>*

*There is an organisation by the name of EPD (Equality for Peace and Democracy), which has councils in districts, men and women are members of these councils. These members have a connection with villagers who know who Talib and who is not. Under the umbrella of this council, women are invited to Jalalabad city for different kinds of programs, to share their ideas with other women about what is good and what is not.<sup>65</sup>*

Because the president dissolved the provincial-level peace councils that were part of the HPC, due to the lack of function and proper planning, local people engaged in peaceful dialogue and conflict resolution through nongovernmental channels. Through these nongovernmental channels, many women participated in indirect talks with the families of anti-government elements and identified their intentions.

*From the government side, nothing has been done for peace. Nevertheless, from the side of people, many discussions took place. Therefore, based on this discussion, the anti-government side has the intention of peace, and they would like to have peace. However, it is an informal discussion, and through the council in which I have the membership, these discussions happened.<sup>66</sup>*

To summarise, women have proven their capacity to work for peace through different channels, and are demanding a more active role in the national peace efforts.

## Challenges and threats

Despite their firm intentions for peace, women still sense threats and experience challenges regarding a longstanding peace in the country, specifically as it pertains to the economic situation. The lack of rule of law, the prevalence of bribes in the government structure and the persistence of injustice, along with a lack of support from the police, are among the hindrances women feel can compromise the national peace efforts.

In addition, the uninformed behaviour of government employees with women and the strict and radicalised outlook of the Taliban threatens women's rights, including participation in elections and access to jobs.<sup>67</sup> As a result, women are insisting on having an active role in the national peace effort.

64 Interview, UNW-WPPD- Jalalabad -15062019

65 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-23062019

66 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-19062019

67 APPRO. 2019. *Fragility and Making Peace: Rights of Afghan Women and Peace with the Taliban*. Research Report, Kabul: Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization, 49. Accessed 11 15, 2019. <http://appro.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-05-01-Fragility-and-Making-Peace-Rights-of-Afghan-Women-and-Peace-with-the-Taliban-1.pdf>.

*If women are not part of the peace effort, I am sure the men will not discuss women right in the national peace efforts, and we will not have peace until women's rights are notsecured.<sup>68</sup>*

*Anyway, I am afraid that after the peace agreement with the Taliban, they should not count women as a second hand and not allow us to have social, economic, and political activities.<sup>69</sup>*

These concerns show that women respondents are reluctant to risk giving up their fundamental rights, for which they have fought, and returning to the Taliban's era with extreme restrictions on women, banned from education, employment, accessing health services delivered by men (with women banned from employment, it was nearly impossible for women to access healthcare), or leaving the house without a male chaperone. The fear of the Taliban and how they robbed women of their rights and agency is foremost in the minds of women fighting to preserve their rights.

In conclusion, we have seen that women have a precedent of involvement in the local peace efforts, albeit with varying degrees of authority and influence that did not necessarily equal that of their male peers. Women's involvement in peace efforts will continue to encounter restrictions, whether in the form of participation or the role they will execute. For instance, cultural barriers have meant that women were engaged only if men could not come to a decision, as opposed to women being actively involved from the beginning. Nevertheless, despite Nangarhar being a more religious and culturally sensitive province, women are still involved in the local peace efforts. Even though male religious scholars have established these councils, women that have a background in religious education or are religious scholars are also active members of these councils. Furthermore, women are not only members of these councils, but they support local peace efforts and conflict resolution through them. Women in Nangarhar province, through these councils, solved many conflicts, and they were also part of the non-governmental peace efforts. They also effectively support the male members of these councils in conflict cases. Therefore in the current national peace process, women's insistence on direct participation is informed by the justifiable fears they have regarding its potential outcomes. Because of their experiences during the time of the Taliban, women do not want a repeat of the era where they were considered second-class members of society, where they faced a lot of restrictions on education, access to basic services, and movement outside of their homes.

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68 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-18062019

69 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Jalalabad-24062019



### 3.2. Balkh

Balkh province is located in the northern part of Afghanistan, and constitutes one of the strategic provinces of the country with borders with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Balkh's strategic location is the source of its rich history. It is considered a hub of commercial, literary, educational, and political activities.<sup>70</sup>

Balkh's geopolitical location made it more vulnerable in every regime, and it continues to be a province where armed and unarmed domestic political contests are waged between government and anti-government armed groups.

Balkh has witnessed the rise and fall of various kingdoms, conquerors, and governments. Among its great personalities, women played a significant role as elites of their times, including Rabia Balkhi, a poet who lived 12 centuries ago.<sup>71</sup> Women's participation in social, cultural, economic, and political fields is not something new or unknown in the province.

Balkh has experienced and witnessed war and conflict under different regimes for more than 40 years, and people have been affected severely by these catastrophes. A member of a local women's council stated:

*Even during the monarchy, it was calm, but most people were illiterate and had no knowledge and education. People had no awareness of their life. They were just happy that they ate a piece of bread in peace, but they did not know where other countries in the world were. However, after the communist revolution when the war has started, with war, although a little bit improvement came. People lost their family members. Women somehow got freedom but were not in peace. At that time, mujahidin were firing on the area. Mujahideen came and fought with each other. Then the Taliban came, and we left Afghanistan, went to Tajikistan, and lived there for 6years. So now, we have this government. Still, we have war here.<sup>72</sup>*

In part due to its strategic location, Balkh has been experiencing not only war but also social insecurity due to different regimes that configured and reconfigured the state. These changes involved the state changing from a monarchy to a republic, a communist state, an Islamic republic, an Islamic Emirate, and to the current regime. As a consequence, people interviewed in Balkh understood peace as being more than just the end of conflict.

#### Peace definition in Balkh

According to women interviewed in Balkh, peace is the condition in which every citizen can live in comfort, work, get an education without major challenges, and have access to all their rights as humans and as citizens. The end of war is not peace, especially for women: under the Taliban government for example, there was no conflict in some places, but people were living in terror and had no access to any public services. In addition to security, financial wellbeing, and access to all public services, access to democratic political participation was another crucial aspect of peace for women in Balkh.

70 Chona R. Echavez, Jennefer Lyn L. Bagaporo. 2012. Does Women's Participation in the National Solidarity Programme Make a Difference in their Lives? case study, Kabul: AREU.

71 n.d. AFGHAN WOMEN SKILLS DEVELOPMENT CENTER. Accessed July 10, 2019. <http://awsdc.org.af/2019/07/10/brief-bio-of-rabia-balkh>

72 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-12072019

*If you ask a child about peace, s/he will say yes, s/he needs peace to go to school to get an education as it is every child's right to attend school. Whenever I see children how they want peace and hope for it, I feel sad all day that how children are worried about their future.<sup>73</sup>*

*Whatever we have achieved during these 18 years, we have to protect it and improve it. Freedom of speech, women's rights, and women's participation in any field is the most important issue for women to protect it. Women's rights and their demands should not sacrifice for peace; otherwise we cannot call that a real peace.<sup>74</sup>*

*During Taliban time, it was calm, but women were banned at home, their rights trampled. We were not in peace.<sup>75</sup>*

*For women to participate in the national peace efforts, participating in politics, democratically is the most important aspect. Security and financial wellbeing came next. In a society where women can access their rights and are able to participate in every field, security will come. When you are secure, you can have a market, and people will be able to start a business and other economic activities.<sup>76</sup>*

The peace efforts and plans are still a puzzle, according to the Balkh women we interviewed, who find themselves confused about what is going on in the process. Furthermore, the Taliban have demands that contravene the Constitution of Afghanistan. As some of the respondents said:

*In the current peace process, even the government is not involved. Right now, the situation is like that you have just released a flock of wolves in the ground; every one of them is just running around to get something. Peace will not come if everyone makes a group and start peace talks; the government should be the core of the talk. All should come together and make a plan and strategy. The government is the decision-maker.<sup>77</sup>*

*People of Afghanistan should accept the constitutional law of Afghanistan. Those who make their groups and are going into other countries as Doha, or Russia, they have to understand that peace will not come like that until they do not negotiate under the name of the government of Afghanistan and based on constitutional law. When we go from one address and have one purpose then we can defeat the enemy.<sup>78</sup>*

*This is God, the Quran, and the Prophet that we accept. I do not understand their demands, and it is not possible to come up with their thoughts. We have to talk with their heads who support them. Here in Afghanistan, we do not have any problem. If a source does not support this person, he will go on his farms and will start farming as before.<sup>79</sup>*

The ongoing impasse clarified women's own definition for peace in Afghanistan, and has made them more active in advocating for women's participation in the peace process.

73 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-8072019

74 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-9072019

75 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-8072019

76 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-3072019

77 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-3072019

78 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-1172019

79 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-0472019



## Women's role in national peace efforts

Patriarchal society has had a substantial impact on women for centuries, and women rarely participated in political issues such as national peace plans and efforts in the past. As a respondent said, "Up to now that I have seen and observed, women are not involved in the national peace efforts at all. Peace without women's participation is not possible to come; we have experienced it for a long time."<sup>80</sup> Women's participation in the national peace efforts has become a significant issue in the last 18 years, and it has recently become more controversial as women have pressed to have more representation via governmental and nongovernmental mechanisms.

### Governmental mechanism

The HPC was the only governmental mechanism in Afghanistan to give women a place to be part of the national peace efforts, even though their representation was limited in numbers: there were only nine women out of 70 members.<sup>81</sup> The HPC had a committee in Balkh province, but interview respondents did not have complete information about its local activities. As the HPC was responsible for talking and negotiating directly with anti-government militants, women members never had the chance to engage with them directly. Two of the respondents, a public leader and a women's rights activist, stated this about the HPC:

*In the past, we had a High Peace Council that was working for peace. As their work and activities were not very useful, therefore, now it is suspended. There were females in HPC, but they did not talk with anti-government groups, I have no idea.<sup>82</sup>*

*...In the past, we had a High Peace Council in Balkh province. However, as they were not exceptionally functional and did not have many achievements, as a result, the president has suspended this council, so now there is no peace council in Balkh.<sup>83</sup>*

Since women members of the HPC committee in Balkh could not get the opportunity to participate in direct negotiations with the Taliban, they became active in other programmes, coordinating with civil society, human rights, and gender activists to prepare and implement peace awareness programmes and training for local people. The women's rights activists mentioned:

*When the HPC was active, at that time, we were working very closely with each other for peace in this province. In the same way, we have trained 20 youth, both male and female.<sup>84</sup>*

A former member of HPC committee added:

*When I was in the Peace council (HPC provincial committee), we were only able to go to neighborhood villages of Taliban to talk with women, but we were not able to talk with Taliban or their women. Only men were able to sit with some of the local Taliban. Women only were participating in local conflict resolutions. No one was ready to take responsibility for women to participate and negotiate with the Taliban due to insecurity.<sup>85</sup>*

80 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-8072019

81 2016. *WOMEN AND PEACE BUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN*. case study, Kabul: OXFAM.

