



Women and Peace Between Hope & Fear

Civil Society & Human Rights Network's Research Team



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Review Book

Women and Peace Between Hope and Fear

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Civil Society and Human Rights Network

(CSHRN)

Human Rights and Eradication of Violence Organization

(HREVO)

Review Book

On

Women & Peace: Between Hope & Fear

Written By

Abdul Rahman Yasa

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

CSHRN	Civil Society and Human Rights Network
HREVO	Human Rights and Eradication of Violence Organization
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution

Acknowledgment

The spike in violence amid the ongoing intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha has spurred concerns over the potential implications of any political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban on the Afghan marginalized segments, especially women. Many women activists are now worried about the loss of their achievements, mainly in the area of human rights, to be compromised during the peace negotiations with the Taliban.

Therefore, the Women and Peace Between Hope and Fear project, as a joint effort, had been designed to produce women-like narratives to highlight women's views, and reflect their concerns and aspirations with regard to the peace talks. The project also intended to underline the protection of human rights gains and women's meaningful participation through mainstreaming gender perspectives in all the stages of the peace process.

In doing so, Civil Society and Human Rights Network (CSHRN) interviewed 100 women and men of various backgrounds across various walks of life to share their views on how to support and strengthen women's role and advocate for the protection of their hard-won gains on the negotiation table. The interviews were printed and published by three major newspapers in Kabul and most of the provinces to raise public awareness of the important role of women in peacebuilding. In addition, CSHRN approached activists and people at the grass-root to express their views and concerns on serious questions surrounding the current peace talks, which will highly impact their lives. As a result, 365 peace messages were rounded up and widely circulated through CSHRN and Human Rights and Eradication of Violence Organization's (HREVO) websites and social media platforms.

CSHRN strongly welcomes and supports the intra-Afghan peace talks in which human rights values, women's social and political rights, freedom of expression, and press in a pluralistic environment are well-preserved. However, we in CSHRN are still concerned about women's low level of presence within the Afghan government's negotiating team, as well as the spike in violence by the warring parties, mainly the Taliban, without any sign of abating. As a human rights defender, I call on all parties to prioritize civilian preferences by observing an immediate ceasefire across the country. Responding to the public priorities not only restore hopes for and ensure the inclusivity of the peace process but will also help the dual parties find a middle ground for ending armed conflict and reaching a joint political agreement.

Likewise, on behalf of CSHRN and HREVO, I would like to express my gratitude to the generous support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) in Afghanistan, which made this review possible. I also acknowledge Abdul Rahman Yasa's endeavor and time for writing this review book. I would also like to thank a number of other people for their contribution to the successful implementation of this project without which it would not have been possible, Ms. Hosnia Mohaqqiq, project manager, Hazaratkhan Hoshmand, finance director, Rohollah Ragbaar, Najeebullah Hussaini, Freshta Hakimi, and Taha Mohaqqiq. Last but not least, a special thanks to those who have attended to share their insights in interviews and peace messages for CSHRN.

Sayed Hussain Anosh
Executive Director
Civil Society and Human Rights Network (CSHRN)

Abstract

The intra-Afghan peace talks have caught Afghan marginalized communities, especially women between hopes and fears. After almost two decades of armed conflict, the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, initiated in early September in Doha, have seen convoluted twists and turns that created public distrust over the Taliban's true will as the group has incessantly stressed on the continuation of violence. The main purpose of the talks is to end several decades of violence and reach a political settlement through a win-win peace accord. However, many women activists across various walks of life in Afghanistan are now worried about the possible implications of what they call a "bad deal" between the two parties in which their rights and hard-won gains of recent years might be compromised with the Taliban. The unpleasant memories Afghan women hold from their living conditions under the Taliban regime in the 1990s and severe losses inflicted upon them afterward have brought them together to jointly speak up for the preservation of their achievements, and meaningful participation in different spectrums.

To that end, women activists and those at the grass-root level alike urge the government and the Afghan negotiating team to mainstream gender perspectives at the heart of the peace agenda. In addition, they call on their strong, meaningful representation at all levels of peace talks with the Taliban, which will ensure the inclusivity of the process. The more inclusive the peace process, the more durable it will be. Women's under-representation will not only delegitimize the outcome of any potential peace agreement but would also perpetuate violence for the next several years to come.

