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AFGHANISTAN: A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACE PROCESSES

JULY 2018

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SUMMARY

The war in Afghanistan represents the first intervention of the ‘War on Terror’. The role of women, and their liberation from the Taliban’s gender norms, was a key narrative and justification in this conflict by the interventionist powers. As such, actors in this conflict had numerous opportunities to centre gender issues, and ensure that the peace process that followed the intervention in Afghanistan was inclusive of women and that the agreements and constitution reflected this inclusion and focus on women’s rights. However, participation (and the implementation of rights and provisions in the peace documents) is shaped by extreme, ongoing insecurity that resulted from the 2001 intervention as well as more historic conflicts. Other factors impacting participation and implementation include very conservative gender norms and power structures, continued influence of the Taliban and other violent actors (most recently Islamic State (IS), which has been targeting development organisations) and ongoing economic insecurity.

STRENGTH OF GENDER PROVISIONS

Afghanistan Compact Building On Success (London Conference) 2006

	0 None	1 Weakest	2	3	4	5 Strongest
Human Rights		✓				
Development					✓	
Post-Conflict Issues	✓					
Violence Against Women	✓					
Participation	✓					
General	✓					

Afghanistan - The Tokyo Declaration 2012

	0 None	1 Weakest	2	3	4	5 Strongest
Human Rights		✓				
Development			✓			
Post-Conflict Issues	✓					
Violence Against Women				✓		
Participation			✓			
General		✓				

WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION: KEY CONSTRAINTS AND ENABLERS

CONSTRAINTS

1. Resistance to women’s rights and increased participation and concessions made to more conservative actors
2. Informal legislative environment – reliant on cultural norms
3. Deteriorating security environment and widespread violence
4. Women’s economic insecurity

ENABLERS

1. Centralised, concerted effort to include women in decision-making processes and organise women’s conferences
2. Space for women’s civil society and articulation of gender demands widened after 2001
3. Direct involvement/representation in the 2002 Loya Jirga, and the constitutional drafting commission



BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

Historically, Afghanistan has been the ground for a number of conflicts involving Western and regional powers. In recent history, the power plays that have occurred by local forces and militias were shaped by the presence of Soviet troops from the 1970s to 1980s (and their backing of the Najibullah regime), and the support of US, Saudi Arabia and other allies against the Soviets, through the backing of the mujahedeen. The Taliban, previously the mujahedeen, continued in their engagement in Afghanistan's civil war following the collapse of the Soviet Union and seized control of the country in 1996.

The history of Afghanistan as a base for terrorist attacks against Western targets also pre-dates 9/11, as does US military intervention in retaliation (the US launched missile strikes in attempts to get Osama Bin Laden in the 1990s, who at the time was accused of coordinating the bombing of US embassies in Africa). Women's rights and access to public spaces shifted with each regime change. With the Taliban's rise to power in 1996 came the gender policies most readily associated with Afghanistan today; women's exclusion from work, education and public life, hard-line interpretations of Shari'a legal frameworks, and ultra-conservative forms of dress.

The conflict in Afghanistan, in its War on Terror iteration, began in October 2001 with the launch of 'Operation Enduring Freedom - Afghanistan.' The operation and much of what followed had a strong NATO presence after 2003. Merely two months after the initial launch of military action, various actors from Afghanistan's political circle attended the Bonn Conference (Dec 2001) to agree on the creation of the Afghan Interim Administration and chose Hamid Karzai as its leader. Karzai would later become President after the elections in 2004.

The transition and power struggles that occurred following this are lengthy and complex, as the factors at play included power struggles within Afghanistan, power struggles within the region, widespread insecurity due to militia/terrorist groups in operation across Afghanistan and Pakistan, as

well as a number of stages where US, NATO and Allied Forces' policies were in flux. Most recently, US engagement in Afghanistan has been shaped by the rhetoric of US President Donald Trump (particularly in his authorisation of the use of the Mother of All Bombs (MOAB) in April 2017), as well as the presence of IS in the country (who the MOAB targeted).

While the implementation of the Bonn Agreement (more detail below) was seen as a success of the early part of Afghanistan's peacebuilding experience, its implementation was coloured by the escalation of military operations in the face of the Taliban regrouping and carrying out attacks and bombings across Afghanistan. The Taliban, operating out of strongholds in the south and the east of Afghanistan, were met with surges in the number of US forces which reached their peak in 2009. In 2014, combat operations were to end, and this plan was enacted by US President Barack Obama. Since then the security situation has continued to deteriorate.