82 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-12072019

83 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-8072019

84 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-12072019

85 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-03072019

Some factors come out here which weaken and make insignificant the role and function of HPC's provincial committee, such as insecurity, an ineffective approach, and also the symbolic role of women. These factors have a strong effect on female members' roles. This committee was established as the HPC's working committee at the provincial level to have direct talks with anti-government groups, but due to insecurity and symbolic roles, female members became engaged with local conflict resolution and peace advocacy programmes and training instead.

### Non-governmental mechanism

Non-governmental mechanisms for local conflict resolution and peacebuilding happen in Balkh, as in other parts of Afghanistan, through national and local Jirgas or local councils. It is, however, rare to find a woman who participates in a Jirga or council to resolve a significant local conflict or any armed conflict, as it is in other parts of the country. A conservative patriarchal society and the ideology of the Taliban/anti-government militants have made the situation difficult for women to participate in negotiations directly.

*In this first peace talk with the Taliban, women were limited to talk directly or have a role. However, it will be good if they give a chance to women or should keep in mind women's roles and women's achievement during these years, though it is not very good.<sup>86</sup>*

*They want to kill even the shadow of women. I cannot dare to go to my province Baghlan these days. It is impossible that a Talib comes and talks to women about peace.<sup>87</sup>*

*When I was in the Peace council, we were only able to go to the neighboring villages of the Taliban to talk with women, but we were not able to talk with the Taliban or their women. Only men were able to sit with some of the local Taliban. Women only were participating in local conflict resolutions. No one was ready to take responsibility for women to participate and negotiate with the Taliban due to insecurity.<sup>88</sup>*

Although there are women in Balkh who have served in a role equivalent to a legal assistant in local dispute and violence resolution that are related to family issues and gender issues, they have rarely dealt with armed conflict or anti-government groups. Sometimes, however, there are exceptional cases in Balkh and other provinces where a woman has talked face to face with the local Taliban. Such cases show that women can participate in peace negotiations, but their presence is still limited and confined to lesser roles.

### Short life story

One of the respondents, a government official, has shared her story with the research team. She had been able to talk with the local Taliban to implement projects and social services in some of the insecure villages of a district in Balkh. Through this negotiation, arranged by the mediation of elders, and through the implementation of projects and programmes, she was able to change the minds of villagers to not support the Taliban anymore, even though they are not able to avoid the Taliban as the village was under their control. The villagers informed her and her team about the local situation, leading her to conclude that she was not able to change the mind of the Taliban.

*I talked with them too; maybe I had tens of meetings with them. My word with them was that all kinds of political projects would come and will end one day. However, we are from the same district; we are neighbours, we have shared land, our life and death are shared, let us not make our relationship and neighborhood worse once you are saying that there is no project here and no services. Therefore, now it is the time, wherever, and whatever projects you want, I will implement and even will bring and*

86 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-07072019

87 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-04072019

88 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-03072019

*implement the best one, any project, water, school. Despite these words, I have started a project there to make a school for their village. Wherever they said to make school, I said ok wherever you are happy I will make the school there. I told them many times to come to make peace; we have no reason to fight; we have no problem with each other. However, they say one thing; “we want to make you people Muslim.”*

*Now, at least the people of the village are cooperating with us. The Taliban commander that I talked about before 80% or 70% of villagers were cooperating with him, but right now, they are not with him. They are ready to cooperate with us in any field. They are calling us and reporting where they (Taliban) now and what they are doing. Because they have understood our goodwill that the government wants to work for them.<sup>89</sup>*

The respondent believes that peace will not come to Afghanistan since it is more complicated than it seems, and negotiating only with some Afghan Taliban will not offer a solution. Since the Taliban’s reach is broader, there should be national, regional and international levels of negotiation.

*I believe that peace will not come through the way that we are going on today. I am a person who sees the enemies face to face, and there is a war now, those people (Taliban) are not ready to cross their values and ideology. They are narrow-minded people; they will not accept. In fact, for peace, we have to go to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and those who support these people financially and fill their minds. We cannot bring peace to negotiate with this Taliban commander (name withheld) in this district. We cannot fulfill their demands. I talk with him; his first word is to become Muslim, I do not know what kind of Muslim they want.*

*I think that peace should come to Afghanistan gradually. If they think of bringing peace at once, it is the wrong idea. Look at this table; if you want to make a table, you have to go step by step, then you get a complete table. Here, we do not have a clear programme for peace, and mostly we think that peace is something just to come at once.<sup>90</sup>*

She understands security as the main aspect of peace, which creates a path to other social, economic, political, and cultural issues.

*Security, security can bring financial wellbeing and development. I see it practically. In those villages where there is fighting, we cannot get any services like education, health, and we cannot help a woman who is in danger and has problems. Without peace and security, life is meaningless. We cannot do anything.<sup>91</sup>*

This life story shows the managing, leading, and negotiating ability of a woman in local peace efforts. She has reportedly been the only woman in the province who talked face-to-face with some local Taliban commanders. She had an impact on people and some of these local commanders through economic empowerment and development projects. It points out that security is the root of making a platform for further peace talks, and highlights the importance of economic wellbeing and social services to have sustainable peace.

### **People’s perception of women’s role in the national peace effort**

After many years of wars and armed conflict under various regimes and governments, people are impatient for peace. Since women are direct and indirect victims of war and insecurity, the current government signed UN Resolution 1325, which has opened a new chapter for women in Afghanistan. A male respondent in Balkh said:

89 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-04072019

90 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-04072019

91 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-04072019

*Similarly, about UNSC resolution 1325 for peace efforts, no one in the country has information about it. This is very strange. We talk about national peace efforts and the role of women, but hardly anyone knows about UN resolution 1325. It means that we do not know peace. We should have separated seats for women in national peace efforts. We should monitor the peace efforts strictly. Both sides (government and anti-government) should review the UNSC 1325 Resolution.<sup>92</sup>*

Since women's substantive participation in political issues, especially in national peace efforts, is something new for society, it will be hard for a patriarchal society and Taliban ideology to accept them as decision-makers.

*Those who are narrow-minded and fanatic men do not think like this. They do not care about democracy or women's participation.<sup>93</sup>*

Women were able to mediate local disputes or conflicts only from a position of an older woman using her honor by putting on her *chadar* (shawl), but they were not able to participate as decision-makers to make peace. Women want to be decision-makers instead of having a symbolic role or using the specific advantages or attributes of being a woman, believing that they can participate in national peace efforts as citizens, notwithstanding the old taboos that prevent most of the society from accepting them.

*When talking about national peace efforts, women have a very inconspicuous role in national peace efforts due to some factors. It is said that women are not aware; most of the high ranks of government and elites are saying that women do not have enough political awareness. Another point is that with whom we are talking about peace, the opposite group is people who do not accept women as a human who can think and make decisions. They want men to make decisions and implement them on women. Therefore, we are against a group that never wants to talk with women wherever, and in any country, they sit to negotiate. These factors made women not have enough role and participation in decision making and national peace efforts.<sup>94</sup>*

*Not at all. Men do not want female participation in politics. As I said earlier, men only want women alongside them, without any privilege and benefits. When money and power comes, it should be only for male not for female. Therefore, from a man's perspective, democratic participation in politics is not for women, only for men.<sup>95</sup>*

Here a male respondent said that men are better able than women to participate in national peace efforts, and they can secure women's rights and dignity:

*From my point of view, we do not need to send women to the peace process. We should send men who could judge and understand the situation after five years. I am not in favor of 25% of the share for women as MP in parliament. We should have a male who can secure women's rights and the dignity of women in society. In case if we send women to national peace efforts, they should be patriots and specialized in peace efforts. Instead of talking about women's participation, we should have a national agenda that secures all the rights of people and women.<sup>96</sup>*

To conclude, women have not had strong support nationally or internationally to participate in national peace efforts actively. Data from Balkh province show that women are marginalised in the

92 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-07072019

93 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-03072019

94 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-03072019

95 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-11072019

96 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-08072019

national peace efforts<sup>97</sup>. From the public's perception, women's participation in peace talks and negotiation is not the priority as up to now their role in national peace efforts through any channels has mostly been symbolic.

### Steps taken by women for peace

To overcome their limited participation in political issues like national peace efforts, women have become active through conferences, workshops, and other kinds of programmes to advocate and spread awareness in society regarding peace and their rights. Women respondents who are gender and women's rights activists stated:

*Before, we had a peace committee, and women were a member of that committee. They did not have any role in national peace efforts. Their role is only limited to the office and participation in some of the gatherings.<sup>98</sup>*

*I conducted several public awareness programs. I believe that if we do not change the mind of the people, we could never implement the programme. In these programmes, we talked and discussed the harms of war and the benefits of peace with the women and displacement of Alborz Mountain. Unfortunately, the high council of peace did not have a good plan and procedure for the provincial committees. We used our relationship, and through our relationship, we ran our work and did our activities. There was no proper plan or road map for running our work.<sup>99</sup>*

*Second, we work for women's participation in national peace efforts. Therefore, we have organized many workshops and seminars for women and their role in national peace efforts. I was a master trainer. I have trained people from different parts of society and provided them training about the role of the women peace efforts. Similarly, I have trained police on the topic of "Women's participation in national peace efforts." In 14 districts of Faryab province, we have established women shura for peace. We have trained a member of these Shura. Through the Shuras, these members have taken part in the conflict resolution at the family and district level.<sup>100</sup>*

Civil society, women's rights, and peace activists alongside governmental officials like female members of the HPC committee have conducted a series of awareness workshops, conferences, and advocacy programmes in Balkh province. These all show that women have not been able to participate in peace negotiations and talks practically through governmental or non-governmental efforts. Instead, they carry out the programmes to advocate for peace and give awareness to the public, which is a significantly diminished role and places women on the sidelines.

### Challenges & Threats

Afghan women are still facing obstacles after 19 years of struggles. They have a fear of being banned once again, and they have a message—"do not sell us out to the Taliban"—to men who negotiate with the Taliban.<sup>101</sup> Despite awareness programmes, women still face challenges and threats within the community and from anti-government militants (Taliban, Daesh, other armed groups). Women feel dread of dealing with the Taliban, but still do not have complete trust in the international community and in the Afghanistan government. The following points were raised by three respondents who were government officials:

97 Patricia Gossman, editor. *Women's Rights, Gender Equality, and Transition: Securing Gains, Moving Forward*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2013.

