



BEYOND KABUL:

WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS' REFLECTIONS ON THE PEACE PROCESS AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

About AWEC

Since 1991, at the height of intense warfare, the Afghan Women's Educational Center (AWEC) held the privilege of working for women empowerment and children development and protection, focusing on those frequently falling through safety nets. AWEC was started as a social and educational center by Afghan refugee women in exile. AWEC's core areas of work have been education, leadership development mobilization and capacity building of CSO and local community organization, and running special educational center programs for street children. Peacebuilding has been an integrated component of the AWEC program. AWEC has organized intra ethnic dialogue of women at grassroots by organizing through regional exposure visits, exchange visits, peace education, community peace dialogues, and peace research.

About UN Women

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Manufactured in Afghanistan

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Acronyms

AWEC	Afghan Women’s Educational Center
CDCs	Community Development Councils
GoIRA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
NAP 1325	National Action Plan 1325
MARWOPNET	Mano River Women’s Peace Network
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNSCR 1325	United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325
WIPNET	Women in Peacebuilding Network

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report was drafted by the Afghan Women's Educational Center (AWEC), synthesizing insights from one hundred and fifty telephone interviews with women peacebuilders and negotiators from eight provinces of Afghanistan (Badakhshan, Kandahar, Herat, Helmand, Paktia, Nangarhar, Kabul, Balkh). It was conducted at a critical juncture, as the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA) entered into talks with the Taliban.

Since the beginning of the United States talks with the Taliban, women across Afghanistan have increased their voice for women participation in peace processes as equal citizen of the country in welcoming the possibility of peace, while raising concerns that their rights may be compromised if the process is conducted hastily and they are not substantially represented. This policy brief aims to ensure that women's voices are heard in upcoming political dialogues and during the intra-Afghan peace process.

Several key themes emerged from the interviews conducted for the present report:

Participants **defined peace as the restoration of communities living in harmonious relationships and the creation of social systems** that serve the needs of both the family and the community. The women peacebuilders also highlighted the importance of creating an environment of tolerance and acceptance.

Participants believe that **the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan signed between the US and the Taliban on 29 February 2020 has no real benefit for Afghans**, particularly not for men and women in rural areas. Almost all participants indicate that violence has escalated in the provinces and civilian casualties have increased. While women insisted on peace talk as only option for some stability in, **eighty-five per cent of women participants hold a negative opinion toward the deal** between the US and the Taliban, while only seven per cent remain positive and expect a good result. These women peacebuilder call for further transparency and tangible results.

The women interviewed are **wary regarding the Taleban's potential return to power**. Thirty per cent of respondents are concerned that the group may revert to its old behaviour, seen during their time in power. The women who were interviewed also expressed a high level of uncertainty and concern in regard to the Taliban's stance on women's rights to work, education and civil liberties, highlighting the violence and abuses that women are subjected to in areas under the Taliban control.

Women peacebuilders **object to the current minimal role of women in the peace process**, describing it as a policy of "tokenism." They noted that greater inclusion of women in the peace process is essential in order to lead the country towards successful, sustainable, and durable

peace. Further, women peacebuilders noted the **critical role of local guarantors** in ensuring real and lasting peace.

Finally, the women interviewed **highlighted the devastating health and economic impact of COVID-19**, noting the difficulties pandemic has raised in their peacebuilding work.

The following recommendations emerged from the discussions with women peacebuilders:

