

INCLUSIVE PEACE: ADVANCING AFGHAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS THROUGH ADVOCACY AND COMMUNITY

A REPORT FOR WOMEN FOR AFGHAN WOMEN
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Acronyms

| | |
|--------------|--|
| AWN | Afghan Women's Network |
| CEDAW | Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women |
| CSC | Children's Support Center |
| DOD | Department of Defense |
| EVAW | Elimination of Violence Against Women |
| FGC | Family Guidance Center |
| GBV | Gender-Based Violence |
| GIWPS | Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security |
| SIGAR | Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction |
| TDR | Traditional Dispute Resolution |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNAMA | United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |
| USIP | United States Institute of Peace |
| WAW | Women for Afghan Women |

Executive Summary

This report presents near-, medium-, and long-term recommendations to the leadership of Women for Afghan Women (WAW). These recommendations are specific to WAW's mission of advancing the rights of women, girls, and children during and after the intra-Afghan peace negotiations. They suggest new approaches to issue advocacy during times of political uncertainty, address historical obstacles to gender equity and justice, and envision the benefits of deepening WAW's presence across Afghanistan's provinces.

The 2020 peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government create opportunities and challenges for women's rights groups. While the talks will generate unique platforms for advocacy, they also hold the potential to restrict women's legal rights and physical security through power-sharing compromises that deprioritize gender issues. In response to the uncertainty of these unprecedented negotiations, a team of graduate students acting as researchers and consultants from Georgetown University organized the following menu of initiatives for WAW's consideration:

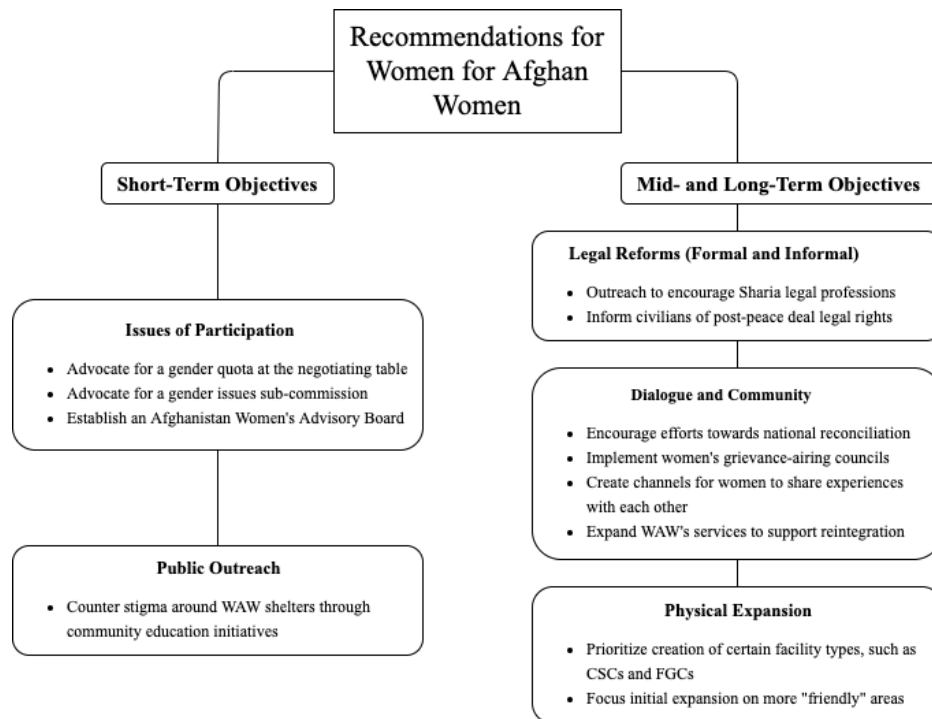


Figure 1 Outline of Recommendations for WAW

This categorized list of proposals is designed to equip WAW with near-, mid-, and long-term options as Afghanistan pursues a peace that is equitable and lasting. These recommendations target both emerging threats and perennial challenges to WAW's mission of women's empowerment and protection. While Section One imagines new roles for WAW as an advocate of key issues during the peace process, Section Two offers mid- and long-term

proposals that build off of WAW's existing services and capabilities. As the country's largest women's organization, WAW has an important role to play in Afghanistan's future, and is well positioned to spearhead any of these campaigns.

Introduction

In February 2020, a ceasefire agreement between the United States and the Taliban laid the tentative groundwork for peace talks between the Taliban, the Afghan government, and prominent national power-brokers. The commencement of intra-Afghan negotiations remains a delicate process, with electoral stalemates, prisoner exchange standoffs, and the COVID-19 pandemic all posing unique obstacles. On March 27, 2020, however, the Afghan government unveiled its negotiating team.¹ Although the Taliban has walked away from specific meetings with the government, it has not rescinded its involvement in the broader peace process.² As of this writing, all parties remain committed to providing Afghan citizens with something they have not experienced in over four decades: peace.

For Afghanistan's women, however, a formal peace accord is hardly a guarantee of liberty or safety. The inclusion of the Taliban in the negotiations suggests that any vision of a post-conflict Afghanistan will involve a power-sharing agreement that legitimizes its role in government. This prospect has threatening implications for the future of women's legal rights and physical security. In preliminary peace talks, the Taliban has articulated a troubling and often misleading vision of women's rights. In a formal statement on February 5th, the group committed to the full protection of women's dignity as afforded by Islam, including the rights to "business and ownership, inheritance, education, work, choosing one's husband, and security." In the same statement, however, the Taliban accused women's rights advocates of circulating indecent ideals, encouraging women to violate Afghan customs, and undermining their morality.³

The Taliban's deputy leader Sirajuddin Haqanni has also promoted a vague "Islamic system," in which "the rights of women that are granted by Islam...are protected."⁴ While certain Taliban officials have suggested a need to reform the brutal standards of its pre-2001 reign, the group has expressed reluctance to allow women to serve in certain high political offices.⁵ In preparing itself for negotiations on the international stage, the Taliban has adopted a measured ambiguity on women's issues. However, in light of its history and recent statements, it will likely seek restrictions on the rights and public roles provided for women in the Afghan constitution.

Regression on women's issues is particularly threatening for grassroots organizations like WAW. WAW runs women's shelters and development centers across the country, and has a working presence in twenty-four of Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces. Its facilities offer diverse services, including family guidance, legal counseling, dispute settlement, children's protection, and professional training. Physical protection is a central concern for WAW. The security of its workers, clients, and facilities is an essential prerequisite for the change it seeks to

¹ RFE, "Afghan Government Unveils Negotiating Team for Taliban Talks."