Today, ongoing unrest has resulted in high numbers of casualties (local and international), primarily due to suicide blasts across the country, including in Kabul. The Green Zone in Kabul, where embassies and international NGOs are largely based, has been targeted specifically in recent months. As such, it is difficult to characterise either Afghanistan as post-conflict, or its peace process as a success. While a common critique of conflict is that there is a failure to acknowledge and address women's issues, the US-led intervention in Afghanistan centred on women's oppression and their liberalisation through intervention as a key justification for military involvement (Abu-Lughod 2002; Kandiyoti 2012). It is important to delineate between the two narratives about Afghan women operating concurrently at the time of the intervention. The first was related to what was presented in Western media outlets as a 'gender apartheid', where clothing enforced by the Taliban was referred to as a 'body-bag for the living' by journalists writing about women's lives (Abirafeh 2009). While these terms may be apt descriptions for the policies that governed gender relations, they tell us little about the alternative narrative; the lived experiences of Afghan women, or what organising, movement and collective gender identities existed for women under Taliban rule, and how they felt about its end.

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WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PEACE PROCESS

This section outlines the key spaces in which women in Afghanistan engaged in the peace process and with a variety of opportunities presented in the new state structure.

THE BONN AGREEMENT

As part of the discussion of the key agreement in Bonn, two women were present. The Bonn Agreement itself mentions women at a few key points. Appointments for the Interim Administration as well as the Loya Jirga were to be made with 'due regards... to the importance of the participation of women' (Section III). What resulted is a reservation of ten per cent of seats for the Loya Jirga for women, the establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) in 2002, and the ratification of CEDAW (it was signed by Afghanistan in 1980) (Larson 2012). While these actions are not directly related to any gender provisions in the Bonn Agreement, it is understood that they are a result of commitments within it, as well as pressure from the international community.

THE LOYA JIRGA

The Loya Jirga, held in 2002 to decide on the leadership of the interim governance structure in Afghanistan, was attended by 1500 - 1600 people. Women were involved at various levels of the Loya Jirga, including one woman as one of the two deputies working under the chairman of the Loya Jirga. 160 seats were specifically reserved for women, making this the first time in Afghanistan's history that women attended a Loya Jirga. Activists and civil society organisations in Afghanistan, bolstered by international organisations and the UN, did have some input into this process.

CONSTITUTIONAL DRAFTING AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Women were also active in the bodies that drafted the constitution (Larson 2012). Based on the Bonn Agreement, a commission of 9 people, 2 of whom were women, was created to begin drafting Afghanistan's new constitution. The commission that replaced this body in 2003 included 9 women in the 35 person group.

QUOTAS IN THE PARLIAMENTARY HOUSES

In 2004, Afghanistan included in its new constitution reserved seats for female candidates. Some of the literature characterises this as a 'top down' approach (Krook, O'Brien & Swip 2010), though there are reports of women's conferences in which the draft constitution was discussed (Dahlerup & Nordlund 2004), and presumably a discussion of representation occurred there.

Women's civil society groups lobbied for a variety of gender-parity gains made during the peace process/drafting process.

In the Wolesi Jirga (the lower house of parliament), each province needed to have at least two female delegates – resulting in the presence of 68 seats for women in the 249 seat Loya Jirga (Larson 2012). In the Meshrano Jirga (the upper house), the President was tasked with appointing one third of the seats, and half of those appointed needed to be women (Dahlerup & Nordlund 2004). Both quotas were enshrined in the Constitution in Articles 83 and 84. The quota as a strategy for fast-tracking women's representation, particularly in relation to Afghanistan and Iraq, is discussed by a number of scholars and represents a key theme in the literature on women in Afghanistan (Dahlerup & Nordlund 2004; Krook, O'Brien, & Swip 2010; Norris 2003).

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND PEACEBUILDING OUTSIDE OF THE PARLIAMENTARY SPACE

During this process, civil society that focussed on gender and women's issues also began to formulate demands and advocacy plans. Larson (2012) characterises women's peacebuilding efforts as having two categories. The first includes women's peacebuilding efforts at local, grassroots levels. The second is women's involvement in formal peace processes, some of which are discussed above, and some followed this period and involved negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban (Larson 2015). The MOWA provided some space for this work as the state women's machinery. The MOWA also had Departments of Women's Affairs (DOWAs) in all provinces in Afghanistan to act as local arms/branches.