- **Women should be involved at all levels of peace processes**, including during the post-peace agreement phase. Women should be part of designing, implementing, and monitoring the post-peace processes and development programme. Women in rural and remote communities have diverse experience that can complement what is offered by other groups of women and men in national level.
- **The GoIRA and the international community should fully invest in building linkages between urban and rural communities**. This will help to rally all Afghans behind any peace process and make it a success.
- **Sufficient investment should be made in building local capacities**, on particularly women mediators and peacebuilders, which will help women on the provincial and district levels to play a vital role in maintaining peace on the local and central levels.
- **Reduction of violence should not be limited to international forces and the Taliban**. The cessation of violence must extend to local communities. Continuous violence in remote, conflict-prone provinces does not only take the lives of women but damages their capacity and ability to help other women within their community.
- **Transparency at all levels of peace talks is necessary to build public confidence**. Women are important development and peace partners who should be engaged in peace and post-peace processed.
- **Guaranteeing access to education and employment, and safeguarding women's rights in any peace agreement is not only a call from urban women** but a demand from rural women peacebuilders living in remote provinces. Basic rights and freedoms need to be guaranteed by the GoIRA and international partners supporting the peace process.

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that the participation of women in peace negotiations and processes is critical to the success of any peacebuilding process; there is a twenty per cent increase in the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years when women are involved—and a thirty-five per cent increase in the probability of it lasting at least fifteen years.

Women also have different experiences of conflict, as well as different coping mechanisms and resolution strategies, thus bringing a unique and vital perspective to peace negotiations.¹

Despite several global policy documents reaffirming the importance of women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts, including the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action, the 2000 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), and ten women, peace and security resolutions,² progress has been made, though very slowly and hesitantly. In Afghanistan, where conflict has been a constant part of the daily life since the adoption of the UNSCR 1325 and consequent national action plans, there have been only halting and inconsistent efforts to engage women in forging peace.

Afghanistan has been exposed to the scourge of protracted conflict for almost four decades and women have, in many ways, borne the brunt of this conflict. Millions of women have been widowed or have lost loved ones, millions other uprooted from their place of origin along their families³ while many more have been deprived of their basic rights, including the right to education, work and access to healthcare services across the country. Afghan-led initiatives such as the National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325, in theory, should redress women's suffering by mainstreaming their roles in decision-making in conflict and post-conflict arenas of relief and recovery, while also safeguarding women's safety and promoting their participation in all relevant political processes. However, women's role in the Afghan peace process remains limited, involving only four women in the Republican negotiating team of total twenty-one participants. Little has been done to ensure that the negotiating team and decision makers are connected to the women's rights movements. Integration of gender and women's rights expertise and engagement with women's civil society into the negotiation process is missing and weak.

This dearth of women's involvement is to the detriment of the country, and to the prospect of lasting peace. Women peacebuilders, particularly women in rural areas, can bring diverse perspectives and priorities to the negotiation table. Rural women are impacted by conflict in ways which differ from those experienced by men, and certainly, by women in larger cities. This is beyond any argument over the urban-rural divide. It is not about disagreement, but rather the equal right of all Afghan women to shape the future of their country based on their different experiences of conflict. The role of women in remote provinces is key to ensuring durable peace

at both the local and national levels, and needs to be recognized as essential to reweaving the social fabric of Afghan society in the aftermath of the conflict.

Following the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan signed between the United States and the Taliban on 29 February 2020, many women in Afghanistan fear that a Taliban return to power would once again subject women to different forms of oppression and exclusion, similar to the Taliban reign in the 1990s. Many Afghan women's rights activists and political leaders strongly believe⁴ that the Taliban have not changed their positions on oppression of women. This stems from their on-the-ground experience of women still being stoned for "moral crimes", the continued targeting of girls' schools and women leaders in places under the Taliban influence and control. The lack of clarity over the ongoing peace process between the GoIRA and the Taliban, the stalemate on an intra-Afghan peace process, and escalating violence heightens Afghan women's concerns over the future of the country and women's role in it.

Addressing these ongoing concerns, the *Women & Peace* project has engaged local women peacebuilders and mediators to highlight, capacitate and mainstream their voices in the peace talks and post-peace settlement.

Building on our earlier experiences in local peacebuilding with women Shuras and grassroots women leaders in various provinces, the AWEC has engaged three hundred and eighty-one women in eight provinces (Badakhshan, Kandahar, Herat, Helmand, Paktia, Nangarhar, Kabul, Balkh) as part of the project.

