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Afghan Women Speak

Enhancing Security and
Human Rights in Afghanistan

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On the cover: Dr. Marzia Mohammadi, in Bamiyan province, sold her jewelry to run in Afghanistan's first democratic parliamentary elections. Photo by Kate Brooks.

Foreword

This research draws on more than 50 interviews conducted from November 2009 to May 2010, including fieldwork in Kabul, Afghanistan, in April and May 2010.

Interviews were conducted with Afghan women leaders, parliamentarians, activists, school principals, nongovernmental organization staff, and health workers. We also interviewed senior Afghan women in the police force and army, including government officials, foreign diplomats, United Nations officials, a senior International Security Assistance Force official, analysts, and former Taliban figureheads. We also spoke to senior State Department officials, NGO workers, and PRT commanders and staff in the United States. Some interviewees requested anonymity or to have their names changed, and this is reflected in the text with an asterisk.

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“From a woman’s point of view, why am I in favor of reconciliation? Because in many parts of the country, in the south and southeast, women are losing opportunities because of the instability. Schools are closed. Health services are poor. Working opportunities are absolutely closed. Participating in the political process like elections has been badly affected. How much longer do women have to wait? ... But it must be reconciliation in a framework, in some boundaries. We have to draw some lines.”

— Shinkai Karokhail, MP for Kabul Province

“What will we have to sacrifice with reconciliation? Is it women’s affairs, is it democracy, is it human rights, is it a free press? For me that is not peace. For me that is a huge prison.”

— Fatima Gailani, President of the Afghan Red Crescent Society

Executive Summary

The prospect of a political solution to the Afghan war has generated much public debate about the fate of Afghan women. Since the overthrow of the Taliban by U.S.-led forces in 2001, the promotion of Afghan women's rights has been a highly politicized appendage of the military intervention. International efforts to assist women have produced mixed results: while Afghan women have achieved improvements in their health, education, and economic and political participation, escalating violence has eroded those gains in many provinces. Women exercising leadership abilities or pursuing opportunities provided by Western donors have been accused of being anti-Islamic and subjected to threats, attack, and assassination. Because of the symbolic and cultural value of women in Islamic society, differing views on women's roles have been a battleground over which competing visions for Afghan society and claims to power have been fought. Women — so often objectified in times of war — have been at the frontlines of the Afghan conflict.

The Afghan Government's policy of reconciling with the Taliban and insurgent groups and the prospect of U.S. and NATO troop withdrawals have heightened fears among some Afghan women that their interests may be abandoned. While the majority of the women interviewed for this study support a negotiated end to the war — pointing to the erosion of many of their gains as the insurgency has intensified since 2005–2006 — they harbor serious concerns that their gains may be sacrificed in a peace deal. Interviewees voiced fears about a return to Taliban-style *Sharia* law and a loss of their constitutional rights, mobility and access to work and education should insurgent leaders gain political influence. Already women's gains are being eroded in Taliban-held areas. They also worry about a return to civil war if foreign troops are withdrawn precipitously.

In highlighting the concerns and status of Afghan women, this report aims to provide options for Western policymakers to protect women's gains while pursuing political solutions to the conflict. While some commentators have suggested that prolonged military occupation is necessary to safeguard women's gains, this report argues that it will be impossible for girls and women to consolidate their gains in a militarized environment. U.S.-led forces have been unable to provide security or protect Afghan civilians in many areas. As the scale of the military intervention has increased, the insurgency has become stronger and the influence of the Taliban and armed groups has spread. The presence of foreign troops has been identified as a major factor driving the insurgency, along with widespread resentment of a corrupt central government and the abuses of predatory strongmen. The climate of insecurity and impunity has produced new forms of powerlessness for many Afghan women and girls, who have been widowed, displaced, trafficked, and forced into marriage as a direct or indirect result of the conflict.

Many stakeholders in the West have high expectations about empowering Afghan women, but prevailing Afghan gender ideologies and misogyny cannot be changed rapidly or by outside forces. The United States and NATO governments have significant influence, however, which should be used to improve security, preserve women's political rights, support Afghan women's organizations actively working for change, and sustain programs for public health, education, and economic opportunity that have improved women's lives.

This report supports the negotiation of a political solution with insurgent groups and gradual demilitarization to help stabilize the region and reduce armed violence. However, the process should be gradual and linked to parallel diplomatic efforts and alternative security arrangements. **Demilitarization should be coupled with the deployment of an interim protection force under the auspices of the United Nations to provide transitional security protection for civilians.**

To guard against a roll back in women's gains, the meaningful representation of women in all peace negotiations and post-conflict recovery planning is critical. As recognized in UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1889, women have a vital role to play in building and preserving peace. They must be fully represented in deliberations over Afghanistan's future. **International donors must use their leverage with the Afghan government to ensure women's inclusion in high-level peace negotiation and reintegration bodies, making funding for reintegration programs conditional on women's participation.**

Because development funding has been linked to military objectives, foreign governments may be tempted to reduce aid programs as they begin to withdraw troops. This would be a disaster for Afghanistan's future and undermine the gains women have achieved. **Any political agreement and draw down in foreign troops must be tied to a social compact that provides for long-term, sustainable investment in aid projects that support Afghan women and families.**

The prospect of reconciliation is nonetheless fraught with risk. The danger of renewed restrictions on women if insurgent leaders are brought into the political mainstream is very real. **The U.S. and NATO governments therefore have a responsibility to grant asylum to women who face continuing threats on their lives for their perceived association with Western interests.**

The report reviews the history of women's rights reforms in Afghanistan, assesses donor efforts to empower women since 2001, analyzes the security situation and its impact on women, and details women's concerns about proposed reconciliation efforts. It concludes with recommendations for U.S./NATO policymakers.

Reform and Reaction

Located at a crossroads between Central Asia, Iran, and the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan emerged as a buffer state between the British Empire and Czarist Russia during the Great Game conflicts of the 19th Century. Fragmented along ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural lines with a predominantly rural population, its history has since been characterized by weak state-society relations, the enduring strength of the tribal periphery, and chronic underdevelopment—the latter compounded by decades of war.

A brief overview of attempts to reform women's status in Afghanistan reveals two predominant trends: resistance to state-led reforms from the tribal periphery, and a tendency by political factions to exploit the issue of women. Because of the symbolic importance of women to maintaining honor in Islamic society and Afghan culture, their status has frequently been manipulated by political factions to strengthen their claims of Islamic legitimacy and undermine state power.

History of Resistance

Early attempts of reform by the Pashtun rulers of the nascent Afghan state met with fierce resistance from the rural periphery. During the 1920s, King Amanullah (1919–1929) opened girls' schools in Kabul, advocated against the veil and gender segregation and ordered all Afghans to wear Western dress and hats.¹ He also introduced the most progressive Muslim family legislation seen at that time, banning child and forced marriage and restricting polygamy—upsetting the political economy of tribal kinship relations and men's patriarchal authority.² Deeply resented in rural areas and by some religious clerics, the reforms fueled opposition and violent uprisings against the monarchy.³ In 1929, a tribal insurrection forced the King to abdicate his throne and his successor, Nader Shah, abolished all reforms relating to women in a bid to appease the religious establishment.

