



From the ground up

Country focus: Women's roles in local peacebuilding in Afghanistan

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“A history of conflict and authoritarian regimes, combined with restrictive social structures and norms, has led to a precarious situation for women in Afghanistan”

Despite the increased international attention to women’s participation in peacebuilding, the achievements and challenges facing women building peace at the local level have been largely overlooked. *From the Ground Up*, a research report published by Womankind Worldwide, ActionAid and the Institute of Development Studies in 2012 addresses some of these gaps by providing qualitative evidence on the roles of women in local peacebuilding in five countries: Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone.¹

Research was conducted in each country, both through focus group sessions in conflict-affected communities, and interviews with staff of local and national civil society organisations, government representatives and community members working to support peacebuilding at the local level.

The research uncovered important commonalities across the countries, providing guidance on how women can be supported to build peace in conflict-affected communities. Certain contextual differences between the communities and countries were also identified, and much rich and insightful information was collected in each country. This paper

provides a picture of women’s participation in peacebuilding in Afghanistan. It explores the national context, examines gendered understandings of peace and peacebuilding, and explores the impact of women’s participation in peacebuilding. Barriers to women and women’s rights organisations building peace are identified, and recommendations to mitigate these are proposed.

Women’s rights at a glance

A history of conflict and authoritarian regimes, combined with restrictive social structures and norms, has led to a precarious situation for women in Afghanistan. Enforced modernisation and conservative backlashes have brought about a constant struggle for women’s rights.² There is evidence that 87 per cent of Afghan women and girls have experienced at least one form of sexual, physical, economic or psychological abuse.³ Many women also faced systematic exclusion from basic health services and education. Taliban rule, between 1996 and 2001, was particularly severe and women were systematically excluded from education, healthcare and employment, and faced increasing levels of violence and restrictions to their movement and choices.

Cover photo: Afghanistan
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Selected Statistics on Women in Afghanistan

Indicator	Women	Men
Population (thousands/%)	16,121 (48%)	17,276 (52%)
Life expectancy at birth (years)	49	49
Population aged 15-19yrs ever married (%)	17.3	n.a.
Population (+25yrs) with at least secondary education (%)	6	34
Economic activity rate (%)	16	80
Maternal mortality ratio	460 per 100,000 live births	
Adolescent (15-19yrs) fertility rate	99.6 per year per 1,000	
Women in national parliament (%)	28	
UNDP 2011 Gender Inequality Index (world rank/value)	147 (0.712)	

Sources: UN Statistics Division and UNDP. Latest statistics available for each indicator.

Women, conflict and peace: general context

Afghanistan has undergone many decades of civil unrest and tribal conflict: first the war during the Soviet invasion from 1979 to 1989, then a civil war from 1991 to 1994. The Taliban took power in Kandahar in 1994, in Herat in 1995, and in Kabul in 1996, ruling until ousted by the US-led campaign in 2001. From 2001 onwards, the process of reconstruction has been guided by international donors following the Bonn Agreement,⁴ with the main goal of transitioning towards democracy.

Gender equality has been at the centre of international discourses, and some gradual progress in advancing the realisation of women and girls' rights has been reported, particularly in terms of access to education.⁵ Women have been involved in political processes but often in nominal ways, such as their presence in debates around the new constitution. The recognition of equality of rights for women and men in the approved constitution (adopted in 2004) is an important step, but has not always resulted in significant gains in practice.

Furthermore, hard-won gains are often threatened. In 2009 Shia Personal Status law was proposed and supported by the government, which would have regulated marriage, divorce, and inheritance for the country's Shia population. However, activists strongly condemned this law as an infringement of women's human rights, highlighting that it would have contravened Afghanistan's Constitution and also the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, to which Afghanistan is a state party. Furthermore, in May 2013, Afghanistan's Upper House of Parliament removed an electoral law stipulating that a quarter of all provincial council seats should be allocated to women. Afghan women MPs and women's rights organisations campaigned for the quota to be reintroduced – and in July, the lower house reinstated the law, but lowered the quota to 20 per cent. Women in public life, including MPs and public servants, are subject to increasing threats and attacks,

which have sometimes been fatal. For instance, in September 2013 Afghanistan's most senior policewoman was murdered.⁶ More widely, many women still face violations of basic human rights, especially in rural areas.⁷

Despite their critical situation, women have organised and created spaces to advocate for their inclusion in national peace processes, and political participation has started to increase gradually. There have also been advances in education parity with 2.5 million girls now attending school. Womankind's partner, Afghan Women's Network has provided an important advocacy platform that is recognised both by the Afghan Government and the international community. Significant concrete results of women's rights advocacy include: the creation of a Ministry of Women's Affairs, the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (2007-2017), the government commitment to implement the constitutional guarantees of non-discrimination and address the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), and the enactment of the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women in August 2009.

