

Moving Mountains

*The Vital Role of Afghan Women in Forging
a Shared Future*



PALWASHA HASSAN

About The Author: Amplifying Afghan Women's Voices and Power



In her role as a Senior Fellow at the Georgetown Institute of Women, Peace and Security, **Palwasha Hassan**, a long-time Afghan women's movement leader, launched this research study in December of 2022 to: 1) identify themes and priorities that diverse women's groups could agree on, 2) facilitate constructive dialogue among Afghan women, and 3) persuade policymakers to include women's perspectives in any dialogues aimed at fostering peace and negotiating how to build a stable, inclusive, and peaceful Afghanistan.

Hassan is one of hundreds of women's rights leaders who were forced to flee Afghanistan after Kabul fell to the Taliban in 2021. With help from colleagues at the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and partners, Hassan was able to evacuate Afghanistan with her family and eventually establish herself in Washington, D.C.

Through her personal experience living in exile and maintaining frequent communication with international policymakers and Afghan colleagues both inside and outside the country, she witnessed the global community's need for guidance on how to address the situation in Afghanistan, from a women's point of view.

Today, Hassan serves as the Senior Technical and Program Director for Mina's List and long-time Afghan women's movement leader. She holds a master's degree in Postwar Recovery Studies from York University in the UK. Her achievements include establishing Roazana, the first women's legal support organization in Afghanistan, and co-founding the Afghan Women Network, which played a pivotal role in establishing women's rights pre-Taliban, and serving as the Executive Director of the Afghan Women's Educational Center. Hassan also contributed to drafting several laws pertaining to women's rights, including family law, proposals for new Shiite personal laws based on progressive Islamic models, and laws aimed at eliminating violence against women. She also served as a member of the constitutional Loya Jirga (2004) in Afghanistan.

Hassan was one of the 1,000 Afghan women nominees for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, a finalist for the Sakharov Prize, and in 2022 received the Hillary Rodham Clinton Award for exceptional leadership and dedication to human rights and women's rights from Georgetown University's Institute for Women, Peace and Security.

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The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security

The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security seeks to promote a more stable, peaceful, and just world by focusing on the important role women play in preventing conflict and building peace, growing economies, and addressing global threats like climate change and violent extremism. The Institute aims to document the critical role women can and must play in peace and security, and ensure that evidence-based research is accessible to practitioners and policymakers. To do so, the Institute engages in rigorous research, hosts global convenings, advances strategic partnerships, and nurtures the next generation of leaders. The Institute is headed by former US Ambassador for Global Women's Issues, Melanne Vermeer.

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Executive Summary

Overview

Since the Taliban takeover in 2021, Afghanistan has faced a grim confluence of crises—a failing economy, widespread poverty and famine, rampant human rights abuses, and a total erasure of the rights of women and girls. Devastating earthquakes and the deportation of Afghans from Pakistan have further compounded the challenges facing the country. The Taliban appear to be indifferent to international sanctions or any of the usual levers of diplomacy and have not heeded global calls to ease restrictions on women and girls. As the situation intensifies, it has become harder to imagine how things will improve, especially for those most impacted.

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, the international community has taken steps to address the situation. In December 2023, the United Nations Security Council adopted a new resolution (UNSCR 2721) on Afghanistan that aims to bring coherence to wide-ranging political, humanitarian, and development activities. Importantly, the Resolution calls for the appointment of a United Nations special envoy for Afghanistan to uphold recommendations from an independent assessment, “particularly regarding gender and human rights.”¹ Not surprisingly, the Taliban have not accepted the report findings or recommendations. Additionally, Afghan women continue to be marginalized from decision-making roles and opportunities to meaningfully influence political processes focused on the future of the country.

To further complicate matters, Afghans struggle to form a unified vision for the future of the country. While many courageous Afghan women continue to speak out against Taliban oppression, consensus on the way forward remains out of reach. Decades of war and instability have created deep divisions in Afghan society, making it difficult for the Afghan women’s movement to mobilize a coordinated, strategic response and articulate a cohesive platform for advocacy.

To support better coordination and advocacy, this study engaged Afghan women to identify priority actions for peace and stability in the country. The goal of the project was to support Afghan women in articulating a strong and unified voice in preparation for the day when peace negotiations are once again possible. While it is hard to imagine a future in which the Taliban will consider progressive reforms or is no longer in power, we believe it is important to start planning for that day now to ensure diverse perspectives are considered and progress toward meaningful reform can be made over time. Afghan women must be central to any national dialogue and future peace processes.

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Drawing on insights from survey findings, as well as interviews and a group discussion with Afghan women leaders, this report highlights the vital perspectives of Afghan women in order to inform efforts aimed at forging a peaceful, inclusive, and shared future among Afghanistan's diverse communities. The women who participated in this project represent a variety of geographical regions, ethnicities, professions, and political beliefs. Some are living in exile, and others remain in Afghanistan. Despite differences, participants shared many common goals and a conviction that, while international support was vital for any substantive change, only Afghans can lead the way out of the current crisis, and Afghan *women* are critical to creating an inclusive, sustainable solution.

The title of this report was inspired by a powerful Afghan proverb: "If men are mountains, then women are the movers." Despite perceptions that the situation in Afghanistan is at a standstill, this proverb reminds us of the strength of women to influence and change even the most difficult situations. We hope findings from this study will serve as a resource for more coordinated and effective action that is aligned with the priorities of those most impacted by the Taliban's brutal takeover of the country.