98 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-08072019

99 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-13072019

100 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-12072019

101 Fatima Faizi and David Zucchino, "700 Afghan Women Have a Message: Don't Sell Us Out to the Taliban." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/world/asia/afghanistan-women-taliban.html>. 28 February 2019 (accessed 15 July 2020).



*There is some violence that happens by people. Farkhunda was burnt and killed, some other women who were raped who did it, Taliban? No, it was done by the people of these societies.<sup>102</sup>*

*I accept that the role of women is symbolic; the reason is the culture; still, the men do not believe in women's rights and women's abilities. The second reason, democracy is nascent and new; the people do not entirely accept it. Moreover, the third reason, the women who are working in high-ranking officials of the governor office do not advocate for the women and do not advise the governor to increase the women staff and change their symbolic role in the government.<sup>103</sup>*

*Do you know what reason behind this decision was? Women have understood that the government and other international communities try to make a peace deal with the Taliban. They have seen the background of the Taliban. They know if the Taliban come to power, there will be restrictions on women's movement again. Thus, they have decided to take an active part in the peace process; otherwise, their 18 years' struggle and achievement will be compromised, and they will not let the government do it.<sup>104</sup>*

Besides the mentioned challenges, another challenge for advocates of women's participation in any field, especially in national peace efforts, is the absence of a sustainable and permanent unit or an institute to work for women's rights. Since 2001, all associated programmes were project-based. A governmental official said:

*There are some NGOs that do some activities on peace, but they are NGOs, and their activities are project-based, and their work is temporary, not permanent. Therefore, they are not sufficient. As an example, the Afghan Women Network worked on peace in this province but their projects were completed and now they do not do anything.<sup>105</sup>*

Another governmental official said that a lower percentage of educated and skilled women also challenge women's active participation in national peace efforts.

*Education is one of the most important issues which can help any society to improve and develop. I think it will help to have sustainable peace too. The reasons that create war are different. There would be political issues beyond our understanding, but one reason is a backward illiterate and uneducated society.<sup>106</sup>*

Summing up, there are some specific challenges that can create barriers for women's participation in the national peace efforts. Women still face society based violence and traditional barriers, which are caused by low levels of literacy and education. The existence of Taliban ideology in the society, even in governmental institutions, is another challenge for women's participation in any peace efforts. From the other side, women see neither a focused and specific government nor the international community's strategy regarding women's rights in the peace talks. These points and all the challenges with consideration of the Taliban's background have weakened women's positions in peace negotiations locally and nationally. Women remain an afterthought and their engagement is still determined by men and until this equation changes, women are unlikely to play a meaningful role in the national peace efforts underway.

102 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-10082019

103 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-13072019

104 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-10072019

105 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-13072019

106 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-09072019

### 3.3. Bamiyan

Bamiyan is located in central Afghanistan. As with other parts of the country, it suffered from war and conflict during past regimes, but since 2001 it has been relatively secure.<sup>107</sup> This relative safety allows increased mobility and opportunities for women, along with more liberal views on women and girls. Bamiyan is, for example, one of the provinces with the lowest rates of out-of-school girls.<sup>108</sup> Looking back in history, there is virtually no record of women's status since Bamiyan has been one of the most remote places in Afghanistan's history, and, regarding women's participation in politics, its history is too recent to consider. In the recent history, there have been exceptional women who have been decision-makers, such as Arbab Khadija, the head of a village who lived during Zahir Shah's monarchy and Dawood Khan's government.<sup>109</sup>

Decades of war and instability complicated Bamiyan women's access to education. Girls and women's education in Bamiyan was intermittent or periodical since the monarchy of Zahir Shah up to the beginning of the current regime,<sup>110</sup> which is one of the factors that might have affected women's participation in public affairs. The improvement of access to education services has been noticed, along with an increase in women's political participation.

Other factors that have had an impact on women's role in various fields in Bamiyan include the nomination of the first woman governor in the history of Afghanistan.

*You know that Bamiyan is the first province which had the first female governor and the first province which had a successful woman in election affairs for eight years. It is the only province where a woman was university chancellor for 2 years. And now "Mostofy" director of the finance provincial department is a female who has the second-high rank after governor, the human rights director was a woman for a while, and the first provincial council head was a woman.<sup>111</sup>*

These emerging gains come on the back of the relative security of the past 19 years, which has provided a platform for Bamiyan people, specifically women, to get an education and participate in social, cultural, economic, security and political fields. The Afghan government also used this chance of relative security to have Bamiyan as an experimental location for women's rights, with experiments such as establishing a regional office of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), having the first woman governor in the history of Afghanistan, the first gender department in a security office, among other initiatives. It made Bamiyan women reach a level of social, economic, cultural, and political standing that had not occurred before.

#### Definition of peace in Bamiyan

Men and women in Bamiyan define peace as a situation where every individual should have access to their legal rights as human beings. Peace for them does not mean simply the end of the war. People want to have social, economic, cultural, and political security, and for women and men to be able to participate equally in these fields. Some of the male and female respondents indicated that:

107 FGD, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-31072019

108 Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). *Global Initiative on Out-Of-School Children: All Children In School And Learning: Afghanistan Country Study* <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cfe2c8927234e0001688343/t/5d1f15629a38c300010a0248/1562318188415/SH-UNICEF-OOSC-Report.pdf>, (accessed 15 July 2020).

109 Pajhwok Afghan News. Accessed 12 8, 2019. <http://elections.pajhwok.com/en/content/background-profile-bamiyan-province>.

110 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-30072019 (2)

111 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-29072019

*I think that there should be security and equality in society. Women should be able to use their rights as men do.<sup>112</sup>*

*Simply, peace for them is the situation to work and go anywhere with no tension. They don't think of peace as the end of the war. Peace for them is to be free as boys and access to opportunities as men. We see boys are staying out till late at night for attending extra capacity building courses, or for enjoyment, and girls should have the same opportunity. That is called peace for women. Peace means girls are able to use public areas as sport places to do sports and exercise as the boys do. End of war is not peace. All citizens should have access to their rights, which are given to all by law.<sup>113</sup>*

*Peace means social wellbeing, security, calmness and a life without tension. This peace process which is going on is not defined based on the current situation of Afghanistan and its people.<sup>114</sup>*

*The peace process is a decision-making process to end a conflict. But it should not end at a high cost. We should not lose our achievement. As I give you the example of Bamiyan province, these achievements that women have here, not achieved easily. I was witnessed for 13 years, how much it took before to change slowly and reach this situation now. If we bring peace by losing the rights of part of the society and those who are the victims, I can't call it peace. Peace is when all people should reach to their rights and their demands should be respected as citizens of Afghanistan.<sup>115</sup>*

*I think women who are in management and leadership positions in Bamiyan define peace as a situation for women to improve well. It is clear, peace can be beneficial for different parts of society, but women will benefit more from it because women are harmed more in war. I say it by thinking about women who are in key positions in this province. They like an environment to have opportunities to improve more.<sup>116</sup>*

Social and financial wellbeing, educational services, and women's participation in any issue in a society are the most important aspects of peace for both women and men in Bamiyan. How women participate in social, economic, and political spheres impacts the society, and Bamiyan can be a relevant role model for it. A gender activist, a human rights activist and a journalist discussed impacts of financial wellbeing and people's involvement in the peace process in Bamiyan:

*...If all people would have jobs and income, they will not use the wrong ways to earn. It is a saying that money doesn't bring prosperity, but as we see, it can definitely bring misfortune and bad luck definitely. I say this because I think that those who make violence and join anti-government groups don't have a proper and secure job to prepare their family needs.<sup>117</sup>*

*In fact, we can say that important aspects of peace are: all citizens of Afghanistan, in all over the country, should have access to their primary and legal rights. Security, financial wellbeing, and participating in the politics of the country are the primary rights of all citizens.<sup>118</sup>*

112 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-26072019

113 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-30072019

114 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-27072019

115 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-27072019 (2)

116 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-30072019 (2)

117 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-26072019

118 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-30072019



*According to my opinion, the important aspect of peace is the elimination of infrastructures of war. It is included in cultural dimension, economic dimension, and in political power's division.<sup>119</sup>*

Analysing the above quote, there are factors which disrupt the peace in society. First, the lack of financial wellbeing and social services can lead people to join anti-government forces for income. Another critical point is the involvement and inclusion of people and of their views regarding peace, especially of women but also of ethnic, age, socio-economic groups. Another topic mentioned is how the ongoing chaotic political situation in the country has increased uncertainty among the people. Some of the female officials, civil society and human rights activists, men and women, believe that the issue of peace has become a dilemma in the country: it is unclear whom the government should talk with, how the government should define the enemy, and how they should be involved in this process. Some of the respondents expressed their thoughts as follows:

*First, I should say that Afghanistan's peace is an ambiguous process. Because people of Afghanistan suffer from war, but they are not involved in the peace talks (both men and women). But women have this perception that they should have a more important role in national peace efforts. Peace is important for men and women, but women suffer more. They lose their husbands, sons, brothers, which hurt them psychologically. Because they are more emotional than men they want peace more.<sup>120</sup>*

*First, we should have a definition from peace, with whom we want to make peace and who want to make peace with us. Unfortunately, we are confused about who is against us, do we negotiate with the Taliban or what. It should be clear; everything should be defined clearly in the resolution that they make.<sup>121</sup>*

*For example, in Doha, the resolution which was made, the Taliban said that they accept the constitutional law based on Islamic sharia. The view and definition that we have from Islam are totally different from the Taliban's. Even, it is different from Nangarhar to Bamiyan, every point should be clear.<sup>122</sup>*

*We are in a sensitive situation regarding the peace process, as we had not a clear definition from our enemy, Taliban and other enemies were called brothers, which still we don't have. The same is with peace. National peace effort is going, but it is not defined clearly for all.<sup>123</sup>*

In conclusion, people in Bamiyan believe that peace and financial wellbeing will not come without the elimination of war structures from society, as well as the unclear definition of the enemy, and unclear strategy of the government against anti-government groups. For a sustainable peace, accepting of Afghan constitutional law by the Taliban is a must, and direct involvement of everyone, especially women, is necessary.