Although many studies have highlighted the important role played by women activists and national-level women's rights organisations in peacebuilding, not much is known about the activities and role of women at the local level in Afghanistan. Accounts show that despite entrenched gender norms, women took on new responsibilities and fulfilled new roles at the local level, particularly in terms of public leadership and decision-making following the absence of men during war(s). Women's groups also helped to set up underground schools, health clinics and other vital services for women and their children.⁸ At great personal risk, women ran clandestine literacy courses for girls during the Taliban rule. These women have emerged as leaders in their communities during the post-Taliban period and provide support and safe spaces for other women to become literate and independent within the constraints of the conservative society in which they live.

1. The full report can be found at: www.womankind.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/09/From-The-Ground-Up-FINAL.pdf (accessed 18/12/2013).

2. Abirafeh, L. 2005. 'Lessons from gender focused international aid in post-conflict Afghanistan...learned?', Gender in International Cooperation, Number 7, Bonn:FES.

3. Global Rights, 2008. Living with violence: a national report on domestic violence in Afghanistan.

4. The Bonn Agreement (officially the Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions) was the consensus document created in Bonn in December 2001 which established the framework for the Interim Administration of Afghanistan, who were tasked with the re-creation of the State of Afghanistan. Full text: www.un.org/news/dh/latest/afghan/afghan-agree.htm (accessed 18/12/13).

5. World Bank. 2011. World Development Report 2012. Gender Equity and Development, Washington, DC: The World Bank.

6. Lieutenant Negar (known only by her surname) was waiting for a government bus to take her to work along with other police employees when she was shot by pistol-wielding men on motorbikes. This was the third such killing in as many months.

7. ActionAid. 2011. A just peace? The legacy of war for the women of Afghanistan, London: ActionAid.

8. Hassan, P. 2010. "The Afghan Peace Jirga: ensuring that women are at the peace table", Peace brief 29, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.

“The impacts of the extended conflict in Afghanistan have been felt in all areas of life – social, political, economic and cultural”

Community profiles: Kabul and Balkh Provinces

The research took place in three communities in Afghanistan, two in Kabul Province, and one in Balkh. Community A is an urban district of Kabul, with an ethnically mixed population of 250,000. It is considered poor and badly damaged by civil war. Due to its central location, there have been a number of projects run by international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Womankind supports the work of the Afghan Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) in this district. Community B is a peri-urban community of Kabul with a total population of 1,680, mainly Pashtun and Pashahi. There is no agricultural land so the main sources of income are via NGO projects. Many residents are engaged in official or private jobs, so the poverty level is medium. During the past three years, a community development council has been established in the village and there is a governance programme run by ActionAid partners. Community C is in Balkh Province, in the north of Afghanistan. It is a rural community with 6,000 people, of mainly Uzbek and Turkmen origin. More than 90% are farmers, and there is a high incidence of poverty due to lack of land, drought and lack of irrigation. There are some donor and NGO programmes; the main project focusing on peacebuilding and conflict resolution is run by ActionAid and its partners.

Impacts of conflict at the local level

The impacts of the extended conflict in Afghanistan have been felt in all areas of life – social, political, economic and cultural. Research participants (both women and men) felt that there are “serious consequences of the ongoing conflict”, in light of the combined effects of the Taliban period and the current context. Regarding the period of Taliban rule, participants highlighted high levels of poverty in their community, hunger, joblessness, mass migration and lack of healthcare. Both women and men noted the particularly negative impacts on women during this time. These resulted

from the strict regulations on family and society – notably that girls weren't allowed to attend school, women were only allowed to be seen by female doctors even when female doctors were banned from working, women and girls were confined to the households, and there were high levels of violence against women.

