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It has always been time to listen to Afghan women

Women, Peace and Security in Afghanistan

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Introduction

Nearly 21 years ago, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 were celebrated as a feminist landmark. Also 21 years ago, women's rights were one of the reasons that sought to legitimize the military intervention in Afghanistan (Berry, 2003). With dashed hopes for a democratic Afghan nation, the international community still holds its breath in suspense 8 months after the Taliban takeover. Meanwhile, new videos emerge almost daily showing women who - pushed out of public life - have decided to fight back peacefully.

While many Afghan women and girls have painfully experienced the curtailment of women's rights and the reversal of the gains made in the past 20 years, including the commitments made under CEDAW and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS), the erasure of women from public life has also taken on various literal forms like the Taliban-ordered beheading of female mannequins in shops and the erasure of women's faces in advertisements (Aljazeera, 2022a). Since their grab on power in August 2021, the Taliban has failed to fulfil its multiple promises about the formation of an inclusive government, the restoration of education for girls and women's right to work. When secondary schools were reopened for boys in September, schools for girls remained closed, and the announcement that higher education for women is only allowed in separation from men by acting minister of higher education Abdul Baqi Haqqani posits a de-facto ban of higher education for women due to a lack of female teachers (Mehrdad et al., 2021).

Instead, the Taliban has detained and killed high-profile women and women's rights activists: Alia Aziz, one of the few female military officers and former head of the women's prison in Herat was arrested by the Taliban in October 2021, her whereabouts remain unknown (Amnesty International, 2022). Women have been protesting the disappearance of Aziz, as well as the shooting of 25-year-old Hazara woman Zainab Abdullahi at a Taliban checkpoint on January 13, 2022 (Aljazeera, 2022c). Following peaceful protests against repressive measures, women's rights activists Parwana Ibrahimkhel and Tamana Zaryabi Paryani were abducted from their homes on January 19, 2022, the Taliban continue to deny its involvement in the disappearance (Front Line Defenders, 2022; Gannon, 2022). However, reports by Human Rights Watch and most recently the UN have shed light on "credible allegations" of enforced disappearances and the systemic manner of extrajudicial killings that disproportionately affect women, and continue beyond the initial weeks of the takeover and the turmoil in Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2021; United Nations, 2022).

This article explores how despite the fact that Afghan women have warned the international community of a renewed Taliban-led regime, they have been notably absent from the Doha peace talks against international obligations made under the WPS agenda by Ghani's Afghan government and its international partners. Mahbouba Seraj, an Afghan-American women's rights activist addressed the UNSC on January 26, 2022:

“My Afghan sisters and I warned the Security Council and broader international community of this possibility for decades. It pains me to be here before you today to affirm this truth. But we will not be silenced, and you have a tremendous responsibility for keeping the promises you have made to us, the women of Afghanistan, over the years”. (NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, 2022)

It is argued that by failing to oblige with the WPS agenda, the negotiating parties in the peace talks in Doha have rendered their leverage and thereby contributed to a political climate in which women on the streets of Kabul once again have to establish their existence.

Women, Peace and Security Agenda WPS in Afghanistan

After the Soviet Invasion (1979 to 1989) and the Afghan Civil War (1991 to 1994), the collapse of the first Taliban regime in 2001 contributed to a more supportive environment for women and girls after varying armed conflicts have dominated the country for the past five decades (Frogh, 2017). Women’s rights have played a pivotal role in the justification for military action and the so-called war on terror that was declared by George Bush in 2001, with then-First Lady Laura Bush equating the fight against terrorism as a *“fight for the rights and dignity of women”* (Berry, 2003, p. 137). This equation is also connected to the ‘WPS agenda’, which refers to a series of UNSC resolutions on Women, Peace and Security, beginning with Resolution 1325 that was passed unanimously by the UNSC in October 2000. Under the WPS agenda, the overarching aim of gender mainstreaming and women’s right to participate in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding were formally specified.

