



# After August: Insights from Afghan women on the Women, Peace and Security agenda

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Photo: UN Women/SayedHabibBidel

## Background: Women, Peace and Security before August 2021

Women, peace and security (WPS) efforts in Afghanistan before August 2021 coalesced around the participation of women – from inclusion of women in the intra-Afghan peace process<sup>1</sup> to increasing women’s representation in governance at all levels,<sup>2</sup> and in the security sector.<sup>3</sup> The Afghan women’s movement was the engine that, supported by women across the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA), brought the WPS agenda to Afghanistan and held the state accountable for its obligations.

Afghanistan’s [National Action Plan \(NAP\) on 1325 2015-2022](#)<sup>4</sup> further emphasised the visibility of women across decision-making levels. While the actual level of women’s participation fell short of the ambitions prescribed in the NAP, women were nevertheless visible in leadership roles in the GoIRA peace negotiation team, the State Ministry for Peace, and the High Council for National Reconciliation – as well as at grassroots level, building peace within their local communities.<sup>5</sup> Women’s civil society spearheaded multiple peace efforts, from garnering the priorities of Afghan women to inform the peace process and reporting on the women’s rights dimensions of conflict, to bringing communities together to broker peace at the local level.

<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that women’s inclusion in the peace process remained tokenistic. The 21-member GoIRA delegation at Doha in September 2020 included 4 women, while the delegation prepared for the March 2021 round of talks included only 1 woman among its 12 members. As regards the earlier part of this period, a 2014 study by Oxfam found that of 23 rounds of informal peace talks involving the GoIRA and the Taliban between 2005 and 2014, women were present at only 2 rounds: Oxfam. 2014. [Behind Closed Doors](#).

<sup>2</sup>The lower house of the National Assembly (Wolesi Jirga) had a 27% quota for women, and, in the 2018 parliamentary elections, more than 400 female candidates ran for office – with over three million women registered to vote: Bjelica J. and R. Soroush. 2018. [Afghanistan Elections Conundrum \(20\): Women candidates going against the grain](#). Female civil service officials in decision-making roles (grades 1-3) increased from 18 per cent in 2019 to 24 per cent in 2020, although Director General (grade 1) and Director (grade 2) positions still only accounted for 12 per cent and 9 per cent respectively; and only three government ministries had more than 20 per cent female employees, with many having less than 5 per cent female employees: NSIA (National Statistics and Information Authority). 2021. [Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2020](#), pp. 29-31; NSIA. 2019. [Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2018-2019](#), p. 28.

<sup>3</sup>In January 2020, there were 3,814 female police officers and 2,000 female personnel in the Afghanistan National Army, respectively accounting for 3 per cent and 1.5 per cent of these security forces: Kamminga, J. 2020. [A Tale of Two Pragmatisms: How to increase the meaningful participation of women in Afghanistan’s police force](#), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>For analysis of the NAP, see: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. [1325 National Action Plans: Afghanistan](#).

<sup>5</sup>The GoIRA’s National Action Plan did not prescribe numerical targets for different objectives and results established under the participation pillar. One strategic objective of the NAP was “enhancing women’s meaningful participation in reconciliation, negotiation, and re-integration at all levels.” Afghan women’s civil society and women in government positions consistently called attention to the low number of women in official peace entities, advocating for the full operationalization of the NAP.

However, while the visibility of women in peace and security increased, so too did the level of attacks and harassment targeting women politicians, security sector personnel, human rights defenders (HRDs), and journalists.<sup>6</sup> In response, protection efforts were bolstered to create enabling conditions for Afghan women's meaningful and safe participation in public and political spaces. National structures aimed at promoting, protecting, and monitoring women's rights were established – such as the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), family courts, Ending Violence Against Women (EVAW) Commissions and special EVAW Prosecution Units.<sup>7</sup>

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**“Women’s rights organizations are the only organizations in the country that can raise the Afghan women voice and problems to the world.” Afghan women, virtual consultation, August 2022**

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After August 2021, with the takeover of the Afghan capital Kabul by the de facto authorities (DFA), the peace process disintegrated, women's rights were systematically erased, and national institutions and legal frameworks supporting WPS priorities were dismantled. Most women peace leaders evacuated the country in response to threats and fear of reprisal. Pathways for women's meaningful participation, across all levels of decision-making in politics, the media, the security sector and conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms which, despite challenges, had previously been possible, are currently non-existent.<sup>8</sup>

The combination of constructed policies of gender inequality, impacting every sphere of women's lives, and a broader environment of intimidation and threats targeting women leaders has severely shrunk civic space and consolidated hegemonic male leadership. In fact, reports show that 77 per cent of Afghan women civil society organisations – the engines for progress and accountability on women's rights the world over - had no funding and are no longer running projects in 2022.<sup>9</sup> The absence of women from public and political life – due to the various restrictions on women – ultimately impacts the ability to build an inclusive Afghanistan. Underrepresentation of women leaders works to reduce government accountability, limits the diversity of perspectives in governance, and narrows the scope and effectiveness of government policies. Given the well-established link between women and sustainability of peace agreement, even in the absence of a peace process, women play an important role in preventing the relapse of violence and building peaceful communities.<sup>10</sup>

