The Women of Afghanistan: Sustaining Gains and Ensuring Security for Their Future

Melanne Verveer and Mayesha Alam
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Research and experience continue to suggest that women are essential stakeholders in the peace, security and stability of any nation, and this is especially true in countries affected by conflict and political upheaval. The empowerment, protection and promotion of women worldwide is a strategic foreign policy and national security priority of the United States, as reflected in the National Action Plan released in December 2011 and reaffirmed by Executive Order 13595 issued by President Obama. The National Action Plan, which grew out of an interagency process that included the U.S. Departments of Defense and State, USAID and other relevant federal agencies, provides a framework for U.S. diplomatic, development and military-related efforts to include the participation and perspectives of women to ensure more effective outcomes for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The Plan lays out five key areas: 1) National Integration and Institutionalization; 2) Protection from Violence; 3) Participation in Peace Processes and Decision-making; 4) Conflict Prevention and; 5) Access to Relief and Recovery. The Plan also necessitates an integration of gender perspectives into American foreign policy and national security efforts.

As Afghanistan prepares for a major transition in 2014, with the winding down of U.S. and other international forces, the future of women may hang in the balance. A key concern for international donors, civil society partners and especially Afghan women is: will the progress that Afghan women have made in the last decade be sustained and built upon or will women be oppressed and Taliban-style abuses be reinstated? Moreover, will their equal participation in decision-making and governance, which is so crucial for the future of Afghanistan, grow or be reversed? This brief outlines some important steps to date and provides recommendations for consolidating gains at this critical juncture for Afghanistan’s future.

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Commitments and Legal Frameworks

Reintegration of and reconciliation with the Taliban must not come at the expense of Afghan women and girls, minorities or any other vulnerable groups. The U.S. has stated that as a part of the outcome of any process, the Taliban and other armed opposition groups must lay down their arms and accept Afghanistan's constitution, including its provisions that protect the rights of Afghan women and girls. President Obama reaffirmed U.S. commitments when he travelled to Afghanistan to sign the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) between the United States and Afghanistan. Embedded in the Strategic Partnership Agreement is the protection of women’s rights, and advancement of the essential role of Afghan women in society. In areas of economic and social development, the SPA outlines joint efforts to support Afghanistan in developing its human capacity, including access to education at all levels for all Afghans and to basic health services – most importantly for Afghan women and children. In furthering the peace process, the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP), which is in part funded through the National Defense Association Act (NDAA), includes assurances that a portion of the funds will be directed to supporting the role of women in these processes.\(^2\)

In Afghanistan, the U.S. Central Command and NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) have established gender advisors to assist commanders in identifying the differing effects that a potential operation may have on local men and women.\(^3\) Some of these advisors also provide support to educate personnel on various potential efforts to ensure that women’s rights and security are factored into decisions throughout ISAF, and to coordinate the efforts of their subcommands with external international organizations, NGOs, and governmental organizations.

Violence Against Women

Partnering with women in vulnerable areas is critical to preventing conflicts from breaking out in the first place. The status and condition of women can serve as telling indicators of a country’s overall stability and security. Especially in volatile political settings, the freedom of women and their ability to participate in public life or be protected against violence, for example, are important factors to monitor for signs of

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what may lie ahead. At the same time, women can be important resources for detecting impending conflicts at an early stage because they know the underlying tensions that exist within a community and often know first when communities are fraying and when citizens fear for their safety. Strengthening protection for women and girls during and after conflict is essential as no country can restore peace or maintain stability when its population lives in fear of violence. For women and girls, and men and boys, gender-based violence is both a cause and consequence of societal breakdown. Civilian insecurity, widespread impunity, and weak rule of law all contribute to high rates of gender-based violence. 

While the overall figures of Afghan civilian casualties have dropped in six years, according to the 2012 Afghanistan Annual Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, the number of Afghan women and girls killed or injured increased by 20 percent compared to 2011. The majority of female victims were killed or injured while engaging in everyday activities in their homes or in the fields. Moreover, women and girls killed and injured from incidents of targeted killings more than tripled in 2012. Recently, for example, the killing of two directors of the Department of Women’s Affairs in Laghman province, the recent killing of Lieutenant Islam Bibi, one of the most high-profile female police officers in Afghanistan, and the kidnapping of female MP Farida Ahmadi Kakar drew much press attention and international condemnation, reminding the world that safety of women is constantly under threat by those who would oppress women and keep them out of positions of authority and off the road to progress. These cases, and many others that go unreported, exemplify why it is imperative that the U.S. Government continues to push for the full implementation and greater awareness of the Afghan Elimination of Violence Against Women law, issued by Presidential decree, the
Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, and other efforts to uphold to the protections of the rights of Afghan women and girls in the Afghanistan Constitution.  