In the case of Afghanistan, this has amongst others been manifested in the realm of policy and the 2004 Afghan Constitution that enabled women’s representation in parliament and stipulated gender equality (Allen & Felbab-Brown, 2020). Crucially, Afghan women have long mobilized and worked towards laws and policies to eliminate violence against women and to enhance their rights, one of the many accomplishments being the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) that was in effect from 2007-2017 and *“aimed to actively promote institutions and individuals to be responsible implementers of women’s empowerment and gender equality by providing clear focus and direction, coordinated action, and shared commitment to the Government’s vision”* (FAO, 2007).

The first National Action Plan (NAP) on the WPS agenda in Afghanistan was launched in June 2015 and marks an important step towards advancing women’s role in governance and development processes in the country. The consultation about the NAP was started in 2011 following the initiative of the Afghan government and according to the main pillars of Resolution 1325, the NAP is based on ‘Participation, Prevention, Protection, and Relief and Recovery’ (Marouf, 2015; O’Reilly, 2019). With regard to the implementation of WPS in Afghanistan, Frogh (2017) has assessed that despite 16 laws and policies developed for women’s rights since 2001 and the commitments made in the NAP, the WPS agenda has

remained “a ‘wish list of many dreams’, with little clarity on the achievable indicators as well as a clear milestone due to lack of the current situation analysis” (p. 8). This is also connected to the strong urban-rural divide in Afghanistan and the lack of access to State institutions and services which has hindered systematic analysis in the realm of WPS in order to thoroughly assess the situation and trace advancements. Regardless of the challenges in the implementation process, measures like international frameworks, laws and policies have supported the acknowledgement of women as a target group of different forms of violence, and ascribed them a special role in all efforts surrounding armed conflicts and peacebuilding missions (Frogh, 2017; UN Women, 2015). Data shows that efforts to advance the position of women and girls in the conflict-ridden Afghan society have led to a considerable improvement of their status since 2001, although gains have been distributed highly unequally throughout the country (Allen & Felbab-Brown, 2020). The WPS Index by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security Research and the Peace Research Institute Oslo has assessed that “by 2018, 83 percent of Afghan girls had enrolled in primary school, and by 2019, more than 1,000 Afghan women had started their own businesses, two activities previously prohibited under the Taliban” (Georgetown Institute of Women Peace and Security, 2021). However, the modest progress has not been linear, and Afghanistan has previously stagnated on indicators like women’s cellphone use, which improved in the majority of the world. Afghanistan’s most recent score on the WPS Index underlines the devastating security situation for women in finding that “On all aspects of security in the global index, Afghanistan’s score is the worst in South Asia and among the worst in the world” (Georgetown Institute of Women Peace and Security, 2021).

Already shortly after the beginning of the US invasion in Afghanistan under the guise of women's rights, analysts have articulated that the exposure of the gender-repressive system of the Taliban must be seen as a highly symbolic act that runs the risk of making women “pawns in a geopolitical conflict, thereby muting their diverse needs and interests and foreclosing the possibility of contributing to the realization of their self-defined priorities and aspirations” (Berry, 2003, p. 137). Looking at the “hasty exit of the international community” (NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, 2022) and the current situation of women and girls in Afghanistan, including the obvious failure to liberate them from the Taliban, it is questionable whether the US has made sufficient use of its bargaining power in order to secure women’s rights in negotiations with the Taliban. Berry’s analysis of “[t]he symbolic use of Afghan women in the war on terror” (2003) thereby reads like a foreshadowing of current events that underscore how a gendered discourse of a liberatory military intervention in Afghanistan has ultimately distracted from actual advancements with regards to women’s position in society. The disregard for the WPS agenda ultimately casts doubt on the role that women's rights have played in US military actions, which is particularly evident in the so-called Doha peace talks.

Women & the peace process

Motivated by the WPS agenda, a growing body of research has revealed that women continue to be disproportionately affected by violent conflict, and that lasting peace is more likely to be

achieved with women's participation either through grassroots efforts or in official negotiating roles (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.-b). Statistical analysis has thereby shown that the inclusion of civil society and women's organizations in peace settlements increases the prevalence and durability of peace (Krause et al., 2018; Nilsson, 2012). In spite of these findings, women have been largely excluded from negotiations for peace in Afghanistan.