Findings

- Current international pressures and sanctions are inadequate and cannot be effective unless the international community takes a stronger and more coordinated position.
- The international community has contributed to Afghanistan's instability and isolation and should play a role in restoring peace and security. While it is the responsibility of Afghans to restructure Afghanistan's government and restore women's rights, they need facilitation and political support from the international community to do so.
- Afghanistan needs to adopt more equitable, inclusive power-sharing norms and that Afghan women must play a central role in all aspects of social, economic, and political life.
- Establishing social rights (a subset of human rights) is critically important for building a government that could sustain lasting peace in Afghanistan.
- The Taliban's interpretation of Sharia is uniquely extreme—to restore order and cultivate lasting peace, the country should look back to previous, more progressive interpretations of Sharia.
- The country could benefit from a national healing process to help Afghans repair divisions within the country and move on from historic wrongs, including the role of the international community in isolating and destabilizing Afghanistan over many decades.

Recommendations

Our research uncovered many areas of commonality among otherwise divided Afghan women activists and revealed a rough consensus as to what needs to be in place for lasting peace in Afghanistan. We offer the following recommendations based on our findings and previous research in this arena:

1. Revoke all bans on girls' and women's social rights and participation.

Restoring women's ability to attend school, work outside the home, receive health care, and move about freely should be a prerequisite for any meaningful national dialogue or international engagement with the Taliban.

2. Include women in decision-making.

Prioritize women's meaningful inclusion and participation in all of Afghanistan's humanitarian and longer-term economic recovery activities.

3. Hold democratic elections.

If held under the auspices of the international community, free and fair elections would be a fundamental step toward Afghanistan establishing an inclusive and representative government.

4. Conduct a census.

With the support of the international community, Afghanistan should conduct a national population census to help inform how they share power and resources in the future.

5. Decentralize power.

Afghans must define a model of inclusiveness that is responsive to the full range of majority and minority concerns at the national and local levels and that more constructively reflects long-standing differences among ethnic groups and geographic regions.

6. Create a reconciliation plan.

Afghans need to develop a long-term reconciliation plan that addresses real and perceived historical grievances. They must set a timeframe for acknowledging past grievances and work toward a shared future that includes more realistic roles for the international community and neighboring regions.

Introduction

Since the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan fell to Taliban forces on August 15, 2021, thousands of Afghans have been forced to leave the country for their own safety, particularly women who held leadership positions in government, the judiciary, and civil society.

The situation inside the country worsens daily, and so far, the Taliban have maintained an inflexible negotiating position. They appear to be indifferent to the suffering of their people and undaunted by sanctions coming from the international community. As of this writing, girls are prohibited from receiving secondary and higher education, women cannot work in NGOs or for the United Nations, and they face hurdles in holding most jobs outside the home. The Taliban have also shut down the media,² free speech,³ art, music, and other central elements of civil society.⁴ Journalists, activists, and artists are subject to constant pressure and scrutiny, and many have been arrested, abducted, or made to disappear.

The Afghan women we interviewed for this project, and many of those speaking out in the media, are relying on international support to address this unsustainable situation. Afghans fear that the international community will abandon their country completely or opt to forego women's rights and recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government to facilitate the flow of humanitarian aid. Research participants acknowledged that some kind of engagement with the Taliban was necessary but were wary of such engagement if it did not come with a meaningful improvement in women's rights or include diverse Afghan groups and ethnicities.

Security Council unanimously adopts Resolution 2681 (2023) on Afghanistan.
Photo: UN Photo/Loey Felipe



Some are finding reason to hope after recent action from the United Nations Security Council. In March 2023, the Security Council initiated an independent assessment to “provide forward-looking recommendations for an integrated and coherent approach among relevant political, humanitarian, and development actors, within and outside of the [UN] system, in order to address the current challenges faced by Afghanistan.”⁵ The independent assessment called for:

- A series of measures aimed at addressing the basic needs of Afghan people and strengthening trust through structured engagement.
- Greater international attention to, and cooperation on, issues that impact regional and global security and stability.
- A roadmap for political engagement intended to fully reintegrate Afghanistan into the international community in line with its international commitments and obligations.
- The establishment of a set of mechanisms designed to coordinate and oversee the recommendations made in the report.

Following the assessment, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2721 in December 2023, which called for the appointment of a United Nations special envoy for Afghanistan to uphold the above recommendations, “particularly regarding gender and human rights.”⁶ While the Resolution has not yet persuaded the Taliban to change any of their positions, it was an important step toward a more coordinated strategy in Afghanistan.

As the international community works to advance lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan, Afghan women must play a central role. Supporting women’s leadership in Afghanistan can serve as a long-term force against extremism of any kind; Afghan women are the loudest voices of resistance against the Taliban policies of oppression and seclusion. Today, women’s organizations, which flourished and consolidated during two decades of international intervention (2001-2021), have gained new momentum since the Taliban takeover. The groups include women of different ages, ethnicities, and regions, and they approach activism in a variety of ways—from those who believe in mounting a quiet, steady fight to those who seek to confront the Taliban out loud in the streets.

In some cases, these divergent tactics are complementary, but women’s groups are largely fragmented and lack a unified stance, which diminishes the strength of progressive voices for Afghanistan. The impact of a decades-long conflict followed by the shock of the Taliban’s return to power has led to increasing ethnic, social, and political tensions within circles of women, making it difficult to articulate a cohesive platform for advocacy.

A review of articles, reports, papers, and other literature published between 2017 and 2022 revealed that many policy documents exploring peace in Afghanistan did not adequately consider the unique concerns of Afghan women. This is an obvious

shortcoming. Not only are there clear human rights concerns inherent in leaving out Afghan women's voices, but women's participation is also critical to the success of peacebuilding efforts.

There is growing evidence that women's participation in peace negotiations contributes to the quality and durability of peace after war.⁷ Research also shows that the status of women and the status of nations go hand-in-hand.⁸ Despite this evidence, women continue to be excluded from formal peace processes and marginalized in social, economic, and political life. This is also true in Afghanistan, where women have historically been pushed to the margins during peace processes despite their active roles and substantive contributions to democratic processes such as elections.