“During the Taliban women wore burqa and women's rights were violated by the Taliban. Women were hit a lot. The Taliban emphasised that women should wear the burqa. Girls were not able to go to courses because if girls went out for study then they were harassed”.

– Young women focus group, Community A

Although all recognise that progress has been made since the fall of the Taliban, people still talk about the lack of justice within their communities. This is particularly related to women's rights abuses such as violence against women and girls (VAWG), where there is difficulty in accessing justice through both the informal and formal justice system. Another example is the lack of a proper vetting process of Afghan Local Police and other security forces to ensure that former and current warlords with previous records of human rights violations (including women's rights violations) are not given formal power.⁹

All respondents discussed the continued psycho-social and health impacts of the conflict, especially older women who had experienced several phases of conflict. This was particularly pronounced in Community A where a number of women talked about their experiences of violent conflict in the area – which included their family members being kidnapped and rocket launches near their homes. Perceived insecurity continues today, with fear of bombing and kidnapping common.

Understanding of peace and peacebuilding

There is a broad understanding of peace by women and men in communities in both Balkh and Kabul. Both women and men talked of peace being about “togetherness, calmness, peace of mind, love between each

9. Afghan Women's Network; Women's security and transition in Afghanistan: Measuring the success of transition by lasting protections for women's security, Position Paper; May 2012, p. 4.

“People don’t know what is happening so they prepare themselves for the worst”

Taking precautions in an insecure environment

“We’re still feeling the same fear. We are still in conflict. We cannot call Afghanistan a post-conflict country. There’s no stability. It means that people inside their houses are living like passengers ...like they know that something will happen and they can [be forced to] leave at any time. If you are not starting to build your own house or equipping your own house, then how can you think about the country overall?”

– Maryam Rahmani, Country Representative, AWRC

Womankind’s partner, Afghan Women’s Resource Centre (AWRC), mobilises women at the village level to be part of volunteer committees. Committees meet regularly to find responses to common issues in communities, raise awareness of child marriage and girls’ school enrolment. They have started to see a worrying trend of women dropping out because their families are forcing them to stop participating.

Recently, two of AWRC’s staff at the village level resigned and no longer attend trainings at the centre AWRC set up because their families said they do not want their female relatives to work anymore. Every time there is a security incident – even if it doesn’t affect the projects directly – AWRC staff have to talk to people in the community to reassure them and convince women and girls to continue to participate. Security incidents are serious reminders of ongoing insecurity and the possibility there will be backlash against women and girls who are active participants in community life.

“People don’t know what is happening so they prepare themselves for the worst. What’s the impact? The first impact is on women. Let’s not send our daughters to school – bring them back home. Maybe the Taliban will come and people will just tell them that this family is sending their daughters to school. Let’s not send our women to work.”

– Maryam Rahmani, AWRC

other and unity”. They also talked about how central security was to their concepts of ‘peace’ – security for people in communities is what makes them and their families feel safe. This includes freedom of movement, lack of violence in the home and safety for children going to the market.

However, there are specific issues that women and men prioritise differently. For women and girls, there was a particular emphasis on women’s rights to education, health care, work, food and the right to live a life free from violence. Women and girls talked about domestic violence and other forms of violence against women as ‘conflict’ in their community.

“We’re not talking about a big war, but peace also means no domestic violence”

– Women and girls’ focus group, Community C

“Peace for me is if I come out of the house – if I am not accompanied by anyone. If people do not care what I’m

wearing, what I’m looking like. If I can visit a village where I am working and feel safe. If my mother doesn’t call me four times a day when I am out for a meeting to check to see if I have returned to the office safely.”

– Women’s Rights Activist, Kabul

While men also talked about peace being characterised by the absence of violence in the household and good relationships within the community, they tended to focus more on what they perceived to be ‘bigger’ issues of peace such as the absence of armed conflict and insecurity at community, regional or national level. They also talked more about peace meaning the absence of corruption and good governance issues, better infrastructure, access to resources and having job opportunities. In areas where there had been specific NGO interventions on gender, men also spoke of peace being about ‘gender equality’ as highlighted in the training sessions they had attended.