Representatives from the US and the Taliban started the peace process in February 2019 in Doha, Qatar, where talks between US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban representative Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar centered on the United States withdrawing troops from Afghanistan in exchange for a Taliban pledge to block international terrorist groups from operating in Afghanistan (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.-a). The US-Taliban agreement concluded in 2020 has paved the way for the start of a formal peace process including direct negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, whereby female participation was not ensured (Mohammad et al., 2021). Taking into consideration the discursive creation of women at the center in the beginning of the US-intervention in Afghanistan, it is revealing how the women's rights rhetoric has not played a central role in negotiating peace towards the end of the US-led military intervention.

The subsequent intra-Afghan negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban saw an increase in civilian casualties and have inhibited trust in the process, also due to a lack of women at the negotiating table and the failure of the Afghan government to protect its women's rights activists and peacebuilders (Rahmaty, 2021). Many international organizations and Afghan women have criticized the talks in Doha for including only four female peacebuilders – Dr. Habiba Sarabi, Fatima Gailani, Sharifa Zurmati Wardak and Fawzia Koofi – in the 21-person delegation of the Afghan government (Cleaveland & Bigio, 2020; Mohammad et al., 2021; Rahmaty, 2021). During a two-day negotiation in Moscow in March 2021, Dr. Habiba Sarabi was the only woman in a 12-member Afghan delegation, further indicating the role that was ascribed to women peacebuilders. After insisting on the importance of women's participation in the peace process throughout the meeting, Sarabi states that she was later approached by Russia's Afghan envoy, Zamir Kabulov: *“Mr. Kabulov smiled and laughed and said: ‘You are the only one, and you are loud enough; imagine what it would be like if there were more women here’”* (O'Donnell, 2021).

The peace negotiations consequently failed to secure guarantees concerning women's rights, despite the fact that Afghanistan's adoption of UNSC Resolution 1325 obliges the meaningful participation of women in the peace process. Women and analysts have continuously warned that if the Taliban secures a place in the government, women and girls will be pushed to the margins of society again, endangering not only the gains in regard to healthcare, education, and work, but putting the lives of many women in danger (Mohammad et al., 2021). Contrary to the appeal made by Jamila Afghani, the representative of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom for Afghanistan at the UNSC in July 2019, the international community has failed to oblige with international commitments and thereby compromised the fate of women and girls for a political peace deal that has offered an opportunity for the Taliban to regain power (Mohammad et al., 2021). With the newly appointed all-male Taliban caretaker government, the warnings of Afghan women activists and

peacebuilders have quickly started to materialize and the humanitarian situation has rapidly deteriorated.

Women in Afghanistan and their struggle for existence

What these circumstances have amounted to is a humanitarian catastrophe. While the international community is assessing how to proceed with a Taliban-government that is far from being inclusive and tolerant as initially assured, women in Kabul look down the barrel of a gun while protesting for their freedom (Barr & Fetrat, 2022).

As a consequence, the security situation is continuing to deteriorate. The general amnesties assured by the Taliban have not been able to stop extrajudicial killings, and human rights defenders as well as journalists continue to come under attack (Kumar & Noori, 2022). The Taliban has been quick in replacing the Afghan ‘Ministry for Women’s Affairs’ with the ‘Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice’ (Aljazeera, 2022b), an elimination that also carries a strong symbolic meaning and marks an attempt to institutionalize gender-based discrimination and violence. The new Ministry is tasked with enforcing citizen’s behavior and determining whether women are allowed to leave their home without a male guardian in a country where millions of women are widows. UN deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Nada Al-Nashif has stated that women’s shelters have been closed and mechanisms to report violence against women and girls are put out of action (Dean & Popalzai, 2021), depriving women of vital protection from (domestic) violence and transferring some of them to women’s prisons (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Additionally, the Taliban has effectively banned girls from attending school. While some provinces have allowed girls to return to their classrooms, millions are still waiting at home or put themselves in danger by attending secret schools (Lamb, 2022). At the same time, a recent report by the Afghanistan Analysts Network reveals that high-ranking Taliban officials have enrolled their daughters in overseas State schools and universities in Qatar and Pakistan to secure their education (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2022; Wallen, 2022). Furthermore, women from across all professions, politicians, artists, journalists, teachers, health professionals, entrepreneurs and civil-society representatives, have not been allowed to work in what seems like a revival of the ban of women from paid work in the 90’s. The Afghan healthcare system is on the verge of collapse (Zucchini et al., 2022) and 95% of Afghans do not have enough to eat (UN News, 2021; UNHRC, 2022). Although the economic crisis is hitting the entire country, agencies predict that the effects will disproportionately be felt by women (Reuters, 2022).