Responding to these pressing circumstances, the WPS focus in Afghanistan has shifted away from women's participation to the protection of women – supporting women human rights defenders (WHRDs) to access safehouses, addressing violence against women, and pivoting toward a gender-responsive humanitarian response. As women are erased from the public sphere, the protection pillar of the WPS agenda is elevated, particularly as Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis deepens and the impact of the absence of the EVAW architecture – EVAW law, courts, women defence lawyers, women's organizations providing gender-based violence (GBV) services – is felt even more poignantly. This increase in visibility of protection risks, combined with male dominance of the de facto authorities and consolidated patriarchal norms, reinforces pre-existing narratives that relegate women to the private sphere, remove their agency, and condemn them to remaining within the homes.

Going forward, it is critical that the protection pillar of the agenda is not elevated at the expense of the participation pillar. It is impossible to protect effectively without empowerment, and empowerment is not possible without protection. These are not separate agendas, but two sides of the same coin. Ultimately the focus of protection sets a pathway that will make it harder to bring women's participation into any decisions made later. Deliberate measures are therefore needed now to put women's rights of influence and participation at the core of all efforts related to protection and relief and recovery.

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<sup>6</sup>See AIHRC (Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission). 2017. [Situation of Women Employed in Defense and Security Sectors](#); Coburn, N and M. Wafaey. 2020. [Violence against Women in Afghanistan's 2018 Parliamentary Elections](#); OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights), UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). 2009. [Silence is Violence: end the abuse of women in Afghanistan](#); HRW (Human Rights Watch). 2004. [Between Hope and Fear: intimidation and attacks against women in public life in Afghanistan](#).

<sup>7</sup>For analysis on the enactment of the 2009 Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW), see: UNAMA, OHCHR. 2018. [Injustice and Impunity: Mediation of Criminal Offences of Violence against Women](#); UNAMA, OHCHR. 2020. [In Search of Justice for Crimes of Violence Against Women and Girls](#); UN. 2021. [Conflict Related Sexual Violence. Report of the UN Secretary General 2020, S/2021/312](#), 30 March 2021; HRW. 2021. [“I Thought Our Life Might Get Better” Implementing Afghanistan's Elimination of Violence Against Women Law](#); Hakimi, M-J. 2020. [“Elusive Justice: Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of Afghanistan's Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women”](#)

<sup>8</sup>UN Women. 2022. [Gender alert no. 2: Women's rights in Afghanistan one year after the Taliban take-over](#); NGO Working Group on WP. 2022. [Gender Analysis of the Situation in Afghanistan: September 2022](#); NGO Working Group on WPS. 2022. [Gender Analysis of the Situation in Afghanistan: June 2022](#).

<sup>9</sup>Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group. 2022. [Research on Challenges, Barriers and Opportunities for Women-led CSOs in the Afghanistan's Humanitarian Crisis](#)

<sup>10</sup>World Bank and United Nations. 2017. [Pathways for peace: Inclusive approaches to preventing violent conflict](#). Krause, J., Krause, W. & Bränfors, P. 2018. [Women's participation in peace negotiations and the durability of peace](#). Domingo, P., Holmes, R., Menocal, A. R., & Jones, N. 2013. [Assessment of the evidence of links between gender equality, peacebuilding and statebuilding](#).

**Methodology:** The views of Afghan women expressed in this document were collated through three consultations of Afghan women living in Afghanistan, held on 10 October 2022 by UN Women. A total of 50 participants took part in these consultations – held in the Northern Region (Balkh, Samangan, Jowzjan), Southern Region (Kandahar, Nimruz, Kandahar), and Kabul. Out of the women consulted, 74 per cent worked on activities spanning all four WPS pillars (participation, protection, prevention, relief and recovery) prior to 15 August 2021. Participants consented to their contributions being shared publicly, with the aim of ensuring that the priorities of Afghan women on the WPS agenda could be fed into discussions in/around the United Nations Security Council debate on Women, Peace and Security.

## WPS after August 2021: Views of Afghan women

**“Nature also dies back once a year, then in the spring everything is revived again. Don’t lose hope.”  
- Afghan woman, virtual consultation, October 2022**

Three consultations were held with Afghan women leaders from diverse sectors in October 2022. The information presented in this section captures the views and policy recommendation of Afghan women on the relevance of the WPS agenda to Afghanistan. Of the 50 women consulted, **86 per cent felt that the WPS agenda is still relevant for Afghanistan today.** During the consultations, Afghan women were asked to respond to a series of polls to assess priorities against the WPS agenda. The polls were complemented by a qualitative discussion to gather a more nuanced understanding of the state of the WPS agenda in the country. Priorities outlined below were analyzed using the poll data and coding of the qualitative discussions.

