



Girls participating in Oxfam's Great Idea project in Parwan Province, Afghanistan. Photo: © Lalage Snow/Oxfam

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

The risk of denying women a voice in determining Afghanistan's future

Women's rights have been held up as one of the most tangible gains of the international intervention in Afghanistan. After 13 years of promises from the international community that women's rights are a high priority, these gains remain fragile and are at an increasing risk of erosion, especially as expected peace talks with the Taliban gain momentum. The international community and the new Afghan government must stand by their promises and include women fully in negotiations on the future of Afghanistan.

SUMMARY

As the Taliban regime fell in 2001 after six years of abuse and oppression, the international community made a promise to the women of Afghanistan, that it would never again abandon them. The protection of their rights, at least in part, became a key element to afterwards legitimize the war which followed. It is 13 years since Colin Powell, then-US Secretary of State, declared that, 'the rights of the women in Afghanistan will not be negotiable.' Now Afghan women are questioning what the future holds.

Undoubtedly, there have been enormous gains for Afghan women in recent years. Almost four million girls are in school, the highest number in Afghanistan's history, and women, particularly those in urban areas, work as politicians, police officers, pilots, judges and governors. Laws are in place to protect Afghan women and their rights, and the Constitution guarantees women's equality before the law, equal rights to education, and women's right to work.

FRAGILE GAINS

By supporting the calls of Afghan women's rights activists and organizations demanding change, the international community has played a critical role in driving these gains. But more still needs to be done to ensure that all Afghan women can enjoy their rights. There remains a very real danger that complacency on the part of both the international community and the Afghan government will undermine these efforts. This would allow the gap between the rhetoric of the international community and the reality for Afghan women to widen once more.

The risk of rollback is very real. Opposition in the Afghan Parliament to the Elimination of Violence Against Women law; the continued existence of entrenched cultural practices, such as *baad* (the exchange of women to end family conflicts); the lowering of parliamentary quotas for women's representation in provincial councils from 25 to 20 percent; former President Hamid Karzai's support of the Ulema council's non-binding edict that women are worth less than men;¹ and evidence of a shift towards an increasingly conservative attitude towards women's rights in some provincial areas; all point to the erosion of support for women's rights, from village to national level.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

The new Afghan President Ashraf Ghani used his first day in office to call on the Taliban to join peace talks,² and the momentum towards a formal political process is expected to build under the new government.³ But it is far from clear whether Afghan women will be given a seat at the table in these talks, and there are fears that women's rights may be bargained away amid efforts to reach a peace settlement.

Despite past rhetoric, negotiations and peace talks to date have taken place predominantly behind closed doors and without Afghan women's knowledge, input or involvement. This has huge implications for the safety and sanctity of women's rights in the future. All parties must recognize that it is only peace efforts that include and protect women that have any chance of succeeding in the long term.

At this critical point in Afghanistan's history, it is crucial that Afghan women are no longer sidelined. The exclusion of women will lead to an imperfect and unsustainable peace. Evidence shows that, when women are included in peace-building processes, the prospects for an end to violence increase by 24 percent.⁴ Peace cannot be secured when representatives of over half the population are excluded from the table and cannot be sustained without women at its core.

INTERNATIONAL WITHDRAWAL

The long-awaited withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan must not be at the expense of the sweeping promises made to Afghan women. The continued support of the international community is essential to ensure that their rights are enhanced, not eroded, as they threaten to be today.

Some members of the international community have indicated that any changes to the Afghan Constitution, in which women's equality is enshrined, would be a redline in negotiations with the Taliban. However, in the absence of explicit guarantees that women's rights are non-negotiable, fears remain that certain rights may prove dispensable, in what are likely to be hard-fought and protracted efforts to reach a peace agreement.

The Afghan Government and the international community must ensure the rhetoric on women's rights matches the reality. This means supporting women's meaningful participation in all peace process initiatives, including through sustained support for women's organizations and for women's capacity building to take part in high-level negotiations.

Without investment and further commitments to safeguard women's rights, there is a very real risk that the hard-won gains of the last decade will be lost.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Afghan government should:

- **Involve women at all levels of decision making in both formal and informal peace talks**, including ensuring women are able to meaningfully participate in high-level political negotiations with the Taliban. This must be combined with ongoing assistance for women negotiators to ensure they can meaningfully contribute.
- **A 30 percent minimum threshold should be established for women's inclusion in the membership of all Afghan government peace bodies**, including the High Peace Council (HPC), provincial peace councils and any bodies set up to replace them.
- **Commit to upholding the protection of women's rights enshrined in the Afghan Constitution and should ensure women's meaningful participation as a precondition for future talks with the Taliban**. The HPC, and any reformed or new body set up in its place, should be tasked with upholding this commitment.
- **Ensure the soon to be established presidential women's advisory board plays a decisive role in advising the President** on all peace and security matters, including modalities and representation in peace talks.
- **Ensure the effective implementation and coordination of Afghanistan's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (NAP)**. An implementation plan for the NAP must be developed as soon as possible, and a coordination and funding mechanism must be established to ensure complementarity of effort between government departments, donors and civil society.

Governments and donors should:

- **Advocate with Afghan stakeholders for Afghan women to be meaningfully represented** and their priorities fully reflected in any peace negotiations. Inclusive peace building should be central to the international community's messages concerning the establishment of a sustainable peace.
- **Provide substantial and sustained funding towards implementation of the NAP**. Improve donor coordination of international support through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in close coordination with the Ministry of Women's Affairs and other relevant ministries.

The Taliban (and other armed opposition groups) should:

- **Support the meaningful inclusion of women at the negotiating table**, in order to increase the possibility of a lasting peace deal under which Afghanistan can prosper. Since women constitute over 50 percent of the population, a long-term inclusive peace can only succeed with the involvement of women, and consideration of women's issues in discussions.

The United Nations should:

- **Continue to monitor peace processes and provide increased technical support to the Afghan government** for all negotiation, reconciliation, and reintegration processes, particularly the involvement of, and impact on, women.
- **Ensure that all UN supported reconciliation and reintegration processes are explicitly linked to the promotion of women's rights**, including by ensuring women are actively involved in the vetting of ex-combatants for reintegration into society. In particular, take steps to improve the links between civil society and women's local level peace-building efforts and the Afghanistan Peace and Reconciliation Programme.
- **Review progress in Afghanistan and include Afghan women's views** in the 2015 high-level review on implementation of UNSCR 1325 currently being commissioned by the UN Secretary-General.

1 INTRODUCTION

The plight of Afghan women and the systematic abuse of their rights at the hands of the Taliban were cited as significant factors to afterwards justify the international intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. Since then, Afghan women have fought for and achieved a number of human rights gains. The international community has supported their efforts by providing funding and, when needed, by applying political pressure on the Afghan government. As a consequence, women's rights have been lauded as one of the most significant achievements of the international intervention.

However, in recent years, some of these gains have been weakened by conservative elements in Afghan society. While the election of a national unity government and some positive signals that the country's new president, Ashraf Ghani, is committed to a better future for Afghan women and girls are a cause for optimism, there are also significant risks ahead.

With the national unity government in place and the majority of international security forces leaving Afghanistan by the end of 2014, peace talks are expected to resume with the Taliban. An analysis of the peace process over the last decade reveals that, despite public rhetoric from the international community and the Afghan government, women have not been meaningfully involved in many of the high-level peace talks with the Taliban. Many Afghan women are concerned that their rights may be traded-away as part of a negotiated peace deal to end the continuing conflict with the Taliban, unless the Afghan government and the international community prioritize these during talks.⁶

This paper highlights some of the key gains made by Afghan women as a result of support from the international community, and the recent setbacks to their achievements. It urges the new Afghan government and the international community to ensure that women are included in high-level peace talks and that their rights are prioritized in discussions with the Taliban.

