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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

As U.S. troops return home from Afghanistan, concerns about the safety and rights of Afghan women are becoming increasingly urgent. NATO leaders decided in their May 2012 summit in Chicago that most foreign forces will be gone by 2014. What will this mean for Afghan women? Will their modest but important gains over the past decade be lost?

This updated edition of *Afghan Women Speak* addresses these questions and presents new data on continuing progress in women's ability to access education and health care and participate in local economic development.

This report draws on more than 70 interviews conducted from November 2009 to April 2012, including fieldwork in Kabul, Afghanistan, in April and May 2010 and in October 2011. Interviews were conducted with Afghan women leaders, parliamentarians, activists, school principals, nongovernmental organization staff, and health workers. We interviewed senior Afghan women in the police force and army, 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 Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) commanders and staff in the United States. Some interviewees requested anonymity or to have their names changed, and this agreement is reflected in the text with an asterisk.

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This report cannot and does not purport to speak for all Afghan women. It reflects the findings of our research and the analyses of the authors, who are solely responsible for the views and recommendations presented here.

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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

International efforts to assist women have produced mixed results: while Afghan women have won the right to participate in public life and have gained improved access to health care, education, and local economic development, escalating violence has jeopardized these gains in many provinces. Women exercising leadership abilities or pursuing opportunities provided by Western donors are accused of being anti-Islamic and have been subjected to threats, attack, and assassination. Differing views on women's roles have been a battleground over which competing visions for Afghan society, Islam, and claims to power have been fought. Women—so often objectified in times of war—have been at the frontlines of the Afghan conflict.

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. The 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. When the scale of the military intervention increased, the insurgency became stronger and the influence of the Taliban and armed groups 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 resulting 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.

The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops has 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 domestic political influence. They also worry about a return to civil war as foreign troops withdraw.

Many stakeholders in the West have high expectations about empowering Afghan women, but prevailing Afghan gender ideologies and misogyny cannot be changed rapidly by outside forces. The U.S. 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 demilitarization and the negotiation of a political agreement with insurgent groups to help stabilize the region and reduce armed violence. However, the process should be linked to parallel diplomatic efforts and alternative security arrangements. **Demilitarization and negotiation of a peace agreement should be coupled with the deployment of an interim peacekeeping force under the auspices of the United Nations to provide transitional security protection for civilians.**

To guard against a rollback 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 (2000) and 1889 (2009), 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.**

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. **The drawdown of foreign troops and political negotiation process must be tied to a social compact that provides for long-term, sustainable investment in aid projects that support Afghan women and families.**

A political solution to the conflict, though urgently needed, 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.**

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 10-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 toward women and in cities, which were viewed as immoral.

Among some classes of Pashtuns, the seclusion of women, or *pardah*, 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 *mahrams* 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 Sept. 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 Nov. 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.



KATE BROOKS

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

A Gendered Intervention

The goal of improving the condition of Afghan women is a legitimate human rights objective, but it is not a proper justification for war. The perpetuation of armed conflict does not benefit the people of Afghanistan, women or men. Preserving the political, social, and economic gains of the past decades will require ending the war and building a comprehensive and sustainable peace in which all Afghan citizens, women as well as men, have a stake.

Since 2001, donors and Afghan civil society organizations have worked hard to improve the condition of women. They have supported 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 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

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

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 2004 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; and
- 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 19.6 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 the 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 UN 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 It is estimated that 81 percent of all women in Afghanistan will experience domestic violence at some point in their lives.²¹

While occasionally acting to support women's rights, President Karzai has also introduced legislation that is blatantly discriminatory toward women. Ironically, on the same day that he signed the EVAW law²² 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. This 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.²³

The government has imprisoned nearly 400 women for so called “moral crimes,” which include running away from abusive domestic situations or having sex outside of marriage, even if it is by rape or forced prostitution. Women fleeing domestic abuse have sought help from police, only to be turned in for leaving their household. The Afghan Supreme Court treats running away as a crime, punishable by up to 15 years in prison. Most cases are never investigated, and women are convicted without any credible form of due process.²⁴ Domestic abuse can be so severe, and the avenues for exit so few, that many women self-immolate. The Istiqlal Hospital in Kabul opened a specialized unit that treats women burn patients.²⁵

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 women who flee to the shelters are victims of sexual and physical abuse and face

harm from family members if they return home. Women for Afghan Women has opened shelters in eight provinces and helped more than 4,000 women since 2006, negotiating favorable outcomes for many of them.²⁶

“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

In 2010, a government commission launched an investigation into the shelters amid false rumors that women in the shelters were prostitutes. The commission drafted legislation to put women’s shelters under government control, possibly requiring government approval or virginity tests for enrollment. A wave of local and international advocacy successfully stopped the regulation. In September 2011, Karzai’s cabinet quietly redrafted the policy to preserve the independence of women’s shelters. However, legislation still requires women leaving the shelters to return to a male-headed household.²⁷

“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.²⁸

While MOWA officials have been able to use their position and patronage to assist individual women—in some cases, personally intervening in domestic disputes²⁹—the ministry has struggled to advance the interests of women across government. Lacking a core budget and reliant on international technical assistance,³⁰ 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



KATE BROOKS

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

narrow gender roles. 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.