The government of Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud attempted modest reforms in the 1950s, advocating against compulsory veiling in 1959. Women also received the right to vote in 1964. These reforms benefitted Dari-speaking urban elites but had little impact on women in rural areas. The Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan attempted wider national reforms when it took power in 1978. Family legislation was overhauled, and compulsory literacy programs introduced for all Afghan men and women, including in remote villages. The heavy-handed Marxist policies were fiercely resisted in many provinces, triggering an armed insurgency. Refugees entering Pakistan in 1978 cited education programs for women as a key reason for their flight.⁴ In 1979, Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan to prop up the failing government, beginning a ten-year occupation and war with the U.S.-backed Muslim *mujahideen*—the last battle of the Cold War.

The Soviet occupation (1979–1989) created openings for women in urban areas, while creating hardships for women elsewhere. Throughout this time, women in the capital Kabul were active in public life as doctors, journalists, and even police women and soldiers.⁵ The state's Democratic Organization of Afghan Women worked to actively promote women's rights. Women's gains were tempered, however, by the brutality of the state's secret service, KHAD, which silenced all political dissent. For rural women, the war brought untold suffering. When the Soviet Army withdrew in 1989, an estimated 1 million Afghans had died and 7 million had been displaced.⁶ Rural infrastructure had been devastated.

Upon seizing Kabul following the collapse of the Soviet-backed government in 1992, the conservative *mujahideen* factions sought to Islamize the Afghan state as a backlash to Soviet influence. Women were dismissed from government jobs and ordered not to leave their houses unless absolutely necessary, and if so—wearing the veil.⁷ Fighting soon broke out between the *mujahideen* factions, engulfing the country in a devastating civil war. Already flimsy state infrastructure was destroyed and sexual and gender-based violence was widespread. The *mujahideen* forces and commanders—many who now hold positions of power in Afghanistan’s government—committed gross human rights abuses against Afghan civilians, including the abduction and rape of women.⁸ Women were sexually trafficked and coerced into becoming “wives” to militia commanders. Rape was used to dishonor entire communities.⁹

Taliban Years

State failure paved the way for the emergence of the fundamentalist Pashtun-based Taliban. Driven to cleanse Afghan society from the ravages of the Civil War, the Taliban’s leaders came from the most rural and conservative Pashtun provinces in southern Afghanistan. They shared a vision of creating an ideal Islamic society akin to that created by the Prophet Mohammed 1,400 years ago.¹⁰ With the support of Pakistan, the Taliban succeeded in capturing most of the country by 1996.

The Taliban’s abuses have been well-documented. Upon taking power, the Taliban enforced a strict interpretation of *Sharia* law and Pashtun customary law, or *Pashtunwali*, which was anathema to many other ethnic groups. Men were forced to grow beards and women to wear the burqa. Girls’ schools were closed and women were banned from working outside the home or leaving their homes without a *mahram*, a male family member. The Taliban’s religious police meted out severe punishments for any infractions of the moral order, including public executions, amputations, and stonings.¹¹ They were particularly vicious towards women and in cities, which were viewed as immoral.

Among some classes of Pashtuns, the seclusion of women, or *purdah*, is seen as a mark of honor and family respectability. The coercive subjugation of women thus became a distinguishing mark of the Taliban.¹² While women secretly resisted the Taliban’s policies by running home schools and finding novel ways around Taliban rules such as hiring *mahrms* to leave the house,¹³ the Taliban’s policies had a devastating impact on their lives and a society already beleaguered from decades of war.

The international community turned a blind eye to the suffering of Afghan civilians throughout the 1990s, but the attacks of September 11, 2001, brought the country sharply into focus. The Taliban regime was swiftly toppled by U.S.-led forces in alliance with the old *mujahideen* factions of the Northern Alliance. The Bush Administration used the plight of Afghan women under the Taliban, which appalled Western audiences, to furbish its case for going to war. In a radio address on November 17, 2001, First Lady Laura Bush declared the war against terrorism also a fight for the “rights and dignity of women.”¹⁴ The aim of “liberating” Afghan women became a cause célèbre for Western feminists and a quasi-policy goal of the intervention.

A Gendered Intervention

Since the signing of the Bonn Agreement in 2001, donors and Afghan civil society organizations have worked hard to improve the condition of women. This has been done by involving women in rebuilding the Afghan state and enhancing their civic rights and representation in the Parliament, civil service, judiciary, and security sector. International donor strategies have focused here on a dual strategy of long-term social welfare programs for all women, focusing on health and education, and more immediate and rapid forms of affirmative action for educated urban elites.¹⁵

In reviewing women's gains in both areas, this section illustrates that while women have made significant strides in the public sphere since 2001, their status in the private sphere remains largely unchanged. In a patriarchal, patrilineal society, women must still contend with deep currents of Islamic conservatism and family and community disapproval for challenging traditional gender roles. Against a backdrop of rising violence, insecurity and disaffection with the Afghan government and the U.S./NATO military presence, there has also been a strong backlash against the women's rights discourse. Viewed as a countercultural, Western intrusion by many Afghans—both men and women—the gendered strategies of the U.S.-led intervention have created challenges for many women, who have been the targets of threats and attack because of their perceived association with Western interests.

Women and State-building

“The citizens of Afghanistan—whether woman or man—have equal rights and duties before the law.”

— Article 22, Afghan Constitution

From the establishment of a new Constitution in 2004, to the adoption of international law on women's rights and gender mainstreaming policies, the Afghan state has taken significant steps toward enhancing the civic rights and responsibilities of women and their representation in public office. Afghan women's organizations lobbied diligently for the following gains:

- A provision of gender equality in the Constitution
- 25 percent quota of reserved seats in the *Wolesi Jirga*, the lower house of parliament
- 17 percent quota of reserved seats in the *Meshrano Jirga*, the upper house of parliament
- The right to vote in elections
- Creation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) and gender units and focal points in other ministries; and of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and its women's rights unit
- Adoption of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan
- Signing of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

Women and Government

The 25 percent parliamentary quota system for women is one of the highest in the world, compared to a global participation rate averaging 18.4 percent.¹⁶ The *Wolesi Jirga* has a higher rate of female participation than most of the world's legislatures, including the U.S. Congress. While impressive, the quota system is seen as having increased the “presence, not the power”¹⁷ of women in government. Female MPs lack real decision-making power and only a few have been appointed to Cabinet. Activists complain that many are aligned with warlords and vote according to their sectarian and factional interests, rather than in support of women's rights issues.

“When it comes to many female parliamentarians, their remote control is with men. They are just sitting there. They don't care about women's empowerment.”

— Asila Wardak, co-founder, Afghan Women's Network

Women also pay a huge personal price in entering public office, facing death threats, attack, and assassination by anti-government elements, as well as disapproval from within their own families. A number of women in public office have been murdered in recent years. While all MPs face intimidation for association with the government, the honor and sexual propriety of women MPs are frequently called into question. They also face threats from within the ranks of government, where men, *ex-mujahideen* commanders, and religious clerics form a conservative majority. The Afghan government has been lax in prosecuting attacks against women and unresponsive to women's demands for greater security and protection.¹⁸

“Chauvinist attitudes, conservative religious viewpoints and the domination of Parliament by MPs with a history of warlordism, means that women are silenced; they actually face attacks—both verbal and physical—if they speak their minds.”