Purpose

This review book is a reflection of the views of Afghan women on the Afghan peace process and highlights their hopes and concerns that must be taken into consideration during the peace talks. The review also pinpoints some of the challenges the intra-Afghan peace negotiations are gripped with and their implications on the lives of women who have fallen the main victims of several decades of conflict in the country. The document is guided by the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on the role of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution and the need for the inclusion of gender perspectives to ensure a comprehensive and sustainable peace.

Introduction

Reaffirming the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and peace-building, and stressing the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making concerning conflict prevention and resolution.

UN Resolution 1325 (2000)

Since Afghanistan is at a critical point of negotiating with the Taliban to end the conflict in the country, we barely hear of women's meaningful presence at the table when the talks take place. Over the last eighteen years, Afghan women, and society as a whole, have changed significantly with the emergence of female entrepreneurs, and practitioners. The Taliban, by contrast, has evolved little, if not at all, on women's issues since being pushed from power in 2001. Unless the government of Afghanistan and the international community take serious steps toward women's rights, any agreement that is reached will be neither inclusive nor acceptable, and durable for the Afghan people. Therefore, the Afghan government should ensure that hard-earned achievements in the area of human rights should not be compromised in the ongoing peace talks with the Taliban.

Immediately after taking power in 1996, the Taliban imposed its strict and oppressive order based on self-interpretation of Islamic Sharia in Afghanistan. Under the Taliban rule, the country had one of the worst human rights records in the world. The regime systematically repressed all sectors of the population and denied even the most basic individual rights. Women and girls were psychologically shocked, physically stoned, sexually harassed, and socially imprisoned inside their homes. It was an egregious war against women. The Taliban closed the women's universities, schools, and forced almost all women to quit their jobs. Some Afghan families resorted to sending their daughters to Iran and Pakistan to protect them from the misogynistic mentality by the regime.

Despite some claims that the Taliban have changed since then, the group has the same mentality as they had when their regime was toppled in 2001. The group is radically harsh and dogmatically strict. In the post-U.S. withdrawal era, the group will again remain strongly opposed to certain freedoms, human rights, and will highly likely attempt to reverse the progress made over the years in the country. In 2019, in a meeting held in Moscow, the Taliban harshly "attacked women's rights activists for spreading immorality and indecency"¹ over the last two decades in the country. During this time, many women and girls were stoned and tortured by the Taliban and those harsh rules still prevail wherever the group has control in Afghanistan.

Therefore, widespread concerns are mounting over the peace process as an elusive endgame with the Taliban. In fact, the Afghan women and girls are caught between hope and fear that their rights will be compromised during the peace process. According to the United Nations'

¹ Emma Graham Harrison and Akhtar Mohammad Mokoii, "The Taliban Took Years of My Life: The Afghan Women Living Under the Shadow of War," *The Guardian*, February 9, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2MuNV7S>.

former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, "there cannot be true peace and recovery in Afghanistan without a restoration of the rights of women."²

Nevertheless, these increased concerns over the peace deal pose the question of how the life of Afghan women would look like at the end of peace talks. To envisage a clear future for Afghan women and girls, they should be well-represented in the process and they must hold their demands and views clearly on the table with the Taliban. In doing so, women and girls, mainly at the grass-root level must be aware and empowered. CSHRN believes that awareness is knowledge and knowledge is power. Therefore, this booklet intends to reflect the voices, concerns, and hopes of Afghan women and girls on the ongoing peace process and further highlights their effective contribution to peacebuilding efforts, as mentioned in the UN Resolution 1325.

Chapter One:

Women During and in Post -Taliban Regime

Environment under the Islamic Emirate

During the rule of the Taliban in the 1990s, women and girls were excluded altogether from any social and political processes. They were not allowed to educate, work, go to school, and participate in any area other than household chores. While confined to home, the windows were painted or screened to prevent them from being visible from the street. Women faced public flogging and execution for violations of the Taliban draconian laws while girls were forced to child marriage. The law was enforced based on the Taliban's self-interpretation of Islamic Sharia. Women were thrashed for not wearing the all-covering *burka* while men were tortured for not growing beards long enough.³

After being overthrown as a result of a U.S.-led intervention in 2001, the Taliban revived following a short period of structural disruption and partial security across the countryside. They rejoined, regrouped and began plotting havoc against the Afghan people, and resumed their brutality of the past that ranges from public execution, stoning, thrashing, and restricting women and girls' movement in their area of control.⁴ This trend has been an open manifestation of the outrageous example of strict and distorted version of justice imposed by the Taliban.

