

From Transition to Transformation - Women, Peace & Security

By Abdullah Athayi

“We, the women are so concerned of the post 2014 exit strategy however I am sure that international community never leaves us alone though they may decrease their military support but we are concerned of the security situation which will become worse... we may witness an increase in suicide attacks and fighting post 2014.¹” (Female MP, 2012)

Since December 2014, Afghanistan has shifted from the internationally led period of “Transition” (2001-2014) to an Afghan-led “Transformation Decade” (2015-2024). During the Transition, with support from the international community, Afghans sought to rebuild the bases of political-, security-, economic and societal institutions, rebuild infrastructure, and restore and protect women’s rights. The Transformation Decade seeks to consolidate the outcomes of Transition and ensure that Afghanistan achieves the goal of functional and democratic governance with rule of law, women and human rights protection, economic independence, and social stability.

Over the course of the 14 years since the Taliban downfall in 2001, Afghan women have made inroads and are playing a major role in institution and peace building processes. They have been contributing in various fields of peace and security, governance, conflict management, education and service delivery at the national, sub-national and local levels. Women have had a long journey in terms of their rights and socio-political participation. As the transition period ends and Afghanistan is entering into the new Transformation Decade, the main questions related to women, peace and security remain: What has been built to ensure women’s protection and participation over the last decade? And what strategic approach could consolidate gender equality in the decade to come?

This article analyses women’s achievements and gaps in the areas of peace and security over the last decade. It also explores priorities and strategies of women’s participation in social and political life. The methodology used for this article is primarily a desk review of the reports, research and papers related to women’s participation in peace and security sectors and decision-making bodies. Furthermore, the author uses a series of in-depth interviews by the HBS and its partner organizations, conducted for various projects of women’s participation in socio-political affairs between 2013 and 2015.

Women’s political participation and leadership

The 2001 international intervention has opened a new chapter for Afghan women. Besides the goal of establishing security, the protection, support and empowerment of women was the top priority of the international community. As a result, women have achieved significant progress in terms of leadership positions over the last decade. "Today women are better represented in various sectors, especially in government, than at any time in the history of Afghanistan [and] undoubtedly the Ministry of Women Affairs (MoWA) has played a key role in this regard, along with the parliament, media and civil society organizations."² (MoWA, 2013). Women participate at all levels of society as voters, candidates, legislators, ministers, governors, council members, civil society activists, and as members of the security forces and judiciary. The post-Taliban situation has not only enabled women to restore their access to inalienable rights and freedoms, but it also has ensured women's representation in a number of public arenas. Women hold 28% of the parliament seats and play a meaningful role in both houses of Wolosi Jirga (Lower house) and Meshrano Jirga (upper house). The quota mandates seem to have a positive impact on women's representation in parliament and in raising the voices of marginalized segments of society "...The national constitution foresees a quota for women, which promotes them even in the presence of male rivals and in a traditional environment..."³ (Female MP, 2012). Female members of parliament (MPs) do not only attend the meetings of the parliament but they also chair some of the important commissions of the parliament and take part in political debates inside and outside of the parliament. "Afghan women should not be seen from the perspective of their weakness but from the perspective of their strength. That's why I chose the most challenging commissions, Commission on Defense Affairs, Territorial Integrity."⁴ (Female MP, 2012). Currently, women represent 20% the Provincial Council's seats across the country.

The National Unity Government (NUG), as committed during the election, has introduced 4 women as cabinet ministers: the Minister of Women Affairs (Delbar Nazari), the Minister of Counter Narcotics (Salamat Azimi), the Minister of Higher Education (Farida Momand) and the Minister for Labor, Martyr, Disables and Social affairs (Nasrin Oryakhail). The NUG approach with regard to women rights and protection has been progressive insofar as the recent actions of the NUG indicate that the regime is moving towards a real role of women in leadership positions. Apart from the four cabinet members, two female governors have been appointed in the provinces whereas 35 women are supposed to be dispatched to Europe for leadership trainings and some female diplomats will be appointed to foreign countries. In the recent meeting with a group of Afghan women, President Ashraf Ghani reiterated his commitments towards the protection of women's rights. He said that the Afghan government will not compromise women's achievements, representation and rights during peace talks with the Taliban⁵.