Afghan women from diverse backgrounds have written important advocacy documents, working with organizations like the Afghan Women's Network, the Afghan Women's Education Center, and the Women and Peace Studies Organization, among others. Nonetheless, few articles or studies reflect Afghan women's voices or seek to synthesize diverse opinions across groups of Afghan women.

To address the under-representation of Afghan women's knowledge, this study was designed to give voice to a broad cross-section of women representing a variety of ages, occupations, ethnicities, geographical locations, and political points of view. In doing so, we sought to contribute to existing research gaps, identify common priorities, and improve the chances that women will play an influential role in establishing long-term peace. Based on survey findings and insights from interviews and a group discussion with Afghan women leaders, this report offers recommendations that can be used to inform inclusive efforts to build sustainable peace in Afghanistan and other conflict-affected and post-conflict settings.

Methodology

The team began the study with a rapid review of existing literature documenting Afghan women's priorities and self-identified needs. The goal of the review was to extrapolate a series of themes relevant to Afghan women, i.e., the factors that Afghan women have highlighted as being most critical to a future in which they can participate in establishing sustainable and inclusive peace in their country. The review covered peer-reviewed articles, books, academic dissertations, news articles, and reports from international NGOs published in English between 2017 and 2022. In addition, the review included publications relevant to the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in Afghanistan since the creation of the first WPS National Action Plan (NAP) in 2015.⁹ Fifteen such publications were organized into a literature review matrix and coded for emerging themes related to women's peacebuilding priorities. The coding exercise revealed four major themes: social rights, inclusivity, religiosity and jurisprudence, and responsibility.

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The four themes were validated via an anonymous online survey using Georgetown University's Qualtrics platform. The survey was sent to 151 women and was available in English and Dari. Respondents were invited to participate via an online link published on listservs and social media pages relevant to Afghan women and Afghan civil society organizations. The link was also sent widely to Ms. Hassan's professional network.

Survey respondents lived in Afghanistan, the U.S., Canada, Europe, and a few other countries. Those living in Afghanistan were mostly from the central region. They represented the Hazara, Tajik, Pashtun, Turcik, and Baluch ethnic groups. Respondents held jobs in academia, journalism, politics, law, civil society, the public sector (teachers, doctors), and business.

Survey analysis was conducted using SPSS. The statistical analysis was based on two primary tests: an ANOVA test, which was used to analyze the difference between the response means and the respondents' demographic variables, and a cluster analysis to group response types into groups (or clusters). Survey results also clarified the degree to which the extrapolated themes were relevant, current, and comprehensive. The research team used the survey responses to modify the themes, generate additional interview questions that corresponded to the modified themes, and triangulate the survey findings with the interview results where relevant.

The research team conducted interviews in Dari and English with 26 Afghan women via Georgetown Zoom. All interviews were recorded except three, where the participant preferred the interviewer to take written notes. Interviews lasted

no more than 120 minutes each and, in some cases, were divided into multiple sessions depending on participant availability. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of a short list of pre-planned open-ended questions. Interview questions prompted participants to reflect on each theme while leaving room for spontaneous questioning based on participant responses. Interviews conducted in Dari also included a Dari to English simultaneous translator who recorded the translation in a separate Zoom room.¹⁰

Recorded interviews were transcribed and cleaned. A codebook was developed to reflect the finalized set of peace indicators and additional questions that were developed based on the survey responses. The codebook was dynamic to allow for emerging themes beyond the peace indicators. The transcripts and any manual interview notes underwent a thematic coding exercise using NVivo.¹¹ Analysis of the interviews explored connections between the four survey themes, differences based on sub-nodes, and emerging themes related to and beyond the peace indicators.

Following our initial analysis, we virtually convened 12 Afghan women's rights and policy leaders living abroad to react to a draft set of recommendations and integrated their feedback into the final version of the report.

An entrepreneur and her daughter run a small business in Bamyan, Afghanistan.
Photo: UN Women/Nangyalai Tanai



Findings

Our research explored themes related to social rights, inclusivity, religiosity and jurisprudence, and responsibility—four areas that are critical to women’s peacebuilding priorities in Afghanistan. Below, we provide a brief overview of why each theme is essential to fostering inclusive and sustainable peace and share key insights from our interviews with Afghan women.

Social Rights

We defined social rights as the moral, legal, and societal rules that are necessary to fulfill people’s needs and promote social inclusion. Social rights also guarantee access to essential social and economic goods, services, and opportunities.¹² According to the United Nations Human Rights Office, “Economic, social, and cultural rights include the rights to adequate food, to adequate housing, to education, to health, to social security, to take part in cultural life, to water and sanitation, and to work.”¹³

Since taking power, the Taliban regime has erased incomes, spiked prices, and cut off aid and cash to the country. Now, the vast majority of Afghans lack access to food, water, and adequate shelter.¹⁴ Afghanistan teeters on the brink of universal poverty, with food insecurity affecting an estimated 15 million Afghans.¹⁵ More than half of the population needs some form of humanitarian assistance, and an entire generation is threatened by food insecurity and malnutrition.

The Taliban continue their restrictive policies even as it becomes increasingly clear that they are destroying the country’s social and economic growth. The policies on employment and education of women and girls have been particularly severe, with significant implications not only for individuals but also for the future of the country. In 2022, the UNDP estimated that current restrictions on women’s employment translate into the loss of roughly \$1 billion U.S. — or up to five percent of Afghanistan’s GDP.¹⁶ Anyone in Afghanistan who dares speak that truth aloud risks arrest, abduction, or disappearance.