Those women consulted shared that, between 2001 and 2021, the **GoIRA and civil society initiatives focused on the promotion of women’s participation** in peacebuilding initiatives. Efforts to increase women’s representation and influence led to the establishment of women’s organizations and networks; peace groups at the village, district and provincial levels; national peace conferences; advocacy programmes engaging Afghan men on reducing armed conflict; and women’s study visits abroad. Women were employed at the MoWA at national and provincial levels and held key roles in advocacy committees on women’s rights, such as those addressing issues of access to justice and security. Women’s organizations led crucial efforts on protection of women’s rights, prevention of gender-based violence, and in establishing, implementing, and monitoring the NAP on UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

Although each of the women consulted pointed to the importance of their participation in public and political life under the GoIRA, they also highlighted that their **participation** had been **inconsistent and largely symbolic** in some cases – despite the NAP stipulating robust participation targets. Women had limited opportunity to participate in decision-making. Often quoted numbers like the 27 per cent quota for women in the lower house of the National Assembly obscured a general lack of influence and minimal representation of women in decision-making roles across the public sector and in other key bodies, including in the GoIRA negotiation team at the intra-Afghan talks in Doha, Qatar. In short, meaningful participation was often lower in practice than it appeared on paper.

Nonetheless, since August 2021 both the practical and paper **gains made on WPS have been reversed.** By the time of the consultations undertaken in October 2022, the number of those women working on WPS activities had decreased by 36 per cent. The restrictions on fundamental freedoms and women’s rights, shifting social expectations on women (and a lack of clarity on which behaviours are now deemed legally/culturally acceptable), and the removal of key gender equality architecture, such as MoWA and ERAW systems and courts, have severely obstructed WPS work. The policies of the de facto authorities and broader societal norms around women’s participation and leadership in public and political life now varies across Afghanistan, covering the spectrum, from loose discouragement to active (and physically enforced) prohibition. The women consulted noted that any civil society projects that frame women’s role in society in a way that is deemed incongruous with the worldview of the DFA are banned. Those consulted also shared that women-led organizations face multiple obstacles in renewing their licenses and lack the financial support to operate and work on non-humanitarian issues, such as women’s rights and gender equality.

**Participation was still considered the main priority under WPS,** despite the dominance of protection concerns in the current context. Participation was cited by those women consulted as a way of providing women with

a voice in a context where there are few opportunities for women to exercise their agency. Afghan women are undoubtedly best placed to advocate for their own needs and rights, and, in a context where sociocultural norms typically confine interaction between women and men to within the family, it is key to have women representatives in decision-making roles as contact points for Afghan women. The women consulted saw the international community as important in playing a convening and facilitative role in creating space for Afghan women to engage directly with the DFA, at all levels.

However, as security concerns continue, women's roles in the peace and security architecture are increasingly important – a point raised during all three consultations. Some Afghan women also noted, for example, that women's participation in security forces allows a gender-sensitive approach to be pursued and addresses current obstacles facing the DFA in implementing their security policies. Due to prevailing cultural norms, in a gender-segregated context, uniformed women are necessary for accessing and working with women within the local community.

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**“Women have no platform to reach out to ask about their rights and share their issues.” – Afghan women, virtual consultation October 2022**

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Under the current conditions, Afghan women across the three consultations agreed that – after participation – **the second most important WPS priority is protection.**<sup>11</sup> Two major protection priorities were articulated: (1) The protection of WHRDs to allow them to continue the fight for women's rights; and (2) The protection of women from gender-based violence. The shrinking civic space for WHRDs is a major protection obstacle, and is exacerbated by safety concerns and fear of the DFA.

Those Afghan women consulted also pointed to the increase in domestic violence due to women being confined to the home by both DFA restrictions and a shift towards restrictive gender norms. This comes on the back of the spike in GBV seen during the COVID-19 lockdowns,<sup>12</sup> likely exacerbated by increased poverty and displacement, the collapse of the economy and women's reduced mobility. When compounded by ineffectual legal recourse and the dissolution of GBV response and support systems, it follows that those Afghan women consulted indicated that domestic violence remains predominantly hidden and unaddressed.<sup>13</sup> The women consulted also agreed that the MoWA, the provincial-level offices of this ministry – the Department of Women's Affairs (DoWAs), the AIHRC, the Bar Association, and ERAW bodies would be key institutions to reactivate in support of the protection pillar. These institutions would also provide a framework and normative basis for **rebuilding strategies for prevention** of conflict and violence against women. In fact, those women consulted stated that the pursuit of WPS activities is more important than ever, given the absence of official bodies working to advance the agenda.