— UNAMA, “Silence is Violence: End the Abuse of Women in Afghanistan”¹⁹

A handful of progressive women in Parliament have nonetheless managed to achieve precarious progress. In July 2009 President Hamid Karzai signed the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law. Drawn up by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and MOWA, the law provides greater punishment for violence against women, which is at endemic levels in Afghan society. A 2008 nationwide survey of 4,700 women found that 87.2 percent had been subject to some form of violence, including forced marriage, honor crimes, rape, and sexual and physical abuse.²⁰

Conservative factions in parliament have been openly hostile to elements of the law, calling its supporters “anti-family and under foreign influence,”²¹ and they have sought to review the decree. Some female MPs are afraid that the law will be shredded if it passes through parliamentary review, and they have worked to remove it from Parliament's agenda—thereby preserving it as a legally binding presidential decree.²²

While occasionally acting to support women's rights, President Karzai has also introduced legislation that is blatantly discriminatory towards women. Ironically, on the same day that he signed the EVAW law²³ the president also signed the Shiite Personal Status Law, regulating the personal affairs of Shiite Muslims in the areas of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Among other controversial provisions, the law stipulates that wives must submit to sexual intercourse with their husbands every fourth night, which was perceived in the Western media as the legalization of marital rape. Under pressure from international actors, President Karzai agreed to have the law reviewed, but only minor amendments were eventually made. Afghan women who protested the law were denounced as "anti-Islamic, Western agents, and prostitutes" by some Shiite clerics.²⁴

Reactionary elements in Parliament have also generated a backlash against shelters and safe-houses for vulnerable women, which have been established with the backing of international donors. The shelter in Kabul run by Women for Afghan Women has helped more than 1,000 women since 2006, and negotiated favorable outcomes for many of them.

"We have this one young girl—she was married at the age of 10 or 12 to a blind cleric. He was at least three times her age and was abusive to her, physically and sexually. Now she's about 17 and we successfully helped her obtain her divorce. But she's still with us because she can't return to her family—they will physically harm her."

—Staff member, Women for Afghan Women shelter Kabul

A government commission launched an investigation into the shelters amid rumors that women in the shelters are prostitutes.²⁵ The move to close shelters is extremely worrying. The women who flee to the shelters are victims of sexual and physical abuse and face harm from family members if they return home.

"The men think that shelters are a concept from the West that encourages women to run from their homes. A lot of men are trying to damage the reputation of shelters because they are fearful of their girls and women actually defending their rights."

—Homa Sabri, Institutional Capacity Development Manager, UNIFEM

Ministry of Women's Affairs

In MOWA and in gender focal points and units in other ministries, mechanisms now exist to mainstream gender across the government, although many of these bodies have little power or influence. Created as a policymaking body in 2002, MOWA has faced constant criticism and attack from reactionary forces. The concept of gender has no equivalent in Dari and is seen by many Afghans as an alien Western discourse. A study of three government ministries found confusion about the meaning of the term among bureaucrats, who viewed it as synonymous with women, foreign, and un-Islamic.²⁶

While MOWA officials have been able to use their position and patronage to assist individual women—in some cases, personally intervening in domestic disputes²⁷—the ministry has struggled to advance the interests of women across government. Lacking a core budget and reliant on international technical assistance,²⁸ MOWA's Department of Women's Affairs (DOWA) branches in rural areas are grossly underfunded and provide limited assistance to women. Often they are only able to offer sewing or carpet weaving classes that tend to reinforce narrow gender roles.

Lacking funding, some DOWA offices have reached out to military-dominated Provincial Reconstruction Teams for financial and other support. Lt. Col. Joy Mann, a former PRT Commander, worked closely with DOWA in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangahar province, throughout 2009 and early 2010. The PRT supported a seminar on violence against women and roundtables and rights classes among other initiatives. DOWA's regional director faced threats, however, because of her association with PRT staff in military vehicles, as Lt. Col. Mann acknowledged: "She had a death threat. It was perceived that she was spending too much time with the PRT Commander."²⁹

MOWA's key gender mainstreaming policy, the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, which was drawn up in consultation with civil society groups, has also been poorly received by government ministries. The only commitment by the Ministry of Finance to fund the action plan has been \$40,000 for the Ministry for Education to build girls schools.³⁰

"We are a policymaking ministry, but no one accepts our policy. They accept it (on face value) but they don't take action to implement our policy."

—Palwasha Kakar, Deputy Women's Affairs Minister



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Women in Nangahar climb out of a crowded building after voting in the 2005 elections.

Women's Electoral Participation

Women's electoral participation has varied widely since the first polls in 2004, dependent largely on the security situation. During the comparatively peaceful parliamentary and provincial council elections of 2005, approximately 44 percent of newly registered voters were women.³¹ Out of 2,835 registered parliamentary candidates, 344 were women and out of 3,201 provincial council candidates, 285 were women.³²

“In 2005, the situation was much better than now. There was more government control in the provinces, more security, women were safer and there was no tension between the parliament and [President] Karzai.”

—Sharif Nasry, Gender Advisor, Independent Electoral Commission

Rising violence since 2005 has since reduced women's participation. While there was a 20 percent increase in the number of female provincial council candidates in the August 2009 presidential and provincial council elections, voter turnout among women was reportedly low at 38 percent compared to 44 percent in the previous elections.³³ Voters were deterred by insecurity and threats by the Taliban to kill voters or cut off their noses and ears.³⁴ The election was also characterized by allegations of widespread fraud and ballot stuffing. Thousands of female votes were misused through fraudulent proxy voting, with female registration grossly inflated in some provinces. Meanwhile female-only polling stations were under-staffed, deterring women from voting.³⁵

National Democratic Institute observers reported that, “aside from Bamyan and provinces in the North, the turnout of women for this election was notably low. In certain polling stations in the south and southeast, almost no women voted.”³⁶ While official figures show women accounted for 38 percent of voters, election officials believe the actual turnout of women was lower than 20 percent.³⁷ Women candidates were also intimidated and threatened with violence. UNIFEM recorded one case of a woman who campaigned in men’s clothes out of security concerns.³⁸

As security continued to deteriorate in 2010, the September 2010 parliamentary elections were also marked by the intimidation and targeting of candidates—specifically women.³⁹ The Free and Fair Foundation of Afghanistan reported that the Taliban sent night letters to candidates warning them not to run, including threats of violence to female candidates in Logar province south of Kabul.⁴⁰ Prior to the elections, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) announced that more than 900 polling stations would be closed across the country—largely in the south and east—because of the violence.⁴¹

“Female candidates report that their ability to campaign is very limited. In particular there are some provinces where women do not feel safe to campaign, or to put posters with photos up. In other places posters of female candidates are being rapidly torn down or defaced.

In some provinces messages from mosques have focused on the inaccurate notion that it is not Islamic for women to be involved in political life in any capacity.”