PROGRESS

The advancement of women's rights in Afghanistan over the last 13 years can be demonstrated in a number of ways. Afghanistan's first Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) was established in 2001. It oversees the implementation of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), which aims to secure gender equality and women's empowerment. Women have also taken on more prominent positions in the running of their country. For example, there is a higher proportion of female Members of Parliament (MPs) in Afghanistan (27.7 percent) than in the United Kingdom (22.6 percent) or in the US Congress (18.3 percent).⁸

'There are so many capable women ready to take the important decisions needed to shape our country's future. We don't want these matters being decided for us behind closed doors.'

Samira Hamidi, Afghan Women's Network⁵

'We have witnessed many changes in the past 13 years, but I have to clearly state that women's participation has not been adequate.'

President Dr Ashraf Ghani⁷

Other appointments of women to high-profile leadership positions include the governor of Bamyan province and the head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, and more women are being promoted to senior positions within the Afghan National Police.⁹

Female education is also on the rise. Of the 8.3 million students in schools across Afghanistan, nearly 40 percent are girls; a record high and a dramatic improvement on the situation in 2001, when fewer than a million students attended school, of which a negligible number were girls.¹⁰ As well as education, women's access to healthcare has improved dramatically. Between 2001 and 2012, women's life expectancy increased from 56 to 62 years – and women now outlive men by an average of three years.¹¹ The maternal mortality rate has dropped considerably, from a staggering 49.4 percent in 2000 to 17.9 percent in 2013.¹²

Legislatively, there have also been gains. The rights of Afghan women were enshrined in the 2004 Constitution, which guarantees women equality before the law (Article 22), the right to an education (Articles 43 and 44) and the right to work (Article 48).¹³ The Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law, enacted by a presidential decree in 2009, was celebrated as a major step forward for women's rights.¹⁴ In 2003, Afghanistan acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) without reservations and has complied with the submission of subsequent progress reports.

ROLL BACK

Despite the significant achievements over the past decade, the new found status of women in Afghan society remains extremely fragile. Political, social and religious elements within Afghanistan have attempted to reverse some of these advances and block the promotion of additional rights. The Afghan Women's Network and Oxfam's local partners, such as the Research Institute for Women Peace and Security (RIWPS), have expressed concerns about the loss of their hard-won freedoms.

The EVAW law is one such example of the perilous state of Afghan women's political emancipation. While a step in the right direction, the law is yet to be ratified by parliament and has been subjected to fierce criticism by MPs, on the grounds that it contravenes Sharia law. In a heated parliamentary debate in 2013 – itself a sign of progress – five MPs argued that both early and forced marriage should not be considered crimes, women's shelters should be abolished, women should be required to secure their husband's approval in order to work, and the conditions imposed by EVAW on multiple marriages should be removed.¹⁵

Even if the EVAW law remains intact and is ratified in the future, this may not be enough to win over strong parliamentary opposition against more women's rights. A previous Oxfam briefing paper on Afghan women and the police stressed that, while the historic 2009 EVAW law criminalized child marriage, forced marriage, rape and other violent acts against

women and girls, few women are able to report such crimes as long as there are insufficient women working in the Afghan National Police Force.¹⁶

In 2012, the highest religious council in Afghanistan issued a non-binding edict stating that women were second-class citizens, which was subsequently endorsed by President Karzai.¹⁷ Though it was later reversed as a result of international pressure, that same year, President Karzai attempted to bring all women's shelters under the control of the government; a strategy interpreted as a gesture to the Taliban that women's rights would be up for negotiation in future talks.¹⁸

Significantly, ahead of the 2014 provincial elections, the Afghan parliament reduced the quota for female provincial council members from 25 to 20 percent. This amendment effectively reduced the political participation of women at the local level, and was far from transparent, as Executive Director of RIWPS Wazhma Frogh describes: 'this was done by the parliament in secret, and civil society and women's organizations were not consulted.'¹⁹ Despite the quota, 12 percent of the 2,595 provincial council candidates were women.²⁰

Female politicians were conspicuous by their absence in talks to secure a power-sharing agreement and to form a national unity government, which again demonstrates that women political participation is still far from becoming the norm.

Earlier in 2014, the Afghan parliament passed a law to ban relatives from testifying against one another, which was internationally condemned as the *de facto* legalization of domestic violence. The law was subsequently blocked by President Hamid Karzai.²²

INSECURITY AND RISK

Attacks on female politicians and other public figures continue to escalate, and the lives of Afghan women leaders are increasingly at risk. In 2012, the provincial head of MOWA, Hanifa Safi, was killed after a bomb attached to her car exploded,²³ and only six months later her successor, Najia Sidiqi, was shot and killed on her way to work.²⁴ Prominent policewomen also continue to be targeted, with several murdered in Helmand province in late 2013.²⁵ Threats and intimidation are also employed against women in public office, as in the publication by the Taliban on the eve of the presidential election in April 2014 of the names of hundreds of female police officers.²⁶

Oxfam's local partner Peace Training and Research Organization (PTRO) conducted a survey in 2012 to identify the principal challenges of the peace process. They found that women in some of the more insecure provinces were twice as likely to fear restrictions on their rights than the male population.²⁷ Such fears are well-founded, given the rising level of insecurity across the country.

'Afghan women have not had a voice in this process. Power structures have been decided among the two candidates. Where are the female politicians and roles for women? We're worried that in the next cabinet we might not even have the three female ministers that we have now – out of 26 ministers.'

Wazhma Frogh,
Executive Director,
RIWPS²¹

Furthermore, entrenched cultural practices continue to violate women's rights in Afghanistan. As documented in a 2010 UN report, practices such as honour killings and *baad* (the exchange of women to end family conflicts) continue to damage gender equality in Afghanistan.²⁸ Some parliamentarians have even called for the reinstatement of stoning as a punishment for adultery.²⁹ Persistent negative social norms and attitudes continue to hinder the translation of constitutional rights for women into reality.

The above examples demonstrate the clear need for the Afghan government and the international community to take steps to prevent any further roll back and to continue to advance women's rights and participation. The inclusion of women in peace talks and a renewed, public commitment to women's rights in the peace process would constitute a significant statement of intent in securing these twin goals.

2 WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN AFGHANISTAN: THE POLITICAL RHETORIC

Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the international community and the Afghan government have publicly reiterated the importance of women's representation and participation in public office. Both the US and the UK have issued statements urging those conducting peace talks to actively involve women in the peace process.

Box 1: International rhetoric regarding women's rights in Afghanistan

- *'The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.'* Laura Bush, former US First Lady, weekly presidential radio address on Taliban oppression in Afghanistan, November 2001³¹
- *'The rights of the women in Afghanistan will not be negotiable.'* Colin Powell, former US Secretary of State, speech at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, November 2001³²
- *'There cannot be true peace and recovery in Afghanistan without a restoration of the rights of women.'* Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General, Afghan Women's Summit for Democracy, December 2001³³
- *'We will not abandon you, we will stand with you always (...) [it is] essential that women's rights and women's opportunities are not sacrificed or trampled in the reconciliation process.'* Hillary Clinton, former US Secretary of State, speaking to female Afghan officials, 2010³⁴
- *'It is consistent with our best values as a nation to back efforts to remove an oppressive regime and to help establish a freer and fairer society in Afghanistan – especially for women.'* Tony Abbott, Australian Prime Minister, parliamentary statement on Afghanistan, 2012³⁵
- *'Afghanistan's full potential cannot, nor will not be achieved, without the full participation of all of its citizens.'* Ambassador Michael Grant, Deputy Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, International Women's Day Celebration, March 2013³⁶
- *'I recognize that both the transition as international forces leave and the prospect of peace negotiations create uncertainty. I can understand those feelings are particularly acute for Afghan women, who remember so vividly the injustices of the past and are so affected by the horrors of conflict. But President Karzai has made clear that a peace process in Afghanistan must work in the interests of Afghan women, not against them.'* Nic Hailey, former Acting British Ambassador to Afghanistan, International Women's Day celebration, March 2013³⁷