² BBC, "Afghanistan Peace Deal: Taliban Walk Out."

³ RFERL, "Afghan Taliban Open to Women's Rights."

⁴ Reuters, "'Historic' U.S.-Taliban Pact to be Signed Soon."

⁵ International Crisis Group, "What Will Peace Talks Bode for Afghan Women?"

affect within its host communities. Afghanistan has long been one of the most dangerous countries on earth for women, where nearly 90% of Afghan women have experienced gender-based violence (GBV).⁶ Since WAW's founding in 2001, the Taliban and other conservative elements within Afghan society have repeatedly attempted to proscribe the operation of women's shelters and block WAW's crucial services.

This report outlines critical challenges presented by the intra-Afghan peace talks, and proposes near-, mid-, and long-term initiatives that WAW may consider to further advance women's rights in a post-conflict Afghanistan. The recommendations in this report reflect a two-pronged approach: **Section One** identifies key issues that WAW may wish to advocate during the peace process, such as formal statements about women's rights and the establishment of equitable representation mechanisms; **Section Two** recommends campaigns that WAW may consider for the mid- and long-term protection and expansion of women's rights, such as legal reform monitoring and community dialogue cultivation.

WAW is poised to become an important leader in the post-conflict protection of human rights in Afghanistan. This report considers the organization's strengths and envisions what that leadership role might look like after a peace agreement. With its international civil society network, invaluable grassroots services, and widespread presence in Afghanistan, WAW is an organization that has an opportunity to affect positive change for Afghan women in political, professional, and social spaces.

Gender and Peacemaking Frameworks

The long-term success of the peace process in Afghanistan will both be dependent upon and have significant implications for the wellbeing of Afghan women. Numerous studies^{7 8 9} have proven the positive effects of women's participation in peace processes, yet women continue to be severely underrepresented.

There is a crucial need to address issues of *gendering*, *gender analysis*, and *feminist security* in assessing women's rights and civil society actors in Afghanistan. The first framework, *gendering*, involves the integration of gendered perspectives into the understanding and construction of social gender norms.¹⁰ The second, *gender analysis*, identifies the differences between and among women and men relative to their positions in society, and the distribution of power opportunities and resources accordingly.¹¹ This then allows for an analysis of how best to address present gender inequalities. The third framework, *feminist security*, is a sub-discipline of security studies that focuses specifically on gendered dimensions of security. Taken together, these three frameworks provide gendered approaches through which peace and security in Afghanistan should be discussed. These frameworks also introduce perspectives on the unique

⁶ UN Women, "Global Database on Violence Against Women."

⁷ Klugman, et al., "Women, Peace, and Security Index 2019/20: Tracking Sustainable Peace through Inclusion, Justice, and Security for Women."

⁸ Kadera et al., "Gendered Participation, Well-Being, and Representations in Political Violence: An Introduction."

⁹ Pratt and Richter-Devroe, "Critically Examining UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security."

¹⁰ "Gendering." *European Institute for Gender Equality*.

¹¹ "Gender Analysis." *European Institute for Gender Equality*.

issues faced by women in conflict and post-conflict settings. Incorporating such analyses will thus lend to a clearer understanding of how WAW can represent women within civil society in the peace process.

The achievement of true peace and lasting security can only be reached with the benefit of a feminist perspective that addresses women’s issues within conflicts. There is overwhelming factual evidence which corroborates the argument that women’s participation in peace processes significantly enhances chances of success. Numerous studies have shown that:

- (1) peace agreements are **64% less likely to fail** with the participation of civil society groups, including women’s organizations;¹²
- (2) peace processes are **35% more likely to last at least fifteen years** when women are participants and;¹³
- (3) gender equality **decreases the likelihood of both inter- and intra-state conflict**.¹⁴

In light of these findings, it is critical to: consider the significance of gender in order to analyze the potential successes of the peace agreement; assess the necessary components of the intra-Afghan peace process to ensure the continued recognition and expansion of women’s rights under Afghan law and; build an Afghanistan for the future that can sustain those rights.

Gender analysis and feminist security frameworks additionally provide researchers and practitioners with perspectives that contextualize issues of women, peace, and security. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS) Index exemplifies the utilization of these frameworks in their research methodologies by identifying eleven indicators that measure the wellbeing of women in their societies.¹⁵ These indicators, categorized into three dimensions of women’s rights and livelihoods are outlined *Figure 2*.

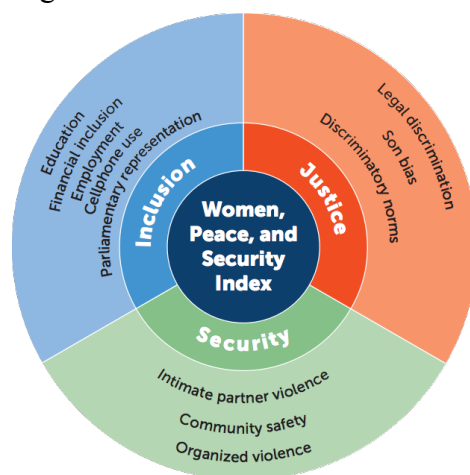


Figure 2 Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20 Indicators

¹² Nilsson, “Anchoring the Peace: Civil Society Actors in Peace Accords and Durable Peace,” 258.
¹³ O’Reilly, et al., “Reimagining Peacemaking: Women’s Roles in Peace Processes,” 12.
¹⁴ Hudson, et al., “The Heart of the Matter: The Security of Women and the Security of States,” 18.
¹⁵ Klugman, et al., “Women, Peace, and Security Index 2019/20: Tracking Sustainable Peace through Inclusion, Justice, and Security for Women,” 12.

These indicators demonstrate the uniquely valuable perspectives that gendered and feminist frameworks provide in measuring, analyzing, and understanding the ways in which women, as well as their issues, are situated within their societal contexts. Social biases and discrimination against women—existent across instilled norms and structures—demand that specific, gender-based considerations be given to any policy so that its effect on women is accurately understood and applied. In designing the recommendations of this report, we have used these indicators as a framework to gauge WAW’s current and potential capabilities in advocating for women’s security and amplifying their platform in Afghanistan.

Lastly, these guidelines point to the importance of gender as a structuring principle for defining a state and how it operates. In particular, a gendered perspective highlights the significance of non-state actors in the international system. This is key, as women often have substantial roles in civil society organizations, even if they do not have such roles in government or other traditional power structures. A governmental system that considers civil society organizations to be functional actors will allow organizations, such as WAW, to contribute to their capacities in the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan.