“Women are often discriminated against by jirgas and decisions are rarely made in women’s favour”

Peace Committees challenging discrimination

In Community C, ActionAid and its partners have worked with local *jirgas* (an informal local council where members are mostly men and are responsible for solving disputes and conflicts within the family and community) and supported the creation of Peace Committees. The men’s Peace Committee includes members from the *jirga*. They have also created a separate women’s Peace Committee which works closely with the men’s committee. ActionAid and its partners have provided training and support to the committees – including training on conflict mediation, legislation, rights awareness, gender equality, the formal justice system and when cases should be referred to formal justice systems such as the police and courts. ActionAid has also supported women’s and men’s Peace Committees to work together in decision-making. The community now takes their grievances to these committees, which have the authority to mediate conflict without taking it to the *jirga*.

As it is rare for women to be on *jirgas*, women are often discriminated against by *jirgas* and decisions are rarely made in women’s favour. In certain cases, women can also be the victims of decisions made by *jirgas* – for example the practice of Baad where women and girls are given in exchange to solve disputes between two parties.

Gender equality and women’s rights training for both men and women enables people to have a better understanding of ‘peace’ and ‘conflict’ in terms of gender. The involvement of women in Peace Committees has resulted in more equitable decision-making processes and better outcomes for women. For example, both Peace Committees have talked about trying to address issues of domestic violence by intervening in family disputes and offering support for reconciliation, or in serious cases for women to seek justice through the formal justice system. Across four provinces in Afghanistan, ActionAid and its partners have supported the establishment of 180 Peace Committees and nearly 40% of the members are women. The project has therefore helped move women from their traditional roles to a more visible institutionalised structure.

“I’m proudest of solving conflict cases – particularly domestic violence cases where, as a group, we have held husbands to account and let them know they cannot get away with it. They know that we will take it further even to court.”

– Head of Women’s Peace Council, Community C

Women’s participation in peacebuilding and its impacts

Given the broad understanding of peace and peacebuilding, it was observed that women within the communities visited play a vital role promoting peace, even they themselves do not define their actions as peacebuilding. Women in all areas spoke about some degree of conflict mediation and peacebuilding taking place - particularly in their homes, but also in the wider community.

In all communities, including Community C, women’s peacebuilding activities focused mostly on the domestic sphere. This is because entrenched gender norms support women’s involvement in home and family life and women talk about the home being the “easy” and “natural” place to start with conflict mediation.

“Society is made up of both men and women, so with every process – social and cultural – we have to consider them both. You can see women’s role in peace as described in Islam. Women’s role is related to men and the family. My main message for my sisters is to teach their sons how to speak and behave. Women have to raise sons to raise their consciousness about peace.”

– Secretary of the High Peace Council.¹⁰

Where there has been long-term support and investment, there has been opportunity to support women to participate in public and political life.

Another key characteristic of women’s involvement in peacebuilding is that women and girls work collectively in groups. Not only does organising give them

10. National level council comprising national leaders, religious leaders and government representatives responsible for oversight of peace processes in Afghanistan.

more influence and impact, but it also offers them a greater degree of protection and support. Safe women-only spaces are vital for allowing women and girls to meet and organise. Across the research sites, it was found that men are much less likely to form strong groups because they feel there is not such a need. Where men do act

collectively it is through more formal systems such as jirgas.

The involvement of women in mediating conflict within the communities (particularly in cases of VAWG) has wide-reaching positive impacts. Women's active involvement in peacebuilding not only improves conflict resolution, but it also

Addressing violence against women and girls

Women and girls in Community A discussed how the extended conflict had led to the normalisation of violence, increasing violence against women and disrupting peace in their community. Womankind has supported the Afghan Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) to build a safe women-only space with a range of activities such as literacy classes, a basic gym, tailoring classes and agriculture workshops, and facilitated the creation of women and girls committees to decide which projects to focus on. In the last five years these committees have carried out awareness raising on VAWG in their community. When AWRC tried to conduct a baseline survey five years ago on VAWG there were many concerns raised in the community, and they were not able to collect the data. Five years on after intensive awareness raising and working in the community, they managed to collect data demonstrating there is acknowledgement in the community of this issue. As a result of their work AWRC has also seen a large increase in the number of women coming to them for support relating to VAWG.

"Membership has greatly increased now and more and more families are allowing their girls to attend the centre. We've never had any security problems here. According to the survey that we did, it is really essential to have these centres, and is important for people to come and share their experiences and ideas."

