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The Afghan Peace Jirga: Ensuring that Women are at the Peace Table

Summary

- In late May 2010, the Afghan government will convene a Peace Jirga in Kabul to determine a national reintegration and reconciliation strategy.
- Afghan women have played a variety of social and political roles during the last three decades of conflict, including as peacebuilders, but now risk being excluded from current peacebuilding processes.
- In alliance with international agreements—most notably United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325—the Afghan government must make sure that women are actively engaged in the upcoming jirga and are included in other reintegration and reconciliation policies.
- The inclusion of women is central to sustainable peace and security in Afghanistan.

Introduction

As Afghanistan's political leaders prepare for the Peace Jirga—bringing together some 1,500 Afghan policymakers, community leaders and elders to end the Taliban insurgency—it is important to make sure Afghan women are duly represented and included in any decisions regarding reconciliation. Banished from public life under the Taliban regime, Afghan women were included in the 2001 peace negotiations in Bonn and have steadily occupied an increasing number of public leadership positions in Afghanistan, challenging longstanding patriarchal norms and attitudes regarding women's role in Afghan society.

Despite marked improvements in women's lives in Afghanistan and greater participation of women in public life, Afghan elders and community leaders continue to demonstrate considerable reluctance to include women in peace talks. Many observers fear, that the Afghan government, desperate for an agreement with the Taliban, will compromise on the issue of women's rights in the upcoming Peace Jirga, and women will be a pawn in the negotiations, and lose ground for which they have fought hard.¹

The reluctance of Afghan leaders to include women as equal partners in policy processes is reinforced by longstanding cultural practices, including the belief that women have mainly been the victims of war, rather than active participants. This view of women as passive victims, rather than as active citizens, limits the scope of women's full participation in the decision-making process, and when women are involved such a perception often relegates them to token positions.

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As we approach the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325—which calls for women to be key actors in peace talks and all aspects of post-conflict reconstruction—there is precious little time to get right the Afghan peace process. It is only with women’s active participation that a lasting peace can be established.

The Role of Women in Afghanistan

The incorrect perception that Afghan women are wholly disempowered and exert limited influence in society due to the cultural norms of Afghanistan is one of the legacies of the Taliban regime. While it is important to consider broad social and cultural traditions, it is also critical for international actors and the Afghan government to recognize the diversity of women’s role in Afghan society and how this role has evolved over time.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Afghan rulers started to promote greater freedom for women, and the 1964 constitution gave women the right to vote and seek elected office. The constitution also guaranteed them the right to education and freedom to work. However, these rights were largely enjoyed only by the elites associated with the monarchy.

The Communist regime (1979-1992) further advanced equal rights for women. Under the Communist regime, women held high posts at the ministerial level of government. Many young women were also given the opportunity to pursue higher education through special scholarship programs in the former Soviet Union and in other allied Soviet states. Women were even employed in the state’s secret intelligence services, the Khad, which was responsible for killing thousands of innocent men and women.

That said, the ensuing Afghan civil war split women, much like it split the country. Indeed, there were also many women in the rural regions who sided with hardline religious parties, including Hizb-e-Islami, the political apparatus of the Jihadist parties that instituted the extremist policies of veiling and gender segregation. A small number of women even participated in armed conflict against the communists. For example, the notorious Commandant Kaftar confessed to slaying numerous people. Traditionally, Afghan women had played important decision-making roles in private settings; the war and the ensuing absence of men in the villages thrust women into public leadership and decision-making roles at the local level. Women also played major roles in refugee camps starting literacy classes and schools for children.

During the Taliban rule, groups of women continued to defy and circumvent many cultural constraints even in the face of brutal repression and set up underground schools, health clinics, and other services vital for Afghan women and girls.

During the post-Taliban era, Afghan women have been playing a variety of roles at the local, national and international levels. Women lobbied hard for the Afghanistan-Pakistan Peace Jirga and managed to convince the government to accept them as participants.² In 2007, women came together in holy shrines in Kandahar to call on warring parties to stop fighting, and to raise awareness about the suffering of women and children. That same year, women in Kabul visited every mosque to call on combatants to cease using religion to justify suicide attacks. In 2008, women in Kabul and throughout the provinces started wearing blue scarves to signify their opposition to war, and to send the message that the suffering of war knows no borders or ethnicity.

Women are also issuing position statements in response to policies that concern their rights. For example, they are asking the government to protect their constitutional rights and ensure that women’s rights are not compromised for the sake of national security or as part of some deal with the Taliban.

In sum, throughout Afghanistan's 30 years of conflict, groups of women have been active peacebuilders as well as social entrepreneurs working around cultural and religious barriers by running schools, clinics and community centers. This has led to the development of a vibrant women's movement.

