

Escaping the ghosts of the past

Women's participation in peace talks in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

How can Afghan women achieve positive results from peace talks with the Taliban?

Women were largely excluded from the Bonn process. Since then, they have made significant gains in rights and political participation. But despite Afghanistan adopting in 2015 a National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, opportunities for women remain limited. And women's rights defenders are wary that negotiations with the Taliban will lead to further losses, given the movement's record and reputation.

But women already make key contributions to local peace initiatives, and the possibility now exists to engage proactively to affect the course of a national peace process. Afghan women encompass a spectrum of interests. Many from rural communities see ending violence as the priority over the sorts of rights that are their urban counterparts' prime concern.

Reaching out to different female and male constituencies is key to building broad support for women's issues. Constructive progress will require acknowledging signs of change among the Taliban and engaging in dialogue with them to explore potential areas of mutual interest and accommodation.



Sima Wali (l) und Rona Mansuri (r) attend a meeting with women's rights representatives during the Afghanistan summit in Koenigswinter near Bonn, November 2001. Members of four different ethnic groups with the exclusion of the Taliban took part in the talks. © dpa picture alliance / Alamy Stock Photo.

The level of violence in Afghanistan appears to grow year by year with more egregious and heinous terrorist attacks claimed by the Taliban, Islamic State and on occasion other armed opposition groups. Donor interest in Afghanistan has been waning, including in providing support to sectors focusing on women and girls. This contrasts starkly with the autumn of 2001, when the issue of Afghan women was high on international military, political and humanitarian agendas, and advocacy groups spearheaded by the Feminist Majority Foundation were highlighting that women were victims of 'gender apartheid' in Afghanistan.

But not long after the 2001 Bonn conference, many international women's rights activists discovered to their dismay what many Afghan women already feared: discrimination faced by Afghan women did not simply evaporate with the removal of the Taliban. The Taliban were just one more manifestation of the structural discrimination, exclusion and inequality that had evolved in Afghanistan over hundreds of years.

The post-Taliban trajectory of women's rights in Afghanistan highlights potential pitfalls for women's presence and power in peace talks with the insurgency today, and the need for careful consideration and preparation by those involved with the women, peace and security agenda. Afghan women activists' perceptions of peace talks are largely negative, clouded by experiences of the past and now dominated by fears of exclusion, tokenism and loss of rights. High on the list of questions is whether a predominantly male-run process will result in leaders seeing fit to capitulate to Taliban demands for political, legislative and social changes which will be detrimental

to women. But talks can present positive opportunities for women to engage in negotiations proactively, to reinforce and even extend the gains achieved since 2001. Meanwhile for many rural Afghan women, ending violence caused by the conflict is the priority.

Bonn process

When the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, was deep in informal and formal deliberations preparing for talks in Bonn, one of the key questions under debate was whether to include women. Fresh from Afghanistan in October 2001, I attended several meetings at the offices of various UN agencies in New York, where opinions were frequently aired that Afghan women were clueless about politics and would take up seats around the negotiating table unnecessarily. This at a time when women's rights activists were hailing the success of the UN Security Council unanimously adopting Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.

As I explained one evening at the offices of then UNIFEM to a group of aggressive male journalists, not all Afghan women were the benighted victims of the Taliban that the press had been portraying for many years; there were professional Afghan women who had served in government as well as committed women's civil society groups. But my words were met with astonishment and incredulity. It was clear that 'gender apartheid' was not confined to Afghanistan.

But a historic moment had arrived for Afghan women and, witnessed by international bodies, their inclusion in national processes would soon be enshrined in a number of key national documents, for example the signing of

the Convention Eliminating All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the new Constitution of 2004, and later, the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA). Other determined individuals and pressure groups continued working behind the scenes. The result was three female delegates attending the UN-sponsored meeting in Germany which led to the Bonn Agreement, the fundamental document for the formation of a new Afghan government after the fall of the Taliban. The female delegates were Sima Wali and Rona Mansuri, members of the self-styled 'Rome process for peace' led by former king Zahir Shah, and Amena Safi Afzali, who attended as a full delegate for the Northern Alliance. Fatima Gailani was advising the predominantly Pashtun Peshawar Group, representing a previous peace process. There were some positive signs from the process. Sima Wali called for the creation of a Ministry of Women's Affairs. An Independent Human Rights Commission was also set up, to be headed by women's rights activist Dr Sima Samar.