*'No lasting peace can be achieved after conflict unless the needs of women are met – not only justice for the victims of crimes of war, but their active involvement in creating a society in which their rights are respected and their voices are heard.'*³⁰

William Hague MP, UK Foreign Secretary (2010 – 2014)

RHETORIC BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The importance of women's rights was emphasized at the very first Bonn conference on Afghanistan in 2001. The international community met with important Afghan stakeholders, though not the Taliban, to agree on provisions to guarantee women's participation in rebuilding Afghanistan's institutions and government.³⁸

More recently, at the second Bonn conference in 2011, Canadian, European and Indian government representatives made forceful statements concerning the need to support women's rights as part of the transition and peace process in Afghanistan.³⁹ The concluding resolution at the conference reaffirmed that 'the human rights and fundamental freedoms enshrined in the Afghan Constitution, including the rights of women and children, as well as a thriving and free civil society, are key for Afghanistan's future.'⁴⁰ It also made specific reference to the peace and reconciliation process and its outcomes, which, it concluded, must be based on 'respect for the Afghan Constitution, including its human rights provisions, notably the rights of women.'⁴¹

Calls to facilitate the participation of women in the peace process are given further weight by the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325). UNSCR 1325 reaffirms the important role women play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. This role was further confirmed at the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan in 2012, at which participating countries stressed the importance of women's organizations in 'support of the peace process and the culture of peace and human rights in Afghan society (...).'⁴²

Box 2: United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325

The resolution on women, peace and security was adopted by the UN Security Council on 31 October 2000. The resolution highlights the important role women have to play, and the importance of adopting a gender perspective in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, post-conflict reconstruction and humanitarian response.

Besides advocating women's equal participation and full inclusion in peace and security efforts, the resolution calls on all actors to protect women and girls from gender-based violence in armed conflict.

Significantly, this mechanism places an obligation on donor governments, as well as parties to the conflict, to include women in the process to establish peace and security. Furthermore, all actors must adopt a gender perspective when negotiating and implementing peace agreements, and any settlement reached must make provision for relevant gender issues.

Subsequent UNSC resolutions which reinforce 1325 include 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106, and 2122, which comprise the international policy framework for women, peace and security. Member states have a responsibility to implement all these resolutions, in conjunction with UN agencies and civil society who are critical partners.

Prominent leaders have also reaffirmed their commitment to upholding women's rights in the country's peace and reconciliation process. Following talks between US President Barack Obama and then President Karzai, the US president acknowledged the provisions within the Afghanistan Constitution that protect the rights of women, but warned of the dangers inherent in any failure to implement them: 'We will continue to voice very strongly support for the Afghan Constitution, its protection of minorities, its protection of women. And we think that a failure to provide that protection not only will make reconciliation impossible to achieve, but also would make Afghanistan's long-term development impossible to achieve.'⁴³

The former UK Foreign Secretary, William Hague, has taken a similar line, expressing his disappointment that 'women and women's groups still have to ask to be included at the negotiating table, as if it were a concession to be granted, or a right to be begrudgingly accorded, when in fact it is the only route to better decisions and stronger and safer societies.'⁴⁴

Box 3: Afghan women's responses to the rhetoric of the international community

- *'There is a lack of commitment by the international community. At the start of the war they talked about the importance of Afghan women's rights. All the gains we have made are very fragile. We can lose them easily without their support. Now they are saying leave everything to the Afghans and Afghan women can defend their rights. Yesterday, they were bold in their statements, but today they are quiet.'* Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, a lawmaker representing Kabul in the Afghan Parliament⁴⁵
- *'They talk about an inclusive process, but they are making their own secret deals while pouring dust on our eyes. We don't even know what is being discussed. I have always been meeting with western officials to raise my concern about women in Afghanistan. But I feel that we have always been used by the international community for their own purposes. When they come here they always meet us and we run to them with our concerns. They use the meetings to show the world and say: look, we met with the women of Afghanistan and these are their concerns.'* Selay Ghaffar, spokesperson of the Solidarity Party, Afghanistan⁴⁶
- *'We should be a top priority and we should be at the negotiating table – we're 50 percent of the population (...). But we need the support of the international community to get there.'* Mary Akrami, executive director, Afghan Women's Skills and Development Centre (AWSDC)⁴⁷

In spite of this rhetoric, women have been notably absent from a number of prominent international meetings. Not a single Afghan woman was invited to attend the international conference on Afghanistan hosted by the British government in 2010.⁴⁸ At the time of writing this paper, it is unclear whether the Afghan delegation to the London Conference on Afghanistan (LCA) taking place on 4 December 2014 will include a significant number of female Afghan representatives to break this trend. Nevertheless, from the sponsored civil society representatives that will

take part in this conference, 45 percent are expected to be women, which is a positive development.⁴⁹

NATO's record is little better, with only one Afghan woman represented at both the 2012 Summit in Chicago⁵⁰ and at a subsequent Summit hosted by the UK in September 2014.⁵¹ In addition to this lack of representation, gender issues were also marginalized at the Summit, with no forum for women to share their insights on peace and security concerns or the violence they face, and a planned discussion of NATO's action plan on women, peace and security was dropped from the agenda of the Afghanistan session.⁵²

There is evidence to suggest that diplomatic pressure to improve women's participation at such international talks does bear results, however, as at the second Bonn conference in 2011, when Afghan women did account for 22 percent of the delegation, due in part to pressure applied to the Afghan government by the international community.⁵⁴

RHETORIC BY AFGHAN OFFICIALS

The Afghan government has repeatedly and publicly voiced its support for women's rights. The Tokyo Declaration issued at the Tokyo Conference included commitments to protect women's rights and to involve women's groups in the peace process.⁵⁶ More recently, at the Universal Periodic Review Session hosted by the UN in January 2014, Afghanistan accepted several recommendations for the advancement of women's rights, including the steady enforcement and implementation of measures and legislation designed to promote and protect women's rights.⁵⁷ In March 2014, in response to an initiative by the HPC that attracted the signatures of 250,000 Afghan women demanding peace, President Karzai called on the Taliban to respect their demands: 'Taliban, who call themselves "son of this soil", should respect their mothers and sisters' outcry for peace and this way seek maintaining [*sic*] peace and stability in the country.'⁵⁸

The degree to which such commitments to Afghan women are respected will largely depend on the measures taken by the newly elected Afghan government. Encouragingly, the newly elected President Ashraf Ghani and his closest rival in the 2014 election campaign, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, both featured the importance of women's rights prominently in their campaigns.

Both signed a petition from the Afghan Women's Network (see Annex I) that highlights policy areas and 30 recommendations for the empowerment of women and girls in Afghanistan, including their involvement in political leadership and peace and security.⁵⁹

'A woman's perspective on peace is crucial. We need women to continue to actively participate in the economy and the politics of the country, and we need to arrive at an enduring peace together.'

President Dr. Ashraf Ghani⁵³

'I hope that enough will be made not only to train young urban women, but also to attract their educated sisters in the provinces.'

Rula Ghani,
Afghanistan's first lady⁵⁵

In the run up to the election, President Ghani promised to appoint the country's first ever female Supreme Court Justice, and even persuaded religious clerics to issue an edict to the effect that women had a duty to vote.

First Lady Rula Ghani publicly campaigned alongside President Ghani and is now playing an active role in advancing women's rights issues publicly, including in launching USAID's Promote programme. Rula Ghani has a significantly higher profile than former President Karzai's wife, Zinat Karzai, who has been referred to as 'Afghanistan's invisible first lady' as a result of her relative absence from public life.⁶¹

Furthermore since coming to office President Ghani has stated his intention to establish a presidential women's advisory board consisting of 30 women's rights advocates and experts from across the country. These are indeed positive signs, and it is hoped that such measures will be fully implemented.