“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

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. Out of 2,835 registered parliamentary candidates, 344 were women and out of 3,201 provincial council candidates, 285 were women.³¹

“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 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.³² Voters were deterred by insecurity and threats by the Taliban to kill voters or cut off their noses and ears.³³ 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 understaffed, deterring women from voting.³⁴

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."³⁵ While official figures show women accounted for 38 percent of voters, election officials believe the actual turnout of women was lower than 20 percent.³⁶ 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.³⁷

As security continued to deteriorate in 2010, the September 2010 parliamentary elections were also marked by the intimidation and targeting of candidates—specifically women.³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

"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.

—Independent Election Commission, September 2010⁴¹

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.⁴² This reflected the determination of some women to participate in the political process in the face of rising threats and violence.

Women in the Civil Service, Judiciary, and Security Forces

International donors have sought to boost women's participation in government, including the civil service, judiciary, and security sector. Women's participation in the civil service increased modestly from 22 percent in 2006 to 25 percent in 2011.⁴³ There are no women in the Supreme Court, and few women are working in the judicial sector (10 percent, up from 4.7 percent in 2006), or in the security sector (5 percent in 2011, up from .5 percent in 2006).⁴⁴

Women interviewed for this report, even those who have attained high public positions, say that, on top of discrimination in the workplace, they face family disapproval for working outside the home, 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. In its attempts to build up the Afghan National Police, the U.S./NATO coalition 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.⁴⁵ There are now some 1,300 female officers in a force of over 143,000 police.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

“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 Shafiq Quaraishi

Female police also faced entrenched discrimination in the force. When they graduate from Kabul's police training academy, they are not issued guns like their male counterparts.⁴⁹ 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

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 data from the MoE:

- 8.4 million students are enrolled in schools—39 percent female—compared to less than 900,000 students (all male) in 2002;⁵⁰
- There are 12,500 schools in Afghanistan; 9,000 have been established since 2001;⁵¹
- The number of teachers has grown from 20,700 men in 2002, to 174,400 in 2011—50,000 female;⁵²
- More than 61 million textbooks for primary and secondary schools have been distributed;⁵³
- 600,000 Afghans are enrolled in nine-month literacy programs; and⁵⁴
- 63,800 Afghans are enrolled in universities.⁵⁵

While the MoE has set ambitious enrollment targets under its National Education Strategic Plan,⁵⁶ significant barriers to female education persist. Investment has focused largely on primary and higher education,⁵⁷ while dropout 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 on female education reduce the number of students.⁵⁸ 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 recorded 1,145 attacks toward the education sector between January 2006 and December 2008.⁵⁹ Attacks have included arson, the murder of teachers, and acid thrown on girl students. In June 2009, the MoE reported that 695 schools were closed across the country, affecting over 340,000 students.⁶⁰ The CARE study found that girls’ schools have been attacked at a disproportionate rate to boys’ schools.⁶¹ The study found that schools that are built by NGOs with community participation are less vulnerable to attack.⁶²

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 toward 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.⁶³

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.⁶⁴ Microcredit institutions have 12 times more clients than commercial banks in Afghanistan.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷ 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.”⁶⁸ According to recent figures, 35 percent of the participants in Community Development Councils are women.⁶⁹



A woman along the bank of the Kabul river.

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Women and Health

In 2002, Afghanistan's health system was described by public health experts as in a state of "near-total disrepair."⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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.⁷² A great majority of these deaths were deemed preventable.⁷³

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 have 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 3,275 midwives in the country, compared to only 457 in 2002.⁷⁴ Of these, 2,000 are members of the Afghan Midwives Association.⁷⁵ According to recent data:

- Skilled birth attendance rose from 14 percent in 2003 to 39 percent in 2011.⁷⁶
- Pregnancy-related mortality ratios dropped from 1,600 to less than 500 deaths per 100,000 live births.⁷⁷ Infant mortality rates declined from 165 to 77 per 1,000 live births from 2002 to 2010.⁷⁸
- Mortality rates for children under 5 decreased from 257 per 1,000 live births in 2001⁷⁹ to 102 in 2011.⁸⁰
- Diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus immunization rates rose from 59 percent of infants covered in 2001 to 94 percent in 2011.⁸¹

Despite these improvements, Afghans suffer some of the worst health conditions in the world. Average life expectancy for both men and women is 62⁺ years.⁸² Despite significant improvements, 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.⁸³

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 are 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.