### **Women's role in national peace efforts**

Decades of war and privation alongside a patriarchal society has marginalised women in Bamiyan, as it did in the entire country. There was no opportunity for women to participate in any fields whether social, economic, cultural, educational, or political. According to a male respondent, peace talks and negotiation are not something new in Afghanistan, but in none of them have women been significantly involved.

119 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-30072019 (2)

120 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-29072019

121 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-27072019 (2)

122 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-27072019 (2)

123 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-27072019

*Another issue is that women have a short social, cultural, and political background (based on their participation). If we observe women's participation historically, we see it very, very inconspicuous. In fact, women's participation in any field was mentioned very less, and there was not anyone even to discuss it. Women's presence did not exist in any national negotiation. You can see it only in the current regime in national peace efforts, in the last 15 years. But, national peace efforts have started since Dr Najib's government. He started and asked all anti-government groups to make peace, and conduct an election. Women were not present at that time. The same is in Mujahidin time. But this new regime made a place for women to participate and exemplify their role in the decision-making process as national peace efforts.<sup>124</sup>*

So, women's political participation, notably in the peace process, has a short history, but their participation in peacebuilding<sup>125</sup> has a long cultural and religious history. As elsewhere, there have been governmental and non-governmental mechanisms for peacebuilding in Bamiyan. The only governmental mechanism was the HPC, and the non-governmental mechanisms are the local people's councils and Jirgas.

### **Governmental mechanism: The High Peace Council**

The HPC established committees in every province, with the one in Bamiyan having 28 members, of which only one was a woman.<sup>126</sup> This committee was the only governmental mechanism to deal with peacebuilding and national peace efforts issues in Bamiyan province, so one of its main tasks was negotiating with local insurgent groups in some remote districts. According to the respondents, the female member of the committee was able only to deal with some local dispute resolutions, all related to women's issues.

*We had a peace council that is canceled now. They have encouraged some of the local commanders who had weapons, to surrender themselves and join the government (they were not Talib). Women were in that council, but if they talked directly with these commanders or not, I don't know about it. So, these commanders surrendered themselves.<sup>127</sup>*

*When there was the High Peace Council committee, the deputy of the committee was a woman. Whenever there was any gathering as seminars, workshops, or any programmes regarding women and peace issues, she was participating.<sup>128</sup>*

Similar to Balkh province, female members of HPC's provincial committee were not involved in local peace talks and negotiations in Bamiyan. They become engaged with civil society activities as giving awareness and advocating for peace in the community.

### **Non-governmental mechanisms**

Non-governmental mechanisms are traditional mechanisms for local peacebuilding as conflict and dispute resolution in Afghanistan, and Bamiyan province is no exception. Though women's participation in the informal peacebuilding mechanisms was exceptional in the past, recently, women have had more opportunities to participate formally. A government official stated regarding women's participation in local dispute resolution:

124 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-30072019 (2)

125 Peacebuilding (In this paper it is referred for local conflict resolution.)

126 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-30072019 (2)

127 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-27072019 (2)

128 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-30072019

*Not with Taliban, but regarding women violence, we had teams to discuss as a mediator to resolve such issues, for example, small issues such as the escape of a girl from home, or any other kind of family violence, or local conflict disputes.<sup>129</sup>*

Indeed, women in Bamiyan are only able to participate in the peacebuilding process as decision-makers or as elders when solving local family disputes. Despite this growth in women's role, they are still restricted to the local level.

It is worth noting that due to Bamiyan's relative security, there are fewer Taliban groups there and thus fewer opportunities to engage with them. Another reason preventing engagement with the Taliban is distrust. A civil society and human rights activist respondent mentioned that, to him, the Taliban were not a trustworthy group: "No, No, because we can't trust them, and they don't have a clear specific address to talk with them."<sup>130</sup>

### Short life story

One of the respondents shared her story and explained how she is active in society as a decision-maker. Though she did not complete secondary education, she is a businesswoman and has a social status that allows her to deal with women's issues in her community. She participated in the National Peace Jirga as a community elder, despite often being ignored by some male members of the community council. She stated with a complaining tone:

*Men everywhere don't take women seriously. Look at me; I am a women's representative in this village. Whenever there is any meeting or gathering in the village, the head of the men council doesn't call me. I tell him, what is the reason that he doesn't inform me... he is making many excuses.<sup>131</sup>*

*Here in our neighborhood, a boy loved a girl from another place, and escaped with her... The family of the girl asked AFN 400,000 from the boy's mother. As she is too poor, and she is not able to pay that much money, she accepted to give her 12 years old daughter instead of the money as 'baad' (compensation). It is a crime. I warned her if she doesn't change her decision, I would report it to the police and AIHRC office. I talked with the family of that girl too and told them if they follow this issue, I will report them to the police. Finally, they brought the contract and canceled it.<sup>132</sup>*

Despite relative security and Bamiyan's notable situation, the culture of patriarchy is still present in the community, but she keeps fighting to continue her mission to help women. Her goal made her reach out to other provinces. As an active woman, she organised trips for women from other provinces such as Nangarhar in Bamiyan, and traveled to other provinces to visit other women. She wanted to exchange ideas through this initiative, and created a kind of peacebuilding network at the national level through women's participation. As a result of her work, she said:

129 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-27072019 (2)

130 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-29072019

131 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-04082019

132 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-04082019

*The government should allow women to participate in every field. The women who I know in Nangarhar, their sons were Talib in the past, but they are not now. Believe me; peace will not come from Moscow. Until women are not involved with national peace efforts, no one else will be able to bring it. Communication should be built among women of all provinces to understand each other's pain and suffering in war. If you leave it only for men, there will be that war and fighting. As much as women become involved in national peace efforts, we will get near to it. Well, I just want to emphasize again and again that women's participation is very important in national peace efforts.<sup>133</sup>*

The woman interviewed here was politically astute and demonstrated political consciousness, despite her limited education. She believes that women's communication through a national network can help them to participate in national peace efforts, which will have a significant impact on peace negotiations. In her opinion, the more women participate actively in peace negotiations, the more peace talks will be successful. The absence of women in national and international peace talks would lead to the failure of the negotiations and further marginalisation of women.

### **People's perception of women's role in the national peace efforts**

Despite improved security, women do not have a significant role in national peace efforts. Respondents mentioned how decades of war and deprivation and exclusion of women from politics have affected them. Women do not trust politicians and the political environment. Women's involvement with politics, especially in political parties, is mostly symbolic. A government official and a journalist expressed people's perception toward women's role in the national peace efforts:

*Well, as I see, there is a kind of evasion in politics, among youth, especially girls. Maybe it has lots of reasons. One of the reasons can be the effects of political parties, and they see politics as a hideous phenomenon, where any kind of lie and other bad transactions existed. Or they believe that politics is something which is controlled from outside and they can't interfere in it. So, we see that youth have less membership in political parties' male and female.<sup>134</sup>*

*...women were under pressure, and their rights were trampled during the Taliban, men didn't face such issues. And one of the concerns of the Taliban is women's rights. Soon after the fall of the Taliban regime, when the new government came, women got access to their primary rights, so the tension that we have, and the tension that men have are different.<sup>135</sup>*

Given that women's political background and experience is different from men's in the country, their exclusion from the decision-making process can be felt and seen in women's role in today's political decision making. Despite significant changes and improvement in women's participation in decision making in Bamiyan, women still do not have a sustainable, active, or meaningful role in politics. Considering the situation, women and civil society activists believe that women need a network, not only in Bamiyan, but nationally and one that is not project-based. A male civil society and gender activist said:

*There are two points. One, players of peace want to have women's roles into consideration, and secondly, women themselves should play their role in this process. We always tell women that whenever you see that a decision is being made for women, whether it is for the benefits of women or against, you should create a movement with a million gathering. With this kind of movement, women can change the perception of others about women and guarantee their role in peace talks. But if they are silent and have no action, they will suffer from this peace.<sup>136</sup>*

133 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-04082019

134 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-30072019 (2)

135 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-27072019 (2)

136 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-29072019

Another male civil society and gender activist added:

*I think women should make political, social, and cultural networks to work voluntarily to advocate for women's rights or any women related issues. As I said, women are not in favor of war. Their roles should become significant in national peace efforts, and it will have more effect on the sustainability of peace in Afghanistan. I believe in empowered women, empowered Afghanistan.*<sup>137</sup>

Security and a high level of women's participation in different fields affected people's perceptions regarding women's participation in national peace efforts. The political platform in Bamiyan appears to be relatively open for women to start a network that is focused on national peace efforts. A government official from a security department brought attention to how women are being engaged in different ways in the security domain, which is unique about the province: "The government of Afghanistan established a gender department in the security field for the first time in the Bamiyan security department."<sup>138</sup> Evidence shows that Bamiyan could be the place where women start a national political network, as has happened in the last 18 years at AIHRC, with gender departments in official government institutes, and with other civil society organs. But such a network would need to extend beyond the province and engage in meaningful discussions and decisions as an equal member.

### Steps women have taken for peace

Despite the fact that women have had and keep having only a limited chance to engage politically with national peace efforts in governmental and non-governmental mechanisms, they kept raising their voices through seminars, conferences, or workshops. As a male journalist indicated:

*There are some civil organs which are active such as Equality for Peace and Democracy, AWN, Naway Sulh (Voice of Peace), and other national and international organisations are active here in Bamiyan. These organs hold workshops, seminars, or any advocacy for peace in Bamiyan. Women are participating in these programs. Their aims are to make women involved with national peace efforts.*<sup>139</sup>

A young women's rights and gender activist in a focus group discussion underscored the limited role women are constrained to:

*We have here programs as workshops or seminars about peace for women, but not any other kind of participation in the national peace efforts.*<sup>140</sup>

Similar to other provinces, Bamiyan women could advocate for women's participation in national peace efforts through workshops, seminars, and conferences, but they have never got the opportunity to participate in peace talks politically and directly with anti-government armed groups. It remains to be seen whether such advocacy efforts have the potential to translate into women being equally engaged in national peace efforts.