Over the course of years, women parliamentarians, together with women rights groups and networks, have been lobbying for a female member of the Supreme Court. This eventually occurred and the president nominated Anisa Rasooli as the only female member of the Supreme Court in the recent history of Afghanistan. But the Wolesi Jirga did not give her a vote of confidence as the traditional elites and conservative male parliamentarians are opposing appointing a woman to this position.

Female participation in the 2014 presidential and provincial council's elections was constructive. Women played a significant role in the peaceful transformation of power by participating in the elections across the country. This significant turnout by female voters has shown that they are realizing their self-determination and are capable of shaping the power along with their male counterparts in society. "Women participation in this election has increased in comparison to previous elections, women's voices raised and their political participation was bold..."⁶(Female MP, 2015). Speaking at a press conference, the Independent Election Commission Chief, Ahmad Yousuf Noristani said that more than seven million votes were cast in the 2014 election and that there were 64 % male and 36 % female voters in the first round and 62 % male and 38 % female voter in the runoff elections.⁷ This means that the National Unity Government (NUG) has gained 38 % of its legitimacy by women and thus, it forces the government to pay attention to the women's rights agenda. Ignoring other areas of governance when it comes to women's rights and protection, the politics of the government will have to prioritize the needs of women, and address them in an effective and appropriate manner by increasing women's leadership positions and by adopting policies to support and protect them, considering women's political interests and supporting their contribution to the peace negotiations.

Legal & Policy Frameworks

Since the Bonn Agreement in 2001, which mandated gender-based governance and formulated the foundation for restoration, protection and consolidation of women's rights across the country, women's rights have become the top priority of the government and the international community. As a result, numerous policies and legal mechanisms have been adopted to restore and protect women's human rights. The most important and relevant legal and policy frameworks, which support women rights, will be assessed below:

The Afghan Constitution

The first ever democratic constitution of Afghanistan adopted in 2004 guarantees a number of rights for women including equal participation, the right to education, equality before the law and access to health services. The constitutional provisions not only abolish discrimination between men and women but it also obliges the government to support and ensure the safety

of families, children and women, as well as female political participation. It foresees quota mandates for women's representation in parliament, which has strengthened women's parliamentary politics. "I appreciate the constitution that gives women the right to join the parliamentary politics and gives women 68 seats, which enables women to do the same as male parliamentarians do"⁸ (Female MP, 2015). This provision has had a positive impact on women's participation in politics and in the peace building process over the last decade. In addition, the constitution obliges the government to sign and implement international conventions, which may contribute to women's empowerment and protection. "The country's constitution is one of the greatest historic achievements of the past decade and it is crucial to upholding those gains, obeying the constitution and remaining committed to it this is the key to make peace and stability possible."⁹ (Senate Member, 2013)

As part of the National Unity Government (NUG) deal, reforming of the constitution in the next two years and integration of the insurgent groups through peace negotiations has shaped the discourse over women's rights in recent years. The concerning issue in this regard is what would happen to the situation of women's constitutional rights and freedoms when amending the constitution. It seems crucial for women and women's rights activists to watchdog the process and develop a strong stance towards sustaining women's constitutional rights and freedoms, meaning that they need to consistently meet with various stakeholders, government and international actors to safeguard and sustain their rights during the upcoming Constitutional Loya Jirga.

The EVAW Law

The Law on Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW Law) has been enacted by President Hamid Karzai through an executive order in 2009 to protect women against violence and bring the perpetrators to justice. Since then, the law enforcement agencies and courts have implemented the law. For smooth implementation of the law, Elimination of Violence against Women Units have been established in the Attorney General office and have been mandated to investigate incidents of violence against women. Over the course of the years a lot of resources have been invested and several projects have been launched to enhance the capacities of the prosecutors of the EVAW Units dealing with criminal cases of violence against women.