The national unity government, with support from the international community, must ensure that women are not sidelined, and their rights not traded off, in any negotiations with the Taliban.

In addition to the above commitments, the Afghan government and the international community must demonstrate a willingness to include women at the negotiating table and ensure that their rights remain on the agenda of any subsequent peace talks. Fears that the rights of women will be rescinded in efforts to appease the Taliban have been stoked by the clandestine nature of these talks; it is essential that measures are seen to be implemented to ensure that the public rhetoric on women's rights is matched by the political decision making behind closed doors.

'Of all the risks involved in reconciliation, of all the areas where there might be compromises, the issue of women's rights and freedoms is probably one that I am most concerned about. It is a clear area of vulnerability because leaders on various sides are all men, and there is little evidence of any genuine interest in strengthening the rights and opportunities of Afghan women, or involving them in a political process.'

Matt Waldman,
Associate Fellow,
Chatham House⁶⁰

3 WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACE TALKS

The Afghan government and the international community have been holding discussions with the Taliban since at least 2005, yet Afghan women have only been marginally represented in these negotiations (see Annex II for a timeline of formal and informal peace negotiations). This section discusses the high-level meetings between the international community and the Taliban, as well as efforts by Afghan officials to engage in talks with the Taliban. Throughout both these processes women's inclusion has been confined to two meetings held in the Maldives and three in France, which are often referred to as the intra-Afghan dialogue. While women are included in the government-appointed HPC, female members have had little more than a symbolic role. Their peace-making efforts, such as the collection of a quarter of a million women's signatures calling for peace have been welcomed by the international community, but their actual inclusion and participation in high level peace talks has been absent.

INTERNATIONALLY BROKERED TALKS WITH THE TALIBAN

The Taliban and UN Special Representative for Afghanistan Kai Eide met in Dubai in spring 2009, and, following the presidential elections, resumed talks in early 2010. However, the process stalled when Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a senior Taliban commander, was arrested in Pakistan in 2010.

The first breakthrough in talks with the Taliban came when Germany's foreign ministry and intelligence agency organized a meeting between US delegates and Taliban officials near Munich in November 2010. Tayyab Agha, a representative of the Taliban commander Mullah Omar, was flown to Munich, accompanied by two close associates.⁶³ The US delegation consisted of diplomats from the State Department and intelligence officials. Qatari officials were also present at the talks, which lasted for 11 hours.⁶⁴ The second round of talks between the US and Taliban officials was held in Qatar in February 2011,⁶⁵ with a third round organized in Munich three months later.

In early 2012, Marc Grossman, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, met with Taliban officials during a visit to Qatar.⁶⁶ According to former Taliban officials, four to eight Taliban representatives travelled to Qatar from Pakistan.⁶⁷ The Taliban announced they had struck a deal to open a political office in Qatar that would allow direct negotiations to end the conflict in Afghanistan.⁶⁸ However, by March 2012, the talks had broken down, as a result of the failure to agree the fate of five Taliban prisoners at Guantánamo Bay. The Taliban accused the American negotiators of being 'shaky, erratic and vague', whereas an American

'Afghan Women's Network has made repeated requests to be at the negotiating table because we do not want our rights to be sacrificed. We are not included in any talks. We always find out after the meetings that there was contact but no one tells us what was discussed.'

Lida Nadery, the Afghan Women's Network (AWN)⁶²

'Participation of women in peace talks is an absolute red line. 1325 is essential, it is like food and water for us.'

Khojesta Fana Ebrahimkhel, Director General, Human Rights and Women's International Affairs, MOFA

official argued that the primary cause for the breakdown had been internal rifts within the insurgency.⁶⁹

An effort to resume talks between the Taliban and US officials was scheduled for June 2013 in Qatar. In the first instance, US officials arranged to meet with the Taliban to explore mutual agendas.⁷⁰ Initial talks with the US were to be followed by discussions between the Taliban and Afghan government officials. But the talks never materialized because of a diplomatic row that ensued immediately after the official opening of the Taliban's Qatari office. The display of the Taliban's flag and a sign saying "Political Office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan", the name used by the Taliban when they ran Afghanistan, infuriated Afghan officials, who then threatened not to send a delegation to Qatar.⁷¹

AFGHAN GOVERNMENT'S CONTACT WITH THE TALIBAN

High-level talks between the Afghan government and members of the Taliban have been reported as early as 2005. Since then the two parties have held talks in Saudi Arabia, the Maldives, France, Japan and the UAE, yet the only meetings known to have included Afghan women were those held in the Maldives and France.

Three rounds of talks occurred in the Maldives in 2010, following a proposal by Homayoun Jarir, son-in-law of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the political party, Hezb-e-Islami, and funded by Afghan businessmen. Although President Karzai rejected the talks, he sent close personal advisors to all three rounds as observers.⁷² The first round was attended by men only, and the second was attended by one female Afghan MP. At the third round in late 2010, four female Afghan MPs participated,⁷³ which constituted less than 10 percent of the total participants. Even this minimal level of representation was not welcomed by all the attendees, and one male Afghan government delegate told a BBC reporter that the women should not have been present at the talks unless they were accompanied by their husbands or close male family members.⁷⁴

From the end of 2011 to the end of 2012, a French government-funded think tank called the Foundation for Strategic Studies hosted three rounds of talks to promote an intra-Afghan dialogue which became known as the Chantilly talks. The Taliban sent representatives to the third round of these talks in December 2012. The discussions involved around 20 Afghans, only two of whom were women.

Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, an Afghan parliamentarian, was present at all three rounds of talks. She says that the Chantilly talks showed that women's participation at the peace table is possible with the Taliban, if those who mediate the discussions prioritize it: 'They [the Chantilly talks] were informal discussions and it was a good effort to bring everyone together. We need to have more talks like the ones in France. These talks were more successful than big and formal conferences because they brought the Taliban around the same table as women.'⁷⁵

While Afghan women such as Ms Naderi have expressed the need to attend talks similar to the ones at Chantilly, the international community has not facilitated any further such meetings. One reason for this is offered by Nader Naderi, an Afghan participant at the talks: 'We had talks at Chantilly, but we were not able to have more because Karzai had a reaction to it. He is so paranoid about any talks that take place about the Constitution in his absence.'⁷⁶ It is hoped that President Ashraf Ghani will encourage women's participation in talks with the Taliban concerning the future governance of the country, and that the international community will support such a dialogue.

HIGH PEACE COUNCIL

In June 2010, a Peace Jirga hosted by the Afghan government and attended by approximately 1,600 people, of which 300 were women, endorsed President Karzai's plans to negotiate with the Taliban.⁷⁷ That September, President Karzai formed the High Peace Council (HPC) to seek peace talks with the Taliban.⁷⁸ But since only nine out of 70 appointed members (around 13 percent) are women, they are vastly outnumbered by their male counterparts. One female member, Gulali Noor Safi, has complained that women within the HPC have been sidelined from major consultations and decision making: 'We are trying to be involved in the peace process but in my opinion, most of the time we're not included in major discussions.'⁷⁹

The role of women members in the HPC has been criticized by women's rights activists, one of whom, Selay Ghaffar, argues: 'If you look at women who are in the HPC, they are passive. They do not play a real role; it is just symbolic so everyone can say "look we have women in the HPC." This is how they are cheating the people of Afghanistan.'⁸⁰

Members of the HPC include former Taliban warlords who are alleged to have committed human rights violations after the fall of the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan in 1992. Ms Ghaffar argues that this undermines its legitimacy: 'As far as women are concerned, the establishment of the HPC was a big mistake. How can you establish a "peace" council that consists of people who have committed so many crimes in the past?'