However, by protesting the Taliban rollback on women’s educational and economic rights, Afghan women have courageously shown that women and girls refuse to give up and will continue to push back. The violent reaction to women protests by the Taliban indicates that women as agents of change do indeed constitute a threat to the Taliban 2.0. As the associate director of the women’s division at Human Rights Watch Heather Barr stated:

“It might seem hard to understand why the Taliban would have such a violent reaction to 25 women standing on the sidewalk, protesting peacefully. But their fears make sense

when you see how powerful and brave these women are, to be stepping out again and again even in the face of escalating violence by the Taliban” (Kumar & Noori, 2022).

Looking ahead

Following the slow and unsteady implementation of the WPS agenda, the failure to secure the meaningful participation of women in the Doha peace talks, the withdrawal of foreign troops and the subsequent Taliban takeover, it is evident that women’s right to take part in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding has been disregarded by the previous Afghan government and its international partners. However, international frameworks were and remain an important tool in advocating for female participation in peace processes, and Afghan and international human rights activists have continued to stress the need for inclusivity in an attempt to achieve sustainable peace. Research supports this claim, indicating that gender equality reduces extremism and instability (UN Women, 2021).

In spite of this knowledge and the (institutional) shortcomings of the past, it is only in the most recent meetings between the US-Europe Special Representatives’ and the Taliban in Oslo, Norway, that women and human rights activists have been given a spot at the negotiation table (Government of Norway, 2022). Previous meetings with the Taliban after the takeover - including talks about women’s rights - have been held without female presence (Gandahara, 2021), causing backlash and raising questions with regard to the credibility of Western countries in their advocacy for a strong WPS agenda and a feminist foreign policy.

In the meantime, women on the streets of Afghanistan have it made clear that the Taliban cannot deny their existence again. They take on responsibility and rightfully ask whether the WPS agenda and UNSC mechanisms will exert any meaning for Afghanistan, as their future cannot be negotiated vicariously through the terrorist group that is depriving them of their rights for the second time. As long as women peacebuilders are not involved in all stages of talks and negotiations, any steps taken towards the recognition of the Taliban can only be seen as an endorsement of the oppression of Afghan women and girls.

For now, the international community urgently needs to step up its humanitarian efforts and provide economic and political support to a starving nation. This includes increasing financial support for NGOs – especially those focusing on women in rural areas – and unbureaucratic asylum visas for Afghans at risk of retaliation by the Taliban. Jami (2022) argues that from a legal perspective, a “*distinction doctrine*” allows for the recognition of the Afghan State without recognizing the Taliban as legitimate government. This is based on the notion that the Taliban neither has the support of the majority of the Afghan people, nor the capacities to govern the country and fulfill international obligations, most notably the protection of human rights in general and the safeguarding of women and girls’ rights in particular. Its non-inclusive government can therefore not be recognized by the international community, while development aid and relations with Afghanistan for example in the realm of culture and education can be continued (Jami, 2022).

The political role of women in Afghanistan is gaining increasing attention after the Taliban took power and may even be the Achilles heel of Taliban 2.0, as increasing atrocities

reveal that recognizing the Taliban is not an option. The courageous protests against the erasure of women from public life and their oppression show that the women of Afghanistan have changed, as Jamila Afghani has anticipated in her UNSC statement in July 2019:

“Afghan women today are not the women of 30 or 40 years back. We know our rights granted by our faith and granted by the constitution of Afghanistan as well as required by the international conventions ratified by Afghanistan.” (Mohammad et al., 2021).

Despite threats, violence and their rights weaponized against them, Afghan women continue to remind the international community of their obligations and resist against the Taliban.

It has long been the time to listen to them.

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