—Independent Election Commission, September 2010.⁴²

On top of the insecurity, candidates have had to contend with new electoral rules that require them to pay Afs30,000 (U.S.\$600) to run, compared to the previous fee of Afs10,000 (U.S.\$200). They must also produce 1,000 copies of individual voter cards or pledges to demonstrate support for their candidacy. These requirements create further obstacles for women candidates, who are less financially dependent than men and have less mobility to campaign house to house, particularly in insecure areas. The changes appear to have been introduced by President Karzai when he revised the Electoral Law in February 2010, in a bid to end foreign oversight of the election process.⁴³ The law also stated that seats reserved for women could be given to men if left vacant, raising fears that female candidates would be bullied to stand down. The electoral law was rejected by parliament, but a constitutional provision restricting parliament’s right to change electoral laws in the last year of its term has left the matter in dispute.⁴⁴ It remained unclear in the lead up to the polls—even to the IEC.⁴⁵

Despite these obstacles, the number of women candidates jumped to 413 in the 2010 elections, up from less than 350 female candidates in the 2005 parliamentary elections.⁴⁶ This reflected the determination of some women to participate in the political process in the face of rising threats and violence. While it is illegal for donors to provide financial support for individual women candidates, the IEC allows it when it is undertaken for a wider group. During the 2010 elections, this enabled donors to support female candidates by offering training programs and printing their campaign posters.⁴⁷

Women in Civil Service, Judiciary and Security Forces

Donors have also strived to boost women's participation in other arms of government, including the civil service, judiciary, and security sector. Exchanges have been established for civil servants among other initiatives. In an attempt to boost Afghan women's profile in government, the U.S. State Department has made it known that all Afghan delegations coming to the United States for bilateral meetings should include Afghan women.⁴⁸ Women's participation in the civil service nonetheless remains low, and has declined in recent years, from 31 percent in 2006 to 21.4 percent in 2009.⁴⁹ There are no women in the Supreme Court and very few women are working as judges (4.2 percent), police officers (0.4 percent) or soldiers in the army (0.6 percent).⁵⁰

Women interviewed for this report, even those who have attained high public positions, say they face family disapproval for working outside the home on top of discrimination in the workplace, leaving them to struggle on two fronts. Their roles in the home have not changed: They are still expected to cook and clean for their husbands, children, and extended family upon returning from work. The disapproval they face is compounded if they work for the government, given its poor image in the eyes of many Afghans.

A closer look at efforts to recruit women into the security forces illustrates these tensions. As the U.S./NATO Coalition has rapidly trained and armed the Afghan National Police, it has taken steps to improve women's recruitment, partly in an attempt to restrain the predatory nature of the force. Women who seek help from the police are frequently turned away, or exposed to further violence and sexual assault.⁵¹ There are now some 700 female officers in a force of over 100,000 police.⁵² Female-only Family Response Units have been established to investigate domestic disputes and crimes. The Gender Mainstreaming Unit in the Ministry of Interior has targets to recruit 5,000 female police by 2014, which would require recruitment at a rate of 1,000 a year.⁵³ European police officers say the targets are unrealistic, and recruitment remains painfully slow, especially in southern provinces where the insurgency is the strongest.

“In Paktia and Khost there are no female police officers. The tribes there are very conservative and they don't allow their women to join the police. When things settle down and when the Police Force starts to function as a civilian police force that provides security and safety for the people, then maybe the Police Force's image might improve in the eyes of the people.”

—General Shafiq Quarashi, Director,
Gender Mainstreaming Unit, Afghan Ministry of Interior

Women face disapproval for joining the police because their honor is not safe in an all-male environment. The Tajik-dominated institution is also viewed as corrupt and abusive, and is frequently the target of suicide bombers, making it a dangerous job. At the Kabul Police Academy, girls creep to the academy secretly in their burqas and then change into their uniforms.⁵⁴

“Families don’t want to send their daughters to the police. They might get sexually harassed. And many of the male police don’t want the females to succeed in the police force. They just want them to serve tea.”

—Jane Bakken, Norwegian police mentor to General Shafiqra Quraishi

The Interior Ministry makes it deliberately difficult for European trainers to run programs for women.⁵⁵ Female police also faced entrenched discrimination in the force. One European police trainer said female graduates of Kabul’s elite police training academy are not issued guns like their male counterparts.⁵⁶ The handful of women who have reached high rank in the police or army say they don’t get an equivalent salary to their male counterparts, nor new armored cars, body armor, or body guards, even though they are more vulnerable. A woman of high rank in the security forces said she does not wear her uniform because of fears of being killed, while another does not wear hers because she is still “treated like a woman” by her male counterparts.

“I no longer want to wear my uniform. Why should I? I’ll wear it and then I’ll get killed. For what? I have a high rank but it means nothing.”

—Afghan woman of senior rank in the Afghan Security Forces*

General Shafiqra is trying to get international funding for recruitment initiatives such as giving a woman an apartment—an attractive incentive for poor women and widows—or providing them with specialized skills such as management training. International donors also want to give all Afghan police training on gender and human rights and have plans to set up a “gender unit” at the Kabul Police Training Academy. However, the Interior Ministry keeps blocking the plans for the unit, reflecting entrenched resistance to concepts of gender and women’s participation in the male dominated force.⁵⁷ European trainers also admit that part of the problem is that NATO partners are unorganized and often pursue different programs without coordinating with other NATO partners.



KATE BROOKS

Girls at school in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

Women and Education

Education has been a key priority of the Afghan Ministry of Education (MoE) and international donors since 2001. Evidence shows that educating girls produces a myriad of private and public benefits: they marry later and have fewer and healthier babies and lower maternal mortality rates. Girls' education also boosts women's participation in the labor force, which is greatly needed in Afghanistan. Significant improvements have been registered in enrollment numbers, the training of teachers and the rehabilitation and construction of school buildings. According to recent UNESCO data:

- 7.3 million students are enrolled in primary and secondary schools—37 percent female—compared to less than 900,000 students (all male) in 2002.
- There are 12,000 schools in Afghanistan, 4,480 established since 2002.
- Teacher numbers grew from 20,700 men in 2002, to 158,000 teachers in 2008—28.8 percent female.
- More than 61 million textbooks for primary and secondary schools are being distributed.
- Thousands of students are enrolled in community-based schools, which provide education to children in areas without government school facilities.⁵⁸
- 62,000 Afghans are enrolled in universities.⁵⁹

While the MoE has set ambitious enrollment targets under its National Education Strategic Plan,⁶⁰ significant barriers to female education persist. Investment has focused largely on primary and higher education,⁶¹ while drop-out rates for girls at the secondary level remain

high. Fewer secondary schools are available—particularly in rural areas—and factors such as early marriage, reduced mobility for girls, and a lack of value placed in female education reduce the number of students.⁶² The worsening security situation is also a critical factor.

As the insurgency has intensified, hundreds of schools across the country have been attacked, destroyed, or closed. A 2009 study by CARE, a nonprofit organization, recorded 1,145 attacks towards the education sector between January 2006 and December 2008.⁶³ Attacks have included arson, the murder of teachers, and acid attacks on girl students. In June 2009, the MoE reported that 695 schools were closed across the country, affecting over 340,000 students.⁶⁴ The CARE study found that girls' schools have been attacked at a disproportionate rate to boys' schools.⁶⁵ Schools are largely attacked because of their association with the government, but contact with Provincial Reconstruction Teams and military forces also makes them vulnerable.⁶⁶ The study found that schools that are built by NGOs with community participation are less vulnerable to attack.⁶⁷

The greatest number of attacks has been in the south, where the Pashtun insurgency is the strongest. Sara Halim*, a midwife from Khost province in the southeast, said the insecurity was preventing her from sending her daughter to school. Sahera Sharif, an MP from Khost, verified that only a handful of girls' schools in the provincial capital are now open because of the insecurity. Girls and teachers take great risks to continue attending.

“In Khost City, girls go to school very discreetly, wearing their burqas. The teachers are also wearing burqas. Four years ago we were able to drive out to rural areas and visit schools in villages, but now I’m afraid to even walk around the city.”

—Sahera Sharif, MP for Khost Province

“Right now I have a 7-year-old daughter and I want to start her in school. But my husband won’t allow it because of the security situation. He is worried about the safety of our daughter—maybe the school will be attacked or she will be kidnapped. I understand this, but I don’t want my daughter to be uneducated.”