Post-2001 Achievements

One of the most palpable achievements of the post-Taliban regime in Afghanistan has been the paramount rise of women in the public arena. The 2004 Afghan Constitution holds men and women equal before the law, along with some additional articles, ensure gender equality to

² Amnesty International UK, "Women in Afghanistan: The Back Story," accessed November 24, 2014, <https://bit.ly/3fyXCgh>.

³ BBC, "Who Are the Taliban?" *BBC*, May 29, 2019, <https://bbc.in/3mN6rFD>.

⁴ Nick Schifrin, "Graphic Video of Fatal Stoning Shows Taliban's Strength," *ABC News*, January 27, 2011, <https://abcn.ws/35WTAtr>.

access to education, economic and political participation. The legislation framework, along with support from the international community for equal rights, has allowed Afghan women to make considerable strides during the past two decades.

Meanwhile, getting to this point has not been so smooth and effortless. Many human rights advocates, especially women have paid dearly for that cause as a warning to mind the limits that the Taliban ideology has and continues to impose on Afghan women and girls, regardless of the rights the country's legal system bestows upon them. This old-fashioned mentality is not limited to the Taliban and other armed groups operating in Afghanistan. There are a bunch of other conservative elements within the system, who reap the benefits of democracy and international assistance while sharing similar views to that of the Taliban in which women have no place in public life.

1. Afghan Women in Politics

During the last two decades, Afghan women have appeared on the political stage to the extent that has historically been unprecedented. They are now holding different leadership positions from ministries to parliament. Women now constitute 28 percent of the Afghan parliament – higher than the global average.⁵ According to the 2004 Afghan Constitution, at least 25% of the delegates in the parliament have to be women.⁶ Following the 2018 parliamentary election, out of 250 seats, women reserved 69 seats in parliament.

Pursuant to the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, which reaffirms the important role of women in peacebuilding, the Afghan government instigated the gender integration and participation plan within the framework of its National Action Plan 1325 to promote female's role in security measures. As a result, women's participation numbers in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces have continued to increase. There are now around 5,982 women in-uniform serving in the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior with one female Deputy Minister working in each.⁷

2. Afghan Women in Economy

Afghan women have made significant progress, especially in the economic development of the country in the last two decades. They now hold various positions in different private and public sectors, bringing food on the table for their families and contributing to the country's fragile economy. During the Taliban rule in the 1990s until 2001, women were strictly limited in their ability to work in the public arena, while now, they constitute around 21 percent of the labor

⁵ The World Bank, "Proportion of Seats Held by Women in National Parliaments," *The World Bank*, 2020, <https://bit.ly/35YgzV4>.

⁶ The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, " *The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, January 26, 2004, Article 83, <https://bit.ly/2TS2z9N>.

⁷ US Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," *Department of Defense*, June 2020, p.41, <https://bit.ly/3oWGGEA>.

force in Afghanistan.⁸ They run and own businesses and work as doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and politicians. From parliament to orchestras, civil society organizations, art, and sports team, Afghan women and girls are now on the national stage more than ever before, all of which contribute to economic stability.

With direct support from the international community and organizations, the government of Afghanistan has also started to enact and implement a wide range of policy actions and strategies aim at providing Afghan women and girls with equal access to resources and opportunities for their active and meaningful participation in the country's economy. For example, the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan between 2007-2017⁹ and also the country's National Development Strategy¹⁰ drafted in 2008 all underline equal provision of rights and opportunities, mainly for women to integrate them into economic development.

Nevertheless, the path to women's progress has not been so easy. Longstanding male-established socio-cultural norms, gender-based discrimination, religious and old-fashioned traditions amid the security deterioration have and continue to limit women's presence in public spaces and restrict their rights to private property ownership and employability.

3. Afghan Women in Education

Afghanistan's education sector has grown exponentially since 2001. With support from the international community, millions of Afghan boys and girls started to get enrolled in schools and universities all over the country. As a result of armed conflict in the 1990s, among other things, the education sector was hit hard and ruined altogether. However, following the new political establishment in 2001, particular attention was paid to rebuild the education infrastructure for millions of Afghan women and men to be enrolled. Afghan women and girls, who were confined to home during the Taliban regime and denied any form of education, were again allowed to go to school and university. Female education was a taboo in the eyes of the Taliban. And yet, following its collapse, millions of Afghan women and girls got the chance to educate and learn. According to statistics, Afghan girls make up around 40% percent of school enrollment.¹¹ Additionally, the literacy rate among female youth aged 15-24 has risen to an estimated 56%,¹² which is a considerable percentage compare to 2001.¹³

Of course, geographical barriers, social and economic constraints under security concerns have always been a challenge, particularly on the way to female education during this time. Nonetheless, women and girls have stood firmly in the face of these challenges. They have

⁸ The World Bank, "Labor Force, Female (% of Total Labor Force) – Afghanistan," *The World Bank*, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3lnv4sd>.