### Challenges and threats

Compared to other provinces, women in Bamiyan have had more opportunities, both men and women having accepted their participation in any area outside the home. Despite this, there are social, cultural, and security barriers for them. FGD members mentioned the problems they are still facing:

137 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-01082019

138 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-01082019

139 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-30072019 (2)

140 FGD, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-31072019

*One of the active women (local NGO staff) was stopped some days ago by the Taliban on the highway Bamiyan-Kabul. They got their laptops and everything and told them to thank God that they are leaving her. They warned her to resign from her position.<sup>141</sup>*

*Bamiyan is the province where women fight and advocate continuously during these 15 or 16 years, and still they have problems. These women that have reached a level of decision making have passed difficult days.<sup>142</sup>*

Women have reached a higher level of decision making in Bamiyan through continuous struggle and advocacy, but they are still not part of national peace efforts, which may be a function of the fact that there is no evidence that anyone had the opportunity to talk and negotiate with anti-government groups who are active in neighboring provinces. According to a young women's rights activist: *"I don't think someone from Bamiyan discussed or negotiated with the Taliban. If there would be a process to talk about peace, definitely women will be involved within Bamiyan."*<sup>143</sup>

In sum, there are some main factors that prevent women from participating in national peace efforts in Bamiyan. One of the factors is that women have not found adequate trust in politics and political parties to join a political process through it. Another factor is the lack of trust for the Taliban and insecurity, which together threaten women in local peace efforts. Finally, the last factor is the geographical location of Bamiyan, surrounded by insecure provinces but itself relatively secure, so Bamiyan women have not gotten the opportunity to engage with combatants.

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141 FGD, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-31072019

142 FGD, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-31072019

143 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-26072019



### 3.4. Kabul

As capital of Afghanistan, Kabul has experienced and witnessed the rise and fall of various governments, regimes, and politics change more clearly than other provinces. According to Pajhwok, “*Kabul’s fluctuating troubled political situation has stunned politicians around the globe. For long, Kabul has been a center of conflicts and wars with a troubled political history.*”<sup>144</sup> As capital of the country, it has been a social-political hub for women’s participation for centuries. Women leaders and politicians have started their struggle in this city. Anna Larson has discussed variance in women’s political participation within Afghanistan and their differences between cities and rural areas: “*Women have had limited access to power and resources in Afghanistan historically, although this limitation has varied between and among urban and rural areas and under different political regimes.*”<sup>145</sup> This is all the more true for Kabul, which has been strategic for women around the state, to raise their voices and advocate for their rights. It also was the worst place for women during the Taliban regime. Respondents indicated that Kabul is the centre of decision making in any field, social or political; as a government official said: “*Kabul is the place where the decisions are made in the country, and women have access to all resources despite security challenges.*”<sup>146</sup>

Having access to resources makes women more conversant on political issues such as the peace process. Therefore, some women can get the opportunity to meet politicians and can share their thoughts with them. As a female FGD participant in Kabul said:

*Whenever we talk about peace, we want to have equal rights and equal opportunities, but as we followed peace talks conducted by Zalmay Khalilzad we have never heard that he talked about women rights and their position in society.*<sup>147</sup>

*Kabul is the only place where women struggle and can communicate with the government and with the international community. At least, they advocate or make declarations to reach their voice to the world.*<sup>148</sup>

Kabul has been a deadly place for women but it has also been the hub of their development and improvement in social, cultural, economic, and political fields, as women in Kabul have more access to resources than in other provinces to fight for women’s rights and political inclusion.

#### Peace definition

Kabul is a strategic city for women to become active in politics. As women’s leaders and representatives from all provinces are present in Kabul, they are seeking a more significant role in national peace efforts. As women have better access to resources in Kabul, and they are updated on the ongoing process in the country, they would arguably have a better picture about what is being prepared for negotiation, by whom and the expected tradeoffs that could take place. Thus, some of these activist women defined peace in their interview as follows:

144 Pajhwok Afghan News. “Kabul Province Background Profile.” <http://www.elections.pajhwok.com/en/content/kabul-province-background-profile> (accessed 15 July 2020).

145 Anna Larson, 13 .

146 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-24092019

147 FGD, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-06102019

148 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-16062019



*From my point of view, peace is not the end of the war. Peace is a secure environment where a human being is able to spend life, and all the services are available for them along with opportunities, and access to education. There is a place where war is not possible, but women in that place do not have access to basic service. This peace does not bring change in the life of the women. In a peaceful environment, both men and women should have equal opportunities.<sup>149</sup>*

*Peace is every Afghan's wish now, it means security. We should have mental, psychological, physical, and social security. What is going on, national peace efforts, it is a kind of project, as parties of the negotiation are not clear, who are they. Are they real leaders of Taliban or not? Are women who participated in national peace efforts really representatives of the provinces and districts? I don't believe in this process.<sup>150</sup>*

Analysing respondents' answers shows that women have doubts about the ongoing national peace efforts in Kabul as in other provinces, because they sense a kind of quandary in the government over women's positions in the negotiations. At the same time, women do not trust the Taliban's commitments regarding women's rights and women's participation in politics and other areas of state. The lack of interest of Afghan male participants regarding women's legal and political rights in national peace effort is another point which undermines women's trust. As some of the women leaders, women's rights, human rights, and civil society activists mentioned:

*I don't trust the Taliban's commitment in the peace process. I don't trust foreigners either. Both of them have no clear stand/views on the peace and both are not honest. You know that the government and people have always been proposing peace, but we are answered with explosions and killing of innocent people, which means that Taliban are not honest in peace. Secondly, Taliban are not one group, and peace talks happen with only one team. They are different groups and some of them might negotiate with the government, but some groups will fight. There will not be peace in Afghanistan even if negotiation happens with the Taliban. We have Daesh who will recruit Taliban fighters and the war will continue in the country. There won't be peace unless the Taliban themselves show commitment in peace. In the past 6 months I have not seen positive signs of peace, because Taliban leaders are negotiating but their fighters are killing us. First the Taliban views should change.<sup>151</sup>*

*Male politicians' commitments are not sustainable regarding national peace efforts. They don't care whether it is for the benefit of women or not. Whether it is sustainable or not, or whether it is project based or not.<sup>152</sup>*

As in other provinces, women in Kabul do not trust the transparency of national peace efforts, as they feel that neither the Taliban nor the international community are honest regarding national peace efforts in Afghanistan. As much as the Government of Afghanistan calls on the Taliban for peace, the insurgents meet such calls with violence, and women do not see any changes in their views or actions regarding women's legal and political rights. The existing situation and women's perception towards the peace process in Kabul also shows that peace talks have become a dilemma for them. Despite the momentum building towards holding intra-Afghan talks with the Taliban, women are struggling to raise their voice and spread their message to all sides of the negotiation teams and to the international community.

149 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-28052019

150 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-24092019

151 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-24092019 (2)

152 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-28052019

## Women's role in national peace efforts

Women have had a path to the political world since the Bonn agreement, and Kabul has become a strategic platform for women from around the country to participate in politics. Whether it is a governmental mechanism of the peace process or non-governmental mechanism, they have been able to catch up with national and international peace negotiators. Despite these opportunities, women are not satisfied with the roles of women in the peace talks. A women's rights activist said:

*In reality women are afraid and worried about the lack of women participation in the current peace process, they (Taliban and Americans) have never mentioned political participation of women during peace negotiation. Women's issue have not been one of the main topic of their discussion.<sup>153</sup>*

A male civil society activist described women's role in national peace efforts as following:

*Women's role in the peace process is not effective and tangible, because still the government has no role in peace talks. So far, negotiation has been mainly between Taliban and US and the government has not been part of the process. Women's leaders have low presence in the peace talks among pro government circles. I do not think women have a meaningful participation in peace talks so far"<sup>154</sup>*

Women and their supporters are not satisfied with women's role in the national peace efforts. Based on respondents' views, the evidence on the ground and the unfolding situation shows that women were marginalised in the USA-Taliban peace agreement. Women also feature poorly in the Afghan government's plans to negotiate with the Taliban. Generally, they have been engaged with the national peace efforts through two mechanisms, discussed below.

### Governmental mechanism

As noted in a previous part of the paper, the HPC was the only governmental mechanism in Afghanistan that was tasked with designing a framework to open talks with the Taliban. The HPC secretariat was located in Kabul and was active from 2010 to July 2019, when President Ghani dissolved it and established the State Ministry of Peace Affairs.<sup>155</sup> Although official sources did not state why the HPC was dissolved, there are three reasons that can explain its dissolution. First, the HPC was regarded as a corrupt institution that was accused of embezzling funds. Statements by Afghan senators and other lawmakers argued for its dissolution for not making any gains and for being corrupt. In 2017, the deputy chairman of the Senate Asif Sediqi alleged, "my advice to donors is the [sic] money allocated for peace is being embezzled...it should be dissolved as it has made no achievements so far."<sup>156</sup> Second, the HPC's composition of former warlords meant that many of these individuals would not be held to account for crimes they committed. The entry of such individuals into the HPC diminished the council's legitimacy, particularly as civil society and rights activists decided against engaging with former warlords for their past crimes. Third, the HPC lacked clarity over its objectives, transparency over its activities, and did not possess expertise in negotiation, mediation, and conflict resolution. The composition of the council with former warlords made the development of these capabilities significantly harder. There were women members in the HPC, but, as mentioned by women respondents in their interviews, their participation was symbolic, even in the HPC secretariat.

153 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-16062019

154 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-25092019

155 Tolonews. "Ghani Dissolves High Peace Council's Secretariat." <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/president-ghani-dissolves-high-peace-council> 27 July 2019 (accessed 15 July 2020).

156 Massoud Ansar. "Senators Label HPC A Failure, Call For Its Dissolution" <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/senators-label-hpc-failure-call-its-dissolution>. 11 July 2017 (accessed 15 July 2020).

*I am not satisfied with the role of women in the peace process, because women's presence was not active in the talks. In general, I can say that women have no active presence in the peace talks. The talks so far have been between men who have been in fighting against each other and women who had no role in the peace talks. The government has been saying that women's role will be 30% in the peace talks. While in practice, this is not true. I think women should have been given an equal chance in the peace process, because the main victims of the violence and conflict have been women.<sup>157</sup>*

The above quote highlights a point mentioned in the section on Balkh province, where there were only nine women out of 70 members in the provincial branch of the HPC. Habiba Sarabi, member of the HPC, emphasised in one of her speeches that no one listens to women and decisions were announced to them, and they had never been part of the decision-making process.<sup>158</sup> It seems from data collected and other sources that women's roles were weak and symbolic even at the national level in Kabul.