– Head of Centre for Women, Community A

Leadership – from the village to the parliament

Community Development Councils (CDCs) were promoted by various NGOs under the National Solidarity Programme run by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, and as an implementing partner ActionAid has facilitated the formation of over 450 CDCs in four different provinces and promoted women-only CDCs to enable them to participate in a women-only setting.

In addition, Womankind's partner, AWRC has been working to create and support women's committees around Afghanistan. Even today it is rare that women are involved at a high level in decision-making processes in the community.

"We are working at the village level so we can bring women to CDC elections. Mostly when you see CDCs – women don't have the senior positions. They are not the director, they are the secretary or assistant. We want to bring them first to that level of director at the community level. Then they can go to province-level elections."

– Maryam Rahmani, AWRC

Eight years ago, AWRC began to support a number of women to be involved in committees – two of whom became committee leaders at the district level. Following their experience and increased access to politics, the women ran for election in parliament, were elected straight away and are now both MPs. AWRC continues to follow this model and expects that six women will be elected at the provincial level in the upcoming 2014 elections.

empowers women to take part in decision-making, building confidence to take up positions of leadership.

Despite these achievements, women don't necessarily recognise the important role they play in building peace. When asked to identify key players in the community who build peace, no women identified themselves or their groups/networks. They focused more on the importance of state actors (government) and traditional leaders as the key actors in peacebuilding. When prompted, women did talk about activities they are doing to promote peace and to prevent and resolve conflict in their communities. For example, through the ActionAid Paralegal Project, women paralegals are providing support to women survivors of violence. Women's conflict mediation in the domestic sphere was also recognised by male members of the community. However women's current or potential role in peacebuilding was downplayed by both women and men in the community.

“Women can't contribute to big issues – but men can. Men are the ones who participate in these discussions.”

– Women and girls' focus group, Community C

Barriers to women and women's rights organisations building peace

“We hear that we don't have women who are sufficiently educated to take part in peacebuilding. Yet we see men taking part who are neither educated nor care about peace. Women don't need to be educated to know how war affects them, and to know what they want from peace.”

– Selay Ghaffar, Director of Humanitarian Assistance for Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA)

The research found significant barriers to women's involvement in peacebuilding, many of which were explicitly identified by women and girls themselves across the communities. First, men and boys tended to focus more on women's lack of education and literacy as a barrier to being involved in higher level decision-making. While women and girls also recognised this as a barrier, giving specific examples of girls being forbidden to attend higher education by their families, they also recognised they had many useful skills for conflict resolution and peacebuilding that do not necessarily require high levels of education.

The second significant barrier identified related to the presence of pervasive negative social norms and a patriarchal society that make it difficult for women to participate safely in a meaningful way. While training in the communities has led to a greater recognition among men of gender equality issues, this does not necessarily translate into changes in attitudes and practices. A male leader in one of the communities talked extensively about gender equality and the importance of women's education and leadership. Despite this, neither of his young daughters attends school. A female participant spoke about the barriers she faces in accessing further education:

“I have graduated from school but my brother won't allow me to go to university. I'm allowed to go to the centre because my brother knows [the head of the centre] and knows she is a good woman and that all of the people there are women so he allows this. This is very common.”

– Female participant, Community A

There were clear concerns about the insecurity and intimidation that women had to overcome to participate in

Changing lives - women's leadership programmes

AWRC runs leadership programmes – where women come for skills learning, education and awareness programmes. As part of the skills training, they have groups of women involved in income generation, where someone volunteers a small room of her house as a production house. One woman who was completely illiterate started as a cleaner in AWRC's community centre. Now, with AWRC's support, she is the head of a group and is often invited to the province or district level for meetings as a business woman.

“A key issue for women and women’s rights organisations is limited funding, resources and support for peacebuilding work”

peacebuilding activities. This is particularly true for women’s rights defenders working in women’s rights organisations who give numerous examples of threats they and their families have received because of their work.

Third, low confidence, lack of knowledge of their right to participate and the lack of recognition of women as peacebuilders limit women’s involvement. In Community B, where interventions have focused on governance rather than peacebuilding, the female heads of CDCs did not address structural or transformational issues such as redefining gender roles and responsibilities, nor did they address women’s rights or women’s role in decision-making processes. Instead, both the male and female CDCs focused more on what they considered to be ‘development’ projects such as construction, road building and income generation which tended to be gender-blind. In contrast, where there has been specific support and training on women’s rights and the links between gender equality and peacebuilding (with both women and men in the community) such as in Communities A and C, there is a marked increase in women’s confidence. As a result women become further involved in conflict resolution and mediation, and men show increased support for women’s participation in decision-making.