To inform upcoming political dialogues and the intra-Afghan peace process, **this policy brief aims to bring the unheard perspectives of women peacebuilders in rural Afghanistan to the attention of the relevant authorities**, including GoIRA, the State Ministry for Peace, the Afghan government negotiation team, the international community, advocacy groups, policymakers, and potential thought leaders.

The first section of this policy brief **examines the critical role women peacebuilders play at the community level** to promote and support sustainable peace efforts. The second section outlines **the perspectives of rural women peacebuilders in relation to the current peace talks**. The final section briefly highlights the ways in which **escalating crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing insecurity, are exacerbating local conflict and stalling peace efforts** within communities. This added layer of analysis is critical to understanding the further efforts that will be required to reach women peacebuilders and engage their voices for peace amid the ongoing pandemic and conflict. The paper concludes with **recommendations offered by the women peacebuilders surveyed**.

It is worth noting that COVID-19 has impacted both the scope of the project and the activities of the rural women peacebuilders involved. Pandemic-related lockdowns and quarantine measures

in Afghanistan have restricted the movement of all people, including women peacebuilders. Precautious measures have limited women ability to reach out to constituencies and forced them to focus on health emergencies and crises within their families. Nonetheless, our engagement has continued through the available channels, adapting as necessary to accommodate the participants' availability and responsibilities at home.

METHODOLOGY

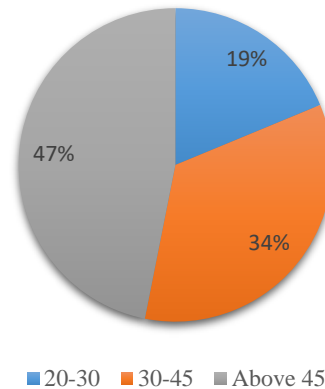
In order to gain better insight into the roles of rural women peacebuilders across Afghanistan, the AWEC initially planned to conduct group discussions and face-to-face interviews in Balkh, Badakhshan, Helmand, Herat, Kandahar, Kabul, Nangarhar and Paktia. These provinces had been selected after careful deliberation, taking both demographic and socio-economic conditions into account. However, due to COVID-19-related movement restrictions, lockdowns and a ban on gatherings, AWEC could not implement this plan. Instead AWEC adapted methodology and hold telephone interviews with one hundred and fifty prominent, active women peacebuilders in the aforementioned provinces.

The women who took part in the interviews and discussion sessions are grassroots women peacebuilders and mediators with diverse experience at community and provincial level. This includes experience mediating as members of local Community Development Councils (CDCs), resolving intra-family disputes and community-level conflicts, as well as mediating with armed groups, including the Taliban. These peacebuilders actively promote plurality and inclusiveness in their communities.

The women interviewed are also active in addressing local women councils, Jirgas and Shuras, on issues of women's and girls' rights, including issues on sexual and gender-based violence. For security purposes, this paper does not include the real names of participants, nor disclose their location beyond indicating their province.

AWEC selected a diverse pool of women from a range of age groups (Figure 1) and professions to solicit their perspectives on the previous peace talks between the United States and the Taliban, and the GoIRA and the Taliban. The interviews also assessed how COVID-19 has impacted their daily lives and their grassroots efforts on conflict resolution.

FIGURE 1
Participant Age



AWEC prepared a questionnaire comprised of twenty-five questions that guide the interview process and to enable us to better understand the role and contribution of these women peacebuilders in their respective regions. The semi-structured interviews provide an insight into the life experience, peace-fostering work, and knowledge of peace mediation of local women peacebuilders.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings of this policy brief are categorized into three main thematic areas, as discussed below.