### Non-governmental mechanism

Despite having access to talks and negotiations, such as the Moscow peace talks, the Doha peace talks, or national Jirgas for peace, women are not satisfied with their role in national peace efforts. Respondents believe that women have to lobby the government and civil society organisations. A government official who is a women's rights activist said:

*There are different organizations who lobby for women's rights. We have to involve them, make them representatives for women in national peace efforts. We have women elites, through them we should lobby to give more chances to women in national peace efforts. If the government is not able to give a chance to women to take part in national peace efforts, all women activists should issue a press release, a resolution to the government, to international institutions and the UN, to impose the decision to the government and the anti-government element to give a chance to women.<sup>159</sup>*

*We heard that two have participated in the Moscow peace talks with the Taliban and some other women participated in Doha as well. I hope these women had a talk with the Taliban regarding women activities and their position.<sup>160</sup>*

Some of the women interviewed indicated they did not have faith in women's participation in peace talks in Doha, believing it to be just a project or a token. Instead, they want an actual national plan for women's involvement in national peace efforts, including a process to listen to women who are direct victims of war. A public leader said:

*The gathering by the Afghan Women Network was a project. There should be a real gathering from all provinces which should not be governmental. There should be a national plan for women's participation in national peace efforts. They had but it was by order of one network, there are tens of networks like that who are working for women's rights. May they not be aware of it, that is why I say it.<sup>161</sup>*

157 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-24092019

158 2018. ATN News. 15 2. Accessed May 7, 2020 . <https://ariananews.af>

159 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-28052019

160 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-27062019

161 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-24092019

What these interviews convey is that women are aware of how the national peace efforts are shaping without them. Women activists in Kabul and in other provinces know and want there to be a single united women's network in each province that can channel their voices to persuade decision makers to act on their agenda. Women who are advocating for their rights also recognise that women's participation has been disjointed because it is project-based or that women's selection comes through specific political channels that are run by men who also determine what role women would play in any platform. Instead of a project-based approach or symbolic participation, women need a strong political network at the country level to lobby and advocate for their rights and position in peace negotiations at the national and international level.

### People's perception on women's role in national peace efforts

Since 2001, women have been struggling for their rights in the state and the government of Afghanistan, and today they are still disappointed regarding women's role in politics. As women have been the most vulnerable during the war, especially during the Taliban regime, it is critical for them to be more included in national peace efforts. Women who are participating in national peace efforts should be representatives of all women, urban and rural. A civil society and women's rights activist said:

*Around five women were participating in the peace talks. Women in rural areas don't know about the peace talks. If you ask village women's perception on the peace talks they don't know about the detail of the talks. The few women who are participating from cities or Kabul cannot represent the rest of women, especially village women. I believe those women who attend peace talks should represent all women and they should represent those women who lost their sons, daughters, and husbands. The women should represent other women who were victims and are still victims of violence by the Taliban. All such women should be consulted and asked about their demands from the peace process, what they want from the peace.*<sup>162</sup>

Since women's rights are a sensitive issue in the negotiations, it is important for women who get the opportunity to participate in national peace efforts to have a detailed and accurate picture of women's situation in different locations and contexts across the country, to better represent and defend them. It seems from the interviews that, so far, women have not been satisfied with the women representatives who have participated in Afghan-Taliban peace negotiations.

Other points which are questionable within the society is the role of women in the peace talks based on religion and culture, which experts, including religious ones, said there is no obstruction for in Islam. There are many records in history showing that women participated in political issues and peace processes in Islamic society, specifically during Prophet Mohammad (Peace upon Him). Only women can oppose the Taliban with religious logic during peace talks and negotiation, one interviewee noted:

*Going back to the Islamic scripture, in many places, women had a key and vital role in the peace process. For instance, if we see the role of Hazrat Ummi Salam May Almighty be pleased with her, it was outstanding. Similarly, in the past when males were not able to resolve a conflict, one side of the conflict sent a female to the opposite. The opposite side shows respect to the women by covering her head and indicates agreement for peace. Similarly, we have a female who participates in Doha talks. She has produced an outstanding speech according to Islamic rules and principles. My suggestion is, instead of sending tens of women from other parts of society, it would be great if we send five women who have Islamic knowledge and talk with Taliban based on Islamic rule and principle. This will for sure will open the mind of the Taliban.*<sup>163</sup>

162 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-24092019 (2)

163 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-15092019

As the Taliban's approach towards women is based on religion, then, by this logic, women must have religious knowledge to stand up to the Taliban. However, the problem is not about whether women have religious knowledge or formal training in scripture, but rather that a radicalist religious group has issues with the modern democratic form of government that seeks to give equal rights to all people.

### Steps women have taken for peace

Besides participating in peace talks and negotiations directly with the Taliban in Moscow and Doha, women have opportunities to advocate and campaign for their participation in national peace efforts. They have met with high-ranking authorities at national and international levels to raise their voice and fight for their rights. One of the respondents stated that women talked with the US special envoy:

*In Kabul women have their own discussion with high ranking government officials, political parties, US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad. These women talk about their concerns regarding their meaningful participation in national peace efforts.*<sup>164</sup>

A male civil society activist stated:

*Now we have a good coordination among women across the country, they are advocating for women's participation in national peace efforts.*<sup>165</sup>

From the national level down to the provincial level, women are getting better at advocating for their rights; however, this has yet to translate into them having an equal and meaningful representation at the national or provincial level where national peace efforts are underway.

### Challenges and threats

Challenges and threats for women in Kabul include conservative male politicians and dependency of women on men or political parties. Insecurity is another threat that exacerbates these challenges and threats. These challenges and threats have made women backstage participants during peace talks both inside and outside the country. A woman politician said:

*It is vital that the women who take part in national peace efforts should be supported. If they do not have support, they cannot go independently. For example, we have seen that we had two women who participated in the Moscow gathering. We were happy for their presence, but these women were nominated by male politicians. We should erase this trend. Women should be appointed by other women or female politicians, then their presence in national peace efforts will be effective.*<sup>166</sup>

She further added:

*One point which needs to be mentioned here, there are some politicians who do not want to send strong women in national peace efforts. It means this politician would like to involve those women in national peace efforts who are under their control. The reason is, they will impose their demands. Now, these politicians are working for it. But the consequences will be catastrophic. We should introduce civil activists to participate in national peace efforts, not people from the political party not from the government. Otherwise, in this case, this female will barge for government or political parties.*<sup>167</sup>

Another respondent also noted how some conservative male politicians do not support women in national peace efforts, and thus support the Taliban's ideology:

<sup>164</sup> Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-16062019

<sup>165</sup> Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-25092019

<sup>166</sup> Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-28052019

<sup>167</sup> Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-28052019

*It is very strange for me that candidates in a round table TV programme discuss peace and they have very similar views to the Taliban regarding women. For instance, a few days ago one of the politicians who was my teacher too and is now a candidate for presidential election, when speaking about women rights, had views very similar to the Taliban's views. Even Hekmatyar's views seemed to be more democratic than this politician's views. We should be concerned about our future. All women have the fear of losing the current opportunity that has been provided for us in the past 18 years.<sup>168</sup>*

The main challenges for women at the national level is the political dependency of women and the existence of radicalist people with Taliban ideology within the government's structure and among politicians. Women have to select their own representatives for peace negotiations and establish an unbiased network to collect ideas and demands from all women from the villages up to the national level regarding national peace efforts. Women will not reach their goal, unless they become independent politically and have a strong political network nationally to coordinate with each other.

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168 Interview, Kabul-UNW-WPPD-24092019



## 4. Comparison of findings

In this section, we compare what activities related to peace have been done in the studied areas, particularly about the red lines for peace and how that related to the aspects that are most important for people in these locations. Furthermore, we also review perceptions of women's involvement in the peace effort and to what degree women are optimistic about their role in it.

### Peace definitions

Interviewees were of different socio-economic backgrounds and locations. In this section, we provide a brief comparison of peace definitions and of what people think are the key characteristics of peace that should not be compromised in the national peace effort.

In Nangarhar, respondents' understanding of peace included women's rights, no conflicts, including suicide attacks, access to all services, including access to education, and the elimination of poverty were the common aspects mentioned to define peace. In addition to this, the right to work, economic development, development of infrastructure, and free movement were also mentioned by respondents.

In Balkh province, the main aspects of peace were the achievements of the last 18 years, the Constitution, women's political participation, the secure financial wellbeing of the people, and freedom of speech. In addition to this, there were some similar aspects with the definition of peace in Nangarhar province, which include women's rights, security, free movement, and access to education. Respondents emphasised women's rights as a critical part of the national peace effort in both of the provinces.

In Bamiyan, the respondents have understood the peace effort differently. Their main aspects of peace were equality in society, free movement, and equal access to opportunities for women, the achievement and development of the province in the last 13 years, and an improved situation for women. Similar to other provinces, the social and financial wellbeing of women, educational services, and women's participation in both social and political fields were the common aspects of the peace definition.

Finally, in Kabul, respondents had similar views on the peace definition as other provinces. Due to the continuously deteriorating security situation in the province, the respondents have highlighted a secured environment or security as one of the key aspects in the peace definition, followed by equal opportunities for women, access to services including education without barriers.

In summary, there is no vast difference in the peace definition in these provinces. The main aspects cited in these definitions were women's rights, access to services especially education and health services, women's political participation, and security. It is also underlined that the Constitution and the achievements of the last 18 years ought not to be compromised in the peace process. This shows that respondents want a peace in which every citizen has their own rights, whether they are from safe or unsafe provinces, developed or not, and liberal or not. This is a positive element regarding women's participation in the peace process, as having the same views and requests will allow for all women to present a united front during the talks and also to make a case that their demands are not siloed to women's rights alone. Regarding the achievements of the last 18 years, people have asserted that they wanted a democratic system in Afghanistan that assures the fundamental rights of people. In addition, respondents expressed to the government and international community that, at any cost, they want peace. Peace for the respondents is access to their fundamental rights with no compromise. They further added that peace is not only the end of the fight with anti-government elements, but is also the removal of all the national and international hindrances that cause problems for accessing comprehensive rights and other services.

These definitions differ from the Taliban's perspectives and definition of peace. Taliban pronouncements call for the reinstatement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, a regime which oppressed women and discarded their rights and confined them to their homes. Taliban statements continue to be silent on women's educational, social, and political rights and even when attempts are made to address them, they seem to be deliberately vague. For instance, in a *New York Times* opinion piece, deputy leader of the Taliban Sirajuddin Haqqani made an ambiguous statement on women's rights noting, "we together will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam – from the right to education to the right to work – are protected."<sup>169</sup> Haqqani's statement is vague and places women's rights on the Taliban's interpretation of Islam and Islamic ideology, which is exactly what women are countering and concerned about given the Taliban's track record on dismantling women's rights. In contrast, the Afghan Constitution gives women equal rights to men and protects their right to education, employment, and political participation. Given the stark differences between what the Taliban have to offer and the protections guaranteed under the Afghan Constitution, it is unsurprising that Afghan women opt for a peace that values them as equals and protects their rights to education, health, and political participation.