—Sara Halim*, midwife from Khost

Ms. Sharif said that schools in the villages that previously ran accelerated learning classes are now closed. She stressed that people in the villages “wanted their daughters to be educated and they still do” but are afraid to allow girls to go to school. While attitudes towards girls' education vary widely depending on local traditions, strong support exists for education in many areas. This is witnessed by the establishment of self-defense units in villages to protect state schools at thousands of educational institutions.⁶⁸

Women and Development

Women's economic and social empowerment has been a key focus of international development agencies. Microcredit programs have been rolled out in the more secure Central, Western, and Northern provinces and are the principal source of credit for many Afghans.⁶⁹ Microcredit institutions have 12 times more clients than commercial banks in Afghanistan.⁷⁰ A high percentage of microfinance clients are women, and loans have been used for everything from beekeeping, poultry farming, kitchen gardens, home-based dairy production, and handicraft production. Many women, however, are still involved in traditional female-only crafts such as tailoring and carpet making at home, and have little control over their income or independent access to markets.⁷¹

A key success story for female empowerment in rural areas has been the widely regarded National Solidarity Program (NSP). Under the NSP the government provides grants to democratically elected Community Development Councils for local projects, such as irrigation and rural roads.⁷² The development mantra of the NSP is the empowerment of communities to make decisions and manage resources at all stages of the project cycle.

The NSP has sought to enhance women's economic and social rights by providing dedicated funding to women and requiring female involvement on the councils and the decision making and control of projects. A World Bank study found that the "NSP stimulates the provision of dispute mediation and greater engagement of women in community activities. The program also appears to make men more accepting of female participation in the selection of the village headman and increases the prominence of, and respect for, senior women in the village."⁷³ According to recent figures, 24 percent of the participants in Community Development Councils are women.⁷⁴

Women and Health

In 2002, Afghanistan's health system was described by public health experts as in a state of "near-total disrepair."⁷⁵ Decades of war had devastated health infrastructure and left the numbers of health care professionals extremely low, notably among female doctors, nurses and midwives—the latter due to the Taliban's ban on female education and closure of midwifery schools.⁷⁶ The maternal mortality rate, estimated at 1,600 deaths per 100,000 live births, was recognized as a public health emergency and the greatest threat to women's health.⁷⁷ A great majority of these deaths were deemed preventable.⁷⁸

Since 2002, primary health care provision has improved through the Ministry of Public Health's Basic Package of Health Care Services. Newborn, infant and maternal health has been among the priorities of the Ministry of Public Health, which contracts NGOs to implement these services. Under a training drive supported by donors, there are now an estimated 2,600 midwives in the country, compared to only 457 in 2002.⁷⁹ Of these, 1,200 are members of the Afghan Midwives Association.⁸⁰ According to WHO data:

- Skilled birth attendance rose from 14 percent in 2003 to 19 percent in 2007
- Infant mortality rates reduced from 165 per 1000 live births in 2002 to 129 in 2006
- Mortality rates for children under 5 reduced from 257 per 1000 live births in 2001 to 191 in 2006
- Diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus immunization rates rose from 54 percent of infants in 2003 to 85 percent in 2008⁸¹

Despite these improvements, Afghans suffer some of the worst health conditions in the world. Average life expectancy for both men and women is 45.5 years, compared to 68 in neighboring Pakistan, 72.5 in Iran, and the worldwide average of 68.9.⁸² In an environment of insecurity, acute poverty, malnutrition, and poor sanitation, nearly one in five Afghan children dies before his or her fifth birthday, according to WHO data. While a comprehensive survey on maternal health has not been done since 2002, the maternal mortality rate is still estimated as the second worst in the world next to Sierra Leone, with the risk increasing in remote areas.

A lack of women's geographical access to clinics, prenatal care, and control over their health decisions contributes to these high figures. Other causal factors include high rates of fertility and child marriage. Underdeveloped girls and teenagers are more likely to experience life-threatening pregnancy complications. Cultural issues also play a role. Families often delay seeking care for a woman who is experiencing complications in childbirth and these delays made worse by poor roads and long distances to clinics in remote areas. A lack of female health care professionals in remote areas means that families often refuse the treatment of male doctors, even if a woman is in extreme distress. Approximately 40 percent of health facilities do not have a female health care provider.⁸³

Improving health will be a function of improving service delivery in remote areas, enhancing the quality of care generally, and providing training for more female health care professionals, which also requires improving education for girls at the secondary and higher education levels. Yet security is also critical. In August 2008, WHO reported that rising violence was straining the health system and increasing civilian injuries.⁸⁴ Thirty-six health facilities were reportedly closed in southern and eastern provinces because of the abduction and killing of health workers, leaving more than 360,000 people without health services.⁸⁵ Insecurity directly impacts women's health by making it harder to recruit female health workers to remote areas and compounding the obstacles that women already face in accessing care.

The Crisis of Security and Governance

Despite the recent surge of U.S. troops and the presence of 150,000 foreign troops in the country, the security situation has continued to deteriorate. Car bombings, suicide attacks, and military assaults have multiplied, as have civilian casualties. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) the total number of recorded civilian deaths in 2009 was 2,412, an increase of 14 percent from 2,118 civilian deaths in 2008.⁸⁶

A growing number of government districts have fallen under Taliban control or influence. An April 2010 Pentagon found that the operational capabilities and organizational reach of the Taliban are "qualitatively and geographically expanding."⁸⁷ The Pashtun insurgency was originally based largely in the south where foreign troops are concentrated, but violence has recently spread to previously peaceful areas in the north.

A number of factors have been identified as key drivers of the insurgency. The presence of foreign troops is viewed as a decisive factor.⁸⁸ Also significant is widespread disaffection with a central government that is viewed as corrupt and illegitimate, including the abuses of predatory strongmen and security forces.⁸⁹ Antonio Giustozzi argues that communities

antagonized by local authorities and security forces provide the largest number of recruits for the Taliban.⁹⁰ Police abuses include not only taking bribes, but also extrajudicial executions, torture, and the arbitrary arrest of unarmed civilians in villages where the presence of Taliban fighters is suspected.⁹¹

Impact of Insecurity

Women interviewed for this report told of being victimized from violence not only between foreign forces and insurgents, but by opportunistic criminal gangs and predatory local government and police chiefs. Ms. Sharif spoke of a complete breakdown of law and order in Khost province.

“There is no security. The police are very weak. Up until eight months ago there was no police chief. Four years ago we were able to drive out to rural areas and visit schools in villages, but now I’m afraid to even walk around the city.”

—Sahera Sharif, MP for Khost Province

This insecurity directly impacts the lives of women and girls by limiting their access to work, education, and health care, as well as restricting their ability to participate politically. In a society where women already have reduced mobility and their honor is paramount, the insecurity has led to the reinforced seclusion and control of women by their families. Sarah Halim*, the midwife from Khost, said her husband wants her to resign and stay home because he doesn’t want to lose her. A group of women in Kandahar, where military operations are ongoing, told researchers for a British government report that their lives are no better now than they were under the Taliban.

“It is like the Taliban times for women now. We are in the same situation as then. We cannot come out of the house to earn extra money or get an education. The only difference is that our honor was safe then but it is not now.”