In 2013, some women parliamentarians pushed the Wolesi Jirga (Lower House) to put the order on the agenda of the plenary session while others opposed this move, as they were concerned the law might be defeated by conservative members of parliament. Those who strived to put the law on the agenda argue that although the executive order on EVAW was a step forward, the law remained vulnerable to reversal by a new president. As the drawdown of the international troops approached, it was feared that the political climate would make it increasingly difficult to get the law anchored in parliament. In addition, the fear was that any

peace talks with the Taliban could end up sacrificing the EAW law in a bid to appease the militants. Securing parliamentary approval for the law would ensure a much stronger case for protecting it against extremist attacks.¹⁰ Those who were opposing this move argue that it was not the right time and anticipated that the law would not get approved. “We wanted to pass the law from the parliament and we also knew that it wouldn’t get votes because there are so many mujahedeen, mullahs and drug dealers who don’t want the law and won’t vote for it.”¹¹ (Female MP, 2015). Eventually, the law was rejected and a few months later the Criminal Law Review Working Group (CLRWG) of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) was established to unify all the criminal laws including the EAW law under a single penal code. The MoJ attempts to incorporate only the articles of EAW related to criminal law. The rest of the articles, including the definition of violence, factors and the assigning of responsibility to related administrations, would remain questionable. The women’s rights groups and networks have been lobbying to prevent the integration of EAW to the criminal coding process. “Our position is that we do not want the EAW law to be in the coding process. It should remain a special law because it is the concrete indicator of the gains women achieved in the past 14 years and particularly the Farkhunda case is a tiny part of the EAW law¹²” (Women’s rights Activist, 2015). “Given the increased terrible violence against women, including murder, cutting off women’s noses and ears and stringing up, a separate law, which criminalizes violence against women and brings the perpetrators to justice, is crucial¹³” (Women rights activists, 2015).

Electoral laws

In 2013 the electoral law was revised. Although much improved, it fails to shore up female political participation in provincial councils and the presidential elections. The previous electoral framework allocated 25 percent of provincial council seats to female candidates, something that had a positive impact on female representation in the last two provincial council elections. But in an inconceivable move, the Wolesi Jirga surreptitiously removed the designated quota system for female representation on provincial councils from the draft law. Afterwards the Meshrano Jirga reinserted it again, albeit in a reduced form. After lengthy debates and joint meetings, they eventually agreed on a 20 percent quota for female representation in the provincial council. The electoral law stipulates that, “at least 20 percent of the seats of each provincial council shall be allocated to female candidates.”¹⁴ Women’s rights activists and female legislators say that the law was revised and approved as a result of a push by conservative forces that do not approve of women’s empowerment.¹⁵

The 2013 election law also created impediments for female presidential candidates. It sets out tough candidacy criteria for presidential candidates, which work against women who are interested in running for presidential office. The major factor for fewer women nominating themselves to run in the presidential election is the new candidacy criteria¹⁶. Any candidate

who fails to obtain ten percent of the total vote and provide 100,000 voting cards and signatures from at least 20 provinces (Article 13 of the electoral law) must file a deposit of one million Afghanis (approximately 17,500 US dollars). This is a major obstacle for women who do not have sufficient financial support. Consequently only one woman registered as a presidential candidate during the whole process. That is compared to almost ten qualified women who had been poised to register as presidential candidates before the new election law came into effect¹⁷. The electoral law discriminates against female candidates and the only female candidate who did plan to run for the presidential election was disqualified by the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission (IECC) as not meeting requirements.

Except for the rights granted to women in the constitution, it seems that the ordinary laws are volatile when it comes to women's rights and regime changes. The volatility and precariousness of women's political participation becomes evident in the recent parliamentary revisions for the 2014 provincial and presidential elections, which codify a decrease in women's reserved seats at the provincial level from 25 to 20 percent.¹⁸ In addition, the rejection of the EVAW law is a big setback for women, particularly female parliamentarians who are supposed to push forward the women's rights agenda in one of the national institutions. This indicates that not only insurgency and insecurity, but the conservative representatives and traditional actors within the system pose constraints for women too.

The Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS)

The Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) has been a key progress toward promoting security, governance, economic growth and poverty reduction. The ANDS emphasizes gender equality as a cross-cutting issue between all ANDS sectors. The ANDS' ultimate goal is 'gender equality'; described as a condition where women and men fully enjoy their rights, equally contribute to and enjoy the benefits of development and neither is prevented from pursuing what is fair, good and necessary to live a full and satisfying life.¹⁹ The ANDS binds the government to address gender equality in all pillars of the ANDS and adopt policies and strategies, programming and budgeting to improve the situation of women. In order to monitor the implementation and progress of the ANDS not only the National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) has been developed but also the Gender Units have been established in numerous ministries to monitor gender mainstreaming in the public sector, even if there is much confusion about the role, structures, responsibilities and core tasks of these Units. Moreover, the Afghan government has put efforts to mainstream gender into government structures, programs, and budgeting to protect women and ensure access to education, health, employment, women's safety and non-violence.

The National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA)

The National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) is a policy framework, endorsed after multiple discussions with ministries, NGOs and the international community in 2008. NAPWA has been considered a major vehicle for consolidating women's gains over the last decade and using them as foundation for institutionalizing a more coherent and comprehensive strategy to improve the status of women. "With this National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, we are taking I-ANDS one step forward by translating its gender commitments and strategies into operational terms. This is also our vehicle for implementing the gender provisions of the Constitution, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) that was ratified by our government in March 2003, and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) that is the global framework for promoting the advancement of women."²⁰ NAPWA envisions "Afghanistan will be a peaceful and progressive country where women and men enjoy security, equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of life."²¹ The implementation of NAPWA will definitely provide support to ensure women's equal rights and participation in decision-making bodies, protection from violence and human development. NAPWA also requires the ministries to increase women's representation on all levels of civil service to at least 30 percent until 2018.

The Afghan National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 (NAP 1325)

The UNSCR 1325 is one of the main international frameworks which address women's participation in national decision making bodies, as well as highlight the pivotal role of women in conflict management, conflict resolution and peace building. After the collapse of the Taliban regime, the Afghan government began implementing UNSCR 1325 to promote women's equal participation and ensure their roles in conflict resolution and peace building processes. The international resolution binds the ratifying countries to take appropriate measures to enhance women's political participation and adopt preventive and restorative measures to increase women's participation in both public and private life.

As part of its commitment, the Afghan government has established a Steering Committee under supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) to develop the Afghan National Action Plan (NAP) 1325 to ensure the full and appropriate implementation of the UNSCR 1325 resolution. The Committee consisted of one civil society organization, the Afghan Women Network (AWN) and of 22 members consisting of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), ministries, departments and relevant institutional actors. At the first stage, beginning July 2011, the efforts of the committee focused on capacity building, preparations and establishing the mechanism. The second phase which was supposed to be completed in 2014, concentrated its main efforts on the thematic development and drafting of the Afghan NAP, where the focus has been on the thematic review, assessment and overview of UNSCR 1325 and international bests practices, creating communication and advocacy materials,

and on public awareness of the 1325 process.²² The Afghan NAP 1325 is a key instrument which pushes forward the meaningful participation of women in the security sector, decision making bodies and peace building processes, both during and beyond transition. “The peace process might change after 2014, or develop into a different scenario, but we need to be sure that two things are not violated – the first is democracy and the second is human rights, so the resolution 1325 is an effective instrument, which gives the government responsibility to ensure that women are a protected part of any security and peace talks.²³” (Female MP, 2012)

However, tangible steps have been taken in terms of a sound legal and policy framework to ensure representation and protection of women’s rights in Afghanistan. But these rights and freedoms granted to women often remain on paper and have not been adequately translated into practice at provincial and local levels. “The representation of women has been largely symbolic and only on the paper²⁴” (Women rights activist, 2013). On the other hand, “while the international community may promote gender equality, other domestic forces, from the Taliban to other conservative elements, clearly do not favor such change²⁵.” It is a common belief among grass roots and traditional elites that human rights and gender equality are a form of imperialism imported from the western countries. “This is a traditional society and the mindsets of the people have not changed, thus there still are many people in the parliament who don’t like female participation.²⁶” (Male MP, 2015). Although many laws, policies, strategies and conventions to ensure women’s protection and participation have been forged, a huge gap remains between paper and practice.