It is common for the international community to interpret Taliban behavior as typical of Afghanistan. While it is accurate to describe Afghanistan as a predominantly patriarchal culture, it is also true that Afghanistan once outpaced many other Muslim countries in addressing women’s social and structural inequality. Afghan women gained the right to vote in 1919, a year before the U.S. established that right. Afghanistan also has a legacy of promoting girls’ education. In 1921, Afghanistan established the country’s first school for girls.¹⁷

Historically, women's rights have also been constitutionally protected. The 1964 Constitution granted equal rights to all Afghan people. Protections for women's rights were further strengthened in the 2004 Constitution.

Historically, women's rights have also been constitutionally protected. The 1964 Constitution granted equal rights to all Afghan people.¹⁸ Protections for women's rights were further strengthened in the 2004 Constitution, which prohibited all forms of discrimination, specifically identified women as having equal rights to men under the law, and established quotas to promote women's political participation.¹⁹

While equality between men and women was not fully realized in practice prior to the 2021 takeover, Afghan society had been making progress. Afghan women were able to serve in high-ranking government positions, as judges, and in the parliament, which had instituted a 25 percent quota for women. Women also enjoyed an increasing level of cultural and social recognition.

According to a report from UN Women, before 2021, Afghan women had "...secured 69 out of 249 seats in parliament, women were negotiating peace across the country, and laws were in place allowing women to include their names on their children's birth certificates and identification cards. There was a Ministry of Women's Affairs, an independent human rights commission, and a law classifying violence against women as a crime. But more than this, women were visible—from law, politics, and journalism, to sidewalks, parks, and schools."²⁰

The Taliban have reversed all gains, seemingly overnight. Every woman interviewed for this report was profoundly distressed about Taliban regulations that categorically deprive Afghan women of basic human rights. Instead of supporting women, they have made them scapegoats for what they consider society's decline into "immorality." One participant noted that "they [the Taliban] would say that the biggest problem of the society is girls because they use lipstick, color their hair, do not properly wear a burka, some of them go to schools, and some sing songs."

The irony is that many Afghan women spent years educating themselves and building the skills necessary to run a successful government. In contrast, many of the Taliban lack any education except in religion and combat and are ill-equipped to govern or end suffering in their country.

One participant said, "In a country where half of the population has no right to use their energy, has no right to work for the country, has no right to progress, has no right to make a decision, how can you bring a balance in a country?"

What happens when you take away women's rights?

Some of the most dangerous new restrictions make it nearly impossible for women to receive healthcare. One interviewee pointed out that she had "witnessed that some men go to clinics, and they get whatever they want from the clinics... There are... parts of Afghanistan where women... [are restricted from going] to clinics and also hospitals... [causing issues] particularly during pregnancies."

Women are also barred from participating in the workforce. "It is clear to everyone," one participant noted, "that women do not have access to their social rights,

particularly the right to education, right to work, right to freedom.” Another interviewee said, “They are not allowing Afghan women to work even in the organizations that they have [their own] NGOs.”

Another interviewee reminisced about a time when, “Culturally, women were always respected, and nobody could insult women publicly or attack women publicly.” She added that women’s opinions were valued, and they were able to assume special roles, like staging an intervention during conflicts between families or tribes.

When discussing women’s rights, interviewees also referred to the intersection of women’s rights and long-standing inequality based on geography, ethnicity, and social class. They also emphasized how power dynamics and decision-making structures affect social rights. The report will cover these intersections more thoroughly in the following section.

Inclusivity

We defined “inclusivity” as ensuring that everyone with a stake in lasting peace has an opportunity to shape the process by which it is achieved. The UN has defined inclusivity as “the extent and manner in which the views and needs of parties to conflict and other stakeholders are represented, heard and integrated into a peace process.”²¹

Afghanistan’s population is 99.7 percent Muslim and comprised of several distinct ethnic groups, clans, and smaller subgroups (or families). Fourteen ethnic groups are mentioned in Afghanistan’s 2004 constitution, with the Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, and Turkman communities playing a prominent role in the country’s political life.²² Despite Afghanistan’s ethnic diversity, the inclusion of women and people of different ethnicities and social groups in traditional decision-making processes, such as shuras and jirgas, as well as modern democratic processes, like elections, is still loudly contested and criticized by segments of the Afghan community, in online forums, and other contexts.

The vast majority of Afghans identify as Muslim. A 2021 report from the Pew Charitable Trusts estimates that Sunni Muslims constitute approximately 80-85 percent of the population, and Shia Muslims make up approximately 7 percent. They also estimated that other religious groups, such as Hindus, Sikhs, Baha’is, and Christians, represented less than 0.3 percent of the population.²³

During the 2001 Bonn Conference,²⁴ organized by the United Nations and hosted by Germany, participants sought to establish an interim government in Afghanistan and create a framework for the country’s political future. The conference organizers endeavored to address Afghanistan’s complex identity issues by inviting participants from different Jihadi and political factions who also represented different ethnic interests. Notably, at least two women participated in the conference for the first time. This was in itself an important step towards inclusiveness, but not sufficient. Several of those who were invited to participate were Jihadi elites representing the

various Mujahideen factions who ruled Afghanistan (1992-1996) until the Taliban first came to power. Many of these military factions had formed largely along ethnic lines and were prone to nepotism, favoritism, and a narrow representation of specific ethnopolitical rather than national interests. Notably, the conference organizers did not invite the Taliban, an omission now seen by many as a missed opportunity for peace.²⁵

The concept of identity in the Afghan context is nuanced, with individuals identifying with overlapping family or kinship ties, tribal, ethnic, or linguistic groups, and geographical regions. Various post-2001 regimes attempted to address this complexity. For example, Afghanistan's 2004 constitution recognized a diverse range of ethnic groups and broadened the definition of what constitutes Afghan citizenship.²⁶ Nonetheless, each new government failed to truly represent the diversity of Afghanistan, and patronage politics prevailed. By and large, political appointments, including to the High Peace Council, were based on ethnic or tribal affiliation rather than expertise or merit.²⁷ This practice reinforced deeply entrenched resentment and distrust.