⁹ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan," *The Government of Afghanistan*, 2007-2017, p. 13, <https://bit.ly/38ovZF6>.

¹⁰ Afghanistan Research Evaluation Unit, "Afghanistan National Development Strategy," *AREU*, <https://bit.ly/2JP25zt>.

¹¹ The World Bank, "School Enrollment, Secondary, Female (% gross)," *World Bank Group*, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2UerVyW>.

¹² According to UNICEF, the number of people age 15-24 years who can both read and write with understanding a short simple statement on their everyday life, divided by the population in that age group.

¹³ UNICEF, "Youth Literacy Rate for 15-24 Years," *UNICEF*, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3nehs2X>.

taken a high risk upon themselves but have never given up to actualize their never-forgotten dreams to determine the direction of their lives.

Chapter Two:

Afghanistan Peace Talks and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325

Women in Peacebuilding Under the UN Resolution 1325

On October 31, 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted UNSC Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security. The resolution underlines the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian responses, and post-conflict reconstruction with further stress on the importance of gender equality and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security in conflict setting. In addition, UNSCR 1325 urges all state parties to mainstream gender perspectives in all UN peacebuilding and security efforts. The resolution also calls on all parties to armed conflict to take necessary measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, including rape, and other sexual violence of all forms, in the situation of armed conflict. The resolution provides a number of important operational mandates, thereby, all the state parties must design their national plan of action.¹⁴ As repeatedly argued that while having little, if not any, share in instigating violence, women, and girls have fallen the main victims of armed conflict. Therefore, UNSCR 1325 highly stresses the necessity to establish a mechanism to protect women and girls from the violence of any kind.

It is also argued that women's inclusion in peacebuilding increases the success of conflict resolution efforts. According to research, in cases where women's groups were able to exercise robust influence on negotiation processes, the likelihood of a final agreement being reached was much higher than in those instances in which women's influence and participation were moderate, weak, or absent in action. This, too, highlights the probability that the peace agreement will last longer.¹⁵ Of course, their inclusion does not necessarily include a direct presence in peace talks. This can take place in multiple modalities such as pre-negotiation, negotiation, and post-agreement implementation. The modalities can happen separately, or, more often, in parallel to each other during all the peacebuilding phases.

Most often, women are not seen as important partners in reaching peace agreements. The central challenge is a lack of evidence-based understanding of the women's meaningful presence in the negotiation processes. Instead, the peace negotiations and processes are more often designed on the basis of untested hypotheses or normative biases, rather than concrete evidence-based findings. However, statistical analysis reveals that women's meaningful participation has positive impacts on the success and the durability of peace agreements.

¹⁴ The United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 1325 (2000)," *UN Security Council*, October 31, 2000, <https://bit.ly/35zXODG>.

¹⁵ Thania Paffenholz, Nick Ross, Steven Dixon, Anna-Lena Schluchter, and Jacqui True, "Making Women Count – not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women's Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations," *The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies*, April 2016, <https://bit.ly/3pBSCvY>.

According to this analysis, based on 182 peace agreements signed between 1989 and 2011, peace processes that include women are 35 percent more likely to last for more than fifteen years.¹⁶ Therefore, to be sustainable, a peace deal must be broad-based, inclusive, and reflective of the aspirations of all the community, mainly those of women.

The U.S.-Taliban Ceasefire Agreement

In early 2020, the United States signed a peace agreement with the Taliban aimed at bringing an end to the U.S. longest war in Afghanistan. The agreement requires the United States to return home over 14 months and the Taliban to negotiate a permanent ceasefire and peace talks with the Afghan government.¹⁷ Of course, the complete pullout would depend on the Taliban fulfilling their commitments to sever ties with terrorist groups such as al-Qaida and others to ensure that Afghanistan never again serves as the base for international terrorists.

