

A place at the table

Safeguarding women's rights in Afghanistan

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Participants from the Women for Women programme, Afghanistan. © Women for Women International.

Women in Afghanistan have achieved real progress in areas such as political participation, the rule of law, and education since 2001, but these hard-won gains remain fragile. With the imminent withdrawal of international forces, there is a risk that the government may sacrifice women's rights in order to secure a political deal with the Taliban and other armed opposition groups. The government and its international partners must do much more to support Afghan women's efforts and uphold their rights while ensuring that women have a strong voice in any future negotiations and political settlements.

Summary

'Women want peace but not at the cost of losing our freedom again.'
Noorjahan Akbar, co-founder of Young Women for Change.¹

Ten years on from the start of the Western intervention in Afghanistan, Afghan women are facing an uncertain future. Women have strived for and made important gains since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, including in political participation and access to education, but these gains are fragile and reversible.

The precarious situation for Afghan women is set against a backdrop of spreading insecurity across Afghanistan. Civilian casualties are increasing, with May 2011 the deadliest month of the war for civilians since 2007.² As security deteriorates across the country, violence against women is also on the rise.

Both the Afghan and US governments are attempting to engage in parallel talks with the Taliban to reach a political solution to the conflict before international military forces withdraw by the end of 2014. These preliminary contacts are matched by peace processes at the national level aimed at reconciling former Taliban fighters with the government.

The assassination of the government's top peace broker, former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, in September 2011 underscores how difficult peace and reconciliation will be to achieve in Afghanistan. What is needed is a political settlement to deliver an end to the fighting and sustainable long-term peace that will create a better life for all Afghans.

Today millions of girls are back in school and women are working once again as doctors, lawyers, judges, and police officers. These rights have been hard won over the past ten years. Major challenges remain and immense disparities between rural and urban areas persist. Women's rights are being eroded by spreading insecurity and a lack of political will to protect and promote them. At the same time, women are being sidelined in the reintegration and reconciliation process.

Afghan women, no less than their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers, want peace. But they also fear that their rights will be traded off for the sake of peace at any price.

However, there are no short cuts to peace in Afghanistan. The only way forward is a transparent and inclusive peace process involving representatives from all parts of Afghan society, including women. The more that women feel involved in and committed to a political settlement which safeguards their rights, the more likely they are, within their families and communities, to promote changes in attitude and genuine reconciliation – essential for a lasting peace.

Western leaders have a responsibility toward Afghan women, not least because protection of women's rights was sold as a positive outcome of the international intervention in October 2001.³ Ten years on, however, time is running out to fulfil these promises.

On the 10th anniversary of the intervention, we are calling on world leaders not to sacrifice the hard-won gains that Afghan women have made. Afghan women want peace – not a political bargain that only serves the interests of a few. In addition, helping women to have a strong voice in these political processes, to consolidate the advances they have made, and continue to build on their gains, is an important way for the international community to fulfil its agenda of setting Afghanistan on its own feet.

The Bonn Conference in December 2011, a decade after the first Bonn Conference, which laid the groundwork for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, is an important opportunity for both the Afghan government and the international community to signal their continued commitment to the peace process and to women’s role both in peace and reconciliation, and in Afghan society.

The Afghan government must publicly reaffirm its pledges to women’s rights, particularly if and when formal peace talks move forward. This means not just ensuring that women are represented in negotiations, but also renewing efforts to ensure they are able to actively participate at all levels of government and society. One important step would be to ensure that the Afghan delegation to the Bonn Conference is diverse and includes a strong contingent of women.

The international community, for its part, must offer specific guarantees of its long-term commitment to Afghanistan, including women’s rights and their needs, well beyond 2014. Both the government and the international community, supported by religious leaders, must seek to better promote women’s interests at the community level with the involvement of men and boys to ensure a lasting change. But, most of all, they must ensure that women are at the negotiating table to speak for themselves.

Key recommendations

The Afghan government and the international community must:

- Ensure women’s rights are not sacrificed, by publicly pledging that any political settlement must explicitly guarantee women’s rights;
- Make a genuine commitment to meaningful participation of women in all phases and levels of any peace processes.

The Afghan government must:

- Enhance efforts to increase representation of women in elected bodies and government institutions at all levels to 30 per cent;
- Encourage religious leaders to speak out on women’s rights in Islam;
- Intensify efforts to promote female access to education, health, justice, and other basic services.

The Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defence must:

- Improve awareness of women's rights and human rights law in the justice and security sector, and ensure effective implementation of these laws;
- Increase substantially women recruits in the security and justice sectors.

The international community must:

- Support expanded civic education programmes to raise awareness of women's rights at community level;
- Support efforts to improve female leadership;
- Intensify support to promote access to education and other key services, and ensure this support will continue at current or increased levels even as international military forces prepare to withdraw.

The UN must:

- Continue to monitor all government actions including the peace processes and provide increased support to the Afghan government on all negotiation, reconciliation, and reintegration processes.

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Notes

¹ Interview with Noorjahan Akbar, activist and co-founder of Young Women for Change, Kabul, July 2011.

² UNAMA Mid-Year Report 2011: Protection of Civilians, July 2011, accessed via <http://reliefweb.int/node/425795>

³ For instance, the then US First Lady Laura Bush gave a radio interview in November 2001 condemning 'deliberate human cruelty' to women. Her interview coincided with a US State Department report on conditions for women and children under the Taliban. See report in the Los Angeles Times, 18 November 2001, <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/nov/18/news/mn-5602>

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