Since then there has been more progress on women's equality and Afghan women have been catapulted into public and political life. Women now have a significant presence in both houses of parliament, ministries, local government, the diplomatic service and the High Peace Council. In June 2015 a National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 was approved. The text of this document is rather telling of the effective cap on women's advancement, however. It indicates that, 14 years after the fall of the Taliban and after millions of dollars of targeted programming, women are still in need of various types of support in order to participate in political and public life; it also recognises women's status as a social and economic minority and the importance of developing a robust implementation framework to support women's active participation in society.

Ensuring women's participation in peace talks today

Women's rights defenders in Afghanistan are justifiably distrustful of peace and reconciliation processes focused on the Taliban, which translates into a combative and suspicious attitude accompanied by hostile pronouncements. While such friction is understandable, shifting to a more proactive stance would facilitate more interesting and productive outcomes.

In a violent society, where security forces are stretched to keep the population safe and political assassinations are frequent, women are rightly still wary of conservative elements in formal and informal political spheres who oppose their presence and participation in politics and public life. Even with a president who is a self-proclaimed

advocate of women's rights, Afghan women still very much feel at the mercy of the funding vagaries and political whims of both the international community and Afghan political elites. Moreover, there is confusion about the role of women in peace and reconciliation processes – from local to national level. Women's actions and achievements in the High Peace Council and other bodies tend to be less public, leading to perceptions that women's roles can be dismissed as symbolic or limited. As a woman member of the HPC told me in February 2018, women's contributions are often belittled and their very presence can be challenged if they 'push too hard'.

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While peace talks with the Taliban present challenges for women's rights defenders, they may also provide opportunities. The assumption that women's involvement in a peace process presents some form of panacea to violent conflict requires scrutiny. But there is no valid argument against women's presence, as women's participation and voice are important factors for gender equality in political representation and are national goals in most countries. Demands from women's rights defenders and strong statements from President Ghani reinforce the need for women's participation in talks. After so much work on women's issues in Afghanistan, women still do not see many national allies and remain suspicious of external advocates who claim to support their cause *in absentia*.

There is a perception among women in Afghanistan that the gains they have made are not important for the men who will engage in talks – but this assumption may not serve Afghan women well. There is almost a sense that if a small group of women is not present, nobody else will lobby for their rights and they will be forgotten. If this is the case then women have to focus on alliance-building with men, to be confident that women's issues are represented and supported by both male and female actors in any peace process.

Representation – which women?

Women's participation intersects with debates around representation and identity. Which women would be the most appropriate or acceptable candidates to represent Afghan

women and which demographics need to be represented to ensure an adequate sense of ownership? Women leaders and groups need to initiate a process to conduct nationwide consultations with enough women to construct a valid, coherent and representative message on peace.

Issues of Muslim identity and levels of conservatism may also come into play. There has been an untested assumption that all Afghan women would unquestioningly rally around a rights-based agenda. Since the rise of the Taliban there has been a perception, again unproven, that Afghan men are for the most part conservative while the majority of women espouse modernity and a polity based on international human rights. Like Afghan men, however, women's Muslim identities also reflect a broad spectrum, from religious extremism to modern or more secular leanings. The prospect of the presence of the Taliban in the Afghan government is worrying for some people precisely because of their ideologies around women. This is why representation needs to be balanced, and not skewed towards either end of the spectrum of Muslim identity. Such issues should be considered and addressed now in order to create a united front. The alternative might be that women's ability to represent effectively is challenged, leading to their presence and voice being stymied at a critical moment.

It is not just Muslim identity which fragments attempts by women to create a coherent movement. Taking a more pragmatic view, most Afghan women live in provinces and rural locations. They feel the war acutely and may be more threatened by violence on their doorsteps than by the potential rollback of rights that many do not currently enjoy or even know about. Rural women in Afghanistan today bear the brunt of war, experiencing forced displacement, insecurity, food shortages and decreased access to healthcare and basic education for their children. They may also have lost menfolk and access to livelihoods. Such women may have different priorities to the minority who currently defend women's rights in very different milieus. The composition of representative groups of women should take such differences in priorities into consideration.

Furthermore, some women currently self-identify as potential victims or pawns in the post-Bonn political process. Their narrative is one of grievance about lack of power, access, voice and control. For the past 16 years, women's rights defenders have assumed that all parts of the Taliban movement see them as enemies, even though these women have never been combatants and have for the most part have never identified themselves as members either of the Northern Alliance factions or of the Afghan National Army. They have not taken any action to test their hypothesis of being the Taliban's enemy, but have

consistently used this perspective to highlight the grave dangers they face.