A New Context for Afghan Women

There is no society in which gender and women's rights are considered a basic imperative. In the Afghan context, top down and politically motivated approaches have historically been unsuccessful and counterproductive. But the opportunity today for reform is more favorable than any other period in Afghan history. There are two major differences that make the current era more conducive to social change.

First, the changing social and political context in Afghanistan has increased the chances for women of the middle and lower-middle class to enter the political scene. Previous attempts to secure more rights for women were dominated by women from elite families associated with the monarchy and, in later years, with the Communist party.

In 2010, most women's organizations and advocacy platforms are not associated with any political party or elite family. The number of women activists from middle and lower-middle classes, if not directly from remote areas, demonstrates that the women's movement is representative of all segments of Afghan society.

Women-led organizations working in remote areas, like the Afghan Women's Educational Center (AWEC) in the provinces of Paktia and Paktika and the Afghan Women Resource Center (AWRC), and Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA in the eastern part of the country), are bridging sociocultural as well as geographical divides, and reflect the larger diversity in the culture and the changing realities of the country.

Second, the incorporation of gender-mainstreaming strategies in international reconstruction efforts is helping to bring women out of seclusion following six years of social and political isolation under the Taliban regime. The Bonn Agreement paved the way for institutional changes by eliminating restrictions on women's public participation and by envisioning the creation of a Ministry of Women's Affairs. Since then, there has been a chain of events leading to the increased participation of women in the political sphere. For example, 100 women delegates participated in the Constitutional Loya Jirga. In addition, 28 percent of parliamentary seats are now allocated to women, and women also have reserved seats in the provincial councils.³ Women now have the opportunity to run for high level decision-making bodies, including for the office of the presidency.

Similarly, post-conflict reconstruction efforts spearheaded by international actors are paying attention to women's rights and assist in connecting Afghan women's groups to larger networks and international organizations. Capacity-building projects as well as female economic entrepreneurship is actively encouraged by donor countries.

While there is significant progress in women's rights, addressing systemic and entrenched gender inequalities is a continuous challenge.

In Afghan society, women demonstrating leadership abilities are often deemed as un-Islamic and representing only western values. Participants of the women's movement in Afghanistan are often accused of rebelling against traditional Afghan values. Afghan policymakers also dismiss calls by women's groups to uphold women's rights and increase women's participation on the grounds that these are liberal values held by residents of urban areas and are not representative of the values of the vast majority of Afghan women in rural and remote areas. These attitudes

espoused by many Afghan policymakers, which Afghan women have dubbed “Talibanism,” is no less threatening to women’s progress as that of hardline Taliban rule.

Even as the Afghan government is taking bold steps toward the goals to achieve gender equity, such as ratifying the U.N. Convention on Elimination of Violence against Women, the government also continues to endorse discriminatory laws toward women, such as the Shiite Personal Status Law—the infamous law that contains a provision obliging a wife to fulfill her husband’s sexual desires. Afghan women regard this provision as legalizing marital rape.

There are also barriers and challenges unrelated to cultural or religious traditions, including the 30 years of conflict that has contributed to a culture of war and impunity. This is a particular problem when trying to combat sexual and domestic violence.

Finally, overemphasizing women’s victim status neglects the other roles and positions women held during the conflict and they hold today as emerging leaders and peace builders. Focusing on Afghan women’s ‘victimhood’ contributes to their isolation and marginalization.

Looking Ahead: Peacemaking, Reconciliation and the Role of Afghan Women

The January 2010 International Conference on Afghanistan held in London brought renewed focus on peacemaking in Afghanistan and marked a significant policy shift in favor of reconciliation and reintegration of former Taliban insurgents. International interlocutors and Afghan policymakers are now taking concrete steps toward realizing these new policy imperatives by allocating funds for reintegration and preparing for a consultative Peace Jirga.⁴

As President Hamid Karzai continues to emphasize the need for reconciliation negotiations and national dialogue with the Taliban, the question remains what role Afghan women have in any of these processes. While it is still unclear as to what will result from negotiations with the Taliban, Afghan women are fearful that the process could resurrect the policies of the Taliban regime. Afghan women are now lobbying the government to ensure protection of their rights, and to contribute their unique experiences to any reconciliation effort. Activists are also calling on international interlocutors to ensure that any peacemaking process is inclusive of women. Women’s participation in reconciliation and negotiations recently received renewed attention following a meeting of Afghan women activists in Dubai in January 2010 and a civil society meeting that paralleled the January 2010 International Conference on Afghanistan. Nevertheless, there remains a looming concern among Afghan women as to what role—if any—women will have in upcoming negotiations and how reconciliation will impact the future of women’s rights in Afghanistan.