Section One: Short-Term Proposals for the Peace Process

In this section, we offer immediate, short-term recommendations regarding women’s participation in the peace negotiations; the establishment of gender-specific bodies and; WAW’s outreach through a community education campaign.

Explicit Reiteration of UN Human and Women’s Rights’ Proclamations

The proclamations on human and women’s rights expressed in the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 are fundamental benchmarks for the articulation of human rights. Respectively, these instruments affirm individual human rights regarding freedom, dignity, security, and equality, and recognize the specific impacts sustained by women and girls in conflict as well as their critical role in peacebuilding. As WAW continues to advance its work in advocating for women’s participation in the Afghan peace process, it may wish to draw upon and refer to the Declaration and Resolution in its work to reemphasize the role of civil society in international negotiations, as well as the role of women as peacebuilders.

This is a particularly momentous year in global advocacy for women’s rights. 2020 marks the twenty-year anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which continues to serve as the model for peace and security for women around the world. Its specific call for the adoption of gendered perspectives highlights the particular needs of women and girls during conflict and post-conflict settings, and in general situations of violence, that violate their fundamental human rights.¹⁶ The Resolution also identifies the crucial role of women’s participation in peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction, which we recognize as a central goal for WAW in both the short- and long-term. WAW can utilize the concurrence of this anniversary and the

¹⁶ United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 1325,” 2.

signing of the U.S.-Taliban peace deal to embed the intra-Afghan peace accords in a gendered perspective and push for women's rights in the peace talks.

Issues of Participation

Quotas of Women Participants in the Peace Negotiations

Increasingly, countries around the world are introducing gender quota systems, within various political institutions, in order to achieve gender balance and greater representation of women. Today, nearly half of all countries employ a type of electoral quota system.¹⁷ However, what that quota is and how it is implemented is, of course, determined case-by-case. The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's Gender Quota Database underscores that "quota systems aim at ensuring that women constitute at least a 'critical minority' of 30 or 40%."¹⁸ The Institute goes on to assert that "today, quota systems aim at ensuring that women constitute a large minority of 20, 30 or 40%, or even to ensure true gender balance of 50-50."¹⁹

For the case of women's involvement in official intra-Afghan peace talks, **the minimum acceptable percentage of women present at the negotiating table should be 30%, with the ultimate aim of achieving a 50% gender balance. WAW could use its position as the largest women's organization in Afghanistan to advocate for this quota minimum.** As the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance iterates, "a fifty-fifty quota is in its nature gender neutral, and it also sets a maximum for women's representation, which a minimum requirement for women in fact does not."²⁰ There are currently five women serving on the government's twenty-one person team. WAW should continue to assert that this 24% participation rate is insufficient and that given this, other bodies (mentioned below) must be established.

However, the content of what is discussed and agreed upon needs to be prioritized in order to make the inclusion of women count, rather than merely counting women.²¹ Women should be meaningfully included in the intra-Afghan negotiations, through both physical presence and via consultations with women's organizations and leaders, in order to ensure that a post-negotiation Afghanistan values the rights and safety of women. Implementing a minimum quota requirement now may also open up space for incorporating minimum quotas within governing and legislative structures that are put in place following a potential power-sharing negotiation between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Although Afghanistan does currently have a gender quota in place for parliament, women only occupy 68 of the 250 seats and 27% is insufficient for true representation to be met.

¹⁷ Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, "Gender Quotas Database."

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Paffenholz, et al., "Making Women Count - Not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women's Inclusion and Influence On Peace Negotiations."

Establishment of Gender-Specific Bodies

A greater overall influence of women, in addition to numerical representation, in official and unofficial negotiation spaces is strongly correlated with more peace agreements being reached and sustained. It will thus be important for women and governing bodies in Afghanistan to look to prior models of women's inclusion in peace processes from around the world for valuable lessons. WAW can specifically look to historical examples of peacebuilding where women leaders have leveraged their informal authority to influence negotiations from both inside and outside the official talks. The peace process in Afghanistan will need to be all-encompassing of both urban and rural women throughout the country to ensure long-term sustainability. In turn, the case of Colombia may provide insight for how WAW may embrace the power of various women in civil society to achieve broader goals within the Afghan peace process. This section aims to highlight several models that may prove helpful for WAW's ability to positively influence official negotiations and implementation.

A 2016 UN Women report on inclusion and peace processes focuses on "how to make women count" beyond including them at the negotiating table and identifies seven modalities of women's inclusion.²² The modalities are: direct representation at the negotiating table; observer status; consultations; inclusive commissions; public decision-making; mass action and; voting for referenda. WAW's power lies in their connections to and support for women of varying statuses and like-minded organizations across Afghanistan. Its focus should therefore be the achievement of influence in the peace process via the modalities of consultations and inclusive commissions. The factors currently enabling WAW's inclusion are their coalition-building capacity and their early involvement in the process, as its comprehensive network of programs and services allows for connection to a variety of women and spaces in the country.

Afghanistan Women's Gender Sub-commission

WAW can capitalize on its status as the largest women's organization in Afghanistan and advocate for establishment of a gender issues sub-commission modeled off of that established in Colombia.²³

In 2013, prior to the comprehensive peace deal's realization in 2016, Colombian civil society leaders formed a National Summit of Women and Peace. This summit paved the way for women to contribute officially in the talks through the establishment of a gender sub-commission, the first of its kind seen in peace talks. It is important to note that in Colombia, women comprised 20% of the government delegation in the official talks and 43% of the FARC's delegates (main opposition group).²⁴

Through careful, concerted efforts by both organizations and influential individuals, women's involvement in the Colombian peace process eventually grew to be all-inclusive beyond its original exclusivity. Jamille Bigio, senior fellow in the Women and Foreign Policy program at the Council on Foreign Relations, believes that women's involvement in Colombia's

²² Ibid.

²³ Council on Foreign Relations, "Colombia."

²⁴ Ibid.

peace process has been relatively successful in part because of the deliberate efforts to have such diverse groups conduct follow-up implementation.²⁵ As women’s groups in Afghanistan are known for their powerful organizing capacity, they may wish to leverage this relative strength by formally joining forces and creating both a sub-commission, and a joint-run campaign for victims’ grievances to be officially brought to the negotiating table. This Afghan Women’s Sub-commission, like the one in Colombia, would deliver the grievances and output of its research directly to those engaged at the negotiating table. Given the diversity of lived experiences throughout the provinces of Afghanistan, it will be especially necessary for women of all walks to have input into what a post-conflict Afghanistan will look like.