A. Afghan women peacebuilders' approaches to conflict resolution

Studies have shown that men and women generally have distinct styles on conflict management. Women are more likely to adopt cooperative conflict management methods such as collaboration, compromising, or avoiding, while men usually use competing or avoiding strategies. Women play a critical part in peace building through four key roles:

“First as activists and advocates for peace, women wage conflict non-violently by pursuing democracy and human rights. Secondly, as peacekeepers and relief aid workers, women contribute to reducing direct violence. Thirdly, as mediators, trauma healing counsellors, and policymakers, women work to ‘transform relationships’ and address the root of violence. Lastly, as educators and participants in the development process, women contribute to building the capacity of their communities and nations to prevent violent conflict.”⁵

There is much to be learned from women peacebuilders' experiences in Liberia, where women played a key role in bringing to an end a year of conflict. Women's groups and networks such as the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) and the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) helped bringing together rebel and government representatives to the negotiating table, resulting in a ceasefire between the warring parties.⁶ These groups monitored and observed peace talks and staged a silent protest outside the venue where peace talks were held. When the peace negotiations stalled, the women blocked the exits and refused to let the negotiators out of the venue until progress was made.

Similarly, women have played prominent and meaningful roles in both the formal and informal tracks of the peace process in the Philippines,⁷ which can serve as a precedent for women's active role in Afghan peace talks. The potential efficacy of such roles women played in formal and informal processes is further supported by the role played by women in peace talks in Burundi,⁸ where they have been both actors and agents of change and peace at grassroots level.

Afghan women have a rich tradition of contributing to the well-being and development of their communities. Throughout Afghanistan's history, women have played⁹ a significant role in the fast-changing political and security context and socioeconomic situation of the country. Women have advocated peace, equal social norms and women's rights. They have addressed activists, politicians, local mediators, judges, teachers, and police. Women's contributions to informal and formal business sectors are significant.

However, the recognition of women as key stakeholders in the current peace process has been very limited. The role of grassroots women peacebuilders, in particular, is far from the spotlights of the national and international peace negotiations, where the Taliban tend to make headlines. If women are brought up, the focus is almost exclusively on women activists in the capital. Keeping women in a shadow and underestimating them as a real local level influencer is a significant missed opportunity. Women-led peace initiatives countrywide are crucial in building a culture of sustainable peace, given women's role in nurturing the next generation.

Speaking to women activists at the local level, the peacebuilders indicated that the primary victims¹⁰ of any conflict are women, as they not only lost their dear ones in conflict but left suddenly with breadwinning task as sole caretakers of the family, in situation where society is yet not ready to embrace this new role. Therefore, women believe that Afghan women should be given a key role in the design and implementation phase of post-conflict processes and peacebuilding activities. Jan Bibi, a local peacebuilder from Kandahar said, *"the Taliban and the Afghan government delegates in Doha should not forget their sisters. We sacrificed more than anyone else (more than men) in this war."* During a recent (October 2020) Mediators National Networking workshop held by AWEC in Kabul, women stated that their lives are gravely affected

by the ongoing conflicts, as family members have been kidnapped or killed, their daily lives have been disrupted and they are deprived of their basic needs.

Regarding to approaches and mechanisms for resolving local conflicts, twenty-eight per cent of women said that they have attended, hosted or are members of local Shuras. Fourteen per cent said they facilitated to resolve local conflicts between families, family violence, or violence against women through the formal governmental and dispute channels. Fourteen per cent also indicated that they seek the assistance of educated people within their community in reaching consensus and finding solutions. Thirty-eight per cent of women peacebuilders said that they resolve their issues by using elderly men and women as their good offices. Finally, six per cent (nine out of one hundred and fifty) referred problems to mullahs (religious scholars).