### Women's Role in the National Peace Efforts

In this section, we have compared the two mechanisms for the peace process, governmental and nongovernmental. In the context of this study, governmental mechanisms refer to the denoted and written component of government policy, namely the High Council of National Reconciliation (HCNR), while nongovernmental mechanisms refer to networks and relationships established at both provincial and national levels to undertake conflict resolution and discussions regarding peace and to understand the role of women in these mechanisms.

#### Governmental mechanism

As noted earlier in the report, the HPC was dissolved by President Ghani in mid-2019 and replaced by the State Ministry for Peace. In May 2020, the political agreement that ended the presidential election impasse led to the creation of the HCNR, which is the only governmental mechanism at the national level. This council aims to pave a path for direct peace negotiations and discussions with the Taliban and other anti-government elements, and also to consult and identify red lines for the consultation team.

In the HPC, though women had a role, it was minimal and symbolic. This council had sub-committees at the provincial level and, in each peace committee, there were several women members, with their numbers fluctuating in each province. For example, in Nangarhar, the role of women in these committees was symbolic given that it was merely as guests. The lack of women's substantive participation meant that many of the respondents were not aware that the peace committee had women members.

Women's participation in the peace committees was no different in other provinces. For instance, in Balkh province, the committee did not have a clear strategy for women's participation in the peace efforts. However, through this committee, some women took the lead and trained several others about peace issues. Other than this, they had the role of guests in workshops and seminars. In Bamiyan, of 28 members in the peace committee, there was one female member, with a role limited to local dispute resolution that relates to women and participating in seminars and workshops as a guest. Similarly, in Kabul, the role of women was blurred, and they were kept away from the main discussion, even though, out of 70 members, nine members were female. During the discussion with women interviewees in Kabul, they clearly stated that they were not satisfied with the role that they have in the peace council. They further added the government claims a 30% role for women in the peace talks, but that, in practice, this is far from reality.

169 Sirajuddin Haqqani. 2020. What We, the Taliban, Want. *New York Times*. February March 20. Accessed 14 July 22 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html?searchResultPosition=26>.

Among other factors, deeply rooted traditional and conservative attitudes can explain this consistent lack of women's participation, even in provinces considered more liberal, such as Bamiyan and Kabul.

Although women had obtained entry and membership into the HPC, their ability to wield influence was hindered by their male peers, who preferred to have them relegated to marginal and symbolic roles. Despite these hindrances, women were able to prove themselves as active members and established connections with both men and women members of the community that were otherwise neglected.

### **Nongovernmental mechanism**

It is evident that women had a largely symbolic role in the governmental mechanism in the national peace effort. However, there are cases where women have taken an active role in the peace effort. At the time of data collection, in several governmental mechanisms, some women had a direct, dynamic role in the peace efforts and in dispute resolution. Among these mechanisms are Jirgas and local councils.

In Nangarhar, apart from Jirgas and civil society, a number of the local councils established through Ulemas of the province aim to resolve disputes and support peace efforts. Interestingly, under these councils, with support from male members, women can have a direct role in peace efforts and conflict resolution. Furthermore, under the umbrella of civil society, women have participated in different innovative gatherings including training, seminars, and discussions about peace at the local level. It needs to be noted that women have a more direct role in cases where women were the victims, and that their participation in these cases has a positive role in conflict resolution.

Contrary to Nangarhar, in the nongovernmental mechanism, the role of women in Balkh province was very much limited to legal assistance, and to cases linked to domestic violence and to gender and family issues. However, there are some rare cases where women have had direct approaches, and where they have directly talked with anti-government elements in the peace efforts, but this remains exceptional.

In Bamiyan, the role of women in informal mechanisms has been increasing. Now, women in Bamiyan province participate in the peacebuilding effort as decision-makers or as the elders of society. The main reason for this improvement was an increased awareness about women's rights, women's capacity building, and participation in training related to peacebuilding. Exceptionally, a few women from Kabul province have participated in the national peace effort and peace talks held in Doha and Moscow. However, their participation was not official and mainly symbolic. Therefore, women are uncertain about having meaningful participation in the process. Many respondents see this participation as project-based and not having a positive impact on women's role in national peace efforts.

These different types and nuances of nongovernmental participation show both the forms that women's participation can take, and reflect the realities of the provinces in which they live. We see there are ways, for example, through family issues and gender-related dispute resolution, for women to prove their ability and, in certain cases, take on a more important role locally, even though this process has yet to be noticed at the national level.

In the governmental structure, evidence shows that, due to the complex nature of the national peace effort, women have either been kept away from the peace discussion or their role was symbolic, making them concerned about the defense of women's rights, of the right to education, and of access to other services. They further argue that there are many examples where women have participated in the peace effort and dispute resolution, though not through an associated governmental structure, and thus that this should pave the way for them to do so. To them, the government needs to take the matter of women's participation in the national peace effort seriously. Instead of a symbolic role, women ought to have an active role in the national peace discussions to advance their fundamental rights further.

Through both governmental and nongovernmental structures, women participate in the peace efforts, albeit in roles significantly less consequential than their male counterparts. Where women have participated, it was beneficial in these structures and they are optimistic about actively participating in the national peace effort where they can raise their voices.

### **People's perception of women's role in the national peace effort**

Women's participation in the national peace effort is a burning issue in Afghanistan, but there is a wide range of perceptions of what this participation is and what it should be going forward. Factors such as awareness, education, cultural and religious sensitivities have significantly influenced these perceptions.

In Nangarhar, the most common belief about women is that they do not have the capacity to participate in politics, and that their involvement in political issues and national peace efforts may jeopardise peace. This belief is carried mainly by men: women respondents oppose it. In the past, women were part of peace negotiations and dispute resolution, although through nongovernmental platforms.

Similarly, in the last two decades, women's participation in social issues has increased, and their presence in politics has grabbed the attention of people. In terms of capacity building, many women have participated in numerous sessions, which, according to women respondents, were effective in giving them the tools to be efficient in public life. This is partly based on these arguments that they have been asking the government to make women part of the national peace effort. In addition, the idea respondents raised of having women with Islamic backgrounds do door-to-door awareness-raising about the national peace effort in Nangarhar province, particularly as it pertains to female members of the families of anti-government elements, was an interesting proposition as it put women at the forefront of awareness-raising on peace.

Similarly, the male-dominated society of Balkh province also opposed women's participation in the national peace effort, claiming a lack of capacity and awareness about political issues and about peace among women. Women oppose these claims, and disagree with the men supporting the idea that men can champion women's rights in negotiations. Women in Balkh argued that in the past, they have participated in conflict resolution but only through symbolic roles. Based on these experiences, women are still uncertain about their involvement in the national peace effort.

Looking at the context in Bamiyan, women there are looking for a systematic approach for women's participation in the national peace effort. People in Bamiyan discuss the potential establishment of a network of women's rights activists through which they can raise their voices and prevent uncertainty and ambiguity about their involvement in the national peace efforts.

In Kabul, women are still deprived of having meaningful participation in the peace efforts. However, in contrast with other provinces, a religious scholar in Kabul argued that women with Islamic knowledge would be in a better position to talk about women's rights in the national peace effort because this would be helpful in challenging and dealing with the Taliban. Despite this point, it is difficult to say with any degree of certainty whether women that have a background in religious education and training would be accepted by the government or the Taliban to participate in the national peace efforts because the domain of politics and negotiation is heavily dominated by men.

In summary, women still believed that a conservative patriarchal society was the principal obstacle preventing women from participating in the national peace efforts. However, women were part of the peace effort and conflict resolution in the past, and in many cases, they were considered a symbol of peace even though this participation was exceptional but effective. Further, in the last two decades, women have participated and built up their capacity, including political participation and in the peace effort. Thus, the international community and the Afghan government should not ignore women's meaningful participation and involvement in the national peace efforts, but instead should open the door for them to discuss their rights and concerns.

Respondents indicate there has been a change in belief and behavior of men concerning women's capacity to engage in public affairs, which has opened the possibilities for women to participate in politics. Although many obstacles remain, sustained support from the government and the international community will help to eliminate them.

### Steps women have taken for peace

Women demand an equal, direct, and active role in the national peace efforts. Evidence shows that some women are involved in the governmental structure of the national peace efforts. However, this involvement is symbolic, and women interviewed were not satisfied with it. As women have not been able to play an equal role in the national peace efforts, many have turned to nongovernmental structures to make their contributions and to have their voices heard. For instance, in Nangarhar province, many women have become members of the peace council composed of different entities and organisations where they have an active role in the peace effort and conflict resolution. Members of these entities participated in many workshops and seminars organised for the national peace efforts, conveyed the message of peace indirectly to the families of anti-government elements, and identified their intentions for the peace.

In Balkh, women have spread the message of peace to the local people through a range of activities including awareness building, advocacy, workshops, seminars, and training initiatives. In these discussions, women raised awareness about peace, war and the effect of war on women's lives. Women have further established female *Shuras* for peace and conflict resolution. Similarly, women in Bamiyan province through seminars, workshops, and conferences have raised their voices for peace. This participation clearly signals that women are determined to take part in the national peace effort. This participation ought to be in the governmental peace effort and not restricted to the nongovernmental level alone.

While women took limited steps for peace in the provinces mentioned above, they went one step further in Kabul, where they were lobbying for a direct role in the national peace efforts. They organised a range of meetings with high officials, and, under the umbrella of civil society, conducted several meetings to raise the issue of women's participation in the national peace effort. These increased steps taken by women in Kabul can be explained mainly by its role as the capital of the country and thus by the presence of the national government and high-level decision-makers, which leads to increased opportunities for women to engage with them.

Even though women had a symbolic role in the governmental structure of the peace effort, this has not limited their competencies and has in fact mobilised them to find creative solutions. Women have made the most of their participation in the national peace effort despite their male counterparts' attempts to undercut their already limited role. As a result, through advocacy and lobbying for their inclusion, women have approached local people and high-ranking officials, where they demand a direct role in the peace effort. Participation in the peace effort through the nongovernmental structure recognises the strong will of women participating in favour of the national peace effort. Seeing their efforts, the government and the international community should not compromise women's participation and instead involve them as equals.

### Challenges and threats

Women sense a threat of their rights being compromised in the national peace effort. Part of this threat stems from the recognition that their participation in Doha and Moscow was only symbolic and carried little weight. Women in Nangarhar express their fear of a lack of the rule of law, corruption, lack of support from police, and persistent injustice. Furthermore, the uninformed behaviour of employees in the government structure and the radicalised behaviour of anti-government elements have confirmed women's fears, potentially having a direct effect on women's rights in the national peace effort.