WAW is well positioned to initiate a grievance campaign modeled off of the one formed by Colombian women in 2014.²⁶ 90% of the 57,000+ clients served by WAW report that they have been subjected to some form of violence.²⁷ Women and children in Afghanistan have experienced domestic violence, rape, forced prostitution, unlawful imprisonment, “honor” killings, and forced marriage, among other injustices. Colombian women’s involvement in “Yes, It Happened in Colombia” was key to reconciliation efforts and a similar model will be just as crucial to ensure protections and justice for women in Afghanistan. For true justice sector reforms to be possible, women must have a say.

Utilizing the “Yes It Happened in Colombia” campaign as a model, WAW could use its extensive network of women including staff, clients, and those in WAW’s training programs—in addition to its connections with other organizations—in Afghanistan to gather testimonials of women who have faced violence and suppression under Taliban rule. Spearheading this initiative could solidify support for the peace process more broadly. As Jana Krause and colleagues note, “collaboration between women delegates and women civil society groups broadens the civilian support base for peace and results in networks that can persistently advocate for the adoption of policies that empower women.”²⁸ Incorporating a campaign like one that the Colombian women worked so hard to move forward could shed light (both international and domestic) on the injustices endured by women in Afghanistan and make it more difficult for the Taliban to revert to their prior treatment of women with impunity. United States Institute of Peace (USIP) scholars Belquis Ahmadi and Maria Antonia Montes recently published their thoughts on Afghan women’s role in negotiations: “Influence does not have to be achieved at the negotiating table alone. Instead, recognizing the different modalities for pushing forward inclusive agendas and voices can also shape a process.”²⁹ This should be embodied by those moving peace efforts forward in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan Women’s Advisory Board

There are other worthwhile, historical routes to consider in order to promote women’s involvement in the Afghan peace talks. It is most important to ensure that women’s voices and concerns are consulted through every aspect of the peace negotiations. **One way to do this is via**

²⁵ Jamille Bigio, Interview, 18 Feb. 2020.

²⁶ Bedoya, “‘Yes, it happened in Colombia’ campaign launched for women victims of sexual violence.”

²⁷ Women for Afghan Women, “About.”

²⁸ Krause, et al., “Women’s Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace.”

²⁹ Ahmadi and Montes, “Colombia’s Imperfect Peace Could Provide a Roadmap for Afghanistan.”

the establishment of an Afghanistan Women’s Advisory Board, modeled off of that established in Syria.³⁰ This body could serve in tandem with the sub-commission discussed above, and also serve as an alternative way to communicate input to those participating in the formal process. While the sub-commission functions as a body that reports its findings directly to the formal negotiating table, the advisory board could consult with and lend support to those engaged directly in the talks, in addition to providing support to the sub-commission. This group would function as more of a parallel advisory body versus one directly under the official talks.

UN-led peacemaking efforts, spearheaded by Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, helped to establish the Women’s Advisory Board and Civil Society Support Room.³¹ These bodies were set up as spaces for Syrian civil society members to consult with one another and advise de Mistura’s team on the official negotiations. Members were required to have relevant technical experience and efforts were made to ensure demographic diversity among the participants. Defining collective stances and engaging meaningfully has been challenging for Syrian civil society and women’s groups, as mere physical presence has not been enough to genuinely influence or steer the talks to consider the concerns of women.³²

There are other important historical precedents, beyond the Syrian and Colombian models, in countries where civil society organizations have engineered different ways to influence official peace negotiations. Women’s groups in Myanmar, for example, have worked to document GBV and human rights violations committed by armed ethnic groups and the military, and are seeking to make their findings published.³³ However, Myanmar women’s groups are severely underrepresented in formal roles within the current peace process. In response to falling short of a 30% representation target within the 2017 official talks, women have taken to mass action campaigns aimed at building public support for their inclusion.

In another instance, women in Guatemala have formed consultative forums³⁴ and established a Women’s Sector within the Assembly of Civil Society, a consultative body set up in parallel to the official negotiations.³⁵ Unfortunately, the Guatemalan negotiations featured only a few women delegates, there was no ensuing gender quota established, and male participants to the talks pushed back on women’s participation. These forums thus helped to fill the void of official women’s voices in this peace process.

It is ultimately important for women in Afghanistan to diversify their efforts in gaining leverage at the official negotiating table and in parallel efforts to advise and influence those setting the agenda. Women’s meaningful inclusion in Afghanistan will be important not only during negotiations but in the resulting, agreed upon governing structure. WAW may wish to join with other Afghan women’s groups to form consensus strategies for influencing the official talks.

³⁰ Mlambo-Ngcuka, “Statement by UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka on the establishment of the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board to contribute to peace talks.”

³¹ Hellmüller, “UN-led mediation in Syria and civil society; Inclusion in a multi-layered conflict.”

³² Hellmüller, “Against the Odds: Civil Society in the Intra-Syrian Talks.”

³³ Council on Foreign Relations, “Myanmar.”

³⁴ Krznaric, “Civil and Uncivil Actors in the Guatemalan Peace Process.”

³⁵ Inclusive Peace, “Women’s Role in Guatemala’s Peace Process (1994–1999).”

Recommendations

Advocate for higher gender quota minimums both within the formal talks and in the resulting government. This allows WAW to pursue an advocacy campaign geared at creating fair representation of women and women’s issues both during and after the peace talks. Publicly advocating for gender quota minimums positions WAW as an organization that the official talks and government cannot ignore.

Establish gender-specific bodies to support the formal negotiations. Women’s involvement in historical peace processes provides insight for how WAW can harness the power of its own women in civil society. Establishment of a body like a sub-commission and/or an advisory board would allow WAW members to provide recommendations on and advice to the official peace process. This may also allow WAW to have input on how protections and justice sector reform are ensured for women in Afghanistan post-negotiations.



Source: Women for Afghan Women. Photo Credit: Leslie Knott

Ensuring the Protection of Shelters in Peace Negotiations

Protecting WAW’s facilities and services is of urgent concern during the intra-Afghan peace process. The organization’s physical spaces are critical to its work and the short- and long-term goals put forth by this paper can only be accomplished if operations are allowed to continue their important work. Special attention should be paid to protecting this right to physical presence during the peace negotiations.