Women’s Security in Transition

The transition of security responsibilities from NATO/ISAF to ANSF was initially announced at the Lisbon summit in November 2010, and at the 2012 Chicago summit, the international community confirmed the end of the ISAF mission by December 31st, 2014. The Chicago summit also mapped out the transition of security from NATO/ISAF to ANSF in five phases. The first phase of the security transition was launched by the former president Hamid Karzai in March of 2011.

The debate over transition has been linked to political transition, security transition and economic transition. “The transition process includes all the aspects of politics, economy, security and other aspects, but security is at the top.²⁷” (Female MP, 2012). Since the very beginning of the international drawdown there have been huge concerns about the simultaneous transition scheduled for 2014, the security and political transition and its economical impact on the life of people. Some female parliamentarians being interviewed in 2012 stress that in 2014 the international community will leave and they would have to deal with the Taliban. They suggested that therefore, Afghans need to have an elected government before the international community withdraws “I believe that there should be a political

transition before security transition, because military transition does not work if there are no changes in government.²⁸” (Female MP, 2012). The economic transition has overshadowed the life of many Afghans, particularly women. This has been anticipated by many female parliamentarians during the transition period. “Economic transition will severely impact the people. Right now, lots of people are suffering from a lack of jobs, but when the international organizations and their support withdraw from Afghanistan, a collapse would impact the whole country’s young generation.²⁹” (Woman MP, 2012). With the security transition completed, many international organizations not only reduce their funding, but some of them remove their employees, exacerbating the unemployment problems. This also has a negative impact on women’s projects across the country. Security is connected to the overall economic situation. “The security challenges are due to poverty, lack of job opportunities and a low economic profile, so these people strive to kill people, steal and ravage properties and etc.³⁰” (Female MP, 2012). In addition to this general insecurity, certain traditions and practices also overshadow the life of women during transition. “The lack of security is one of the main hindrances to the progress of women and society, yet Afghan women are often victims of unreasonable traditions and practices that prevail in our society. Therefore, until we have ensured comprehensive peace, everyone will continue to suffer from the negative impact of instability.³¹” (Senator, 2013).

Some women do not understand transition as a transferring of security responsibility from the international forces to Afghan National Security Forces, but they go beyond any apparent meaning of transition and consider the realities of the society. “Afghanistan is one of the countries whose children were born in war and grew up in war, so during transition we should work a lot to change their mindsets and encourage young men and women to go to school, and prevent them from joining insurgency groups, because they are the cornerstone of the society and the future of our country.³²” (Female MP, 2012). In addition, “we expect good governance and justice, because if there is a transition, but there is no justice and good governance, then we may face problems especially in terms of women’s right and women’s issues.³³” (Women rights activist, 2012)

There has been a lengthy debate over the transition process since the very beginning of the international drawdown. The perspectives of people vary between being optimistic, pessimistic, happy and unhappy, because the international intervention has provided huge opportunities for Afghans, particularly for women. The majority of gains that women achieved over the last decade have been fundamentally linked to the 2001 international support and intervention. “This is the international community’s achievement that I am able to be a representative as a woman. In addition, a situation has been created in which women can work, study and get engaged in civil society activities³⁴” (Female MP, 2012). Furthermore, “one of the most important achievements is that women are able to work outside their home. Before the