When asked how women cope with conflicts arising from forced marriages, dowry giving, or family violence, sixty per cent of women peacebuilders said that they resolve these types of conflict through intra-family engagements. Women also noted that they usually partake in the local tribe's Jirgas, shoulder to shoulder with men, to restore peace and forge amicable relationships between families. One thirty-four year old woman from Paktia stated, *"We women understand the pain and agony behind losing our sons and loved ones. Therefore, we also understand our role and the importance of a friendly and cordial relationship between different tribes and people within our community."* She further noted, *"we always try our best to engage women of different families to influence our men to avoid escalating tensions or conflicts,"* point out that this approach has *"yielded results."*

B. Current peace talks as seen by Afghan women peacebuilders

The prospect of a negotiated settlement is tempting. However, if the path to sustainable and durable peace in Afghanistan is to be reached, it is critical to understand how people across the country - especially women in rural areas - view the current peace process. As noted above, there are numerous studies¹¹ and examples that support the link between durable and sustainable peace and the meaningful participation of women peacebuilders. Thus, it is vital to involve both girls and women as important partners and resources for peace. Their involvement in local peace initiatives, civic activism, local administration, national governments, and as international implementers is crucial to constructively shape and define peace agendas and conflict resolution architecture.

1) Women's definition of peace

When asked how women perceive the notion of peace, the majority of the women respondents expressed that they consider peace as a restoration of communities living in harmonious relationship and the creation of social systems that responds to the needs of the families and

communities. Women highlighted in their responses the importance of creating an environment of tolerance and acceptance, in which children's futures are the top priority.

Going beyond any potential peace with the Taliban, participants comprehend peace as something that has a positive impact on their daily lives at home, within their families and communities - among and between themselves. In the view of Rahmat Bibi, a twenty-three-year-old woman peacebuilder from Paktia province, this *means "peace between two people, two families, two villages, is when we all live in solidarity with each other."* Durkhani from Nangarhar said that peace is *"being able to relax when my girl and boy go to school and I am not worried that someone will stop them, harm them, or kill them on the road."*

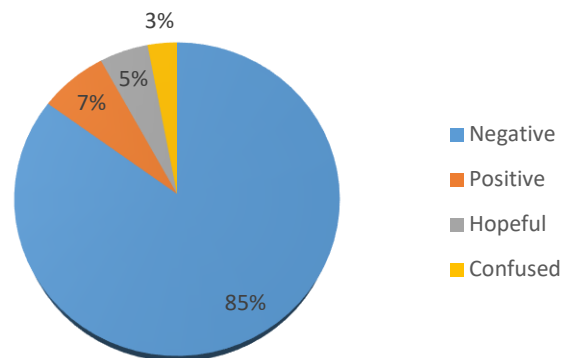
2) Reflections on the US-Taliban Agreement

Participants of this survey believe that the US and the Taliban deal has no real benefits for Afghans, especially for men and women living in rural areas are believed not to benefit of the Agreement. Almost all respondents stated that violence has escalated in the provinces and civilian casualties have increased. Women complained that they are forced to leave their homes when fighting escalates. The reason of higher number of disappointment of US Taliban agreement was the least outcome was ceasefire. According to a recent United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report, thirty-five thousand people were displaced from their homes during the October 2020 Taliban attack in Helmand, with four thousand children forced to drop out of school.¹²

Further, as represented in Figure two below, eighty-five per cent of women participants hold a negative opinion on the US-Taliban deal, while only seven per cent remain positive and expect a good result. Five per cent of the women were hopeful that the situation will change as the peace process moves ahead. Three per cent were confused by the ground realities, stating they did not know what will happen next, as the peace agreement lacked clarity and transparency.¹³

Women peacebuilders and mediators believe that the developments of the peace process do not currently translate into tangible results, at their homes and in their communities, and asked for more transparency. Women respondents noted that the situation of "ongoing conflict and violence and peace talks at the same time" does not make sense, and asked for a ceasefire as the most pressing need. They also expressed concern for the future of their children and their mobility within their community. They further note that it is imperative to ensure women's rights are protected in the ongoing intra-Afghan negotiations. Jan Bibi from Kandahar said, *"When the Taliban and the Afghan government are talking in Doha, they should not forget their sisters [women], we paid the biggest price in this war, more than anyone else."*

FIGURE 2
Opinions on the US - Taliban



When reflecting on the prospect of the Taliban return to power, thirty per cent of participants said that the Taliban might resume to their old behaviour, seen during their time in power. Eighteen per cent of women participants indicated a negative view of a Taliban return to power as a result of a peace agreement. The women noted that although some experts¹⁴ feel that the Taliban may be less opposed to women’s freedom and rights than previously, it is still vital to learn their stance on women’s right to work, education, and freedom. Further, women termed any such agreement “a deal of paper,” which has failed to change the security situation on the ground in their daily lives.