Organizations centered on the protection of women and prevention of GBV are especially at risk for restrictions from the Taliban during and after the negotiations. WAW operates within several networks that can be leveraged in order to help to ensure that the protection of facilities is a prominently discussed issue. The Afghan Women’s Network (AWN), of which WAW is the largest member, and the Afghan Shelter Network, which was founded by WAW, are two networks that could demand the protection of facilities, like shelters, at the peace negotiations.

WAW may wish to advocate for a specific promise by all parties to the intra-Afghan peace talks to protect the shelters. If negotiators commit to protecting these spaces, the peacebuilding activities of WAW and other organizations can promote the peace process while also continuing to help move the country forward.

Public Outreach

To provide bottom-up support for women’s inclusion in the ongoing Afghan peace process, WAW launched their Peacebuilding Program in 2019. Through the Peacebuilding Program, WAW employs a combination of locally-tailored outreach, education, and trainings to advocate for and support the meaningful participation of women in every facet of peacebuilding. WAW informs women and men about women’s rights under Afghan, Sharia, and international law, and engages with government officials to promote the involvement of women in decision-making across the spectrum of politics and civil society.³⁶

A distinctive feature of this program is training aimed at “building the capacity of women civil society leaders as mediators, negotiators, and advocates to amplify women’s voices in Afghanistan’s peace process.”³⁷ Just since 2019, more than 3,000 women have participated in these trainings and over 20,000 more women and men have participated in dialogues on the future of peace in Afghanistan.³⁸ Broadening the reach of WAW’s Peacebuilding Program would be an invaluable step to support an inclusive peace process. In an uncertain political climate, however, the most pressing challenges facing WAW must additionally be addressed through programs that focus on generating and mobilizing popular support independent of inclusion in the formal political sphere.

WAW’s women’s shelter facilities—the Women’s Protection Centers—and like shelters within the Afghan Shelter Network are at a particular risk in a changing political climate.³⁹ These shelters offer a critically needed safe haven, along with medical, psychological, educational, and socioeconomic support for the women of Afghanistan. However, these facilities face tremendous stigma, as political leaders and local community members mischaracterize them as undermining religious and cultural norms. This stigma manifests not only as political and logistical opposition, but also through violent reprisals against WAW’s facilities, employees, and the women who rely on their services.⁴⁰ WAW works diligently to educate the public on the valuable service they provide through these facilities, but obstacles remain in overcoming this stigmatization.

Through its Men’s Movement Program and Women’s Rights ARE Human Rights Training Program, WAW has developed training materials and workshops specifically for men to “challenge norms and attitudes detrimental to women and girls, while remaining culturally sensitive, to ensure enduring and extensive support for women’s rights in Afghanistan.”⁴¹ It is

³⁶ Women for Afghan Women, “Women and Peacebuilding”

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Corrado and Nasim, Interview, 27 Feb. 2020.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Women for Afghan Women, “Transforming Afghanistan,” 2.

crucial to actively include Afghan men in women's rights outreach and education to generate the popular support necessary to ensure the enforcement of Afghan women's hard earned rights and the protection of women's shelters. Given their mandates, these programs are particularly well suited to counter the mischaracterizations of women's shelters that perpetuate their stigmatization, and also encourage community members to refer women in need of assistance to WAW's facilities. **With a proven track record of building bridges with local and provincial leadership and working from the bottom-up to cultivate the support of Afghan men, WAW can have an even greater impact if their Men's Movement Program and Women's Rights ARE Human Rights Training Program are made more widely available.**

Additionally, we recommend that WAW consider leveraging the wealth of testimonials that they have already collected from women who rely on the Women's Protection Centers, through a public education campaign to personalize their work regarding this critical service. By sharing the stories of women who rely on WAW's services, this campaign would serve a unique role in informing everyday citizens, as well as provincial political leaders, about the necessity of the life-enriching and lifesaving services these shelters provide.

Since institutional political support for these services and facilities is highly precarious, it is more important than ever to generate and mobilize popular support for WAW's Women's Protection Centers, so that they can operate safely in their communities even in the absence of official, government support. This campaign would complement one of our long-term recommendations intended to shed light on the violence, oppression, and injustice Afghan women have faced, in order to support an environment of truth and accountability and inclusive political representation. In an effort that more closely resembles public education outreach than explicit political activism, this campaign is designed to mitigate the stigma and opposition women's shelters face, irrespective the protection afforded by formal political mechanisms.

The campaign could highlight the indispensable role of these shelters in the protection of women from violence, and provision of necessary care, through sharing stories of how WAW's Women's Protection Centers have helped women escape and survive household violence and oppression. These testimonials would help the public connect to the real human value of WAW's services; counter mischaracterizations of these shelters as brothels and; underscore the care WAW and its partner organizations take to engage cooperatively with local communities. In essence, these stories can affirm the role of these shelters as a complement, rather than threat, to the way of life in the communities they serve.

Recommendations

Expand successful programs like the Peacebuilding Program, Men's Movement Program, and Women's Rights ARE Human Rights Training Program. Expanding these programs would help to increase the meaningful participation of women in decision-making in both the peace process and across Afghan society; reduce opposition to and violence against women's shelters and; encourage members of the community, political and tribal leaders, and the police (among other actors) to refer women who need protection or assistance to WAW's shelter facilities.

Share personal testimonials of how the Women’s Protection Centers have helped women, through a public education campaign. Even if details must be changed to protect the privacy of these women, sharing true and specific examples of the lifesaving and life-enriching services these shelters provide will help personalize these valuable services in order to generate public support and mitigate stigmatization and opposition.



Source: Women for Afghan Women

Section Two: Mid- and Long-Term Monitoring and Implementation

In this section, we provide medium- and long-term recommendations for WAW to consider regarding: increasing its legal advocacy capacity; the creation of an information campaign and avenues to report violations; the promotion of community dialogue and national reconciliation; inclusive reintegration efforts and; enhancing its facilities.

Legal Reforms (Formal and Informal)

Increasing the Presence of Sharia Legal Professionals^{42 43}

Rule-of-law and justice-building remain at the forefront of priorities for women's rights protections in Afghanistan. Despite the existence of laws that establish repercussions for the violation of women's rights, these laws are often ignored or referred to informal mediation, decreasing the likelihood of strong enforcement.⁴⁴ Additionally, women are less likely to report

⁴² Throughout this section, when using the term “legal professionals” we are referring to lawyers, advocates, prosecutors, judges, law professors and legal experts as used by the International Development Law Organization.