**Afghan Accountability**

Such laws and legal frameworks providing protection can only be implemented to the extent key stakeholders and local Afghans are aware of them and held accountable for enforcing them. Training Afghan National Security Forces on these mechanisms and the rights of women and girls through Afghan laws will help to strengthen implementation efforts. Gender sensitization through training is, however, only one component of improving civilian protection and civil-military relations. The incorporation of women into the Afghan police force is important for not only achieving gender equality but also enhancing protection of vulnerable groups. The presence of women in security forces is a salient measure for increasing women’s confidence that their lives are valuable and ought to be protected. Women in positions of authority, particularly in military or police organizations, also serve as examples in deeply traditional societies that women, too, can lead. At the same time, holding accountable members of security forces, who fail to protect or deliberately violate the rights of women and girls, is also crucial to ending impunity and restoring the faith of civilians in security forces. It is important to incorporate these and other types of key efforts throughout both bilateral agreements, such as through the Bilateral Security Agreement, and in existing programs and engagements with local religious, judicial and political leaders.

In recent months, there have been a growing number of troubling signs that suggest the gains made for and by Afghan women are fragile and could be bargained away by certain political powers during negotiations in the peace process. There have been numerous attempts to erode the progress that has been made to elevate Afghan women and dismantle legislation that protects their rights and freedoms. These include, for example, targeted violence towards visible women leaders such as Fariba Ahmadi Kakar, a decrease in the number of reserved seats for women in provincial councils and the recent edict issued by clerics in the Deh Salah region of Baghlan province that would reinstate Taliban-era restrictions on women’s mobility, access to education and participation in public life. Moreover, President Karzai’s recent appointments to the human rights commission, which include former Taliban officials with appalling human rights records, reflect a blatant disregard for the future protection of rights of women and minorities. Members of the international community have reacted with rightful concern and some donors have threatened to withdraw aid if both the protection and participation of women is not guaranteed during and after the 2014 transition.

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Recommendations for the Way Forward

Facilitating safe and equal access to relief and recovery efforts after a conflict is a fundamental step to ensuring effective long-term support as well as to sustaining progress. USAID recently announced their largest gender-focused program, called PROMOTE, which commits $200 million in support of women and girls in Afghanistan during and beyond the transition process.\(^\text{10}\) This five-year program aims to build upon previous and existing efforts targeting a new generation of educated Afghan women. This initiative will focus on increasing women’s contributions to Afghanistan’s development, strengthening women’s rights groups, boosting female participation in the economy as well as bolstering business and management skills, and increasing the number of women in decision-making positions within the Afghan government. This is undoubtedly an ambitious agenda and will require cooperation among parties as well as security guarantees. These initiatives are examples of “smart power” at work and represent important steps forward in integrating women into all aspects of peacebuilding and security, but can only be successful through partnership and collaboration across the Afghan government, with the assistance of donor governments and through multilateral organizations. At the same time, the role of the private sector and civil society organizations cannot be overstated.

Another area of focus is expanding women’s participation in peace processes and decision-making institutions before, during, and after conflicts. Security in Afghanistan will only take root when women at all levels – national, provincial and district – have an active role in rebuilding civil society and a voice in their nation’s political process. At Afghanistan’s constitutional convention in 2004, women accounted for only 20 percent of the delegates but they successfully advocated for equal rights for all Afghan citizens and they came together across ethnic lines to support the Uzbek minority’s efforts to gain official status for their language.\(^\text{11}\) Today, there are only a handful of women present in the High Peace Council.\(^\text{12}\) Women need to be able to participate freely as voters and as candidates in the country’s democratic processes. This will be especially true for presidential election scheduled for spring next year. In order for this to be possible, an enabling environment must be created. For example women election officials need to be trained and deployed to make it safer and easier for


\(^{12}\) A full list of the members of the High Peace Commission can be found on their website [http://www.hpc.org.af/english/](http://www.hpc.org.af/english/)
Afghan women to vote. At the same time, women candidates whose lives are endangered by the Taliban and other extremist factions should be afforded physical protection through the national police force.

If and where possible, efforts should be made to cooperate with religious leaders in Afghanistan to instill respect for women’s rights and condemn gender-based violence. Allying with religious leaders, including local Imams, has been a particularly effective mechanism to call for protection of women’s rights and participation of women in public life because religious leaders can communicate these ideals in a way that is culturally appropriate and in accordance with Quranic values and therefore more likely to be accepted by local populations. For example, Dr. Sakeena Yacoobi, the founder of the Afghan Institute for Learning, has helped create safe access to education for girls by garnering the support of religious leaders in the placement of schools within close proximity to mosques. The recently launched Religious Leader Engagement National Strategy is a tool for the U.S. government, and its partners on the ground, to creatively address sociocultural barriers to women’s empowerment in Afghanistan.¹³

The future of Afghan women has been a non-partisan issue in U.S. Leaders from both parties have voiced concern for the safety and freedoms of Afghan women in the post-2014 U.S. engagement. Any prospect for sustainable peace, stability and economic opportunity in Afghanistan will not be possible if Afghan women are marginalized or silenced. Leaders in the U.S. and in the larger international community need to continue to speak out on the indispensable role Afghan women can and must play in building a more secure, economically prosperous and peaceful Afghanistan. This is not an issue for women alone and must be championed by men and women alike because the fate of Afghan women is incontrovertibly linked to the fate of the whole country.