Fourth, a key issue for women and women’s rights organisations is limited funding, resources and support for peacebuilding work, which requires intensive community engagement over long periods of time. The research found that communities were frustrated with short-term funding by international non-governmental organisations and donors, particularly for peacebuilding work at community level. The research also revealed a desire for more safe spaces for women in which they can collectively organise for peace – i.e. a building or a separate space where women could come together to meet and talk, and also to learn and participate in a range of activities including skills training.

Finally, there is a lack of knowledge and information being shared and circulated.

This is particularly true in terms of sharing information about what is happening on the national stage and the peacebuilding process. The sense of insecurity based on confusion about what is going on at the national and international level acts as a barrier to women’s active participation in peacebuilding in the community, as the quote below highlights.

“There are many people who do not know a single thing that is happening at the national level in Afghanistan. This creates an image – the situation is bad, the project failed, these people are leaving us so let’s be prepared. Maybe it means other groups will be coming back – like the Taliban.”

– Activist, Afghan Women’s Network, Afghanistan

Local to national links

“At the national level it’s the same people all the time. We need to start at the community because we’re not changing anything at the moment.”

– Activist, Afghan Women’s Network, Afghanistan

While women are less likely to recognise their own important role in peacebuilding, all community members believed that community peacebuilding from the grassroots up was just as important as top-down national and international approaches. While different groups and communities differed in their suggestions of ‘who’ is most important in maintaining peace at the community level, both women and men talked about the importance of the individual and the family unit. As the old Afghan saying notes, setting an individual example is vital: *“Drop after drop becomes a river”*.

Community members (both women and men) reiterated that their community was seen as an example to others and that other villages nearby had seen the difference made by peacebuilding interventions and were keen to emulate this. This is particularly true of Community C where ActionAid has been supporting a peacebuilding project.



Above: Afghanistan
Womankind

“If one village sees us with peace they think that this is also possible for them – it will have impacts at district and provincial level.”

– Male focus group, Community C

However, the research did not find links between what is happening at the local level in terms of peacebuilding and what is happening at the national level or with international donors. ActionAid is looking at ways to create links between their own initiated peace councils at community level and national decision makers. The Secretary of the High Peace Council noted that while more could be done, there are district peace councils with at least two women participating.¹¹ However, in all of the research communities, no one mentioned the district peace councils as a key stakeholder, even when prompted.

“Women can contribute to the peace process but men challenge this. In the High Level Peace Council there are only seven or nine women – they don’t have real power and time to engage in the peace process. They are just symbolic. People use security as a way of denying women the right to participate. Also people say that women cannot keep secrets so we cannot involve them in confidential discussions.”

– Shalah Farid, Lecturer at Kabul University and women’s rights activist

There are clearly few spaces for the voices of those working for peace within their communities to dialogue with decision makers. At the national level, those involved in more ‘formal’ peace processes have few mechanisms for two-way information sharing and dialogue. There is increasing frustration that it is “the same people” speaking to each other about the issues while paying little attention to what is needed at the community level or how to build peace at all levels of Afghanistan. In the opinion of a representative of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs:

“In my perspective, peace council at local level is not active and efficient. All the people at the national peace council are not related to the community. We also have a lot of expert people – religious people etc. But if members of councils are chosen from the community then this process will be better in my opinion.”

“At the national level it’s the same people all the time. We need to start at the community because we’re not changing anything at the moment.”

– Maryam Rahmani, Afghan Women’s Resource Centre

11. Interview with the Secretary of the High Level Peace Council, Prof. Aminiddin Muzafary.

Conclusion

“Women’s rights organisations are vital to local peacebuilding, as well as building links between local communities and national level peace processes”

The research has highlighted that women in Afghanistan are instrumental as peacebuilders within their families and their communities. A key characteristic of women’s involvement in peacebuilding is that women and girls work collectively in groups, which not only brings them more influence and impact, but also offers them a greater degree of protection and support. In addition, the role of women in mediating conflict within their community (particularly in cases of VAWG) has had wide-reaching positive impacts.