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 statistics used here for life expectancy and mortality rates are drawn from two recent reports: the 2010 Afghanistan Mortality Survey, which was published in 2011, and the Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2010-2011 (AMICS), published in 2012. The Mortality Survey is a comprehensive scientific study utilizing demographic research methods based on 22,351 family household surveys of 47,848 women performed by 184 trained interviewers, 102 of them male and 82 female. It is the most comprehensive scientific study of life expectancy and mortality rates ever conducted in Afghanistan. The AMICS report surveyed 21,290 females in 13,314 households using a 50/50 ratio of male and female interviewers. The life expectancy and mortality figures reported in both reports are dramatically better than previously available figures found in standard references such as the CIA *World Factbook* and World Bank development reports. The differences between the current figures and previously reported numbers would seem to suggest that life expectancy jumped from 44 years to 62 years in the space of just one decade, and that mortality rates improved by similar proportions. Such improvements would be outside the experience of any other developing nation and are unlikely. The differences probably result from the lower quality of previous estimates, contrasted with the more reliable data generated by the rigorous scientific methods employed by these recent surveys.

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



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The Crisis of Security and Governance

Despite the surge of U.S. troops and the presence of 150,000 foreign troops in the country by 2011, the security situation continued to deteriorate. Car bombings, suicide attacks, and military assaults multiplied, and civilian casualties increased. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the total number of recorded civilian deaths in 2011 was the highest yet at 3,021, an increase of 8 percent from 2010 and a 25 percent increase since 2009. Deaths caused by the Taliban increased by 14 percent to 2,332. It was the fifth consecutive year of increased civilian deaths.⁸⁶

In recent years, a growing number of government districts have fallen under Taliban control or influence. An April 2010 Pentagon report found that the operational capabilities and organizational reach of the Taliban are “qualitatively and geographically expanding.”⁸⁷ General Petraeus, commander of the U.S. Forces Afghanistan from July 4, 2010, to July 18, 2011, described it as an “industrial strength insurgency.”⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰ Researcher Antonio Giustozzi argues that communities antagonized by local authorities and security forces provide the largest number of recruits for the Taliban.⁹¹ 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.⁹²

Impact of Insecurity

Women interviewed for this report told of being victimized from violence not only between foreign forces and insurgents, but also 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.”

—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. 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, Kandahar⁹³

The violence has deepened the suffering of many women and girls, leaving them maimed, displaced, widowed, or fatherless. Researcher 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.⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ A 2001 study by UNICEF noted that in Afghanistan, “war and militarization have led to an increased number of forced marriages of young girls.”⁹⁶

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.⁹⁷

“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 have 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.⁹⁸ In 2009, it reported that cases of rape and forced prostitution of children in Afghanistan had risen.⁹⁹ Women for Women International reported in 2009 that 43.9 percent of women believed that incidents of rape had increased since the fall of the Taliban, while 32.2 percent believed there had been an increase in forced prostitution.¹⁰⁰

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.¹⁰¹ 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.”¹⁰² 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 a decade 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.¹⁰³

At the 2012 Chicago NATO Summit, the United States and its allies confirmed that they will end their participation in combat operations and withdraw most of their troops by 2014. The United States plans to leave in place a residual military force, however, to train and support Afghan security forces as they battle the insurgency. This is a formula for continued military operations to kill and arrest insurgents, but with less U.S. participation and fewer troops. Counterinsurgency policies have not been able to defeat the Taliban over the past decade, and it seems unlikely that they will be more successful in the years ahead.

Most wars end through negotiated peace agreements, not military victory.¹⁰⁴ The pursuit of a negotiated settlement would be the best option for achieving durable peace and bringing stability and security to Afghanistan. A peace process would lower the levels of armed conflict and save thousands of lives. It could reduce the appeal of militancy and further weaken the

diminishing Al Qaeda influence in the region. For a peace process to succeed, however, it must be comprehensive and inclusive, with strong international backing. Peace processes are most successful when they help to create economic and social opportunity and establish more accountable governance and security institutions.¹⁰⁵ They are also more successful when they are monitored and policed by third-party peacekeeping forces.¹⁰⁶

The Afghan government and the United States and its NATO allies have endorsed the goal of a negotiated peace, but little progress has been made toward reaching an accord. Recent studies by the International Crisis Group and the RAND Corporation recommend the creation of a high-level UN-led mediation team to work with the Afghan parties and neighboring states to facilitate a comprehensive multi-faceted peace process.¹⁰⁷ The negotiations should seek an agreement between insurgents and the Afghan government and a diplomatic compact among neighboring states. The former would attempt to create a more accountable and inclusive system of governance within Afghanistan, while the latter would seek pledges of noninterference and support for stabilization from surrounding states.