Despite these potentially insurmountable obstacles, some women reported that after an initial shutdown of activities they had **found ways to continue essential work.** The challenges are significant. The lack of coordination and opaque lines of decision-making authority among DFA actors remains an issue for engagement efforts, and the prevailing lack of certainty and predictability ultimately limits the ability of women's organizations to plan strategically. Nevertheless, when engaging the DFA on projects, some women's organizations have been able to create space that allows them to operate while also strategically incorporating key elements of the WPS agenda.

Those Afghan women consulted indicated that the DFA seem more amenable to relief and recovery projects, highlighting that the DFA have allowed projects focused on distribution of goods, addressing humanitarian needs, and livelihood programmes. Although not considered by the Afghan women consulted to be the current main priority in the WPS realm, these types of programmes were nonetheless identified as important – given the dire economic and humanitarian situation in country. Those women consulted also considered economic and humanitarian projects as one viable avenue for achieving WPS advances. Although it will not fix the multiple overlapping crises affecting Afghan women on the ground, activities of this nature could potentially produce (realistically achievable) gains in increasing women's participation in the humanitarian response, ensuring that aid reaches women.

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<sup>11</sup>Within the WPS agenda globally, protection refers to specific protection rights and needs of women and girls – including needs of women Internally Displaced Persons and HRDs, and protection from GBV.

<sup>12</sup>UN Women Afghanistan produced a series of Gender Alert on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women and girls, available [here](#).

<sup>13</sup>UNAMA notes significant underreporting of GBV. Cases registered at hospitals have halved in number since the de facto authorities took control of Afghanistan. This could be due to women's limited freedom of movement, the absence of mechanisms for protection or redress, and the current insecure environment for women: UNAMA. 2022. [Human Rights in Afghanistan: 15 August 2021 – 15 June 2022](#).

## Recommendations

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**“Restrictions mean that women cannot make plans, even for tomorrow.” – Afghan women, in-person consultation, August 2022**

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The cumulative effect of a shrinking civic space and gender-specific restrictions on fundamental rights has left the Afghan women’s movement with almost no room to move. However, even in this highly charged and dangerous context, women are resisting the status quo by taking to the streets in protest, running organizations to meet the humanitarian needs of women and girls, and brokering pathways to meet with the de facto authorities to advocate for the needs of women and girls. Now – as in the past – the grassroots women’s movement remains the backbone of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan. Efforts to promote women’s participation, advocacy, and influence in decision-making – both in Afghanistan and at a high level internationally – must be prioritized, with existing policy pathways for Afghan women replicated across sectors.

Afghan women consulted in October 2022 were asked how the international community – **the United Nations System** and **United Nations Members States** – could advance the WPS agenda in Afghanistan to return the focus to women’s leadership and agency. The two most important actions that the international community could take were identified as: (1) **Influence the DFA** to improve the situation of women and girls; and (2) **Fund women-led organizations** and women leaders. Specific recommendations are outlined below.

### **The United Nations System should:**

- **Provide financial support for flexible and responsive programming** to meet current challenges, such as women’s livelihood programmes reflecting WPS goals, enabling a focus on women’s agency and leadership.
- **Increase the focus on the participation pillar of the WPS agenda** by ensuring that women’s empowerment is central to all protection efforts and humanitarian interventions.
- **Assume a convening, facilitative role for Afghan women and the DFA**, and provide a platform for exchange of views – while normalizing consultative processes between the DFA and Afghan women.
- **Support Afghan women’s networks and councils** consisting of both Afghan men and women, to build shared understanding and tools for addressing current challenges.
- **Prioritize the protection needs of women** as a pathway to alleviating the pressure of DFA restrictions on Afghan women and secure space for movement towards women’s participation goals.
- **Bring established international Islamic scholars together** to discuss women’s rights directly with the DFA, or in a supportive role with women meeting directly with the DFA.
- **Establish monitoring mechanisms on WPS objectives** to provide accurate, regular reporting and awareness-raising with the DFA on key WPS issues.

### **United Nations Member States should:**

- **Continue to advocate for the participation pillar of the WPS agenda** and put pressure on the Taliban to ensure the full and equal participation of women in all decision-making processes –without fear of harassment, intimidation, and violence.
- **Continue to impose sanctions on the DFA** to maintain pressure and influence the DFA regarding the WPS agenda.
- **Invest in the protection and funding of WHRDs and women-led organizations** promoting women’s rights, to support their continued engagement in WPS efforts.
- **Prioritize flexible and responsive support for Afghan women** to reinforce their agency and provide security for renewed WPS advocacy and programming.
- **Monitor the protection and promotion of women’s rights closely** in Afghanistan, with a view to placing pressure on the DFA to reduce restrictions on women and women’s organizations, particularly regarding women’s employment.