However, significant barriers to women’s involvement in peacebuilding were identified and the vital roles that women play are often not formally labelled as peacebuilding. Despite this, all community members believed that community peacebuilding from the grassroots up was just as important as top-down national and international approaches. However, the research did not find links between what is happening at the local level in terms of peacebuilding and what is happening at the national level or with international donors, and there are clearly few spaces for the voices of those working for peace within

their communities to dialogue with decision makers.

Women’s rights organisations are vital to local peacebuilding, as well as building links between local communities and national level peace processes. They also provide crucial support to women, for example through providing leadership programmes or by supporting survivors of violence. However, there is currently limited funding, resources and support for their work, which requires intensive community engagement over long periods of time.

It is clear that women’s active involvement in peacebuilding not only improves conflict resolution, but it also empowers women to take part in decision-making, building their confidence to take up positions of leadership. Given these findings, an ideal gender-responsive approach to peacebuilding should recognise the importance of gender equality for sustainable peace, support the important roles that women undertake within their families and communities as peacebuilders, and bring these skills, experiences and priorities to the regional, national and international levels.

Recommendations

Develop and implement concrete, coherent policy commitments

Just and sustainable peace, which includes meaningful participation of women and inclusion of women's rights, begins with coherent policy. All development, defence and diplomatic policy should have clear, strategic commitment to women's rights and gender equality including measures to promote women's participation. Women's rights and gender equality should be recognised in all peace processes, agreements and transitional governance structures, and national and local policy should incorporate views and lessons from women building peace at local level.

To achieve this the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan should fully implement the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), as well as ensuring that all action taken is informed by the provisions of UNSCR 1325. This must be done in consultation with women's rights organisations at local, regional and national levels, with adequate long-term resourcing, and ongoing robust monitoring of its implementation.

Ensure women's participation in peace processes

To ensure a durable and just peace, national and international peace processes must include women as decision-makers, and reflect the priorities and views of women building peace at local levels including the views of women from ethnic minority groups, widows, survivors of sexual violence, displaced women, women with HIV/AIDS and disabled women. Further, all communiqués, declarations and agreements resulting from national or international peace processes should have dedicated commitments to women's rights and gender equality.

As a starting point to achieve this, the quota stipulating that women should constitute a minimum of 25% of the Provincial Peace Council should be reinstated. This will help build awareness of the Afghanistan Peace and Reconciliation Programme at the provincial level, creating a mechanism at the grassroots level to increase women's participation and voice in the peace process.

Provide long term support and funding to women's peacebuilding

Women's rights organisations are at the forefront of innovative peacebuilding work at a local level. For them to reach their potential, this work needs to be adequately and sustainably funded. Furthermore, all funding to peacebuilding initiatives should demand demonstrable women's rights outcomes, including support for women's economic empowerment which enables their participation in peacebuilding processes.

In line with the United Nations target, a minimum of 15% of all funds in support of peacebuilding should be dedicated to activities whose principal objective is to address women's specific needs, advance gender equality or empower women.

Tackle violence against women and girls

Violence against women and girls is a pervasive element of conflict, and continues long after the laying down of arms. It is both a gross violation of women's human rights, a key barrier to their participation in peacebuilding and public life, and to building sustainable peace. Women need law enforcement and formal judicial mechanisms to be accessible and fair. In addition, no peace process, whether at the national or the community level, should result in impunity for serious violations of human rights such as violence against women.

All peacebuilding policy, funding or activity should contain a gendered risk analysis, and include targeted action and ring-fenced finance, to tackle violence against women and girls as a key barrier to peace.

Build an enabling environment for women's peacebuilding

In order for women's efforts in local peacebuilding to be effective, national policies and infrastructure must ensure women's rights and participation. Gender discrimination must be eliminated and women's rights promoted and protected in all public infrastructure and institutions including those in the legal and justice, healthcare, transport and education systems.

Collaboration between women's rights organisations and women in political parties, parliament and government should be promoted. Gender discrimination must be addressed at each stage of the political process including in citizenship, electoral registration and election processes. Targeted voter registration drives and political education campaigns should be targeted at women, particularly those in remote communities.

In order to achieve this, the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan should fully implement the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, as well as relevant regional treaties, paying particular attention to institutional reform.

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