3) How participants see the role of women in peace talks

The participants objected to the current minimal role of women in the peace process. Those peacemakers interviewed insisted that women should be given full participation in the process, as they can speak on behalf of the half of the population and can accurately reflect the realities on the ground.

Participants reiterated that almost all actors have adopted a policy of “tokenism” when it comes to the role of women in negotiations. Respondents concluded that women representing all ethnic backgrounds and provinces should have a role in forging peace and building the future of the country. Women noted that inclusivity is essential to leading the country toward successful and sustainable peace.

4) Rural-urban divide among women

The discussions also touched upon the division between rural and urban women. Participants agreed that women in Afghanistan are not a homogeneous entity: Socially and geographically

they are different. However, research for this policy brief confirms that there is a great deal of convergence in regard to women's basic needs and rights, across both urban and rural areas. All the women who took part in the interviews and discussions agreed that rural women may not have the same language as their sisters in large cities, but their needs are the same. Women in rural settings, too, want to access healthcare services, attain education, work and continue to enjoy the option of civic engagement. Saqi Jana said, *"I have not gone to school ever, but I want my daughter to have a different future, I want her to study."* Regarding the possibility of a referendum on any future peace deal, some participants pointed out that the rural women vote has been a game changer in deciding recent elections.¹⁵ Hence, they emphasized that they want to continue to exercise their rights.

5) Local guarantors

According to a forty-year-old woman peacebuilder Gulmakai, many women, young girls and their parents fear retaliation by insurgents after any post-peace settlement. She noted that if the post-peace plan fails to mobilize guarantors at the local level, the peace might fail. This could result in regression to the previous situation where insurgents prevented her from sending her children to school.

With regard to employment, almost all participants agreed that women should have free mobility within their communities and continue working, as their family cannot survive only men working. Any peace deal that does not guarantee their freedom, access to education and employment will not bear fruit, nor will it earn the support of more than half of the Afghan population. Durkhanai stated that she and other women will never allow their daughters to remain only at home, depriving them of continuing their education and work. She noted, *"We have a lot of regrets in our lives, but it will never be acceptable for me to deprive my daughter, who is in grade ten, of further education."*

All these women pointed to the current status of women across Afghanistan as a cause for ongoing concern. For instance, they noted that women in areas under the Taliban influence still face a terrible situation; they are stoned to death, their schools are burnt and destroyed and they have been subjected to violence and tortured, in both the Taliban and GoIRA controlled areas.

Bibi Sailo, forty-three-year-old woman from Balkh, stated, *"When a woman is subject to any sort of violence and harassment in the GoIRA controlled areas, we can go and ask justice the relevant governmental department. But when she is harassed or subject to violence in the Taliban controlled areas, we do not know where to go"* - as the Taliban do not have formal state structures or settings." This reinforces women's concerns that the Taliban have not changed, and that any future peace may curtail their freedom to work, study, and being active members of society.

C. The impact of insecurity and COVID-19 on women peacebuilders' activities

The COVID-19 pandemic has infected millions of people around the globe, spreading with alarming speed. The whole world continues to grapple with the growing humanitarian and economic impact of the virus.