Women in Balkh province also recognise a range of threats to their participation in the national peace effort. That included lack of trust in the government and international community, lack of men's belief in women's capabilities, lack of advocacy in the high ranks of government, and lack of female employees in the government structure, especially in key positions. As a result, in the peace effort, women may not have a direct role in discussing women's rights. Some women believe that other challenges exist in society and count as threats for women's participation in the peace process, for instance, lack of a unified entity that fights for women's rights and a weak democratic system. On the other hand, women in Bamiyan province support self-determination and involvement in the decision-making process, although they still fear they will be left out of the national peace effort.

Lastly, women in Kabul acknowledged a range of challenges and threats that probably prevented their participation in the national peace effort, including corrupt and conservative politicians, high levels of insecurity, and a male-dominated society.

In Afghanistan, women have identified a range of challenges and threats that endanger women's participation in the national peace efforts. A uniform center or organisation consisting of women's rights advocates that is plugged into the national peace effort and is recognised by the government and the international community has the potential to make their participation in the national peace effort more effective.

Key findings concerning the opportunities this research found include the importance some respondents gave to women having religious education in order to counter Taliban arguments in their way. Religious leaders agreed on the fact that there was no restriction on women participating in the national peace efforts in the religious script. Furthermore, both religion and tradition have allowed women's participation in peace efforts because it proved to be effective. In addition, women with a background of religious studies provide many examples from religious scripture where women participated in conflict resolution. This key suggestion raises the question of whether or not this debate should focus on the religious side or the rights side, but this can be used as a starting point to push for the inclusion of women in the peace talks.

Another key finding was that there are many barriers between women and the Taliban, that have made direct talks a challenge. First, the ideology of the Taliban has made the situation difficult for women to participate in negotiations directly, by rejecting their presence. Women further lack trust in the Taliban, and believe they might not be faithful to the agreement in the future. The government is the third barrier: the peace efforts lack transparency, which makes it harder for women to trust it, and there is no clear plan and strategy for direct talks with the Taliban. Women having a role in the national peace efforts are thus not satisfied. The behaviour of government employees regarding women's participation in the peace talks is a major hurdle. This all happens in a general context of Afghanistan's conservative patriarchal society, which has not favoured women's public participation, and thus has not prepared the ground for the current situation.

In summary, in the religious scripture and tradition, there is no constraint on women's participation in the peace effort; nevertheless, understanding of tradition, cultural norms, and religious background will further support women's participation. Lack of clear strategy in the government for national peace effort, the issue of trust in the Taliban, their ideology toward women, and the patriarchal nature of the existing government have made it difficult for women to talk directly with the Taliban.



## 5. Conclusion

The process towards peace and the construction of peace itself have been a controversial and challenging issue for Afghan women for years, since the participation of women in society and the political structures has been noticeably limited. However, because women have been the most vulnerable element in Afghan society, they must have a significant active role in the peace talks and negotiations. The following is a short discussion of key findings, challenges and threats that highlight the participation of women in the national peace efforts.

It is the desire of every Afghan man and woman to live in peace, having been deprived of their rights and freedom for over four decades of conflict. During this period, women have had either significantly limited access to their most basic social and legal rights or none at all. Now, people want to live in a peaceful environment where they can have access to all their political, social, legal and economic rights, and can practice their responsibilities as citizens free from fear and coercion.

Just like health is not the absence of sickness, peace is not the absence of conflict. Most of the respondents highlighted this point, defining it instead as access to all their social and legal rights and any social services that remain available to men. The more women participate meaningfully in national peace efforts, the more these dimensions will be integrated and protected. This research shows how women have been involved in nongovernmental peace negotiations and conflict resolution mechanisms, mainly through the HPC and a set of informal mechanisms such as the work of the Jirga and of local councils. Where women have encountered obstacles, they have found creative solutions to go around them to the extent that is possible, but, despite these steps, women are significantly restricted from participating in meaningful roles held by their male peers.

Findings indicate that women are mostly unhappy with the level of participation in national peace efforts, past and current. At the village, district, and provincial level, their role has been limited to informal local councils or Jirgas. Their participation remains exceptional, linked to serious cases or cases related to women's rights, and even then, their role is perceived as not one of a full member and decision-maker of the Jirga or council, but more as an honorary member or guest of the process. Their participation in governmental mechanisms seemed to be limited to seminars, conferences, training, workshops, and lacked any implementation aspects. Women have called for equal participation and what this translates to as a demand is a participation that is equal and grants them authoritative roles and equal and appropriate decision-making powers. Women are seeking the capacity in which they can support or stand against any decisions where their fundamental rights are concerned in the national peace effort. Furthermore, women's call for equal participation also means where they have the power and authority to accept or reject any agreements.

At the national level, women have had no active role, governmental or nongovernmental, to talk directly with armed anti-government militants. Their participation in the current talks has been described as symbolic at best.

The stories we compiled show that women have the capacity and the willingness to meaningfully participate in local conflict resolution and peace negotiations, contrary to the national level where there is no such precedent. The women interviewed lacked trust in the willingness of the government, the Taliban, and the international community to integrate them into the current peace talks, but noted that their options to impose their participation remained limited.

The majority of respondents indicated that the ideology of the Taliban was not accepted anymore. Respondents observed that the Taliban had shown no commitment to peace due to ongoing violence, and how they enforced strict punishments and restrictions on men and women under territories they control further underscored this point. The respondents did not believe the Taliban had changed their views on women's rights and women's participation in social or political affairs and expected them to object to women's inclusion in the peace process. Respondents recounted cases wherein people in their individual capacity approached the Taliban and talked to them about peace, including in areas that had benefited from development projects they controlled. Yet these efforts did not lead to

positive steps or opening the door for peace discussions. Respondents further added that there was no consensus on the interpretation of religious scriptures during discussions with the Taliban, noting that they remain fixed on their view as being true, pure and legitimate.

According to respondents, the government and the Taliban held different notions and interpretations of peace. The majority of respondents observed that from the Taliban's perspective, peace is only the elimination of violence, and does not extend to rights, whether they are for men or women. By contrast, respondents said they see peace as an agreement between the government and the Taliban in which their fundamental rights are assured and protected. All Afghans must have social, educational, health, and political rights, as they currently do under the current system they maintained. To bridge the divergent positions on peace, respondents suggested that the government and the Taliban should revisit the interpretation of Islamic literature to find a consensus in this regard.

To some extent, women have been able to carve out a role at the local level and in some cases have obtained the support of religious leaders that lead over local councils. The Social Council for Peace Consolidation is one such example, which demonstrates how a customary system evolved to give women permanent membership which stands in contrast to other local councils that only allow women temporary, conditional, or honorary memberships. As the Social Council for Peace Consolidation shows, women are playing an active role in conflict resolution and local peace processes that are key for holding communal peace and harmony. This example shows that non-governmental systems, including those that entail justice systems, with the support of Islamic scholars, are slowly adapting and allowing women to join their ranks. Although there is a considerable way to go to achieve equal and meaningful representation for women in these councils, their openness to change should serve as an example to decision makers at the national peace efforts that women ought to be meaningfully engaged and involved in discussions that affect all Afghans.

## 6. Recommendations

We have provided a set of recommendations for each of the main actors engaged in the national peace efforts below. These recommendations are not comprehensive, but they should be seen as a starting point to ensure that women have meaningful roles and participation in the national peace effort and that the rights of Afghans are not bargained away in the negotiation process.

### Afghan government:

- There should be a National Priority Program (NPP) on women's political participation with clearly defined resources and funding to address the challenges that women are facing across provinces, strengthening women's political participation at the national and sub-national levels, and seeking women's meaningful participation in the program design and delivery.
- The government should actively support women's meaningful participation in national peace efforts; guarantee no less than 33% women's involvement in the negotiation team; and select women who have a strong commitment toward all Afghans' rights and are not siloed or constrained to a single area such as women's rights. Women's rights is an area that should be raised by women and men and should not be left to women to advocate for alone.
- The government should involve women at the leadership level of the HCNR where they would have decision-making power. At least two of the deputies of the HCNR must be women.
- The government must be transparent and share key discussion points and components of the peace process and the progress that it is making to obtain the trust of the people and to get their buy-in toward the national peace effort.

### Independent women initiators:

- Independent women initiators who are active in local peace efforts and peacebuilding should work together in a national political network to connect women from different provinces. By establishing a network, they should advocate and lobby at local and national levels for their participation and meaningful engagement in the national peace effort.
- The independent women initiators should have a broader connection with the international community to advocate and lobby for women's meaningful participation in the peace process, and with countries that have open connections with the Taliban.
- The national political women's network should not be project-based but should be a sustainable and durable political network to make women's role in the national peace efforts robust, transparent, and strategic.

### Civil society:

- Civil society must sustain its efforts to hold the Taliban and the Afghan government accountable for any problematic position, including trading away of rights or diluting constitutional provisions in the name of peace.
- Civil society must advocate for the meaningful participation and inclusion of women in the national peace efforts without siloing women to women's rights alone.
- Civil society should work with each other and form alliances with peers instead of competing for exclusive inclusion in the national peace efforts. Civil society should actively play a role at the stage of peace talks with issues related to disarmament, reintegration of fighters into communities, transitional justice, political integration, and ceasefires are discussed and ensures that women's concerns are addressed.

- Civil society should plug itself into existing and emerging mechanisms. It should also interact with the HCNR in varying capacities, such as mediators, negotiators, and experts on various issues under discussion. Some points where civil society can add significant value include but are not limited to disarmament, reintegration of fighters into communities, justice, political integration, and ceasefires. The involvement of civil society has the potential to shape the national peace efforts and flag risks that could endanger rights, communities, or the role of women in the country.

**International community:**

- The international community must recognize that women's representation in the peace process cannot be tokenistic, but must entail equal and meaningful participation where women preside over matters of strategic significance that go beyond the remit of women's affairs and where they have decision-making power.
- The international community should be vocal about its support for the inclusion of women's voices and women's rights in the peace process. They should make clear they would only support a peace that is inclusive of all groups in the Afghan society, starting with women.
- The international community should provide certain guarantees including the impartial monitoring of the peace process to ensure that women are not excluded from the process and have a meaningful role in it.
- The international community should lobby and advocate for women's inclusion and equal participation and use different channels to ensure they are integrated into the discussions and have meaningful roles.

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