Soon after the U.S. ex-President, George W. Bush ordered the U.S.-led military intervention in Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 attack, the Taliban regime was toppled, and the al-Qaida top militants with their notorious leader, Osama bin Laden, were scrambled across the border into Pakistan. The international community then began establishing state-building processes based on the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. However, following a few years of stability, the Taliban could regroup, reorganize, and currently hold sway over large rural geographical areas. And yet, the U.S.-Taliban peace deal is skeptically viewed by many war-weary Afghans, especially Afghan women and girls, who have fallen the main prey of the ongoing conflict, fear a comeback of repression under the ultra-conservative Taliban. In the 1990s, the Taliban regime had grossly repressed all, but mainly Afghan women and girls under a harsh, strict brand of Sharia law. Since then, women's human rights have remained a top concern for human rights defenders in a country where women and girls are still struggling for their basic rights.

Intra-Afghan Peace Talks in Doha

After several months since the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement, on September 12, 2020, the intra-Afghan peace talks kicked off in the Qatari capital of Doha.¹⁸ The development came into being following the U.S.-Taliban ceasefire agreement in early 2020. Representatives from both sides, the Afghan government and the Taliban gathered in Doha to negotiate a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire in Afghanistan. Although the negotiating teams of both parties have not yet officially began direct talks, their contact groups have discussed the preliminary issues surrounding the peace agreement.

However, recently, the peace talks came to standstill due to several sticking points. Among other things, discrepancies over the enacted Afghan Constitution, as the group calls it non-

¹⁶ Marie O'Reilly, Andrea O' Suilleabhain, and Thania Paffenholz, "Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes," *International Peace Institute*, June 2015, p.12, <https://bit.ly/2ILxhiE>.

¹⁷ Sara Dadouch, Susannah George, and Dan Lamothe, "U.S. Signs Peace Deal with Taliban Agreeing to Full Withdrawal of American Troops from Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, February 29, 2020, <https://wapo.st/3IUCL9z>.

¹⁸ Wolfgang Minatti, "The Challenges of the Afghan Peace Talks," *European University Institute*, September 28, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3kHLBpA>.

Islamic, and a political framework with the Taliban's integration within. In addition, the Taliban's obdurate stance on a particular Islamic jurisprudence – the Hanafi Fiqh – to serve as a guide to all aspects of the terms and conditions besides the U.S.-Taliban peace accord to form the overarching foundation, or the "mother deal" underlying the intra-Afghan peace talks. While the Hanafi jurisprudence is practiced by most Muslims in Afghanistan, the Taliban's uncompromising position would exclude millions of other Afghan Shia Muslims, who practice Jafari Islamic offshoot, and a dwindling number of Hindu and Sikh community. Moreover, the deadlock is due in part to the Taliban's unwillingness or inability in reducing violence despite their commitments under the U.S.-Taliban peace accord signed. With the increase in violence, the group is trying to put mounting pressure on their Afghan interlocutors in Doha, or it does not have full sway over their men on the battled ground. To push forward the stalled peace, there is a hard path ahead.

Chapter Three:

A Reflection on the Views of Afghan Women

The reflection is going to be based on the data gathered from 100 interviews and 365 peace messages which constitute the primary source for analyzing the views of the Afghan public, especially women, conducted with Afghan men and women of different backgrounds across various walks of life. The interviews have been conducted with experts and informants while the peace messages reflect the views of people mostly at the grass-root level. In fact, the collection of individual interviews from women and men that served to prepare this review confirms a degree of commonality of experience and perception. It shows that balanced gender participation, mainly in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, not only brings different perspectives and values but also ensures the inclusivity and durability of the peace process.

What Does Peace Process Mean for Afghan Women?

Given the effective role of women in development since 2001, the intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha have brought both hopes and fears to the Afghan public, especially women and girls as the main victims of several decades of armed conflict. Many women's groups and advocates as well as those at the grass-root level are now concerned about their hard-won gains to be compromised during the negotiations with the Taliban. They believe that the Taliban's return to power, or an inconsiderate deal that grants the group undue influence, could mean a comeback of the dark age of repression when women and girls were confined to home, tortured for exposing their hair, banned from working outside, and or going to school and universities. Despite some beliefs that the group has evolved since its so-called Islamic Emirate collapsed in 2001, their harsh and restrictive behavior against women and girls in controlled areas over the last twenty years manifests the same mentality the group had before. They are still religiously radical, mentally harsh, and behaviorally brutal.

Civil society activists and women rights defenders now demand a strong and meaningful representation of women and girls in different phases of the peace process. The Taliban have claimed that they will ensure women's rights around the Islamic principles; however, the group has not yet clarified what that means. Given the Taliban's application of their self-declared Islamic rules in the 1990s and in their swayed areas afterward, mostly in the countryside, it was nothing but mere brutality, dictatorship, and hostility.