While the impact of the pandemic has been catastrophic worldwide, Afghanistan has been disproportionately affected due to its poor health care infrastructure. Afghanistan's health care system has been stretched to breaking point by limited resources and medical personnel - and poor social cohesion resulting from forty years of war, alongside with a large influx of refugees returning from Iran and Pakistan. In addition, continued violence combined with targeted attacks against healthcare facilities threatens to reduce or prevent access to health services for millions of Afghans, who need such services more than ever before.¹⁶

The initial pandemic related shock followed by lockdown and quarantine measures restricted the movement of all people, including women peacebuilders. The measures limited their ability to engage with peers and continue their normal outreach following the signing of the US-Taliban peace agreement. As one women peacebuilders from Balkh province stated, *"As the pandemic restricted our activities, it also restricted the ability of other women in need to reach us."*

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a devastating economic impact. All participants reported family members losing jobs and small businesses failed to maintain their markets and clients.

To combat the adverse impact of the pandemic and avoid a human catastrophe, the GoIRA has launched several initiatives to assist impoverished communities. For instance, it initiated relief schemes for poor Afghans, such as the distribution of bread across the country.¹⁷

However, when asked whether they had received government support in their communities in these difficult times, the majority of participants said they had not received government's relief packages that could have helped them to overcome their financial obstacles. Almost all respondents (one hundred and forty-six women) assessed GoIRA's relief efforts negatively, labelling them as ineffective in the fight against COVID-19.

One woman said, *"They [the government and donors] left us on our own to fight Corona without any support."* Both the government and the Taliban claim to have helped people in areas under their control and influence. However, the participants stated that they could not access many of the government's local health facilities and did not benefit from the GoIRA's schemes that were intended to alleviate the economic and health related distress caused by the virus, such as the aforementioned bread distribution initiative.

Women peacebuilders also noted that their access to health facilities was non-existent; they did not receive medical help, as the local medical facilities lacked necessary equipment to treat those

infected by the virus. All one hundred and fifty participants dismissed the Taliban's claim of supporting families in areas under their control and influence.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The women of Afghanistan have played an active role in the political and social transformation of the country. Despite the lack of recognition of women in rural and remote communities, they have always held a critical role in local peacebuilding and dispute resolution. Since the end of the Taliban rule, women have made real strides on the political, social, and economic fronts.

An increase in women's participation at all levels of the peace process is essential to solidifying these gains and ensuring a just and equal future for all citizens of Afghanistan. This participation should reflect the diversity of women's experiences, ensuring that both rural and urban women's voices are heard.

Women living in the provinces and remote communities represent an untapped resource that can be positively engaged in any post-peace settlement, monitoring peace, fostering development, and resolving local disputes in a way that ensures that Afghanistan moves forward.

Based on the research conducted for this policy brief, the following recommendations should be implemented to improve the peace process and ensure that any resulting agreement is durable, lasting, and reflects the priorities and needs of both men and women:

- **Women should be involved at all levels of the peace processes**, including during the post-peace agreement phase. They should be part of designing, implementing, and monitoring the post-peace processes and development programme. Women in rural and remote communities have diverse experience that can complement what is offered by other groups. Local women peacebuilders in local shuras, development councils and associations can be identified and mobilized to play role in local peace processes, including post peace community development, conflict resolution and reintegration process.
- **The Afghan government and international community should fully invest in building linkages between the urban and rural communities.** This will help to rally all Afghans behind any peace process and make it a success. Joint consultations, planning meeting involving distinctive roles for women in rural urban areas can help clearly define convergence and networking as important elements.
- **Sufficient investment should be made in building local capacity**, particularly for women mediators and peacebuilders, which will help women play a vital role in maintaining peace on the provincial and national levels. Women peacebuilders in rural communities can be identified, trained in conflict management, ceasefire monitoring, and reintegration processes to play more substantial role in peace and post-peace agreement processes.

- **Reduction of violence should not be limited to international forces and the Taliban.** The cessation of violence must extend to local communities. Continuous violence in remote, conflict-prone provinces not only take the lives of women, but damages their capacity and ability to help other women within their communities.
- **Transparency at all levels of peace talks is necessary to build public confidence.** Women are important development and peace partners who should be engaged in this process. Women at both provincial and national level should be involved as Peace Watchdogs that contribute to Afghan owned peace outcome and architecture.
- **Guaranteeing access to education and employment and safeguarding women's rights in any peace agreement is not only a call from urban women,** but a demand from local women peacebuilders living in remote areas. These rights need to be guaranteed by the GoIRA and international partners supporting the peace process. The future peace agreement should clearly spell out women's and girls' rights and their access to mobility, education and work to ensure women's confidence on peace outcome.