To ensure meaningful participation by women in Afghan political life and in the reconciliation process, I offer the following recommendations to the Afghan government and international actors.

Recommendations for the Afghan Government:

- Ensure women’s active participation through specific quotas in the different consultative and decision-making fora, including the upcoming Afghan Consultative Peace Jirga, bodies devising reintegration policies and strategies, and other relevant fora regarding peace and development in Afghanistan. Women should be represented according to the quota set out in the Afghan Constitution, which is 25 percent in political representation.
- Consult women activists and civil society actors on issues and policies affecting women’s rights, and give serious considerations to position statements on women’s rights.

- Protect and promote women's rights and access to justice by providing support to the family law reform process and cooperate with the family reform movement in Muslim countries.
- Support a gender sensitive environment in educational institutions.
- Train law enforcement agencies to be able to address women's specific protection needs in times of conflict and peace.
- Be consistent with U.N. Security Council resolutions 1325, 1820, 1888 and 1889 when developing a national security strategy. A national action plan on women peace and security should be integrated as a core element of the national security policy, and a quota of women's representation in all peace and security deliberations should be established.⁵
- Ensure the implementation of U.N. Resolution 1325, a practical national action plan is necessary that emphasizes joint collaboration with civil society organizations, specifically women's groups and government agencies, specifically a Ministry of Women's Affairs. A mechanism must be in place to ensure the implementation and monitoring of the action plan and women's role in current peace and reconciliation efforts.
- Implement all commitments made in the London Communiqué, National Action Plan (NAPWA), and the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) bill.

Recommendations for International Actors:

- Sensitize international forces deployed in Afghanistan on cultural practices and the special protection needs of women in the Afghan context in conflict areas.
- Conduct research and explore new approaches that can encourage women's participation.
- Build on the existing capacities, the momentum of change, changing gender roles and the emerging leadership among women.

In summary, the changing sociopolitical reality and the breakthrough in the perceived gender roles are bringing women to new positions of responsibility and influence around the world and also in Afghanistan. Now, more than ever, Afghan women have the opportunity through the reconstruction process to work toward and shape a comprehensive peace agenda. We must acknowledge that Afghan women's important participation in traditional community dispute mechanisms and their roles in the country's wars as both conflict actors and peacemakers contradict the perception that women are passive agents or victims in Afghan society. Women's leadership in social entrepreneurship, their growing presence in traditionally male-dominated occupations and spaces, and their active role in lobbying the government and international community are incrementally transforming longstanding cultural and structural norms and practices.

Harnessing the experience and capacities of Afghan women to engage in decision-making processes in both peacemaking and reconstruction requires policymakers to adopt a perspective that acknowledges and emphasizes women's resiliency throughout decades of conflict, and their important contributions to peacemaking and reconstruction in the post-Taliban era. The Afghan government and the international community must continue to enhance the capacity of Afghan women and encourage their participation in the reconstruction and peacemaking process.

Endnotes

1. See for example, Karin Brulliard, "Peace Deal could erode Afghan's women's progress," *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2010. At the time of this printing, the Peace Jirga is expected to convene the last week of May 2010.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

The May 2010 Afghan Peace Jirga will be convened with the purpose of ending the Taliban insurgency. It presents a great opportunity for Afghan women to be engaged in the peacebuilding process. The Afghan government and international actors must work together to ensure that women have their place at the table in order to achieve a lasting peace. This Peace Brief offers recommendations for the government and international actors to bring this about. The author, Palwasha Hassan, is a former U.S. Institute of Peace Afghanistan fellow in the Jennings Randolph fellowship program. She is an active member of the Afghan women's movement.

2. The Afghan-Pak Joint Peace Jirga convened in Kabul, Afghanistan from August 9 to August 12, 2007 as a result of an initiative taken by the presidents of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. This was the first event of its kind, and opened a channel of dialogue between members of the parliaments, political parties, religious scholars, tribal elders, provincial councils, civil society, and members of the business community. Seven hundred people from both countries participated. Regrettably, women were excluded from the smaller councils (Jirgatee).
3. Two seats from each province are reserved for women.
4. Zalmay Khalilzad. "The Taliban and Reconciliation." *The New York Times*, February 19, 2010.
5. This was a recommendation made by Afghan women activists. "Reaction from Afghan Women Civil Society Leaders to the Communiqué of the London Conference on Afghanistan," United Nations Development Fund for Women, http://www.unifern.org/news_events/story_detail.php?StoryID=1019 Resolutions 1820, 1888, and 1889 relate to sexual violence.



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