Despite multiple rounds of talks between the contact groups from both the Afghan government and the Taliban in Doha throughout 2020, the uncompromising nature of the Taliban amidst the increase in violence across the country, the prospects for a sustainable political settlement remain obscure, as does the future for Afghan women.

Considering the ongoing peace discussions aim at ending the armed conflict of several years, the country's marginalized segments, especially women and girls along with minority groups are profoundly worried about political consequence, and the implication of a possible Taliban rebound and the U.S. withdrawal which may adversely affect their lives. Additionally, they have constantly insisted that their rights must be set a "red-line" to be preserved in any political settlement.



The Taliban may not accept women's perspectives. I think, women representatives of various spectrums should be present on the negotiation table with the Taliban to defend their rights. Afghan women no longer accept humiliation.

Rohina Zafari

Logo of the European Union, Sida, and the EU Afghanistan Peace Support Mechanism.

As mentioned earlier, with direct support from the international community, the society as a whole but mainly women have made considerable progress in different areas of life. However, many human rights activists are concerned about a relapse into violent conflict. Women practitioners, entrepreneurs, businesswomen, teachers, lawyers, and activists believe that in case of a "bad deal" with the Taliban, they will not be able to pursue their aspirations. They argue that the Taliban's view of human rights, mainly those of women have not changed and any "bad deal" which brings the group back to power will drag Afghanistan back to the 1990s, during which everyone, mainly women experienced widespread oppression. Women were not allowed to partake in social affairs or walk in the street as if they were put into lockdown.

However, since then, tremendous progress has been made, particularly in the area of human rights, including, among other things, access to education, work, healthcare, and freedom of expression provided within the constitutional framework.



Given the Taliban’s position in Doha and their treatment of women in areas under their control, it proves that the group has not changed on women’s rights. The Taliban’s misinterpretation of Sharia Law highly restricts women, and if the peace process brings them to power, women will be deprived of all their civil and political right.

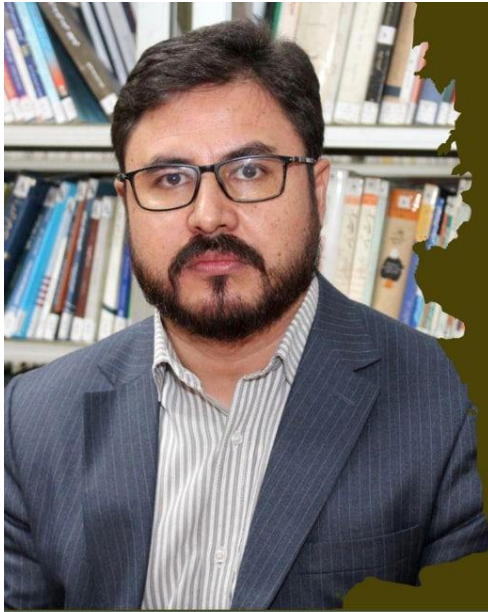
Tara Hussaini



ميكافورم صحتيات التخابر اوروبا
از پروژه صلح افغانستان
د افغانستان د سترواکۍ لخوا
د اروپايي اتحاديې د ملاتړ لاندې

Given the Taliban's ambiguous perception of Sharia Law, the group has remained inordinately opposed to the democratic and human rights values. Expressing her frustration, Sharifa Mehrat, a women activist, believes "the Taliban's inconsistency with democracy means that the group will not acknowledge women's rights and a peace deal that compromises her hard-won gains, confines her to home, and or forces her to put on barqa, would be nothing but a mere enslavement."¹⁹ Unlike some perceptions that the Taliban have evolved on different progressive themes, activists maintain that the plight of women in Taliban-swayed areas proves it otherwise, and they still hold an inferior view of women.

¹⁹ Sharifa Mehrad, women activist, in discussion with Hosnia Mohaqqiq, November 24, 2020.



The Taliban’s view of women may have changed somewhat, but the group still denies women’s fundamental rights and freedoms. The only way to preserve these achievements is the international guarantees after a peace agreement.