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Appendix

JOINT STATEMENT FROM WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS AND MEDIATORS ON PROMOTING WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY IN AFGHANISTAN

Kabul, 28 October 2020

We women from eight provinces of Afghanistan, which include remote districts devastated by conflict, poverty, and neglect, call on all parties of war to commence a ceasefire and open the path to genuine peace talks. We have come together in Kabul for the peacebuilders and mediators national networking event organized by the Afghan Women's Educational Center (AWEC), held as the world gets ready to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325).

RECALLING our commitment to promote peace at our homes, communities and country through sowing seeds of peace, continuing to teach our young lessons on living together, creating cohesive communities, and promoting friendship within our tribes and ethnic groups. We will continue to mediate between parties in conflict in our own surroundings in order to promote a peaceful environment for everyone, protect women and girls who are victims of violence, and develop our sisterhood by lending a hand to those in need of safety and protection.

REAFFIRMING our commitment to create flourishing, peaceful communities and eliminate violence against women and girls, as reflected in our religion and the positive traditions and laws that promote and protect our rights. We continue to fight injustice and those who would destroy our peace and stability.

CONCERNED by the increasing and unprecedented threat posed by conflicts, and increasing number of refugees and displaced persons, including women and children; and the two-fold victimization of our community - by different sides in conflict, while our homes are bombed.

CALLING ON the Government of Afghanistan, the Taliban, and International Community:

The Government of Afghanistan:

Transparent & Just Institutions: Build transparent, just and inclusive institutions that bring the country together for genuine peace. We spent years suffering to our core to educate our girls and boys, who today find themselves jobless. The youth of Afghanistan, both young men and women, deserve an equal opportunity to shape the future of their country. Our institutions must be committed to serve each and every Afghan - and ensuring transparency and just institutions that address corruption will be crucial for the future of the country.

Security and Justice: National security forces that mirror the communities they serve is better prepared to protect the security and rights of its citizens. Security and justice sector should be accessible to everyone, including women.

Education: Quality of education is highly compromised in our communities and girls and young women face extreme hardship in accessing their right to education. Children do not enjoy an environment conducive to academic success and are forced into classes of sixty to eighty students, particularly in southern and eastern provinces. The situation has become even worse in the aftermath of the first wave of COVID-19, with no textbooks and no teachers due to lay-offs that have slowed the reform process in educational system.

The Taliban:

Immediate Ceasefire: A ceasefire that comes immediately into effect is needed. Conflict makes no party a winner. It is time to open the way to genuine peace, by committing to putting down arms. When you are making peace, do not forget we women have paid the highest price for this war, and peace must include our voices, perspectives, rights, and participation.

Equality: Afghanistan is our common home and all ethnic and tribal groups have equal right to live in this country. This right needs to be recognized and respected by all parties to ensure that a larger group of Afghan women and men participate in the peace process.

The Future of Our Girls: Some of us never had the chance to go to school. We have been raised in wartime, but we want our girls to continue their education. Our daughters are prevented from attending schools and madras beyond grade six in some districts under your influence in Kandahar and Paktia. Women teachers are not safe and receive threats because they work for peace in their community. We need our daughters to have access to full education and we want women's and girls' education to have a main priority in the future development of Afghanistan.

The International Community:

Ensure that regional countries remain committed to their promises on peace in Afghanistan and curtail any activities that fuel violence in our country.

Advocate for an immediate ceasefire and guarantees to reduce violence. Afghan people are paying too high a price amid record-level high violence.

Support civil society and women's groups to advance independent voices for peace.