While it is true that, by their nature, peace processes often include parties that have committed some level of human rights violations in conflict, it is not unreasonable for Afghan women to harbour a degree of scepticism regarding the HPC's interest in pursuing women's rights when negotiating with the Taliban.

4 PRIORITIZING WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN PEACE TALKS

Owing to the sensitive nature of the talks with the Taliban, there is very limited information in the public domain about their substance, but from what is known, it is clear that women's rights have been a low priority.

AGENDA OF THE TALKS

The agenda of any dialogue with the Taliban, whether formal or informal, direct or indirect, forms part of the peace negotiations. Every moment is an opportunity for the Afghan government and the international community to promote and protect the gains made in the last 13 years.

While these talks may not officially be regarded as formal "negotiations", they have certainly laid the groundwork to bring both sides a step closer to a peace settlement. As such, they represent a missed opportunity to include women in the agenda of the wider peace process.

During the German-mediated talks between the US and the Taliban in 2010 and 2011, the following issues were discussed:

- the release of five Taliban prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay in exchange for a US soldier detained by the Taliban;
- the establishment of an office from which the Taliban could conduct their political affairs;
- the removal of Taliban members from the UN's 'blacklist'; and
- a complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan.⁸²

The US accepted the Taliban's first three requests and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission formally ends on 31 December 2014. However, under the terms of a bilateral security agreement signed by the US and Afghanistan in September 2014, US and NATO troops can remain in Afghanistan until 2024. Efforts to open an office for the Taliban in Qatar were made, and the office opened, albeit briefly, in the summer of 2013. And in June 2014, President Obama made the executive decision to release the five Taliban prisoners in exchange for a US soldier detained by the Taliban.⁸³

In addition, the UN, after intense lobbying by the UK, revised the UN sanctions regime in June 2011, so that the Afghan Taliban would be treated separately from al-Qaeda and other groups thought to be involved in international terrorism. The UN has since made further concessions, including the removal of 15 individuals from the sanctions list,⁸⁴ which enabled Taliban members to travel abroad for peace talks.⁸⁵

'I am not optimistic at all. We do not know the agenda of the talks and this worries all women in Afghanistan.'

Suraya Parlika, Nobel Peace Prize Nominee and member of the upper house of the Afghan Parliament⁸¹

The extent of these efforts to accommodate the Taliban in exploratory talks and formal negotiations has made many in Afghanistan question what else may be conceded in any future political settlement. There is growing concern among Afghan women that their rights will be compromised as part of a negotiated peace deal. It is the duty of the international community that this does not happen.

There are differences of opinion about women's rights among various factions of the Taliban, and divisions within the leadership make negotiations particularly problematic. A US State Department official confirmed in an interview in 2014 that such divisions exist, and the lack of clarity over which of the key decision makers within the Taliban hold the balance of power makes any efforts to negotiate a less conservative position with regard to women's rights fraught with even greater difficulty.⁸⁶

THE CONSTITUTION AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The Afghan Constitution is particularly important for Afghan women as it guarantees them equality before the law, the right to an education and the right to work. However, Taliban representatives at the Chantilly talks have criticized the current Constitution,⁸⁷ and many fear that their demands for a new Constitution will undermine these hard-won rights.

Nader Nadery, the director of the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, was a participant at the Chantilly talks, and is one of those concerned:

'The Afghan Constitution must be safeguarded. The redlines are defined by the Constitution itself. The Afghan government and its international partners have used legal and non-violent means to promote values such as freedom, women's rights and a democratic process. To defend and protect these gains, the Afghan government and the international community should be more vocal about these issues when talking with the Taliban. If we speak from a position of weakness, we have to give in to the demands of the Taliban and that means undermining the Constitution.'⁸⁸

One Afghan participant at the Chantilly talks, who does not wish to be named, says:

'The Taliban stated at Chantilly that they do not accept the Constitution because it was drafted by foreigners. Yes, there were foreign advisors when we were drafting it, but the main body was drafted by Afghans. The international community's priority should be to get the Taliban to accept the Constitution and the political process [of elections]. This will guarantee the rights of women and prevent any roll back of the gains made.'⁸⁹

While at Chantilly, the Taliban demanded a new Constitution based on 'principles of noble Islam, national interest and historical achievements,'⁹⁰ however, the Taliban have yet to clarify how exactly they would like the Constitution to be changed.

REDLINES

Afghan human rights activists have expressed concern about the lack of preconditions to any talks with the Taliban. As one activist, Ahmad Fahim Hakim says,

'Peace talks with the Taliban lack redlines, clear policy and transparency. Most importantly, there is an absence of guarantees, or even emphasis, on the part of the leadership and government authorities about the importance and protection of human rights, justice, and ending the culture of impunity through these peace negotiations. These factors are especially worrying for women's rights and civil society institutions.'⁹¹

For their part, US officials have regularly cited three redlines as preconditions to any talks. First, the Taliban must renounce violence; second, it must break ties with al-Qaeda; and third, it must adhere to the Afghan Constitution, particularly the rights of women and minorities. While there is some disagreement by experts on the imposition of redlines, the US has nevertheless repeatedly referred to them in their public rhetoric and must ensure that they make good on these commitments and do not waiver.

In 2011, former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, hailed as a champion for promoting women's rights in Afghanistan, said that insurgents must 'abide by the Constitution of Afghanistan, including its protections for women and minorities' as one of the 'necessary outcomes of any negotiation.'⁹²

That same year, during an Oxfam interview, a US embassy official in Kabul confirmed that guarantees for women's rights would not be a precondition for any negotiation: 'We do recognize the need for protection of women's rights. But we can't impose this as a pre-negotiation redline because that will be counter-productive in getting to talks. Women's issues are important, but they are not our top priority.'⁹³

Farid Hamidi, Deputy Chair of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, says that preconditions to talks should be formally agreed among international partners: 'The US, the UK and the rest of Europe should have something on paper stating their preconditions for any negotiations. If the international community were to give something in writing then it would ensure that they are not able to shift their stance so easily.'⁹⁴ Any such written declaration would also give the women of Afghanistan some much-needed clarity in terms of the international community's priorities.

5 DONOR FUNDING

Development aid for Afghanistan is predicated on an agreement of mutual accountability, which enables donors to use funding to ensure that the Afghan government meets its international obligations. Contained within this agreement are both the NAPWA and the EVAW law; as a result, donors have a mandate to make funding conditional on the upholding of women's rights and the prominence of gender issues.

Too often, however, conditionality has not been used to promote gender issues. When the Afghan government failed to meet the July 2013 deadline set under the mutual accountability framework for a report on the application of the EVAW law across Afghanistan, international donors voiced criticisms, but did not suspend their funding. The report was not delivered until January 2014, and the lack of meaningful sanctions for such a delay signals to the Afghan government that they will not be held to account if they do not prioritize women's issues.

While donors have invested large sums of money in the promotion of women's programmes across Afghanistan as part of their commitments to women's rights, the focus has been on "hard deliverables" such as schools and health care centres, rather than on efforts to facilitate women's greater inclusion in public life in general, and in the peace process in particular.

Much more investment is needed to support women's political and economic empowerment, and in this respect USAID's Promote programme launched on 8 November 2014 is an important initiative. Backed by a \$216m funding commitment over five years, the programme is a joint endeavour by the US and Afghan governments to promote the inclusion of women among a new generation of Afghan leaders in the political, economic and civil society sectors. The largest women's empowerment programme in US history, it focuses on four pillars: the development of women's leadership, the inclusion of women in government, the empowerment of women in the economy, and the strengthening of capacity and influence of women activists and women's rights organizations. Other donors will hopefully join this endeavour to further increase the size, scope and impact of the programme. However, it is crucial that large-scale programmes, like Promote, are monitored and critically evaluated to ensure they deliver real results for women.