—Women’s group, Kandahar⁹²

The violence has deepened the suffering of many women and girls, leaving them maimed, displaced, widowed, or fatherless. Deniz Kandiyoti notes that multiple factors—including the breakdown in law and order, poverty, and the rise of a criminalized economy—have created hardships in the private sphere as well, increasing the number of child brides and forced marriages.⁹³ Evidence suggests that the rate of early marriage increases in times of war and extreme insecurity, reflecting the desire of parents to safeguard their daughter’s honor against threats of rape or possible forced marriage to militia commanders. In neighboring Tajikistan during the 1992 civil war, the number of early marriages rose sharply when fighting erupted, later declining when the war ended.⁹⁴ A 2001 study by UNICEF noted that in Afghanistan, “war and militarization have led to an increased number of forced marriages of young girls.”⁹⁵



A woman along the bank of the Kabul river.

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Unlike other Muslim countries, in Afghanistan, the bride price or dowry is given to the bride's father. While child marriage is viewed as shameful by many Afghans, it is often arranged by poor families—particularly in rural areas—for reasons of economic survival. It is also arranged to atone for an offense or debt between families or tribes, the customary pashtun practice of *baad*. As the drug economy has expanded, there have been reports of poppy farmers forced to exchange daughters to settle debts with drug traffickers if their crop fails or is wiped out.⁹⁶

“If there was more security and the economic situation was better, families wouldn't think to sell their daughters. They get desperate and then get intimidated by thugs who use stand-over tactics. It's shameful for families to give up their daughters.”

—Suraya Perlika, All Afghan Women's Union

Several studies show that the threat and prevalence of the sexual assault and trafficking of girls and women has increased since 2001. In 2003, Human Rights Watch reported that Afghan government soldiers and commanders were raping girls, boys, and women in provinces in southeast Afghanistan.⁹⁷ In 2009, it reported that cases of rape and forced prostitution of children in Afghanistan have risen.⁹⁸ Women for Women International reported in 2009 that 43.9 percent of women believe that incidents of rape have increased since the fall of the Taliban, while 32.2 percent believe there has been an increase in forced prostitution.⁹⁹

A 2008 study by the International Organization for Migration found that drug trafficking networks are being used to traffic women for sex and forced labor.¹⁰⁰ According to the U.S. 2010 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, Afghan women and girls are vulnerable to “forced prostitution,

forced marriages—including through forced marriages in which husbands force their wives into prostitution—and involuntary domestic servitude in Pakistan and Iran, and possibly India.”¹⁰¹ In conflict and post-conflict settings, the threat of human trafficking is more pronounced due to the large numbers of displaced and vulnerable populations.

Political Solutions

After more than nine years of war, with public support for continued military involvement diminishing in the West, many analysts have called for a greater emphasis on political rather than military solutions. The Afghanistan Study Group, a prestigious collection of more than 50 prominent U.S. security experts and former government officials, advocated in its September 2010 report that the United States should lower its military footprint, support power-sharing within Afghanistan and sponsor regional diplomatic efforts to guarantee Afghanistan’s neutrality. The Study Group urged the Obama Administration to stick to its announced decision to begin the gradual downsizing of U.S. troop levels in July 2011.

Political reconciliation with insurgent groups has been endorsed as official policy at the London donor conference in January 2010 and the Karzai government’s peace jirga in Kabul in June 2010. Japan and Germany, among other countries, have pledged \$150 million towards the Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund, designed to support community-based development projects that provide jobs for insurgents reintegrating back into civilian life. The logic of reconciliation is compelling. Armed conflicts end either through military victory, or negotiated solutions that usually include some form of power sharing among former belligerents. Since the prospects of military victory for either side in Afghanistan are dim, a negotiated settlement is the only rational option.

Reconciliation presents a moral and political quandary, however, given the abominable human rights record of many insurgent groups. Many international policymakers and officials of the Obama Administration fear that insurgents who gain political positions or control over Afghan territory may commit the same abuses that were endemic during the Taliban’s time. While the British Foreign Secretary David Miliband has fully endorsed a negotiated settlement with insurgent leaders, U.S. officials have shown reluctance to engaging the senior leadership of the Taliban.¹⁰² CIA Director Leon Panetta stated in June 2010 that he has seen “no evidence” that the main insurgent groups are interested in reconciliation, and that this will remain the case until the groups believe that the United States “is going to win.”¹⁰³

To date U.S. officials have focused only on the reintegration of low-level fighters. With the use of Commanders Emergency Response Program funds, some U.S. commanders have reported successes in enticing insurgents with jobs and “infrastructure construction incentives.”¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless it is likely that higher-level political deals are being considered. A senior ISAF official interviewed for this study said it should be no surprise if insurgent leaders such as Hezb-i-Islami’s Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—who reportedly was behind acid attacks on women in the 1970s—are welcomed back into the political mainstream.

Local women at work in a dried fruit factory in Kandahar.



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“In that Afghan way, people like [Gulbuddin] Hekmatyar have a history of doing all sorts of deals, and when they recognize that their future will be better by coming out of fighting into what passes for normal Afghan politics... we shouldn’t be too surprised if they do.”

—Senior ISAF official

Taliban Demands

NATO and U.S. officials have said that insurgents seeking reintegration must renounce violence, sever any links to Al-Qaeda and pledge to respect the Constitution. The Taliban has in turn demanded a withdrawal of foreign troops and the re-Islamization of the Afghan state, with reference to the legislature, judiciary, and education systems. An ex-Taliban minister interviewed for this study, Maulavi Arsalan Rahmani, insisted that the Taliban’s conditions for negotiations were “flexible” and the group would not seek to collapse the government or overhaul the Constitution. Now part of the government as MP for Paktia province, Mr. Rahmani said it was “propaganda” that the Taliban would once again clamp down on women.

“It won’t be like the past, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan with Mullah Omar as president. It won’t be like that because it’s not acceptable to Afghans, it’s not acceptable to the world or even to me.”

—Maulavi Arsalan Rahmani, MP for Paktia Province

Mullah Abdul Salem Zaeef, the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, was less sanguine. Describing the government of Afghanistan as an “un-Islamic” puppet regime, he called for *Sharia* law and an overhaul of the Constitution. He also expressed dismay over what he views as the moral decay of Afghan society and the West’s pro-women agenda.

“When the people look at Western culture, at alcohol, taking girls, and the culture they are bringing to spread in Afghanistan, all the people are angry at it.

The whole international community is talking about women’s rights, women’s rights, women’s rights, but the community of Afghanistan is different from the U.S., the UK, and Canada. If they are trying for 100 years here, they won’t change things.”

—Mullah Abdul Salem Zaeef, former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan

Mullah Zaeef said the Taliban is not against girls’ education, but he deemed the current educational system un-Islamic, pointing to co-educational universities where men and women are free to mix. He said female students must be covered and taught in all-girls schools by female teachers. Women should only work in some sectors like hospitals “according to Islamic principles,” he said, and should be prohibited from joining the military or police. He was undecided about whether women should run for parliament. Mullah Zaeef was adamant that the question of women should be decided only by Afghans: “The only right that America has is for Afghanistan not to be used to attack America. Women’s issues are an internal matter.”

Peace at What Price?

The Taliban’s demands have raised a number of red flags for Afghan women. Some women interviewed for this study rejected negotiations outright and called for a prolonged presence of foreign troops in the country, fearful of losing gains underpinned by international support. The majority supported a peace process, pointing to the erosion of many of women’s gains as violence has increased. Yet they did so with clear caveats, stressing the importance of protecting the mobility of girls and women, their access to education and work, and constitutional and legislative gains.

“We should not lose anything in the Constitution. If they want to bring amendments in the Constitution which kind of amendments do they want to propose? If they ask to eliminate equal rights or reserve seats in parliament for women, these are all the achievements that we got. We don’t want to lose these things. Our government should protect our interests and our rights and there should be no compromise on women’s rights.”