Throughout Afghanistan's history, conflicting identities and alliances have also made it difficult to develop a genuine sense of unity around social rights and women's rights. Afghans, both inside and outside the country, continue to debate what it means to be truly inclusive and representative.

How to build an inclusive government

Overwhelmingly, participants recognized that Afghanistan needs to adopt more equitable, inclusive power-sharing norms and that Afghan women must play a central role in all aspects of social, economic, and political life.

When asked to reflect on "representation" and "identity" in Afghanistan, nearly all interviewees showed a preference for building a national identity. The women we spoke to were unanimous in their criticism of the former government's lack of inclusiveness and its apparent desire to consolidate power in the hands of individual power brokers and warlords, who, in turn, fostered a system of patronage and nepotism. Most of our interviewees agreed that the last two decades have been marked by criminality, nepotism, and corruption.

When asked about the current distribution of power among ethnic groups, interviewees agreed that power was concentrated in the hands of one group, as illustrated by one participant's response: "It is not equal at all, and people do not have equal access to power and decision-making, because right now only one group [the Taliban] belonging to one ethnicity [Pashtun] in Afghanistan is in power."

Overwhelmingly, participants recognized that more equitable power-sharing practices were foundational to creating peace. One participant remarked, "If they ensure inclusivity, if they ensure power sharing and power distribution, I think we will be able to ensure lasting peace in Afghanistan."



Women's photojournalism course in Farah City, Afghanistan.
Photo: Flickr, U.S. Navy photo by HMC Josh Ives/released

To achieve this, participants pointed out the need for decentralized power structures, decision-making, and resource allocation. However, there was far less agreement as to what model would work in Afghanistan. The participants suggested that any such plan or model would need to be based on a national consultation process.

Participants were also asked about ideas commonly tossed around in political forums, such as federalism. Several of the participants were skeptical about the concept of federalism as a solution for decentralization. One participant shared, “Whenever people bring up federalism, what indicators do you suggest? Geographically? Ethnic? What are the driving factors? If ethnicities are the driving factor, then there will be genocide. We are all mixed. This whole notion of federalism is so far from reality on the ground. Why is it even being discussed?”

Throughout the discussion, participants reflected on the types of approaches that could be used to build inclusiveness in a future government. Most agreed on the need for confidence-building mechanisms such as dialogue forums, mediations, and other formal and informal reconciliation processes.

Participants were also asked about their views on the practice of holding jirgas—a traditional, informal conflict resolution mechanism primarily used to resolve contemporary local, tribal, and even national conflicts.²⁸ Responses were split down the middle on their effectiveness. While some were vehemently opposed, saying, “Historically, whenever a jirga was conducted, [only] the current rulers of the time had an influence on it.” Others acknowledged that the jirga was a useful mechanism in theory: “If people who join the Jirga.... are free of discrimination, only then will we be able to have an effective outcome.”

The participants also discussed who should lead or be part of a future inclusive government in Afghanistan. They repeatedly expressed that free and fair elections were essential to building a true representative democratic government. Many noted that while former members of the Mujahideen faction or previous governments can be part of the process, they should not be considered the only representatives.

Interviewees strongly believe that the presence and participation of the diaspora will be important to rebuilding the country. According to a 2021 article in *The Atlantic* magazine, 100,000 of Afghanistan's most educated and skilled citizens were evacuated, including politicians, artists, scholars, and activists.²⁹ One participant stressed that Afghans living outside the country bring much-needed skills and resources: "The Afghan diaspora can play as important a role as the diaspora did in the case of Poland, Israel, and other places."

How to allocate resources fairly

When asked about minority needs at the provincial and national levels, participants noted that the issue requires a more holistic perspective. They insisted on the importance of "allocating resources in proportion to the needs and size of the population in different regions and provinces." An important question that arose from our interviews was how to define majority and minority. These terms have different meanings depending on whether one is talking about Afghanistan as a country or specific regions. Adding to the complexity, the last four decades of conflict have created militarized zones and criminal and parallel power structures, including regions run by warlords.

In the feedback roundtable, participants emphasized that a national census was important to understanding the demographics of the population and creating evidence-based systems for distributing resources instead of the usual perception-based system. The government has not attempted to conduct a census since 1979, and even that census was incomplete. Today, all demographic and statistical data in the country are estimates based on sampling surveys or the incomplete 1979 census.³⁰ The lack of current data makes it nearly impossible to distribute resources equitably, even if the current regime wanted to.

Acknowledging women's unique role

Many of those who participated in this research have experience in politics, leadership, negotiation, working with communities, and peacebuilding, so it was not surprising to learn that the majority believed that women have an important role to play in bridging the country's ethnic divides and in developing collaborative strategies to ensure inclusiveness in a future government.

Many spoke of women's long-standing ability to reach across ethnic divisions and bridge political differences in an equitable manner. One participant noted that "Afghan women from different tribes talk to each other about the problems of Afghanistan." Another emphasized that "we need women from all ethnic groups. We need to have a clear strategy so that we are able to convince women to be part of the movement and that they all stand united in order to bring change to Afghanistan." Another underscored, "Talks.....should be women-centered. And these [women's] organizations in Afghanistan can introduce the [right] people—they can identify the people who are working [for an inclusive peace] and who are effective—and they can work as a bridging factor."