⁴³ International Development Law Organization, “Women’s Professional Participation in Afghanistan’s Justice Sector: Challenges and Opportunities,” 9.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Review of Afghanistan.”

claims of violations for fear of shame and stigmatization due to a male-dominated legal system.⁴⁵ One approach to encourage the reporting of violations is to increase the presence of female legal professionals. There is a strong likelihood that women will be more inclined to report violations if they have the option to approach other women.

Legal professionals and mediators skilled in Sharia are some of the key resources which WAW provides to women and girls in Afghanistan. By providing them access to legal representation, more cases can be resolved or brought to trial. WAW currently employs forty-three defense lawyers and forty-five caseworkers who litigate relentlessly in order to help bring justice to women.⁴⁶ The experiences of women like Damsa and Najia Sadiq further highlight the importance of legal services and legal representatives. Referred to WAW as a victim of domestic violence, Damsa was provided a defense lawyer who was able to secure her legal separation from her abusive husband.⁴⁷ Najia Sadiq, a defense lawyer who joined WAW's team with extensive experience, continues to diligently fight cases of women's rights abuses in the courts and portrays the importance of female advocates.⁴⁸ These women's stories exemplify the great advantage of female legal professionals in securing tangible results for female victims of violence.

A challenge facing the legal community in Afghanistan, however, is the concentration of women legal professionals in Kabul, leaving the rural provinces underrepresented.⁴⁹ Legal presence in Kabul is critical, yet there is great need for women legal professionals in the districts as well. The reality that less than one in thirty of prosecutors in the provinces are women greatly impedes rural access to vital legal services.⁵⁰ Furthermore, it is exceedingly difficult to attain competent legal representation in informal justice proceedings which are more common in the rural areas.

USIP found that "legal-aid providers or paralegals armed with Islamic education were far more welcomed in the communities than those without Islamic legal credentials, even if their conclusions were identical."⁵¹ **Therefore, increasing the presence of female legal professionals in the provinces is essential, although when qualified with knowledge of Sharia law there is a greater probability of success.** Equipping underrepresented areas with Sharia legal expertise will provide a customary approach to broadening women's access to justice.

Given that WAW provides legal counseling and mediation in sixteen provinces, it is in a unique position to promote the entrance of women living in the districts to the Sharia legal sector. The following are proposed ideas to encourage and support women to enter the Sharia legal sector and then practice in the provinces.

⁴⁵ Manawi, "More Female Prosecutors for Afghanistan."

⁴⁶ Women for Afghan Women, "Najia's Story."

⁴⁷ Women for Afghan Women, "Damsa's Story."

⁴⁸ Women for Afghan Women, "Najia's Story."

⁴⁹ Manawi, "More Female Prosecutors for Afghanistan."

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Hozyainova, "Sharia and Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 4.

Recommendations

Information Campaigns: Provide women who enter each of WAW's facilities with background information on careers in the Sharia, Afghan, and international civil legal sectors through informational campaigns.

Seminars/trainings on Sharia law: Provide similar training through the Women's Rights ARE Human Rights Training Program, to both women and men, with a focus on entering the Sharia legal sector and practicing in the provinces.

Mentoring Sessions: Provide mentoring sessions with WAW's legal professionals for those interested in pursuing a career in Sharia law, and encourage participants to apply their skills and training to the practice of Sharia law in the rural provinces.

Educational grants for women to attend Sharia faculties: Provide educational grants for women in the provinces interested in pursuing a career in Sharia law studies. Upon completion, encourage the grant recipients to practice as Sharia legal professionals in the provinces to increase the presence of women Sharia legal professionals there. A specific donor-funded program would be the necessary conduit to issue such grants. WAW could serve as a facilitator should a donor be willing to provide such funding.

The above listed recommendations can be promoted at all WAW facilities including its Family Guidance Centers (FGCs), Transitional Houses, Women's Protection Centers, and its Halfway House.

The sacrosanct status of religion in Afghanistan cannot be overlooked when thinking about strengthening women's access to justice. In order to help secure women's rights, an increased presence of women Sharia legal professionals, specifically in the provinces, will empower women to understand their rights through Islamic interpretations. WAW has a unique opportunity through its vast presence to be the driving force for increased women's participation in Sharia legal professions.

Establishing New Avenues for Information and Accountability

This section recommends the establishment of new information transmission mechanisms that can bolster the protection of women's and human rights afforded by Afghanistan's constitution, its civil legal framework, and international law. By maintaining and creating channels for women to learn about their rights and report violations, WAW will address two historically persistent challenges to rule-of-law in Afghanistan. The first challenge is a lack of efficient top-down communication between government decision-makers and provincial communities. The second obstacle is the prevalence of traditional dispute resolution (TDR) structures and their potential to obstruct on-the-ground implementation of women's legal protections.

WAW is well positioned to spearhead two nationwide rights monitoring initiatives:
1) An information campaign to inform civilians across all provinces of their rights under

Afghan law and; 2) The multimedia establishment of discrete communication channels for women and men to report justice sector violations. Both of these initiatives are compatible with WAW's ongoing services and are aligned with the organization's long-term mission of expanding women's rights. Building stronger civic awareness in rural Afghanistan is key to bridging the gap between prescribed and practiced human rights.

A WAW-led information campaign would create online and offline resources for rural Afghan women to educate themselves about their legal rights in the wake an intra-Afghan peace accord. This low-cost initiative would involve multi-language pamphlets for distribution at WAW's FGCs and across all twenty-four provinces in which it has representatives.⁵² In addition to making the pamphlet information available on WAW's website, the organization should utilize its community contacts and spread new information through the attorneys, public officials, imams, and tribal elders with whom it works. Because of rural Afghanistan's high illiteracy rate, any campaign of this nature must have robust methods of verbal and graphic information distribution, such as pictographs and radio reports, and community dialogue events.

WAW's experience in curriculum-building and its extensive contacts with other Afghan women's groups would allow it to extend these information services to the ten provinces in which it does not work. WAW could compile a concise list of essential facts about women's rights in a post-conflict Afghanistan and send them to organizations and agencies that it identifies as primary providers of educational services. Through network mobilization, WAW can oversee a nationwide effort to make crucial legal information more available to citizens with otherwise limited access to top-down information flows.

This initiative would be a natural outgrowth of WAW's ongoing Women's Rights ARE Human Rights Training Program and Peacebuilding Program. While the former educates local civilians, community elders, security officials, and medical workers about the rights of women enshrined in Afghan law,⁵³ the latter works to build women's understanding of the ongoing peace process and their potential for participation in peacemaking. WAW should build off of the curriculum and structure of these programs to create a reproducible and widely distributable product to increase public awareness of rights in the immediate wake of a peace accord.