Asadullah Pazhman



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مېکانيزم حمایت تخنیکي اروپا
از پروژمه صلح افغانستان
د افغانستان د سولې څانګه
د اروپايي ټولنې د ملاتړ څانګه

In addition, the Taliban's insistence on a particular Islamic jurisprudence – the Hanifi fiqh – as the sole religious basis for negotiation conspicuously stymies an inclusive, broad-based, and sustainable political settlement. Like the 1990s, the group still insists on its old-fashioned exclusionist status to stamp out other ethnoreligious minorities, including Shia, and Ismaeli Muslims, and the dwindling Hindu and Sikh communities. Many interviewees contend that for successful talks and durable peace, along with women's active presence, other marginalized communities such as minorities, war victims, and persons with disabilities must have equal representations in all stages of the peace process.



Women with disabilities must be represented in the peace talks as they are circled by double marginalization lines of being women and having disabilities.

Parwana Sama Samadi



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مېکانيزم حمایت تخنیکي اروپا
از پروژمه صلح افغانستان
د افغانستان د سولې څانګه
د اروپايي ټولنې د ملاتړ څانګه

Currently, four of 21 negotiating members from Afghanistan – about 20 percent – are women. Although a quota system does not in itself guarantee a desirable outcome, Afghan women must be empowered and supported by their male partners in the team who share the same commitment to gender equality in peacebuilding. If the goal of negotiation is to restore lasting peace, then women need to be substantively involved at every level of peacebuilding efforts. According to Dr. Mohammad Amin Ahmadi, a member of the Afghan negotiating team:

Speaking up for women's rights is not only the responsibility of women but also of men. In my opinion, quantity is not as important as quality. Therefore, it would be ineffective if dozens of women representatives participate in the negotiation table with the Taliban but cannot defend their rights.

Dr. Mohammad Amin Ahmadi

Logo of the European Union (EU)
Logo of Sida (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency)
Logo of the EU Afghanistan Peace Support Mechanism
Logo of the Ministry of Peace and Reconciliation of Afghanistan
Logo of the National Center for Human Rights and Democracy of Afghanistan

مېکانيزم حمایتي اتحاديه اروپا
از پروژه صلح افغانستان
د افغانستان د سولې شخړه
د اروپايي ټولني سازمان لخوا

As the main prey of conflict, women must have meaningful participation in a peace dialogue. They should be given the chance to speak up for themselves and by themselves in order to safeguard their rights and values. To achieve this end, supportive mechanisms need to be put in place. First, the preservation of gender equality for both women and men under the republic system within the constitutional framework need not be open to negotiation in the peace talks. Second, Afghan women could be given the right to veto during the peace talks on issues that impact their lives. Third, the financial assistance provided by the international community must be explicitly conditioned on the protection of achievements, mainly human rights and other democratic values. Finally, the international community should put pressure on the Taliban and the group must, in turn, ensure that it remains committed to fulfilling its obligations in case of a possible political agreement for ending the conflict.




“
Women’s meaningful participation in peace talks can be a guarantee for the protection of their rights after the peace agreement (if any). However, one serious concern is the Taliban’s reluctance to change their views on women’s issues after the talks. Therefore, the group must give national and international guarantees in this regard.
”

Farida Safa Badakhsh




مېکانيزم همکاري تهذيب اروپا
 از پروژه صلح افغانستان
 د افغانستان د سولې څانګه
 د اروپايي ټولنې د ملاتړ ټولګړۍ

Nevertheless, the Taliban, despite being engaged in intra-Afghan peace talks, have constantly refused to agree on a ceasefire or recognize the elected government in Kabul. Many activists believe that such a double game not only undermines the continuation of peace talks but also does raise skepticism over the group's true will and independence for a permanent ceasefire.



“
The ceasefire is a step towards building confidence between the Afghan government and the Taliban. In addition, it would also prove whether or not the Taliban are independent in their decision for a peace agreement.
”

Farid Ahmad Amiri



مېکانيزم همکاري تهذيب اروپا
 از پروژه صلح افغانستان
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In fact, ceasefire agreements create momentum in peace processes and further pave the way to confidence-building between the two or more belligerent parties who have fought for years. Therefore, the spike in violence without showing any sign of reduction has created a bleak

public perspective over the positive outcome of the peace efforts. On March 23, 2020, amid the Covid-19 spread, the UN Secretary-General, called for an immediate global ceasefire, which followed by the same appeal from the European Union, and China. The Afghan government welcomed the call; however, the Taliban denied the call as ever and continued their relentless attack.