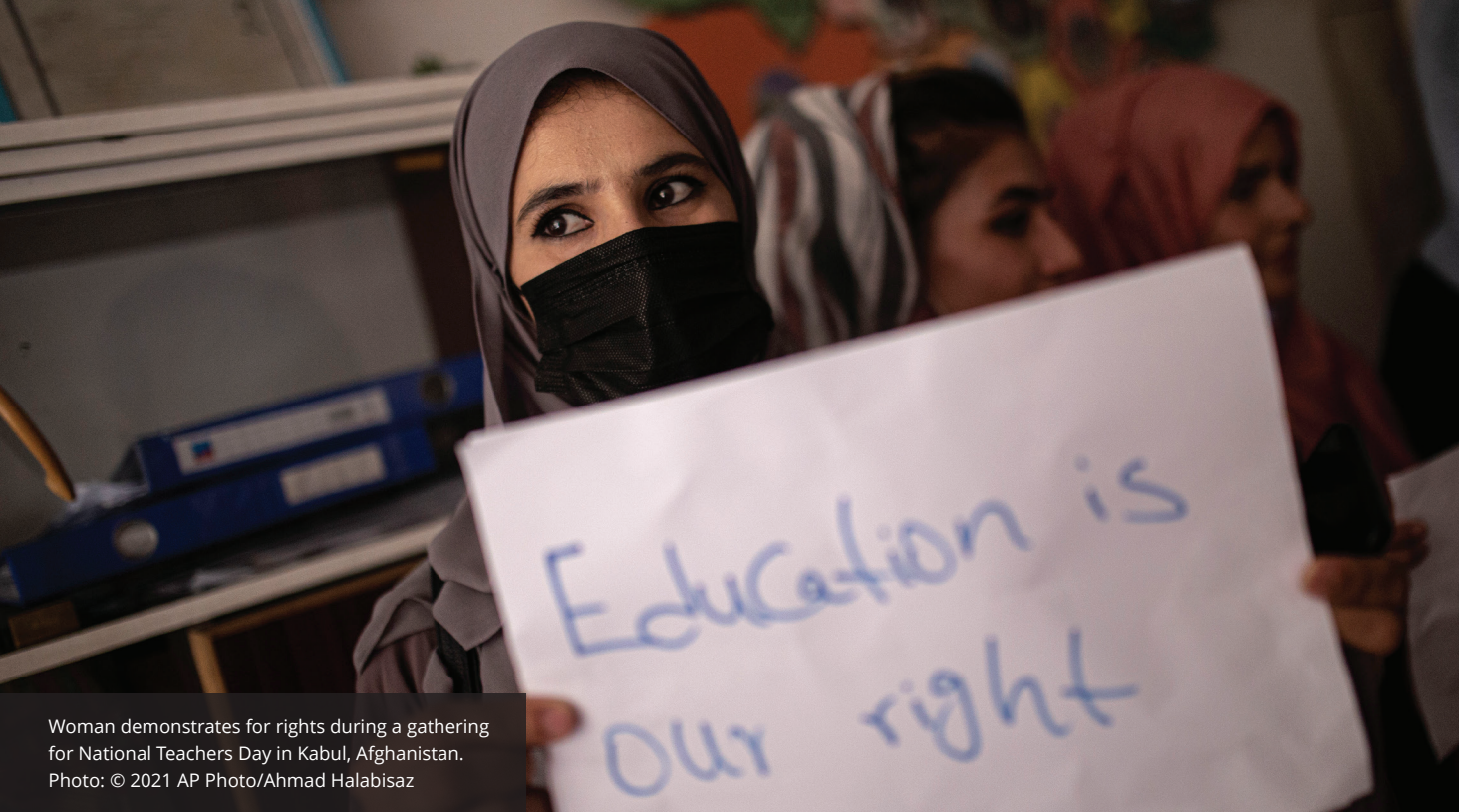
Religiosity and Jurisprudence

We defined religiosity and jurisprudence as the role of Islamic law in the country. In Muslim countries like Afghanistan, religion is used as a foundation to establish governance and jurisprudence. Legal interpretations drawn from the Quran and the Sunnah (teachings of the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him (PBUH)) form what is known as Sharia or Sharia Law. There is a rigorous process for deriving laws based on the Quran and Sunnah, which is known as ijihad, to establish Islamic jurisprudence or fiqh.³¹ These legal interpretations govern every aspect of a Muslim's life, from daily prayers to how to conduct financial transactions.³² Many Muslim-majority countries base their laws on an interpretation of Islamic law, but no two have identical laws, as the principles vary according to the interpretation of experts in Islamic law.

The Sunni majority and the Shia minority have lived in relative harmony for centuries. Sharia has played a pivotal role in Afghanistan since the late 7th century when the Umayyad Empire introduced Islam during its conquest of the region. Afghanistan began modernizing its legal system in 1930, drawing on Western models to establish laws governing commercial and criminal procedures while retaining a firm basis in religious law.

Efforts to reform Islamic laws that undermine women's rights began as early as the 19th century under Amir Abdul Rahman Khan, who, with his successors, helped pave the way for Afghan women to be some of the first in the world to secure the right to vote. As Afghanistan continued to develop Islamic jurisprudence addressing modern needs, it interpreted Sharia to provide wide-ranging rights to women and girls³³ and enshrined equality for all Afghans in the 1964 Constitution. In the following years, Afghan women and lawmakers started drafting laws to further expand women's rights, such as laws targeting violence against women and sexual harassment. In addition, women put enormous effort into drafting and passing the 2004 Afghan Constitution, which both supported women's rights and reaffirmed the country's adherence to Sharia by recognizing Islam as Afghanistan's official religion and affirming that "no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam in Afghanistan."³⁴

When the Taliban took power again in 2021, they announced plans to implement the 1964 Constitution, with the caveat of removing articles that contradict their interpretation of Islamic law.³⁵ In August 2021, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid went as far as to announce, "We are going to allow women to work and study...women are going to be very active, but within the framework of Islam."³⁶ That was an empty promise. Today, the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia is more radical than any other Islamic government and at odds with the Quran, Hadith, and other well-established legal interpretations derived through legitimate ijihad by other Muslim countries.³⁷ The Sheikhs in Kandahar retain total power and continue to pass edicts that do not conform to the 1964 Constitution.³⁸ Of the numerous edicts the Taliban have issued since taking power in 2021, over 80 specifically target women.³⁹



Woman demonstrates for rights during a gathering for National Teachers Day in Kabul, Afghanistan. Photo: © 2021 AP Photo/Ahmad Halabisaz

An extreme interpretation of Sharia

To explore the theme of religiosity and jurisprudence, interviewees were asked to reflect on to what degree Islam should be embedded in the legal and political framework of Afghanistan and whether the former government's interpretation of Sharia provided adequate protection for Afghan women.