An information campaign would address historical problems of communication disconnect between the government and the general populace. The lack of public access to legal information has contributed to a mismatch between rhetoric and action on issues of women's rights. Rural Afghan women have especially limited access to information sources beyond their immediate family circles. WAW has also identified a reluctance of women in conservative areas to seek help outside of family circles as a central challenge to their outreach.⁵⁴ The 2018 Deputy Minister of Women's Affairs identified the lack of information flows to women as a key obstacle to the protection of their rights.⁵⁵ Despite the growing availability of smart phones, Internet sites—that may provide specific details about peace accords—are not widely trusted news

⁵² Corrado and Nasim, Interview, 27 Feb. 2020.

⁵³ Women for Afghan Women, "Women's Rights Training," 2020.

⁵⁴ Corrado, Interview, 27 March 2020.

⁵⁵ Hakimi, "Elusive Justice," 61.

sources among Afghan women.⁵⁶ The mission of providing up-to-date information to women in all provinces must be led by an organization that can furnish reliable facts in digital, physical, and verbal form. WAW is an organization that meets these criteria.

WAW may also consider a long-term communication initiative to establish safe channels through which Afghan women and men may report misuses of the justice system. The provision of protection and legal assistance to reporters of gender-based crimes and the facilitation of gender-equitable conflict mediation are two of WAW's most crucial services.⁵⁷ WAW can use these community inroads to develop distinct channels for citizens to report when TDRs and informal mediations deliberately sidestep the women's rights standards enshrined in formal law. This initiative would improve available statistics in post-conflict justice sector monitoring, and would offer women comfortable—and if need be, confidential—opportunities to report concerns about the handling of their grievances. Furthermore, WAW can promote this specific method of complaint filing as a replicable campaign to women's groups that operate in other provinces.

Afghanistan formally adheres to the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as well as its own Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law, which was ratified in 2009. EVAW's landmark authorization provided a legal framework for protecting women and girls against GBV and discrimination.

The reality for Afghan women, however, is grim: domestic and gender-based violence remains endemic across Afghanistan, with over 50% of partnered Afghan women reporting instances of abuse and 35% reporting that they were married while underage. Women carried out 80% of Afghanistan's suicides in 2015, and aid workers have reported that the situation for women across the country has only worsened since 2008, when a Global Rights Survey revealed that nearly 90% of Afghan women had experienced domestic violence in their lives.⁵⁸

Legal experts and aid workers identify informal mediation as an obstacle to EVAW's on-the-ground implementation, as it presents opportunities for community patriarchs to sidestep the human rights standards of Afghan law.⁵⁹ Extralegal conflict resolution processes, however, are a historical constant within Afghan society. They vary by local, tribal, and ethnic tradition, but structures that settle disputes based on community and elder consensus exist across all provinces. As of 2011, Afghan citizens used TDRs for at least 80% of all disputes.⁶⁰ While they may not result in a legally binding agreement, TDRs have a unique capacity to bestow popular legitimacy on a decision.

While *shuras*, *jirgas*, and other TDRs offer a culturally organic approach to civil suits, they often subvert women's rights protections in cases of criminal GBV. By 2014, only 10.6% of all gender-based cases were reported and processed according to the EVAW law. Women

⁵⁶ Humayoon and Basij-Rasikh, "Afghan Women's views on Violent Extremism," 2, 14.

⁵⁷ Corrado and Nasim, Interview, 27 Feb. 2020.

⁵⁸ Hakimi, "Elusive Justice," 54-7, UN Women, "Global Database on Violence Against Women," and Bohn "We're All Handcuffed in This Country."

⁵⁹ Hakimi, "Elusive Justice," 57-8.

⁶⁰ Sinha, "Traditional Dispute Resolution and Afghanistan's Women," 1.

victims rarely participate in TDRs, and many still respect pre-Islamic forms of dispute settlement such as *Baad*—the practice of exchanging women for marriage as restitution. The prevalence of *Baad* is reflected in Afghanistan’s high rate of underage marriage. It is also rare for TDRs to provide protection or legal services to victims, many of whom are economically dependent on their assailant or perpetrator.⁶¹

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the AWN have launched programs in the last decade to train Afghan women in conflict mediation and incorporate them into TDRs.⁶² WAW also plays a role in facilitating mediation for clients they already serve. These initiatives have reported some success in cultivating stronger linkages between the formal and informal justice sectors.⁶³ While women’s participation in all forms of recognized law are critical to ensuring justice for gender-based crimes, the creation of better communication lines to keep track of TDRs that subvert EVAW standards will ultimately lead to stronger record-keeping and greater accountability in the informal justice sector.

In order to implement this initiative, WAW would likely need a memorandum of understanding from the Afghan government. Without government approval, WAW would run the risk of operating as an unauthorized legal watchdog organization. Furthermore, this initiative would face the same logistical challenges as other efforts by WAW to open up communication channels to women with limited ability to report problems. However, positive government relations and deeper access to at-risk women are already two of WAW’s primary organizational concerns. All obstacles facing this communication initiative are ones that WAW continually seeks to improve upon. As it develops a clearer vision of its role in a post-conflict Afghanistan, WAW may consider this project as a long-term investment in Afghanistan’s justice sector.

Recommendations

Launch an information campaign to provide resources for Afghan civilians about their rights. This initiative would allow for information to be disseminated, in the form of online and offline, multi-language pamphlets, in WAW’s FGCs across its operating provinces. A campaign as such would allow WAW to maximize its community relationships, while helping to bridge the informational gap between the Afghan government and populace.

Establish communication channels through which Afghan women and men can report abuses of the justice system. These community inroads would allow for WAW to further position itself in assuring that prevalent TDR mechanisms adhere to the EVAW law and other women’s rights standards. The provision of such channels can build upon the mediation work that WAW already takes on in extralegal conflict resolution spaces.

⁶¹ Hakimi, “Elusive Justice,” 56-9.

⁶² Sinha, “Traditional Dispute Resolution and Afghanistan’s Women,” and USAID, “Rule of Law Stabilization Program – Informal Justice Sector Component,” reflect both the regressive tendencies and the progressive potential within TDRs in Afghanistan.

⁶³ USAID, “Rule of Law Stabilization Program – Informal Justice Sector Component.”