INVESTING IN WOMEN'S PEACE EFFORTS

Donors have also provided funds for government-led peace and reconciliation efforts that have not ensured women's participation, including funding the HPC, which is tasked with overseeing peace negotiations and has councils at provincial level. In 2012, it was reported that the HPC received up to \$157m from international donors, but was not required to maintain a gender balance among its members.⁹⁵ Women also remain

under-represented in provincial peace councils, with between two and five women per council (out of a total of 20 to 30 members).

The broader Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP) receives funding from a variety of donors, including the US, the UK, Japan, Australia and Germany. Donors have pledged \$220m for this programme, which began in August 2010 and is set to run until July 2015. In 2013 the expenditure was \$65.3m.⁹⁶ UNDP also provides technical support to the programme. The APRP is overseen by the HPC and reaches out to insurgents to encourage their reintegration through disarmament activities, the provision of transitional financial assistance, livelihoods skills building and development programmes for communities.

However, women's participation in the formal processes of the APRP remains extremely limited. Recent research by PTRO suggests that women were not empowered to accept or reject the reintegration of insurgents at the local level. Female participation is often taboo, there is a lack of awareness around women's rights, and there are cultural barriers preventing women from playing a bigger role in this area.⁹⁷

In addition to direct funding to the HPC and APRP programmes, many donors have provided assistance for grassroots peace-building activities, such as the EU-funded Oxfam project Building Afghan Peace Locally, which provides training to civil society organizations in peace building and encourages peace councils to include women in their efforts.

Oxfam's Building Afghan Peace Locally project

Financed by the EU, the Building Afghan Peace Locally (BAPL) project was a three-year project that started in January 2011. Currently under evaluation to see how it can be continued, the project aimed to contribute to long-term peace in Afghanistan by facilitating more effective resolution and mitigation of local-level conflicts, while enhancing the status and inclusion of women. It targeted both men and women, in 80 communities in eight districts across Paktia, Bamyan, Takhar and Faryab provinces. Implementing partners have established trained, mentored and empowered 77 community-based peace committees and eight district-level peace councils. They have also coordinated with provincial peace councils.

An evaluation survey of project participants shows that 87 percent of those surveyed believed that initiatives such as BAPL can contribute to peace building in Afghanistan. Women's peace councils also enjoyed recognition and support from their communities. At the end of project's initial duration, there were a total of 1,311 peace committee members and 211 peace council members. The number of female members in the former group was 28 percent, while the number of women in peace councils was 9 percent.

Ninety percent of those surveyed at the end of the project had confidence that their case would be resolved in a fair manner and a high percentage reported an awareness of the inclusivity of the peace councils. The number of community dispute cases resolved by the peace councils consistently increased from 2011, peaking at 585 cases resolved in 2013. Since the project began, the peace councils had resolved a total of 1,288 cases. Ninety percent of those surveyed in Takhar were very satisfied with the work of the peace councils, alongside 87 percent in Paktia, 81 percent in Faryab, and 73 percent in Bamyan.

Programmes like this demonstrate that with international support, local peace-building initiatives can generate real change from the ground up, and can establish crucial links with government-initiated peace and reconciliation processes.

Many other organizations receive bilateral support from international donors, including prominent organizations working on women's participation such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI). In 2010, the Canadian International Development Agency supported NDI to organize a Post-Peace Jirga Symposium of Afghan Women, at which 73 women attended from across 33 provinces. The women stated in their conclusions:

'Women, who represent half of the population in Afghanistan and 58 percent of eligible voters in the country, demand to be a party sufficiently represented in any future peace negotiations. They insist on the precondition that peace cannot be negotiated at the cost of diminishing women's rights.'⁹⁸

Ultimately it is the women's rights activists and organizations at local and national levels that will provide the pressure needed to advance the realization of women's rights in Afghanistan over the long term. Therefore, civil society organizations, and women's organizations in particular, will require sustained funding from the international community over the coming years. This will help to develop women's capacities so they are better equipped to contribute to peace and reconciliation efforts and to continue to exert pressure on the government, the Taliban and the international community, to sustain women's issues as a priority of any future government.

To this end, additional training in negotiation and communication skills should be provided to Afghan women, such as that conducted by civil society organizations including Oxfam's local partner RIWPS. RIWPS hosts mock discussions between women and former members of the Taliban administration with a view to building women's confidence and providing them with the tools to demonstrate why a peace process must be inclusive. Such organizations can also play a critical role in working with communities to promote positive social norms on gender equality and women's rights.

The UK Department for International Development, alongside Nordic civil society organizations, has provided £31.68m to fund the Tawanmandi Civil Society Strengthening programme, which focuses on peace building and conflict resolution. Over 400 peace councils have been established locally in nine provinces, including 80 women-only peace councils. The programme has been running since 2011 and is set to finish in 2015; it is unclear whether or not it will be extended.

As the peace process evolves under President Ghani, ongoing financial support from the international community will be required to address barriers to Afghan women's participation and to support women to gain the skills to negotiate in peace processes at local and national levels. Linking local and national level peace efforts will be vital in securing a sustainable peace. Having intervened in Afghanistan in 2001, donors have a responsibility to use their influence to insist on the participation and inclusion of women in the peace process to promote and protect women's rights.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Although significant advances in women's rights have been achieved in many areas of Afghan society since the fall of the Taliban regime, the ongoing status of these rights remains fragile. Women still struggle to contribute to and participate in the peace negotiations and this should be of great concern to the international community.

Women must make up at least 30 percent of the leadership positions involved in Afghanistan's political process.⁹⁹ The international community in general, continue to exert influence over the terms of any peace settlement and must use this to ensure women's meaningful participation in peace talks. This participation should not be symbolic, but should rather be regarded as a key condition for effective peace talks that can result in a sustainable peace agreement.

The international community must stand by its commitment to Afghan women and the new Afghan government must prove that promises made in the run up to the elections will be fulfilled. As the new Afghan government takes shape and the Taliban are once again allowed to the negotiating table, it is more important than ever that women are given a more prominent role in deciding their own fate and that of their daughters, in order to ensure that women's rights do not become sidelined in the negotiation process.

The Afghan government should:

- **Involve women at all levels of decision making in both formal and informal peace talks**, including ensuring women are able to meaningfully participate in high-level political negotiations with the Taliban. This must be combined with ongoing assistance for women negotiators to ensure they can meaningfully contribute.
- **Establish a 30 percent minimum threshold for women's inclusion in the membership of all Afghan Government peace bodies**, including the HPC, provincial peace councils and any bodies set up to replace them.
- **Commit to upholding the protection of women's rights enshrined in the Afghan Constitution and should ensure women's meaningful participation as a precondition for future talks with the Taliban.** The HPC or any reformed or new body set up in its place should be tasked to uphold this commitment.
- **Ensure the soon to be established presidential women's advisory board plays a decisive role in advising the President on all peace and security matters**, including modalities and representation in peace talks.
- **Integrate high-levels talks with community reconciliation** as an essential element of efforts to secure an inclusive and meaningful peace. Women who are playing an important role in local peace-building efforts should be involved in broader national efforts.
- **Publish and share public annual reports on progress toward the fulfilment of obligations to Afghan women and girls** that are enshrined in international treaties to which Afghanistan is a party, including CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- **Ensure the effective implementation and coordination of Afghanistan's National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security.** An implementation plan for the NAP must be developed as soon as possible, and a coordination and funding mechanism to ensure complementarity of efforts between government departments, donors and civil society must be established. Each Afghan government ministry with responsibilities in the plan must allocate a budget towards implementation, and a robust system for monitoring line-ministries' implementation of the NAP must be developed in consultation with civil society.