Many participants shared that before the Taliban's takeover, Sharia provided a useful framework for women's equality and legal protection. They highlighted that the previous regime interpreted Sharia in a way that protected women instead of harming them. One participant said, "When 99 percent of people are Muslim, it only makes sense to have Islamic laws, but what the Taliban are implementing is a limited tradition that is very specific to them and not even shared by the larger Afghan community." Participants cited Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) willingness to fight for the rights of girls and women as an example of the institutional rights of women embedded in Islam. One participant pointed out, "There is an entire chapter by the name of women in the Book of Quran," which is commonly interpreted to grant women the right to an education, the right to work, and the right to inheritance, among others.

Participants repeatedly conveyed that the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia is uniquely extreme—not matched by any other government in the Islamic world. As discussed in previous sections, upon taking power, the Taliban quickly barred girls from school and women from the workplace, among many other restrictions on their rights and freedom.⁴⁰ There has been global outcry by Islamic scholars in response to Taliban interpretations of Sharia used to roll back the rights of women and girls.⁴¹ However, the Taliban cloaked themselves in tradition to justify their actions and accused the international community of attempting to interfere in their "internal issues."⁴² One participant said, "The Taliban are rejecting everything [women's rights interventions], saying this is a Western agenda."

Interviewees voiced their frustration that the Taliban have discarded decades of careful work (grounded in *ijtihad*) that established laws protecting women's rights. One interviewee pointed out that "the constitution of 2004 and other pro-women laws are well researched and are in conformity to Islam." They emphasized that without a constitution, Afghanistan lacks the building blocks necessary for an effective governing system, causing chaos and confusion at all levels of government and society.

Many participants made clear that all Afghans, including members of the Taliban themselves who do not hold uniform positions on all issues, are confused by the Taliban leadership's changing and sometimes contradictory regulations. One participant noted, "[T]here's no legal system here—even in the courts, people are confused. No one knows the real procedure."

Activists cannot negotiate changes to rules that are not written down, but codifying the Taliban's discriminatory policies into law also runs the risk of further entrenching the systematic oppression of women. Additionally, there is no guarantee that the Taliban would agree to negotiate changes, especially when it comes to women's rights. That said, the majority of interviewees believed that when negotiation does become possible, it must be based on sound scholarly arguments grounded in Islamic law. Participants were not unanimous, however. Some argued that, to avoid problematic interpretations of Sharia, Afghanistan should move towards separating religious law from civil law. At least two said they would prefer to totally separate religion and civil law and considered religious interpretation as a fundamental source of problems in Afghanistan.

Responsibility

We defined "responsibility" in relation to the actors who contributed to a problem and those who should take action to fix it. Specifically, we were interested in Afghan women's perspectives on who is responsible for the current situation in Afghanistan, and who is best placed to design and implement a plan for the way forward in the country.

When looking at potential routes to resolving Afghanistan's current conflict, one must take into account many regional and international factors. The Afghanistan crisis has always been more than an internal conflict—the country's fate is also being shaped by strong regional and international forces.⁴³

Afghanistan's geopolitical position is unique. In over four decades, the country has fought and lost two major wars with two superpowers and served as a battleground for multiple regional rivalries. Neighboring countries have supported different factions over the years, seeking to protect their own interests and further destabilizing the region. For example, Pakistan has long been accused of supporting the Taliban insurgency, even while maintaining cooperation with the international community.⁴⁴ Countries like China, Russia, Iran, and Brazil are eyeing Afghanistan's

trade routes and rich mining resources and are poised to make further moves into a weakened Afghanistan.

The core Taliban leadership group in Kandahar lacks the basic traits of statesmanship. They are indifferent to outside pressure and retain a tight grip on the country's resources, channeling money to their headquarters with no system of checks and balances.⁴⁵ There are exceptions—a few bold members of the Taliban have made statements against the dominant conservative leadership.⁴⁶ These statements could possibly reflect the beginnings of cracks within Taliban leadership and dissent among those who understand the bigger international picture and want recognition for their government.

Since the 2021 Taliban takeover, the U.S. and the international community have attempted to pressure the Taliban by maintaining sanctions, freezing Afghanistan's reserve fund,⁴⁷ and refusing to recognize the Taliban government. But these actions have had no effect. As the situation in the country deteriorates, the Taliban are using the catastrophe to their benefit, holding millions of Afghans hostage as they pressure the world to accept their regime. The international community and regional leaders are concerned but acting cautiously as they try to find strategies to engage in a non-confrontational way. A deteriorating security situation in the country negatively impacts not only Afghanistan but also the region. However, some international actors consider the current situation to be relatively stable and secure—despite the repression,⁴⁸ while others believe the Taliban will counter terrorist groups operating on Afghan soil.⁴⁹

Where does Afghan responsibility begin and end?

“Without us [the Afghans], nobody can build our country.”

Participants made it clear that they felt it was Afghans' responsibility to lead any efforts to restructure the current government, restore women's rights, and improve conditions in Afghanistan. One participant stated, “Without us [the Afghans], nobody can build our country.”