—Shinkai Karokhail, MP for Kabul Province

Many women expressed serious reservations about the reconciliation process. Some worry that if proxy Talibs or Hezb-i-Islami figures are absorbed into an already conservative government, they could achieve a greater majority and alter the Constitution in the future through a constitutional Loya Jirga—scrapping Article 22 stipulating gender equality. Others voiced concerns about the implications of giving insurgents political power at central, provincial, and local government levels or control over territory, which the Taliban has requested in the past. If proxy Talib or Hezb-e-Islami leaders are appointed to the education or justice ministries, one interviewee said, subjects like science or information technology could be banned and private, co-educational schools closed. These private schools offer the best education available in Kabul.¹⁰⁵

“If they want to be a police chief or a governor of a province, they should guarantee women’s (freedom of) movement, women’s participation, girls’ education, services to women and the elimination of violence against women.”

—Shinkai Karokhail, MP for Kabul Province

While the women interviewees did not object to *Sharia* law, they expressed concern about how Taliban groups would implement such law. During the 1990s, the Taliban’s justice system meted out punishments according to *Sharia* and *Pashtunwali*, and as such they were deeply resented by other ethnic groups. While some Afghans in unstable areas have welcomed Taliban-style justice back into their midst—viewing it as swift and fair next to a corrupt government-run justice system—many women interviewees view it as barbaric and explicitly discriminatory towards women.

“The Taliban always talk about Sharia, but they didn’t respect the Sharia. Is beating a woman who left her house alone to go to the hospital—is this Sharia? Is stopping a girl from going to school—is this Sharia?”

—Maisha Faiz, defence attorney for Medica Mondiale

Women interviewees also expressed anxiety about the Amnesty Law introduced in December 2007, which grants impunity to former combatants. They expressed fears about the political enfranchisement of political figures with gross human rights records. One interviewee said that instability and ethnic conflict have been fueled by impunity and the granting of government positions to warlords. These women warned that ignoring these problems will only perpetuate the underlying causes of war.

“If there is no transitional justice there won’t be peace, it won’t be permanent.”

—Dr. Soraya Sobhrang, Commissioner,
Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission



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A girl on the roof of her home overlooking Kabul.

The Way Forward

The political choices in Afghanistan are limited and unattractive. Two basic options exist: continued war and counterinsurgency, in the hope that U.S.-led forces can gain the upper hand, or demilitarization and the pursuit of political reconciliation and power-sharing, to seek a negotiated end to the fighting. Each option entails risks. Many analysts question the ability of the Afghan National Security Forces to provide security when foreign troops are withdrawn, and Afghans harbor legitimate concerns about a return to civil war given the weakness of the Afghan government. Seeking reconciliation and negotiation with narrow-minded and fanatical adversaries like the Taliban is also fraught with political peril and moral hazard. Diplomacy is a realm of moral and political ambiguity where pure choices are rarely available. The very act of talking can be seen as a reward to criminals. These are hard realities, but they do not obviate the search for political solutions that can end the violence.

Interim Security Force

The deployment of an interim Muslim-led security force could help to facilitate the withdrawal of foreign troops and bolster Afghan security. The proposed security force should operate under the auspices of the United Nations, with a mission of providing population-centric protection during an interim period. Taliban representatives have suggested the deployment of an international Muslim-led protection force, and they have pledged not to attack such a force. The required interim security force would not need to be large, once allied military operations cease and insurgent attacks diminish. It would need to be paid, trained, and equipped by the United States and its NATO allies. As U.S.-led forces cease operations and pull back to their bases in advance of withdrawal, the interim security force could be introduced. Remaining foreign troops could assist with training and equipping the force. The UN Security Council could be asked to authorize the security agreement and the interim security force, which would operate for a limited period with the consent of the Afghan government.

The Inclusion of Women

One of the means of building a more just peace is guaranteeing the meaningful inclusion and representation of Afghan women in reconciliation planning and implementation. As determined in UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1889, the creation of stable peace hinges upon the full involvement and participation of women. The reconstruction and healing of society should not be entrusted solely to former combatants and warring parties, with women ostracized and excluded. The active involvement of Afghan women in the peace process, the full recognition of their voices and priorities, and their enfranchisement in post-conflict life will be essential to building peace and preserving the human rights gains achieved since 2001.

“I am not too in favor of reconciliation, but this is a process that is going to happen. If you’re in, you can have influence and make some changes. If you’re out—you can’t do anything. We must make sure we have enough women who can participate in this process.”

—Orzala Ashraf Nemat, activist

Women activists and civil society groups have fought hard to be heard at conferences that have shaped the proposed peace process. Despite being initially ignored by the organizers of the London Conference for donors in January 2010, a group of Afghan women activists were able to gain entry at the last minute and galvanized significant media attention for women’s issues on the sidelines of the conference.¹⁰⁶ They received a personal pledge of support from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and an invitation to a reception at Buckingham Palace, where they distributed photocopied statements to world leaders and military chiefs.¹⁰⁷ The event was attended by the Prince of Wales, Secretary Clinton, former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown, former U.S. Commander in Afghanistan Stanley McChrystal, and top Afghan officials.

“It was a shock for many senior Afghan officials to see that Afghan women had reached all the way to Buckingham Palace, because they had completely ignored them ... they think that women can’t talk about politics.”

—Homa Sabri, UNIFEM

Through strenuous advocacy efforts, led by the Afghan Women’s Network, women activists also managed to increase their representation at the peace jirga in Kabul in June. They were initially promised less than 10 percent representation, but pushed this up to 20 percent. Of the estimated 1600 participants, more than 330 were women. President Karzai and several other senior male politicians spoke of the need for women’s inclusion. The jirga broke into 28 committees, with approximately 20 percent women’s representation on each. Only one woman acted as a committee chair, however, and very few women were given the chance to speak.¹⁰⁸ At the Kabul Conference in July 2010, women again received public support from Secretary Clinton, yet struggled to be included. Staffan de Mistura, the UN’s Special Representative to Afghanistan, admitted that women were not consulted in the lead up to the conference.¹⁰⁹

Women must be meaningfully represented in all aspects of the reconciliation process, especially in the High Peace Council, established by President Karzai to lead negotiations, and the Joint Secretariat for Peace, Reconciliation and Reintegration Programs, which is leading the design of reintegration initiatives. Women's participation will ensure that the reconciliation process addresses the priorities of Afghan families and communities, not just those of political and militia leaders. Female participation should include not only those who are government officials and members of parliament but also leaders and activists of community groups.

Women interviewed for this report raised particular concerns about the Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund. They want women's needs to be considered in the design and implementation of projects, including health and education programs. If land or property is redistributed as part of reintegration, some argued that women should have the right to be listed on property deeds. They also called for the wives and children of insurgents to be resettled into communities from places in Pakistan, to ensure that fighters renounce violence and do not return to safe havens across the border.

Masoum Stanakzai, the Afghan official in charge of the reintegration program said gender concerns will be considered in the roll out of community projects. He said a special package will also be designed to provide victims of the insurgency with skills training and jobs. Women raised concerns that if compensation is part of this package, funds may not reach women victims or widows. They point to an existing government compensation fund for civilians, where money tends to be distributed to the male heads of families because government officials and the military only interface with men.

“The problem, especially in the Pashtun context, is when a family loses the male member of the family and the widow is left with small kids, the [compensation] will reach to the father of the house, the grandpa. And I’m sure he will keep this money in his pocket. Either he’ll go for a second marriage or start a business, but it will not reach to the hand of a widow, the real victim, or the kids who will be forced to work to feed themselves.”