Governments and donors should:

- **Advocate with Afghan stakeholders for Afghan women to be meaningfully represented** and their priorities fully reflected in any peace negotiations. Inclusive peace building should be central to the international community's messages concerning the establishment of a sustainable peace.
- **Provide substantial and sustained funding towards implementation of the NAP.** This should include improved donor coordination of international support through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in close coordination with the Ministry of Women's Affairs and other relevant ministries.
- **Publicly call for any political settlement in Afghanistan to explicitly guarantee women's rights.** Donors must continue to insist on the acceptance of the rights enshrined in the Afghan Constitution as a key precondition of talks.
- **Provide sustained and reliable core funding to women's organizations, in a coordinated way with other donors.** Afghan women's organizations must be supported to strengthen existing alliances and develop stronger links between the national and community level to ensure broad representation of women's interests and voices in peace processes. After peace agreements are signed, progress needs to be sustained through further support. This should include funding for training and capacity building, to allow women to play an effective role in decision-making processes and to foster women's leadership.

The Taliban (and other armed opposition groups) should:

- **Support the meaningful inclusion of women at the negotiating table,** in order to increase the possibility of a lasting peace deal under which Afghanistan can prosper. Since women constitute over 50 percent of the population, a long-term inclusive peace can only succeed with the involvement of women, and consideration of women's issues in discussions.
- **Make a commitment, in line with UNSCR 1325,** paragraph 9, which calls upon 'all parties to armed conflict to fully respect international law applicable to the rights and protection of women and girls'; to respect civilian engagement in peace processes at all levels, and to respect women's equality as enshrined in the Afghan Constitution and Afghan law.

The United Nations should:

- **Continue to monitor peace processes and provide increased technical support to the Afghan government** for all negotiation, reconciliation, and reintegration processes, particularly those concerning the involvement of, and impact on, women.
- **Ensure that all UN-supported reconciliation and reintegration processes are explicitly linked to the promotion of women's rights**, including by ensuring women are actively involved in the vetting of ex-combatants for reintegration into society. In particular, the UN must take steps to improve the links between civil society and women's local level peace-building efforts and the Afghanistan Peace and Reconciliation Programme.
- **Reinforce the importance of safeguarding women's constitutional rights under Afghan Law**, particularly within any discussions and interactions with the Taliban.
- **Consistently and publicly advocate for women's inclusion in all peace dialogues** and use its presence in Afghanistan to identify and report on possible threats to women's rights.
- **Review progress in Afghanistan and include Afghan women's views** in the 2015 high-level review on implementation of UNSCR 1325 currently being commissioned by the UN Secretary-General.
- **The UN Security Council should pass a resolution** as soon as possible committing the international community to support Afghanistan in creating a sustainable and inclusive peace process. The UN Security Council must then remain apprised of the situation in Afghanistan, in order to monitor and respond to any deterioration of the security situation.

ANNEX I: AFGHAN WOMEN'S SIX POINT PETITION

To the front runners of the 2014 Presidential Election, June 2014

Afghanistan is at an important juncture in its history. On 5th April 2014 Afghan women and men reaffirmed their commitment to democracy and the peaceful transfer of power through their widespread participation in the presidential election, in the hope of securing a better future for themselves and their children.

We, the undersigned, congratulate the two main candidates, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and Dr. Ashraf Ghani. We commend them for not compromising the results of the election and for showing their readiness for a second round of elections in conformity with Afghan law, allowing the women and men of Afghanistan, God willing, to participate in selecting a government that best represents them.

We, as equal citizens of this country, recognize the achievements of more than a decade in our nation's struggle with the support of the Afghan government and international community. The equal rights enshrined in Afghanistan's Constitution (2004) for both women and men, the high participation of women in leadership and politics through political quotas (Parliament, Senate, and Provincial Councils) and the affirmative action engendered by their understanding of historical setbacks and suffering that women have experienced are some of the important achievements of our time.

Despite several setbacks and challenges there have been landmark changes in women's socio-political status when compared to pre-2001, where oppression against women was institutionalized and women confined to their homes. The momentum of progress made over the last decade must be sustained with the change of national leadership set to take place. Women's health, education and leadership should be a priority. Women's inclusion should be considered as an integral standard of good governance, not a superficial commitment to the international community. Women's voices should be counted, just as their vote counts and defines the elections.

Endorsement will indicate a commitment to reflect the recommendations outlined below in your action plans, policies, and commitments for your five-year term, should you be elected. Commitment should include concrete steps for advancing implementation of the National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law, and other national and international commitments that have been adopted over the last decade and reinforced by commitments made in the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (July 2012).

Education

- Continue the implementation and close monitoring of the National Education Strategic Plan.
- Observe the 'Increasing of Girls Enrolment to Primary and Secondary Education' policy.
- Sensitize school curricula to reflect commitment to women's rights and a violence-free culture that promotes a just and peaceful society.
- Allocate a specific budget for women's expanded access to higher education, nationally and internationally.
- Plan and implement long-term strategies for professional capacity building of female and male schoolteachers and university professors.

Health

- Address high mortality rates of mothers and infants.
- Maintain basic health centres in remote areas, while improving hospital standards in cities.
- Provide capacity to public health facilities to counter violence against women by effectively collecting and documenting evidence while also providing immediate medical and psychological support.
- Increase the number of trained gynaecologists and midwives in the provinces and capital by provide scholarships and other incentives.

Political Leadership

- Safeguard quotas for women's political participation in parliament, senate, and provincial councils.
- Commit to ensure 25 percent of political posts including cabinet, local government, ministries, embassies and international missions are filled by women.
- Institute short-term and long-term programmes for the recruitment of women in key decision-making positions.
- Allocate specific funds for the implementation of commitments made under the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and the National Action Plan for Women to recruit and promote women to in all level of civil services, ensuring a minimum of 30 percent are women.

Justice and Judicial

- Affirm a commitment to implement the EVAW law, as per the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework endorsed in July 2012.
- Increase the appointment of women to key judicial and legal positions, ensuring a minimum of 25 percent women in all related institutions.
- Appoint a minimum of one female judge to the High Council of the Supreme Court.
- Support women's shelters and legal aid centres addressing the needs of women affected by gender-based violence.

- Sensitize and equip the Afghan National Police Force to address violence against women, including an explicit focus on building the capacity and resources of the Family Response Units.

Peace and Security

- Cultivate a commitment to developing national security forces that are inclusive, representative of the Afghan population, and able to address the security needs of both women and men.
- Create an enabling environment for the recruitment, retention and security of women in the Afghan National Police Force.
- Build the capacity of women police to serve in oversight and leadership roles.
- Require instruction on human rights, women's rights, civilian protection and gender-based violence in the Police and Army Training Academies.
- Involve women at all levels of decision making related to the peace process, including women in the peace efforts at the community level, on the High Peace Council, provincial peace councils and in civil society.
- Address the needs of women in the families of fighters who have chosen to reintegrate.
- Ensure the inclusion of women in the vetting of potential reintegrated combatants, related community recovery and local grievance resolution.
- Finalize and implement the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security to fulfil Afghanistan's obligations under UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

Economy

- Develop and enforce women-friendly labour laws and employment policies in both government and the private sector.
- Support women entrepreneurs as a means of enabling broader economic development.
- Ensure a minimum of 25 percent of businesses in all National Industrial Parks already in use or soon-to-be established are women owned.
- Recognize women's roles in the agricultural sector and expand their access to basic inputs, such as seeds and fertilizer, as well as transportation to and from markets.

ANNEX II: TIMELINE OF PEACE TALKS

2005

From early 2005 onwards: Informal meetings occur between Taliban representatives and delegates of the Afghan government, including President Hamid Karzai. In 2005, President Karzai sets up a reconciliation commission. In May that year, Karzai and the head of the commission, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, declared a general amnesty to Mullah Omar and Hekmatyar. Despite the fact that Karzai retracted these words after international pressure, he would later again express his willingness to embrace both these leaders if they would renounce violence.