Peace and reconciliation present a moral and political quandary, given the abominable human rights record of many insurgent groups. Seeking reconciliation and negotiation with narrow-minded and fanatical adversaries like the Taliban is 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.

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. Mr. Rahmani was killed by unknown assailants in May 2012.

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.

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 coeducational 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.

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-i-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.

"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 toward 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, defense 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.”

**—Soraya Sobhrang, Commissioner,
Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission**

The Way Forward

Interim Security Force

The recent RAND study on peace negotiations in Afghanistan suggests that a UN peacekeeping force could be an important part of a political settlement. Former U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan Ambassador James Dobbins and former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia James Shinn write of the need for “some more neutral party, perhaps the UN, to organize a peacekeeping force.... to fill the likely interim security vacuum created as Western forces withdraw and to reassure all parties that they can safely fulfill the pledges they have made to disarm and share power.”¹⁰⁸

Dobbins and Shin suggest that a peacekeeping force could include Muslim forces from non-neighboring countries. The proposed peacekeeping force would be negotiated as part of a comprehensive peace process to end the war and reach a political settlement in Afghanistan. It would be deployed only after agreements are reached on essential political and security arrangements, as part of a settlement that ends all combat operations and armed attacks. The political agreement and cessation of hostilities would need to come first, with the Kabul government and insurgent forces fully in accord.

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 political negotiations about securing the country’s future. 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.

A 2011 report for the United States Institute of Peace recommends an inclusive peace process with participation from diverse sectors of civil society.¹⁰⁹ Based on numerous interviews in Afghanistan and lessons learned from peace processes in other settings, the report by Lisa Schirch emphasizes the importance of building a national consensus through widespread public dialogue and consultations among all stakeholders. Peace will not be sustainable unless it addresses the drivers of conflict, creates more legitimate and effective governance, and improves relations among diverse ethnic communities.

“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



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A girl on the roof of her home overlooking Kabul.

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.¹¹⁰ 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.¹¹¹

“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

Women must be meaningfully represented in all aspects of the peace process. Women's participation will help ensure that these efforts address 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.

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 the Kabul regime 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 billions to fund its continuing operations. 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 toward political solutions. 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.¹¹²

As the United States 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.

The significant achievements that all Afghans have registered in education and health will not be sustainable without significant long-term donor commitments. 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

Little attention has been paid to 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 for fear of destabilizing the government.¹¹³ 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. Some analysts propose high-level symbolic prosecutions, but these are unlikely. More realistic would be truth telling, compensation for victims, and the acknowledgment of victims' 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

The Afghan Women's Network has proposed the creation of an International Afghanistan War Memory Commission "so that the past 30 years of war violations are identified" and documented. "Such an investigation does not have to conclude in a legal trial but a memory of war and the beginning of a healing process." Without an end to the practice of impunity, the women argue, Afghans will not be able to unite toward the rule of law.¹¹⁴

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 and aid agencies. Many women have been threatened and may face even greater dangers in the future as political alliances shift and troop levels are reduced. It would be unconscionable for these women to be abandoned. The U.S. and NATO governments should establish programs of asylum for vulnerable Afghan women who request and urgently need assistance to escape injury or death.

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 deeply 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 against girls and women with any perceived association with Western interests.

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. Negotiating with insurgents poses clear dangers for women, however, 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 Hillary Clinton has displayed exemplary 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 through:

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

Assure women's participation in negotiations and reconciliation through:

- full participation of women in all high-level peace councils and reconciliation programs; and

- exchange visits and support programs for women parliamentarians, public servants, judges, lawyers, and police officers. Governments should follow the practice of the U.S. State Department and require that all international conferences and bilateral Afghan government delegations include the participation of women.¹¹⁵

During negotiations:

- Uphold constitutional provisions for gender equality.
- Include explicit mention of women's right to education, work, and freedom of movement.
- Create transitional justice mechanisms that advance national healing.

Support women in public life through:

- long-term mentoring and training for female police officers and a coordinated program among donors to provide all Afghan police with gender-sensitized training;
- media campaigns on television and radio to educate the public about the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law; and
- implementation and funding of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan.

Maintain support for development and health programs through:

- 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 well-being, including the increased training of female health professionals and expansion of health care in remote areas; and
- long-term funding for shelters for abused women.

Provide sanctuary and asylum for threatened women through:

- establishing 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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