



Girls participating in Oxfam's Great Idea project in Parwan Province, Afghanistan. Photo: © Lalage Snow/Oxfam

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

The risk of denying women a voice in determining Afghanistan's future

Women's rights have been held up as one of the most tangible gains of the international intervention in Afghanistan. After 13 years of promises from the international community that women's rights are a high priority, these gains remain fragile and are at an increasing risk of erosion, especially as expected peace talks with the Taliban gain momentum. The international community and the new Afghan government must stand by their promises and include women fully in negotiations on the future of Afghanistan.

SUMMARY

As the Taliban regime fell in 2001 after six years of abuse and oppression, the international community made a promise to the women of Afghanistan, that it would never again abandon them. The protection of their rights, at least in part, became a key element to afterwards legitimize the war which followed. It is 13 years since Colin Powell, then-US Secretary of State, declared that, 'the rights of the women in Afghanistan will not be negotiable.' Now Afghan women are questioning what the future holds.

Undoubtedly, there have been enormous gains for Afghan women in recent years. Almost four million girls are in school, the highest number in Afghanistan's history, and women, particularly those in urban areas, work as politicians, police officers, pilots, judges and governors. Laws are in place to protect Afghan women and their rights, and the Constitution guarantees women's equality before the law, equal rights to education, and women's right to work.

FRAGILE GAINS

By supporting the calls of Afghan women's rights activists and organizations demanding change, the international community has played a critical role in driving these gains. But more still needs to be done to ensure that all Afghan women can enjoy their rights. There remains a very real danger that complacency on the part of both the international community and the Afghan government will undermine these efforts. This would allow the gap between the rhetoric of the international community and the reality for Afghan women to widen once more.

The risk of rollback is very real. Opposition in the Afghan Parliament to the Elimination of Violence Against Women law; the continued existence of entrenched cultural practices, such as *baad* (the exchange of women to end family conflicts); the lowering of parliamentary quotas for women's representation in provincial councils from 25 to 20 percent; former President Hamid Karzai's support of the Ulema council's non-binding edict that women are worth less than men;¹ and evidence of a shift towards an increasingly conservative attitude towards women's rights in some provincial areas; all point to the erosion of support for women's rights, from village to national level.

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The new Afghan President Ashraf Ghani used his first day in office to call on the Taliban to join peace talks,² and the momentum towards a formal political process is expected to build under the new government.³ But it is far from clear whether Afghan women will be given a seat at the table in these talks, and there are fears that women's rights may be bargained away amid efforts to reach a peace settlement.

Despite past rhetoric, negotiations and peace talks to date have taken place predominantly behind closed doors and without Afghan women's knowledge, input or involvement. This has huge implications for the safety and sanctity of women's rights in the future. All parties must recognize that it is only peace efforts that include and protect women that have any chance of succeeding in the long term.

At this critical point in Afghanistan's history, it is crucial that Afghan women are no longer sidelined. The exclusion of women will lead to an imperfect and unsustainable peace. Evidence shows that, when women are included in peace-building processes, the prospects for an end to violence increase by 24 percent.⁴ Peace cannot be secured when representatives of over half the population are excluded from the table and cannot be sustained without women at its core.

INTERNATIONAL WITHDRAWAL

The long-awaited withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan must not be at the expense of the sweeping promises made to Afghan women. The continued support of the international community is essential to ensure that their rights are enhanced, not eroded, as they threaten to be today.

Some members of the international community have indicated that any changes to the Afghan Constitution, in which women's equality is enshrined, would be a redline in negotiations with the Taliban. However, in the absence of explicit guarantees that women's rights are non-negotiable, fears remain that certain rights may prove dispensable, in what are likely to be hard-fought and protracted efforts to reach a peace agreement.

The Afghan Government and the international community must ensure the rhetoric on women's rights matches the reality. This means supporting women's meaningful participation in all peace process initiatives, including through sustained support for women's organizations and for women's capacity building to take part in high-level negotiations.

Without investment and further commitments to safeguard women's rights, there is a very real risk that the hard-won gains of the last decade will be lost.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Afghan government should:

- **Involve women at all levels of decision making in both formal and informal peace talks**, including ensuring women are able to meaningfully participate in high-level political negotiations with the Taliban. This must be combined with ongoing assistance for women negotiators to ensure they can meaningfully contribute.
- **A 30 percent minimum threshold should be established for women's inclusion in the membership of all Afghan government peace bodies**, including the High Peace Council (HPC), provincial peace councils and any bodies set up to replace them.
- **Commit to upholding the protection of women's rights enshrined in the Afghan Constitution and should ensure women's meaningful participation as a precondition for future talks with the Taliban.** The HPC, and any reformed or new body set up in its place, should be tasked with upholding this commitment.
- **Ensure the soon to be established presidential women's advisory board plays a decisive role in advising the President** on all peace and security matters, including modalities and representation in peace talks.
- **Ensure the effective implementation and coordination of Afghanistan's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (NAP).** An implementation plan for the NAP must be developed as soon as possible, and a coordination and funding mechanism must be established to ensure complementarity of effort between government departments, donors and civil society.

Governments and donors should:

- **Advocate with Afghan stakeholders for Afghan women to be meaningfully represented** and their priorities fully reflected in any peace negotiations. Inclusive peace building should be central to the international community's messages concerning the establishment of a sustainable peace.
- **Provide substantial and sustained funding towards implementation of the NAP.** Improve donor coordination of international support through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in close coordination with the Ministry of Women's Affairs and other relevant ministries.

The Taliban (and other armed opposition groups) should:

- **Support the meaningful inclusion of women at the negotiating table**, in order to increase the possibility of a lasting peace deal under which Afghanistan can prosper. Since women constitute over 50 percent of the population, a long-term inclusive peace can only succeed with the involvement of women, and consideration of women's issues in discussions.

The United Nations should:

- **Continue to monitor peace processes and provide increased technical support to the Afghan government** for all negotiation, reconciliation, and reintegration processes, particularly the involvement of, and impact on, women.
- **Ensure that all UN supported reconciliation and reintegration processes are explicitly linked to the promotion of women's rights**, including by ensuring women are actively involved in the vetting of ex-combatants for reintegration into society. In particular, take steps to improve the links between civil society and women's local level peace-building efforts and the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme.
- **Review progress in Afghanistan and include Afghan women's views** in the 2015 high-level review on implementation of UNSCR 1325 currently being commissioned by the UN Secretary-General.

NOTES

¹ *The Telegraph* (2012) 'Hamid Karzai under fire on Afghan women's rights', 8 March, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/9130508/Hamid-Karzai-under-fire-on-Afghan-womens-rights.html>

² The authors acknowledge that behind the term 'Taliban' there is a wide variety of different groups and interests.

³ S. March (2014) 'Afghanistan's new president Ashraf Ghani calls on Taliban to join peace talks, says country tired of war', ABC News, 30 September, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-29/afghanistan-new-president-ashraf-ghani-sworn-in/5776962>

⁴ L. Stone (2014) 'Can women make the world more peaceful?' *The Guardian*, 11 August, http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/aug/11/women-conflict-peace-society?CMP=tw_t_gu%20

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