Summer 2005: The German foreign intelligence agency coordinates with the chancellery in Berlin to meet two Taliban representatives in a Zürich hotel for talks. These talks are said to be coordinated with the US intelligence agencies, and European countries such as France are in the know. The German intelligence agency's goal is to know if the Taliban are prepared to withdraw from al-Qaida's embrace in return for Germany's involvement in reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. The Taliban demand political recognition. The talks are said to fail because Mullah Omar refuses to distance himself from al-Qaida.

2007

In April 2007, President Karzai reveals that he had been secretly negotiating with the Taliban. In September that year, the US, UK and the UN clarify their stance in favour of negotiations with the Taliban, giving Karzai more room for manoeuvre.

2008

Ahmed Jan, an intermediary for the Taliban and tribal elder from Helmand province, is sent on behalf of the Taliban to Kabul for talks with the Afghan government. Jan is arrested by US officials and detained at Bagram when they discover the talks are to take place.

September: Preliminary peace talks are held between Afghan officials and Taliban proxies in Saudi Arabia.

October: Abdul Qayyum Karzai, Hamid Karzai's older brother and US citizen, describes the potential Saudi reconciliation process to the US ambassador in Kabul. The ambassador is told about a recent Afghan delegation of 17, including former Taliban officials, who went to Saudi Arabia for a meeting with the King. Qayyum assures the ambassador the US would be consulted at every step and requests that the US urge the Saudis to remain engaged. Prince Maqrin, head of Saudi intelligence, says Saudi Arabia does not want 'to be alone in this,' highlighting the importance of keeping the US and the UK informed.

2009

February: Secret negotiations seem to be under way to bring troops fighting alongside the Taliban into Afghanistan's political process, according to reports by Al Jazeera. Talks between Taliban-linked mediators, Western officials and the Afghan government are said to be underway. The talks apparently involve a proposal for the return to Afghanistan of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. It is not clear whether the secret negotiations are aimed at separating Hekmatyar's faction from the group or encouraging some elements of the Taliban to join the political process.

Spring: Exploratory meetings take place between representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban in the United Arab Emirate (UAE).

September: German officials at the request of the Taliban, hold their first meeting in Dubai.

2010

January: Informal talks between Afghan MPs and some representatives of the Taliban take place in the Maldives, attended as well by members of Hizb-e-Islami, apparently as observers. The talks, denied to have taken place by both the Afghan government and the Taliban, come as several Taliban fighters were taken off the UN black list. No Afghan women were present.

January: Regional commanders on the Taliban's leadership council, the Quetta Shura, seek a meeting with the UN special representative in Afghanistan, Kai Eide. The meeting takes place in Dubai on 8 January. The Taliban denies the meeting took place and vow to persist in its war 'against the invaders.'

May: Seven Taliban leaders and 14 members of the Afghan government reportedly attend talks in Maldives. President Karzai's spokesman denies the government has sent representatives. It is speculated the meeting involves the leadership of Hizb-i-Islami. The Taliban deny taking part in the talks. One female Afghan MP is said to be present.

Spring: Bernd Mützelburg, Germany's special envoy to Afghanistan, meets Tayyab Agha who is said to represent Mullah Omar.

September: Karzai announces he has set up the High Peace Council to pursue talks with the Taliban.

September: A spokesman for President Karzai confirms there have been contacts with the Taliban at every level. He says: 'There have been different levels of contact – sometimes direct and sometimes indirect,' but cautions the contacts could not be characterized as even the beginning of formal negotiations.

6 October: Although unconfirmed, several Pakistani and Afghan sources insist that CIA officials have held clandestine meetings with top Taliban leaders. At least two rounds of meetings were reportedly held in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province bordering Afghanistan.

7 October: Secret high-level negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban leadership are believed to have taken place in Dubai. The Dubai discussions are said to have centred on the conditions under which the Taliban would agree to call a ceasefire. They are insisting on an agreed timetable for the exit of NATO troops.

Early October: The US based East-West Institute organizes a round of meetings in Kabul, funded by the emirate of Abu Dhabi. No “serving” Taliban take part in these meetings, but some “reconciled” ones, including Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef and former foreign minister Wakil Ahmed Mutawakil. These meetings can be considered as exploratory attempts, not as formal negotiations.

Mid-October: It is reported that Taliban commanders from the highest levels of the group’s leadership, are secretly leaving their sanctuaries in Pakistan for talks with President Karzai’s inner circle. NATO governments are helping to facilitate the discussions by providing air transport and securing roadways for leaders coming from Pakistan. It is reported that in at least one case, Taliban leaders crossed the border and boarded a NATO aircraft bound for Kabul. Taliban commanders reportedly include Maulvi Abdul Kabir, former governor of Nangarhar province and deputy prime minister during the Taliban rule, Mullah Sadre Azam and Anwar-ul-Haq Mujahed. The men were brought by helicopter from Peshawar.

November: NATO supported talks with the Afghan government come to an end when it is revealed the man posing as the Taliban representative, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, one of the most senior commanders in the Taliban movement, is an imposter.

November: It is reported that representatives of various Afghan factions have recently met in Maldives.

November: In a secret meeting arranged by Germany’s foreign ministry and intelligence agency, US delegates meet with members of the Taliban for the first time near Munich.

2011

February: US and Taliban officials meet in Doha for a second round of talks.

April: At a press conference in Kabul, Mohammad Massoom Stanekzai, secretary of the HPC and an adviser to President Karzai, says reconciliation talks have been underway with insurgents for some time. The US is supporting the effort, Mr. Stanekzai said. The American ambassador, Karl W. Eikenberry, also present, concurs.

May: US and Taliban representatives come face to face for a third round of meetings near Munich. The meetings last two days.

June: President Karzai says publicly for the first time that the US and the NATO-led coalition have been actively negotiating with the Taliban.

September: A Taliban suicide bomber assassinates Burhanuddin Rabbani, head of the High Peace Council.

December: By the end of 2011, US and Taliban representatives have reportedly met more than seven times.

November - December: Foundation for Strategic Research, a think tank funded by the French government hosts the first of a series of talks to promote intra-Afghan dialogue.

2012

January: Taliban establish an office in Qatar. Marc Grossman, the Obama administration's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, has "a number of meetings" related to Afghanistan when he visited Qatar the week before.

March: Talks between the US and Taliban break down.

June: Former Taliban, Hizb-e-Islami and Afghan government officials, including High Peace Council members, attend meetings in Chantilly. These meetings are followed by another round of meetings at an academic conference in Kyoto's Doshisha University.

December: Taliban representatives travel to Paris on official Afghan passports to take part in a conference organized in Chantilly by a French think-tank, Foundation for Strategic Study. This is later claimed by an Afghan government spokesperson, Aimal Faizi.

2013

June: Talks between the US and Taliban officials are scheduled to take place in Qatar. The talks are stalled immediately because of a diplomatic row following the opening of the Taliban's office.

July: President Karzai's spokesman says: 'In a special meeting chaired by President Hamid Karzai, the president has decided to suspend talks about a security pact with the U.S. because of their inconsistent statements and actions in regard to the peace process.'

November: Taliban are said to initiate contact with President Karzai.

2014

January/February: The High Peace Council says it has held talks with Taliban leaders in the UAE. The Taliban deny reports of the talks. Afghan officials have also reportedly met with influential Taliban leaders in Saudi Arabia.

April: The High Peace Council talks of a renewed effort at peace negotiations with the Taliban.

September: Newly elected President Ashraf Ghani uses his inaugural speech to call for the Taliban to join peace talks after 13 years of war.

November: In meetings between Oxfam and various representatives of the Afghan government, it is confirmed that informal contacts and exploratory meetings continue to take place at different levels. However, the start of the next formal peace process still has to be announced.

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