Many now argue that the Taliban's unwillingness to reduce violence not only delegitimizes the negotiations in the eyes of the public but also it openly marks the group's disregard of the people's preference. Shahrzad Akbar, the Chairperson for Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, for instance, has described it as such:

I think, if the peace talks coincide and move on in parallel with violence, the negotiations will soon become pointless. Thus, both parties must look at the peace talks as an alternative for war, which, if that is the case, everyone will naturally agree with. Otherwise, the peace process will have no legitimacy. Afghan public demands an immediate ceasefire as they have had for a long time, regardless of where they live, what language they speak, and what religion they believe in. There might be several reasons why the Taliban have ignored the ceasefire, including the group's sense of unaccountability, and its decaying legitimacy before the public. The common wisdom is that any government or group must consider the public's priorities to rally their support.²⁰

If the Taliban aim at clinging to power through insurgency, this will never happen. The group must understand the realities on the ground, the changes that have taken place, and Afghanistan's international obligations. The current conflict has no solution except negotiation in which the principles of gender equity and equality must be permeated the entire mission. As equal partners, women and men must be involved in all aspects of the peace process, from peacekeeping, reconciliation, and peacebuilding, towards a situation of political stability in which both can play an equal part in the political, economic, and social development of their country. This will increase the best hope of sustainable peace.

Conclusion

During the last several decades, everyone but Afghan women, in particular, have borne the brunt of armed conflict. They have suffered a lot than anyone else in society. In the 1990s, both the Afghan mujahideen and the Taliban equally, but differently disgraced Afghan women that ranges from harassment to rape, beatings, stoning, and jailing at home. After the defeat of the mujahideen, the Taliban Islamic Emirate imposed draconian self-declared Sharia law in which everyone, mainly women were excluded from all their basic rights. They were banned from going to school, universities, and or taking over social affairs of all kinds.

²⁰ Shahrzad Akbar, Chairperson for Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, in discussion with Hosnia Mohaqqiq, September 12, 2020.

After the disintegration of the Taliban regime in 2001, a new and yet encouraging horizon unfolded for Afghanistan. Among other things, gender equality was endorsed, of course, more in words but less in practice. The new constitution was drafted and enacted in which women's participation in all spheres of life was recognized with a government's commitment to comply with international human rights documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. After a period of severe restrictions, women got the chance to go to school, universities, and participate in social, political, and economic arenas to ultimately contribute to the development of an already broken economy and fragile stability.

However, despite the progress being made, women are still struggling to see their rights fulfilled. Following the drawdown of foreign forces and security deterioration, violence, human rights violations, and threats against women activists rose exponentially. The Taliban, along with other terrorist groups, began mobilizing their efforts to sabotage the development process by liquidating cities, killing men, women, and children.

To end the violence, with support from the international community, the Afghan government introduced and pushed the peace negotiation process to the forefront of national and international agenda. To that end, the intra-Afghan peace mechanism was proposed to the Taliban to end violence and integrate into society. The Taliban, despite extensive efforts, have constantly denied any reduction in violence and further placed stress on a guerrilla campaign to take power. As the result of the U.S. shuttle diplomacy, the peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban was signed in early 2020, which also left the Taliban with an obligation to negotiate with the Afghan government. The intra-Afghan peace talks, consequently, embarked on in September. Despite the exchange of prisoners between the government and the Taliban, the latter has been stressing on the continuation of violence, simply because to gain more on the negotiation table.

Meanwhile, Afghan women are caught between hopes and fears. Their concerns initially stem from the loss of their achievements as the results of what they call a "bad deal" with the Taliban. If the intra-Afghan peace talks preserve and protect human rights, women's civil and political rights, it would be a significant step forward; otherwise, it would be a mere regression to the dark age that women had experienced. Over the last two decades, Afghan women have made striking progress in various areas of life, including education, economy, and politics. While the intra-Afghan peace talks are underway in Doha, women activists demand the Afghan government to protect and preserve their gains in the talks with the Taliban. In other words, women's rights and gender equality within a constitutional framework must be set a "red-line" to be safeguarded in any peace agreement.

To this end, a clear mechanism needs to be put in place in which women can have full, meaningful participation at all levels of negotiation. For sustainable and lasting peace, the process must be inclusive and broad-based. All the marginalized segments, especially women must be involved in all rounds of negotiations and post-peace situation. Therefore, any political settlement in which gender perspective is absent, the process will be neither legitimate nor durable. Women must be the centerpiece of the intra-Afghan peace negotiation.

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EU AFGHANISTAN PEACE SUPPORT MECHANISM

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WOMEN & PEACE BETWEEN HOPE & FEAR

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