At the same time, participants noted three major obstacles that prevent Afghans from building back without the international community's assistance. The first obstacle relates to the Taliban's inflexible stance and willingness to entrench their policies through violence and intimidation. They have taken an uncompromising position on several critical issues. For example, they refuse to negotiate or recognize opposition groups and have rejected the last two decades of change in Afghan society. They are abducting civil and human rights activists, arbitrarily killing former government security forces, and cracking down on demonstrators and those who campaign for education and other social rights.⁵⁰

Second, would-be Afghan reformers are burdened by historical grievances (real and perceived) related to migration⁵¹ and the practice of shifting communities from south to north,⁵² as well as a legacy of deep mistrust and division. When participants were asked about the idea of unity in Afghanistan, many referenced the painful historical memories that Afghans carry and the deep scars left by sustained conflict and atrocities carried out against combatants and civilians. Four decades of war and shifting conflict lines have blurred the boundaries between victim



and perpetrator; groups have been victimized during some phases of the conflict and acted as the perpetrators of violence in others. This vicious cycle of violence, suffering, and trauma has affected almost all the country's citizens throughout this multifaceted conflict. While interviewees were unified in their desire for a long-term healing process, this was something they did not believe the Taliban were capable of delivering. To achieve peace, Afghanistan must acknowledge the past, initiate a healing process, and find ways to move forward together.

Third, without assistance from international partners, Afghanistan lacks the economic capacity to support a formal government, begin economic rehabilitation, or respond to the humanitarian crisis.

What role should the international community play?

The participants frequently mentioned the complexity of involving the international community, and the U.S. specifically, in their ongoing efforts to rebuild their country. Many noted the positive, stabilizing role that U.S. forces played in the years prior to their withdrawal. At the same time, many saw the withdrawal as the primary cause of the Taliban's reemergence. One participant noted, "The problems of Afghanistan have been created by the superpowers of the world."

Participants noted that while it is the responsibility of Afghans to restructure Afghanistan's government and restore women's rights, for example, the fact remains that they need support from the international community to do so. Second, participants noted that, while they acknowledged the shortfalls of former governments, the deep internal divide among Afghan polity,⁵³ and the burden of historical grievances, there was a strong consensus that the international community has contributed to Afghanistan's instability and isolation and should play a role in restoring peace and security.

The Afghanistan crisis has always been more than an internal conflict — the country's fate is also being shaped by strong regional and international factors.⁵⁴ Respondents insisted that Afghanistan needs the support of the international

community to maintain its non-aligned status and non-interference stance. One participant said, “Afghanistan’s internal differences cannot be resolved unless we have an agreement among countries in the region at the same time for non-interference and a commitment for not supporting insurgencies.”

Many expressed displeasure with the 2020 Doha agreement⁵⁵ between the U.S. and the Taliban, which they saw as giving legitimacy to a government that was never elected by the people. Participants highlighted that to more effectively incorporate the international community into a future peace process, the U.S., the United Nations, and other international power brokers must acknowledge their own past mistakes and wrongdoings in Afghanistan. While participants appreciated the mediating role that the U.S. and the United Nations can and should play, they stressed that future interventions must be carefully designed and planned alongside the Afghan people, making sure that the long-term needs of the Afghan people are prioritized over the potential strategic advantage of keeping the Taliban in place to counter global terrorists.

Participants pointed out that current international pressures and sanctions are inadequate and cannot be effective unless the international community takes a stronger and more coordinated position.

Participants pointed out that current international pressures and sanctions are inadequate and cannot be effective unless the international community takes a stronger and more coordinated position. They agreed that if anything, the Taliban are getting more repressive, especially with regard to women’s and human rights. One interviewee noted, “... sanctions are meaningless when the Taliban are moving freely in the region and opening diplomatic relations.”

Fifteen countries have reopened their embassies in Kabul since the Taliban takeover: China, the European Union, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Uzbekistan. Likewise, the Taliban have reestablished Afghan embassies or political offices in eight countries: China, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Uzbekistan.⁵⁶

Participants pointed out that the international community should use the Taliban’s quest for recognition as leverage to restore women’s rights, not just to counter terrorism. Interviewees were united in their desire for peace, while also wary that talk of “engagement” could easily lead to “recognition” without any improvement on women’s rights.

Recommendations

We conducted this research in the belief that no matter how hopeless the situation appears now, we must continue talking, strategizing, and planning for a future in which the Taliban are willing to negotiate or are out of power.

Our extensive conversations with Afghan women brought to light a strong consensus on essential actions needed to build a government capable of sustained peace and stability in Afghanistan:

1. Revoke all bans on girls' and women's social rights and participation.

Restoring women's ability to attend school, work outside the home, receive health care, and move about freely should be a prerequisite for any meaningful national dialogue or international engagement with the Taliban.

2. Include women in decision-making.

Prioritize women's meaningful inclusion and participation in all of Afghanistan's humanitarian and longer-term economic recovery activities.

3. Hold democratic elections.

If held under the auspices of the international community, free and fair elections would be a fundamental step toward Afghanistan establishing an inclusive and representative government.

4. Conduct a census.

With the support of the international community, Afghanistan should conduct a national population census to help inform how they share power and resources in the future.

5. Decentralize power.

Economic stability in Afghanistan is tied to politically inclusive governance. Afghans must define a model of inclusiveness that is responsive to the full range of majority and minority concerns at the national and local levels and that more constructively reflects long-standing differences among ethnic groups and geographic regions.

6. Create a reconciliation plan.

It is important to learn from history—without getting stuck in the past. Afghans need to develop a long-term reconciliation plan that addresses real and perceived historical grievances. They must set a timeframe for acknowledging past grievances and work toward a shared future that includes more realistic roles for the international community and neighboring regions.

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