support by the international community and security, we were not able to go to the mountainous areas for campaigning for the parliament, as I did. Now, there are lots of women who, similar to me, are able to get an education and work outside of their home.³⁵” (Female MP, 2012). A lot of things have been done for rebuilding the country’s governance structures – elections, employment, education, access to health services, infrastructure and much more. However, these efforts were accompanied by the realization that they were donor-driven and lacked innovative approaches from the Afghan side and have weakened self-reliance, responsibility structures, programming and more. “Afghans have grown up in an environment, where they just consume, even if they are able to produce something themselves. It is like the proverb we have in our language that says ‘They did not teach us how to get fish, but they taught us how to eat fish’. In terms of security and economy, we are not prepared or trained for the impending departure of the international community from Afghanistan.³⁶” (Female MP, 2012). The drawdown of the international community and the reduction of funding has had a negative impact on Afghan citizens. It is difficult for Afghans to manage and take on responsibility all at once. The best option would be to gradually transform the political, security and economy transition, in which Afghans might be able to govern their country.

The Afghan Women Network (AWN) and the Afghanistan Public Policy Research organization (APPRO) have developed certain indicators to monitor the impacts of transition on Afghan women in the areas of mobility and access to public life, access to services (health and education), access to justice and violence against women. According to the fifth cycle of the report on Women’s Security in Transition, published in January 2015 after the completion of the transition period “the vast majority of women attribute the increase in violence against women, to poverty, rising unemployment and drug addiction. The deterioration of security and rise of poverty and unemployment have limited women’s access to justice and services³⁷.” A worsening of the security situation across the country has been anticipated by numerous people during and after the transition.

Farkhunda’s Case – remobilizing

The first alarming women’s rights violation occurred shortly after the transition process ended, and involved Farkhunda, a 27 year-old girl who studied Islamic studies. She was kicked and beaten to death by a large group of men, armed with sticks and stones. Finally, the angry men ran a vehicle over her while she was still alive, and set fire to her. The brutal incident took place on Thursday, March 19th, 2015 at Shah-e-Do Shamsheer shrine in the middle of the capital city of Kabul, within walking distance from the presidential palace. The horrific murder was filmed on mobile phones by the passersby and widely circulated on national and international social media. “One of the worst incidents was the Farkhunda [case], which was terrible and degrading and which we never expected. It shook the whole network, and me as a human being, to the

core, because it was the first incident of such brutality happening here in Afghanistan.³⁸” (Women rights activist, 2015). Farkhunda’s case occurred after more than a decade of efforts to promote women’s rights and directly after the transition period ended. Following the incident, the president formed a fact-finding commission including female parliamentarians, women’s rights groups and relevant government institutions to investigate the case. The investigation proved that Farkhunda was falsely accused of burning the Quran, given her higher religious education and detailed knowledge of the holy Quran. But “the commission was unable to identify a definitive motive for the attack, but said it was likely that Farkhunda had encouraged visitors to the shrine to abstain from buying charms, upsetting shrine guardians and leading to the false accusations³⁹”. It is assumed that based on her knowledge of Islam, she decided to speak up against the practice of mullahs (religious scholars) selling tahwiz (amulet), which contain verses from the Quran that are said to bring good luck in the life of the people.

A nationwide consensus and unity for the protection and advancement of women has emerged following Farkhunda death. “We defend our position as women - what else should we do? Because Farkhunda could have been any of us.⁴⁰” (Women’s rights activist, 2015). Over thousands of women’s rights groups and civil society activists marched on the streets in front of the Supreme Court, demanding justice and strict punishment for the killers of Farkhunda. “Not only civil society activists, but also ordinary people, men and women, came together and raised their voice to push the government to follow up Farkhunda’s case⁴¹” (Women’s rights activist, 2015). “Furthermore, it was not only the women’s organizations and networks, but also various other groups that initiated [demonstrations against Farkhunda,s death], which gave us more energy and motivation that we were not alone.⁴²” (Women’s rights activist, 2015).

The increased violence against women across Afghanistan, including the cruel killing of Farkhunda in the capital of the country, leaves a lot of questions pertaining to women’s security and the situation of women’s rights to be solved in the decade to come. Though the terrible killing of Farkhunda will remain alive in the minds and hearts of the people, particularly Afghan women have to make an effort to bring about fundamental changes for women’s social protection. However, the influence of Farkhunda’s case on repressive mindsets and bad practices is worth mentioning: Her death changed years of struggle for ordinary women and civil society activists and advocates. The shocking display of violence mobilized even the most conservative and traditionalist elites in support of women’s rights – elites, who regularly oppose the women’s rights agenda. This is, indeed, a turning point for women, and can bring a lasting change to the social and legal protection of women if they can manage to direct it in a positive way.