By convincing themselves that the Taliban are at war with them, women's rights defenders are potentially missing an opportunity to place themselves in a unique position in the vanguard of a peace process and even to begin discussions ahead of any formal negotiations. This could even afford them room to manoeuvre in terms of tackling the Taliban on their stance on issues of importance to both sides. The Afghan Public Policy Research Organisation stated in 2015 that during informal talks between representatives of the Taliban and the Afghan government in Oslo earlier that year, diplomatic and political cadres of the Taliban had reportedly been showing a more positive attitude towards female interlocutors, and also that some senior Taliban were now at least talking openly about women's political rights.

Negotiating women's rights with the Taliban

A key question is what demands and priorities would women actually take to the peace table? There is currently no clear narrative from Afghan women on a peace process with the Taliban. Discussions have consistently centred around: fear of betrayal by male politicians; fear of loss of what has been achieved on behalf of women, particularly provisions for the basic rights of women in the constitution; and fear of a reversal of some rights which were returned to women after the fall of the Taliban.

There is also often an assertion that gains from a peace process absent of women would not be sustainable. But it is not clear how women's participation would guarantee sustainability if women participants are in any case disempowered and must be granted space and permission to engage in the first place. This comes across as fearful and anxious rather than a proactive approach to entering the peace marketplace and seeing what is on offer. On the other hand, proactive approaches to peacebuilding on a small scale and at a local level have been fruitful, as a woman activist working with local *shuras* to reduce civilian casualties recently told me.

Many would argue that women's rights defenders and the Taliban have nothing to discuss. But attitudes among some Taliban leaders have been changing in relation to some issues affecting women, although as the Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organisation reported in 2015, such shifts in opinion among some Taliban leaders are not highly publicised:

'The Taliban leadership and the *Ulema* associated with it believe that they have gone as far as possible in nuancing their positions on women's rights and education without completely alienating their ranks and file, whose views

about women and education are typically much more restrictive than the more progressive elements in the leadership. However, the Taliban have not been very effective or proactive in communicating their more moderate positions and are probably waiting for talks to begin before going more public with them.'

Despite the lack of publicity, this does show movement in the right direction. Women's rights defenders, however, remain rooted in grievances of the past. They neither invite the Taliban to engage on the issues that the movement seems to be willing to give ground on, nor challenge the Taliban to a dialogue on more contentious subjects.

Safeguarding education, employment and health offer potentially productive entry points for women advocates and activists to talk to the Taliban. Provision of basic services has always been a practical and constructive point for engaging the Taliban on women's issues. During Taliban rule, women working in the health sector were often exempted from bans on employment and in spite of myriad accounts of the ban on education, the Taliban turned a blind eye to home schools and even the construction of girls' schools in certain provinces.

Interactions with Taliban pre-2001 revealed in some areas they gave limited access to education and health services for women, although escalations in fighting resulted in marked downturns in access to such services. The Taliban have also held *shuras* on access to education for women, with discussions centring around the hijab, segregation of the sexes, the role of Islamic education and topics suitable for women. There are also potential points of engagement on legal issues. The Taliban have been known to forcibly return inheritance shares to women when these were wrongfully allocated to male relatives as a result of pressure from traditional elders. There are other legal issues where the Taliban's approach has more in common with the aspirations of activists than supporters of *Pashtunwali* (Pashtun traditional ethical code).

Conclusion: pathways to meaningful participation

Afghan women's groups currently lack a clear narrative and a representative movement with sufficient influence to sustain itself. Without addressing this deficit, women's presence in any peace process may not lead to concrete gains or be able to resist the reversal of achievements from the past decade. Women's rights defenders may need to update their agenda and keep up to speed with Taliban policies and shifts in their stated identities and narratives. Coming largely from an urban, educated background, women's rights defenders may find that continuing to hold fast to a possibly outdated view of the Taliban as yet another group standing between them and their rights is not constructive, and will not help them to achieve their objectives.

Discussions on a range of issues with certain elements within the Taliban may well be possible. But they need to be mediated with sensitivity. The Taliban will be wary of anything which affects their identity. Mishandled engagement with them may lead to a negative change in the internal dynamics of the movement as well as relations with external actors, including jihadist sympathisers and funders.

The issue of representation also needs to be tackled, with any peace process on the horizon providing an opportunity for women's rights defenders to consult with the parts of the population they claim to represent, and to build the constituency to provide the popular support they currently lack. President Ghani's support for women's participation in peacebuilding efforts and negotiations should give women activists the impetus they need to engage, and to ramp up their efforts in formal and informal processes. Extreme diplomacy will be required in approaching the Taliban. But assuming that the movement has not changed its stance on women since Bonn is a pathway to an opportunity lost.