In 2003, UN agencies and the MOWA arranged a conference for women's groups to discuss the draft constitution (Dahlerup & Nordlund 2004). Other researchers report that women's civil society groups lobbied for a variety of gender-parity gains made during the peace process and drafting process (Cortright & Persinger 2010). Depending on location, which impacts norms around women's public roles, there are also reports of women involved in resolving local disputes (Larson 2015). These programs or efforts seem to have support from the DOWAs, UN Women and potentially other international organisations attempting to empower women's peacebuilding capacities. Grassroots organising around a variety of issues, causes and activities seems to have flourished, particularly immediately after 2001.

It should not be assumed that Afghan women do not have a history of organising and activism.

Some women began to publish women's newspapers, with one group launching theirs to coincide with International Women's Day in 2002 (Povey 2003). Women's groups - and the government itself - are also engaging with international gender frameworks, particularly through the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Women, Peace and Security (WPS) spaces. Afghanistan launched its first National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325 in 2015. Afghanistan has also engaged with CEDAW reporting processes after ratification in 2003, and a civil society network (Afghan Women's Network) also submitted its first CEDAW shadow report in 2013.

While women's presence in political spaces (with thanks to a quota) has increased, legislation that enshrines and implements equality is sorely lacking – showing that while descriptive representation is present, it may not be translating into substantive representation in this case – a sentiment echoed by a number of researchers investigating women's representation and the implementation of the quota (Cortright & Persinger 2010). Anna Larson (2012), who conducted interviews with a number of female MPs in Afghanistan, groups the barriers to this into three categories:

1. Women's collective identity as women faces hurdles, particularly as issues relating to ethnic and regional identity are so strong;
2. The legislative environment in Afghanistan is a deeply informal one, based on cultural customs and norms. This in turn makes it difficult for female MPs to promote women's rights; and
3. The deteriorating security environment undermines the ability of female MPs to engage meaningfully in advocacy work, as such work brings considerable insecurity for themselves and their families.

These barriers are reiterated but also extended by the analysis of others working on women's rights in the aftermath of the implementation of Afghanistan's peace agreements, as well as the ongoing security concerns. The economic needs of women are often highlighted as a key barrier not only to women's participation but also to the focus of women's rights as a whole. Huma Ahmed-Ghosh's interviewees (being Afghan women activists) highlighted to her that 'women's political participation is dependent on their economic empowerment and social and physical security' (Ahmed-Ghosh 2006: 111), highlighting a hierarchy of needs that were not being met by any of the actors operating in post-2001 Afghanistan.

Outside of the discussion of peacebuilding success is also the presence of large numbers of refugees in neighbouring states, as well as high numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) within Afghanistan, contributing to vulnerability, violence, poverty, issues with access to vital resources and education. This need is also exacerbated by a rural-urban divide when it comes to women's economic well-being and access to livelihoods. As refugee returnees to Afghanistan were primarily returning to rural contexts, this vulnerability and economic insecurity was further exacerbated (Ahmed-Ghosh 2006).

GENDER PROVISIONS

The Afghanistan Compact, signed in 2006, notes the full implementation of the Bonn Agreement and sets out a development agenda including the following:

- Commitment to implement the Compact in a way that emphasises gender equality
- The full implementation of the NAP for Women in Afghanistan and gender specific Millennium Development Goal (MDG) commitments by the end of 2010.
- Separate 'justice infrastructure' facilities for women and juveniles by end of 2010
- Increasing the number of female teachers and net enrolment for girls and boys in primary education (for girls the aim was 60 per cent). 35 per cent was the benchmark placed for women in higher education
- A reduction of maternal mortality by 15 per cent
- Reduction of female headed households that are experiencing poverty by 20 per cent

The Tokyo Declaration, signed in 2012, renewed human rights and development commitments, while emphasising the support of partners (state or otherwise) in Afghanistan's development. Gender provisions in this Declaration include:

- Emphasis on the need for the protection of the human rights of women and children (Preamble, Point 3)
- Stressed the importance of women's participation and mentions UNSCR1325 as an important pillar in the calls to action
- Emphasis on the need to support job creation initiatives for youth and women, and support women in participating in the private sector
- The importance of strengthening access to rights, with indicators that include:
 - Allowing civil society organisations (CSOs) and the Independent Human Rights Commission to function independently and appropriately
 - Demonstrably implementing the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law and the NAP for Women annually.