Women participation in security sector and peace negotiation

Afghanistan has been named the world's most dangerous country to be born a woman⁴³. Regardless of cultural practices and social norms, the ongoing conflict over the decades has adversely affected women's lives. "Fortunately, the situation for girls and women has improved over the past few years, and they can choose to study in any field and enter any kind of profession in the security and military areas."⁴⁴ (Policewoman, 2013). Currently, 1373 women out of 147,838 police officers are serving in the Afghan National Police, and 352 women out of 149,650 soldiers are serving in the Afghan National Army. The Afghan government aims to increase the number of women within the armed forces by at least 10 percent. According to reports, women mostly work in logistical and administrative roles. Women in the police tend to be active in the Family Response Units and other duties where police must deal with women as victims or criminals.⁴⁵ "We live in a society where honor killings, incidents of violence and thousands of other issues relating to women make the headlines on a daily basis, therefore; the representation of women in these various fields will lead to the better growth of the nation. That applies to the military, too. The participation of women is undeniably and undoubtedly an important way to improve military programs and form a relationship with society⁴⁶." (Policewoman, 2013).

The High Peace Council (HPC) has been founded in 2010 to provide political support to the peace process and to oversee the implementation of the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP). The HPC has 70 members and out of 70 members only 9 are women. This means that women constitute 13 percent of the Afghanistan Peace negotiations. At the provincial level, there are a total of 31 peace provincial councils with 20-30 members, and only 2-4 are reported as being women. Although they have been part of HPC, both at the national and local level, their position inside HPC has not been defined, and their role in peace negotiations are vague. Still, the symbolic value of women as part of the peace process is important, and HPC, as a whole, has ensured that women's gains over the last decade in terms of access to education and employability and participation in social and political affairs are the red lines that will not be compromised in the peace process.

Women rights and the recent peace talks

After the formation of the National Unity Government and constructive cooperation by the regional actors, peace talks have rapidly been taking place across the globe, between representatives from the Afghan government and Taliban delegations.

In the non-official meeting sponsored by Pugwash in Qatar on 2-3 May, 2015, civil society representatives - including a few women, along with various other parties and groups - talked with a Taliban delegation face to face. In addition, on June 6th, 2015, a Taliban delegation met a group of female Afghan lawmakers and peace negotiators in the Norwegian capital Oslo⁴⁷. Though the meetings were deemed informal, it has been considered an unprecedented step for

Taliban militants to discuss on women's rights, seeing that they have harshly restricted the rights and freedoms of women during the Taliban's five-year rule in Afghanistan between 1996-2001. Even in an unofficial capacity, the meeting of Taliban representatives with Afghan female leaders represents a potential turning point in the militant group's positions⁴⁸, meaning that their politics with regard to women's rights and their participation in socio-political affairs have changed. Taliban militants have expressed their support for the protection of women's rights in the Doha conference. A statement released by the Taliban in local language indicates that, "the Taliban are committed to the rights of women, which have been guaranteed in Islam" and goes on to elaborate certain significant rights of women: "women have the right to choose their spouse, the rights to property and inheritance, education and work."⁴⁹

On Monday, June 15th, a six member delegation including former Minister of Women Affairs went to the Norwegian capital of Oslo to meet with Taliban envoys. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the potential modalities of comprehensive peace negotiations. Presence of women as part of the peace delegation is a positive sign towards respecting and protecting the rights of women. Their presence in any peace talks could ensure that their gains will not be compromised during peace negotiations.