— Shinkai Karokhail, MP for Kabul Province

Because the Afghan government has shown repeated resistance to addressing the needs of women and including women in high-level decision making forums, international donors should tie funding for reintegration to the meaningful involvement of women in high-level peace negotiation and reintegration bodies. The Afghan government is a classic rentier state and is heavily dependent on foreign funds. It is requesting millions to fund the reintegration program. This gives international donors leverage, which should be used to ensure that women have a meaningful seat at the table in determining the country's post-conflict development priorities.

Sustained Support for Development and Women's Rights

Women interviewed for this study expressed concerns that donor support for women's education, health, and empowerment initiatives may dwindle as foreign troops begin to disengage. Because foreign aid has followed the fighting, there is a serious risk that aid flows will diminish with the shift towards political solutions. Figures from Oxfam in 2008 showed that major development agencies have concentrated their budgets in war-torn areas in the south. The UK Department of International Development allocated one-fifth of its budget to Helmand. Canada gave one-third of its aid budget to Kandahar. USAID spent more than half of its budget on the four most insecure provinces.¹¹⁰

As the U.S. and NATO partners begin to lower their military profile in Afghanistan, they should substantially increase their support for the Afghan people. Demilitarization must be accompanied by greatly increased levels of support for economic and social development and the protection of civil and human rights. The United States must not repeat the mistakes of the 1990s when it largely abandoned Afghanistan after the *mujahideen* war against the Soviets.

While many aid projects for women have been criticized as short-term, symbolic, and poorly planned, Afghan women NGOs are reliant upon foreign funds. The significant achievements that all Afghans have registered in education and health will not be sustainable without significant long-term donor commitments. Many of the programs needed to sustain economic, social, and human rights progress are identified in the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan. The United States and other donor states should prioritize support for these programs and provide the political and economic support that can assure their implementation.

Transitional Justice

To date, the international community has been divided on the question of transitional justice. While some European governments are sympathetic to the issue, the United States and the UK are reluctant to address it out of fears of destabilizing the government.¹¹¹ Many Afghans also say that it would be impossible to prosecute the crimes of the Taliban or other insurgents while leaving the *ex-mujahideen* commanders in government untouched.

In 2005, the Afghan Government passed the Action Plan for Peace, Reconciliation and Justice. Drafted by international donors, the ambitious document sets out a plan for the compensation of victims, prosecutions, and a vetting mechanism for senior appointments to government. There has been limited progress on the plan, however, and its deadlines expired last year. Some analysts propose high-level symbolic prosecutions, but these are unlikely. More realistic would be truth telling, compensation for victims, and the acknowledgement of victim's suffering.

“At least have some memorials for the people who died and at least name and shame (the warlords). This would give some healing.”

—Asila Wardak, activist

U.S. and NATO policymakers should encourage the Afghan government to recommit to elements of the Action Plan for Peace, Reconciliation and Justice in the interests of national healing. Public acknowledgment of the crimes of former combatants is critical to the reconciliation agenda.

Protecting Women

The U.S. and NATO governments have a special responsibility to help those who have worked with the U.S.-led intervention and to provide sanctuary and support if this becomes necessary and is requested. Protection also should extend to women who face threats and attacks on their lives for any perceived association with Western interests. This may include women working for the government, aid agencies, or in association with PRTs, for example. Many women have been threatened and may face even greater dangers in the future as political alliances shift and troops are drawn down. It would be unconscionable for these women to be abandoned. Programs of asylum for vulnerable Afghan women who request and urgently need assistance to escape injury or death should be established by the United States and NATO governments.

Conclusion

Since 2001, Afghan women and girls have taken great personal risks to renegotiate the strict gender roles and identities that were imposed upon them by the Taliban. In the face of rising insecurity, violence, and threats, they have seized donor-backed opportunities to go to school and university, to earn a living, and to participate in public life. Their progress has nonetheless been slow. The cultural barriers that exist to women's participation in the public sphere remain deep rooted and will not be changed overnight. Growing anger over the prolonged international military presence and the 'pro-women' agenda of the West has generated a backlash towards girls and women with any perceived association with Western interests.

“We should not say the last eight years have been a failure ...We have made gains. Eight years back I could not come out of my house and today I am leading one the biggest women’s organizations in Afghanistan.”

—Hassina Safi, Director of Afghan Women’s Educational Centre

This report has argued that it will be impossible for girls and women to consolidate their gains in a militarized environment. Real change will only come in a climate of security and peace. While reconciliation is one path towards peace, it poses clear dangers for women and will only assure progress if women are meaningfully represented and active in all stages of the process. Gradual demilitarization must be accompanied by significant, long-term commitments by the donor community to support health, education, and development programs.

While the Afghan government has shown a repeated disregard for including women in high-level decision-making forums, Western policymakers have significant leverage with the Afghan government in advocating for women's interests. The commitment of U.S. and NATO policymakers to the women's rights agenda remains uneven, however. While U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton has exercised leadership in advocating for Afghan women's rights, political will among other officials is less certain. Some consider the issue of women's rights "soft" and incongruent with security concerns, but this ignores now widely acknowledged links between human rights and peace.

As recognized in UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1889 genuine security requires the full involvement and participation of women in all stages of building and maintaining peace. To create a stable and secure future for Afghanistan, women must have a central role in achieving reconciliation and building peace.

Recommendations for U.S. and NATO Governments

Provide Transitional Security Protection

- Gradual demilitarization should be coupled with the deployment of a Muslim-led interim protection force under the auspices of the United Nations.

Assure women's participation in reconciliation and reintegration programs

Support should be provided for the following:

- Full participation of women in the High Level Peace Council, which is leading negotiations with insurgent groups, and the Joint Secretariat for Peace, Reconciliation and Reintegration Programs, which is designing reintegration programs.
- Strong oversight of the Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund and monitoring of funds' delivery according to gender. Aid for reintegration programs should be conditional on women's involvement in their design and implementation.
- Upholding the Constitution and its provisions for gender equality in peace negotiations.
- Explicit mention of women's right to education, work, and freedom of movement in any peace accords.
- Transitional justice mechanisms, encouraging the Afghan government to re-commit to elements of the Action Plan for Peace, Reconciliation and Justice in the interests of national healing.

Support women in public life

Support should be provided for the following:

- Afghan women organizations, to strengthen their work in promoting women's rights.
- Exchange visits and support programs for women parliamentarians, public servants, judges, lawyers, and police officers. Governments should require that all visiting Afghan government delegations include women.
- Long-term mentoring and training for female police officers and a coordinated program among donors to provide all Afghan police with gender-sensitized training.
- Initiatives to support and train female candidates in the lead up to elections.
- Media campaigns on television and radio to educate the public about the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law.
- Implementation and funding of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan.

Maintain support for development and health programs

Support should be provided for the following:

- The expansion of education opportunities, including improved access to secondary and higher education, the construction of community-based schools in remote areas, and increased training for female teachers.
- Sustainable community-based development, including microfinance programs and increased training for women in marketable skills and programs that help them increase their access to markets.
- The expansion of vital public health programs that have improved women and children's wellbeing, including the increased training of female health professionals and expansion of health care in remote areas.
- Long-term funding for shelters for abused women.

Provide sanctuary and asylum for threatened women

- Establish programs of sanctuary and support for vulnerable Afghan women and girls who request and urgently need assistance to escape injury or death.

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