The progress planned during the peace process for Afghanistan, particularly in terms of cultural and social reform, was met with resistance from conservative

factions (Suhrke 2007). The Ministry of Vice and Virtue (known for its repressive activities under the Taliban regime) was reinstated in 2006, potentially to appease those who opposed the social and cultural changes that had occurred. The Constitution, adopted in 2004, includes five articles that specifically mention women:

- Article 22 stipulates that men and women are equal before the law
- Article 44 discusses improving women's access to education (significant in this case as prior to this, the Taliban had banned women's presence from schools)
- Article 53 relates to medical and financial aid for vulnerable persons, which includes 'women without caretaker[s]'
- Lastly, Articles 83 and 84 discuss the women's quota in both parliamentary houses.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

With the above as a backdrop, the security situation in Afghanistan does not seem to have improved considerably. In fact, according to UN reporting, 2014 was the worst year since the beginning of the conflict in terms of violence experienced by civilians. It should also be noted that the conflict in Afghanistan as it relates to the War on Terror is much more long-term. In 2001, Afghanistan was facing 25-30 years of a mixture of civil and proxy conflict, instability and extremist rule. This has a profound and long-lasting impact on the social, political and economic capabilities of the Afghan people, as well as an impact on gender relations and women's presence and roles across the different communities in Afghanistan.

Despite the harsh restrictions on women imposed by the Taliban, it should not be assumed that Afghan women do not have a history of organising and activism, as well as active engagement in opportunities that former governments had provided in education and other spaces. Each wave of attempted reform, particularly in relation to personal status (polygamy, forced marriage), incurred strong and at times, violent opposition. This is telling of the importance of gender roles and hierarchies in the power structures underlying Afghan society – based on tribal and kinship structures (Cortright & Persinger 2010), and heavily reliant on the 'symbolic value of women's honour' (Abirafeh 2009: 15). Afghan society, though diverse, is predominantly shaped by 'a particularly entrenched form of patriarchy and a tribal-based social structure' (Moghadam 2002). There were also inequalities in who could access the benefits from these reforms or policies, and while gains were being made - particularly during the Soviet occupation in 1979-1989 - rural women experienced acute hardship due to conflict, violence and the impact on livelihoods during this same period (Cortright & Persinger 2010).

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

Under the Taliban, women's exclusion from public economic and political life is well documented. However, despite that exclusion, women did engage in productive economic activities that were hidden from formal (public) economic processes. There are reports of women running schools and handicrafts courses in private homes, away from the eyes of the Taliban during this time, and thus carving out a space of resistance as well as access to education (Cortright & Persinger 2010; Povey 2003). Alongside the peace and statebuilding effort that the post-2001 period was to bring to Afghanistan, a reconstruction and development effort was created to match (Suhrke 2007). The Afghanistan Compact is a good example of this agenda in action. Prior to the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan, women did become central in the planning of the development and modernisation of Afghanistan, particularly in relation to access to education (Suhrke 2007), echoing similar calls to action in neighbouring, Arabic-speaking countries.

The post-2001 economic context in Afghanistan is a difficult one for women for a number of reasons. Within it, it seems women who are voicing needs, concerns and demands have a strong focus on economic empowerment (Ahmed-Ghosh 2006). Women's groups operating in this context run small scale education programs designed to help women become 'economically independent' (Ahmed-Ghosh 2006). Issues related to health and education access continue to persist. The maternal mortality rate remains high, despite a decrease from 1,600 per 100,000 live births in 2002 to 396 in 2015 (according to UNFPA). The birth rate is also at 4.5. While these figures show considerable progress, they also show the gaps in services available to women. Interviews Povey (2003) completed with women's rights activists reveal the women's understanding of the threats to their economic security came from threats to physical security (as well as vast inequality and widespread experiences of hardship). Indeed, the concerns they raised in the interviews seem to shape Afghanistan in an ongoing way.

Immediately post-2001, the presence of aid workers and other foreign actors created a 'dual economy' in Afghanistan and associated with that, a duality in behavioural norms and social contexts (Suhrke 2007). Alcohol consumption in particular and prostitution within the expat communities who worked as journalists, security contractors and in NGOs was visible and as such, created tension with conservatives (these venues were targeted by Taliban attacks too).

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This situational analysis supports the Australian Research Council Linkage Project "Towards Inclusive Peace: Mapping Gender Provisions in Peace Agreements, 2000-2016" (LP1048808). The project is hosted by Monash GPS and partnered with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or Australian Research Council.

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