Karzia's government has taken significant measures in strengthening the role and participation of women, not only in security sector, but also in national decision-making bodies. Similarly, the National Unity Government has provided the foundations for further consolidating the role and participation of women in security sectors, peace talks and national institutions. Women's participation is one of the precondition of the peace talks and the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The NUG is committed to ensure women's participation in all decision-making bodies at national and sub-national level, as sustainable peace and stability requires women's cooperation and political participation. Indeed, establishing gender equality and women participations in all levels of political and social affairs is precisely what the UNSCR 1325 mandated its members to do.

The Way Forward

The transformation decade, the years of 2015-2024, is the benchmark for all Afghan women to not only build on achievements of the past decade, but also to consolidate and institutionalize women's social security, political participation and basic fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution. Despite significant developments and achievements made for women since 2001, there has been a common understanding among Afghans that many of these gains might be at risk in the aftermath of the transition. The ongoing conflict across the country requires serious action on the part of the country's political rulers, to enable people to get through the period of transition and successfully enter the transformation period. They must draw on past experiences to push forward and bring tangible changes to the people's lives. The current peace

and negotiation process, the possible integration of the Taliban, amendments to the constitution and the parliamentary election of 2015 will all be the critical indicators, which may either push forward or limit women's participation and protection.

It is important for Afghan women and relevant stakeholders to cross from policy development to the concrete implementation of the conventions, laws, policies and strategies related to women's protection, participation and representation. This means that parliamentarians, women's rights activists, networks and government actors should shape their approaches towards the realization and implementation of policies and strategies. At the time of writing this essay, the Afghan NAP 1325 has just been finalized. Now, it needs to be published and publicized so that women and men know its contents and begin to practice them. It is significant for Afghan women to prioritize the realization of the NAP 1325 and NAPWA, as they will serve as concrete indicators to sustain the gains that have so far been achieved. Indicators, which will help to foster and push forward women's participation in leadership, peace and security sector throughout the transformation decade.

It is crucial that women make up a major part of the workforce and that they participate in important political decision-making processes to be able to defend their well-being and their security. Only then will the government take decisions that truly represent Afghan women's interests.

Moreover, it will be of great importance to further establish strong coordination and a united voice among both women within the institutional system (women MPs, ministers, governors, directors) and women outside of it (women rights activists, women networks, lectures) during the next decade. Over the past few years, a lack of trust and a deficit in coordination among various women groups has contributed to isolate interventions and programming related to women's rights. A coordinated platform would ensure that international donor support to women's rights and women's empowerment is channeled in the right way.

Women also need to push forward such a common platform as the peace talks approach. Additionally, the focus should not be limited to increasing the quantity of women represented in the High Peace Council (HPC), but rather reflect on the quality of the women rights agenda.

Last but not least, as the transition process comes to an end and donor agencies reduce their funding, it is significant for Afghanistan civil society organizations and women's groups to pursue women's rights issues on a volunteer basis, rather than in the form of donor funded projects. Only widespread volunteer initiatives and motivation will be able to sustain the women's rights agenda.

In summary, Afghan women have come a long way and have restored their basic rights and freedoms. They have gained fundamental rights in terms of participation and representation in

socio-political affairs, at least in the major cities. Even though many changes made so far remain largely on paper, they still reflect a major progress in a society where traditionalism, societal conservatism, and discrimination prevail.

The politics of the National Unity Government with regard to women's representation, protection and sustaining the gains made in the women's rights agenda, so far spark optimism. They have provided significant ground for an effective role and engagement of women in future public affairs. These steps are important, as they guarantee the foundation for ensuring gender equality, the representation of women's interests and women's protection.

The post-2014 period presents numerous challenges, but also many further opportunities for advancing gender equality in Afghanistan. Women have gained sufficient knowledge to safeguard, pursue, and consolidate their rights in a traditional, patriarchal and male-dominated society. Afghan women now do not only need to build on the achievements they have made in the previous years, but they also need to turn towards institutionalizing their rights as equal citizens, so that the next generations can enjoy equal rights and equal opportunities over the coming decades as well. It is crucial for Afghan women, whether in government, civil society or parliament, to get together under one umbrella and unify and prioritize their needs, demands and programs and jointly work towards making their own future.

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