Dialogue and Community

Envisioning Transitional Justice through Community Dialogues

Transitional justice mechanisms play an integral role in sustaining peace and reconciliation in a post-conflict setting. The protracted nature of the conflict in Afghanistan highlights the need for considerations to provide redress for the human rights abuses that have been committed against all members of Afghan society, particularly women. While restorative (truth-seeking), retributive (prosecutorial), and reparative mechanisms can all contribute to transitional justice, we recognize that organizations such as WAW can play a crucial, impartial role in the implementation of truth-seeking efforts specifically, so that Afghans' rights to "truth" and "justice" are fulfilled.⁶⁴ It will be essential for the newly-formed Afghan government, especially one that includes the Taliban, to formally enact such measures to ensure accountability and the recognition of victims' dignity.⁶⁵ Therefore, with regards to transitional justice, **we recommend that WAW, among other organizations in the Afghan Women's Network, encourage and support largescale efforts that take steps towards national reconciliation, through restorative, truth-seeking mechanisms.**

Given our understanding that the majority of WAW's clients have been subjected to violence, it is not surprising that the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) cites various "discriminatory practices" as contributing factors to a chronic underreporting of conflict-related gender-based violations.⁶⁶ In light of these circumstances, special attention should be given to ensure that women's voices are not only included, but also elevated within grievance-sharing and truth-seeking processes.

We suggest that **WAW play an active role in implementing micro-level, women-specific, grievance-airing dialogues, as an extension of the work the organization already does through its Peacebuilding Program.** Women should have their own designated safe spaces to discuss the violence they experienced during the conflict and take part in collective healing. These forums would provide opportunities for women to discuss conflict-based violence committed by the Taliban, Afghan forces, U.S. troops, or otherwise, to contribute to a national acknowledgement of the injustices against women that were borne from a brutal war. The facilitation of such testimony-collection by WAW would be a natural extension of our proposed public education campaign, as WAW has already gained valuable experience in the collection of narratives. Providing a unique space for women will enable them to feel more comfortable to partake in meaningful conversations surrounding their individual grievances, while ensuring that Afghan women's perspectives are not overlooked.

⁶⁴ Bisset, "Truth Commissions and Trials within the Transitional Justice Framework," 12.

⁶⁵ United Nations General Assembly, "Promotion of truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence," 4-5.

⁶⁶ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, "Afghanistan."



Source: Women for Afghan Women. Photo Credit: Leslie Knott

Cultivating Dialogue Channels between Various Conflict-Affected Women

WAW should not be the only organization that collects testimony in the pursuit of truth-seeking efforts. Rather, **WAW and its partner organizations within the AWN can coordinate their actions to create channels for various women to connect with each other, and provide an opportunity to combine testimonies in order to contribute to a national-level, truth-seeking report.** This coordination would also ensure that women from an increased number of provinces (in addition to WAW’s current twenty-four operating provinces), as well as a range of urban and rural voices, are heard. The communication between various organizations in the AWN could also facilitate consistency in the way that the grievance-airing dialogues are conducted, as well as provide an avenue for shared feedback to improve the process as it takes place. At its core, such dialogue between conflict-affected women will enrich and foment the likely common experiences of women across Afghanistan. This is a crucial component to facilitate national reconciliation.

Additionally, the coordination of testimony-gathering between WAW and other AWN-organizations would aid in the presentation of a diverse, broad, and collective women’s truth to be presented in a national truth-seeking effort. Once testimonies have been collected, AWN-organizations can work together to combine them and distill the most significant commonalities that arise between the accounts. In turn, those women who have seats at the negotiating table in an intra-Afghan negotiation can present the findings to a broader, Afghan truth-commission and ensure that women’s stories are included in the official historical memory of the conflict. Bringing the stories of Afghan women into the fold of a more general truth-seeking mission will translate to the demonstrated significance of protecting women’s rights—and the organizations that protect women from violations to their inherent rights—within the macro-level story of the conflict in Afghanistan. This narrative will naturally include contributions from a large number of civil society members, the Taliban, and Afghan-government forces.

The publication of a government-sanctioned memory that elevates women’s issues will furthermore help to prevent the recurrence of violence, which is one of the fundamental goals of

transitional justice on the whole. Such a report should be accessible in the several languages used across Afghanistan, exist in both textual and auditory options, and be disseminated through AWN-organizations. Additionally, efforts of WAW and AWN-affiliates to contribute to the official narrative of Afghan reconciliation will further legitimize the already vital role that these organizations play in protecting women's interests across Afghanistan. Finally, we stress that these community dialogues should take place regardless of whether or not the Afghan government and Taliban agree to establish a gender sub-commission or an official truth-commission. These smaller, grievance-airing forums can still contribute to individual and collective healing, as well as societal reconciliation, even if not officially mandated.

Recommendations

Advocate for the Afghan government to initiate a nationwide, truth-seeking effort.

A national reconciliation effort will help to show a willingness of a newly-formed Afghan government, including the Taliban, to attempt to remedy the human rights abuses that occurred during the conflict and ensure non-recurrence of violence. WAW can exercise its voice to help establish an impartial and national truth-seeking mechanism.

Establish and foster women-specific, micro-level dialogues for Afghan women to air their grievances.

By creating grievance-airing dialogues that are designated for women at the community level, there will be greater opportunities for women's voices to be elevated and included in a national truth-seeking effort. WAW can build upon its Peacebuilding Program to aid in macro-level efforts for truth and reconciliation.

Coordinate dialogue efforts with other organizations within the AWN.

A combination of such efforts among various organizations can potentially help bring women together from different regions across Afghanistan, while ensuring that dialogues are held in a coordinated manner across the country. This would also allow for WAW and its fellow AWN-organizations to combine women's truths and present them to a national truth-commission for inclusion in a historical memory of the conflict.

Leveraging WAW's Services to Support an Inclusive Reintegration Effort

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) calls attention to the urgent policy challenge of reintegrating thousands of ex-combatants into Afghan society in the wake of an intra-Afghan peace agreement. Citing Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr.'s testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, SIGAR explains that should "peace efforts succeed, an estimated 60,000 full-time Taliban fighters may seek to return to civilian life"⁶⁷ and that the "number of ex-combatants could be increased by efforts to demobilize other armed groups that have been engaged in fighting the Taliban, or by potential reform of Afghan security forces."⁶⁸ SIGAR delivers a sobering caution as to the stakes of the reintegration challenge: "If

⁶⁷ Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., "Advance Policy Questions for Lieutenant General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., USMC, Nominee for Commander, United States Central Command," 9.

⁶⁸ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Reintegration of Ex-Combatants: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan", VII.

ex-combatants are not accepted by their communities or are unable to find a new livelihood, they may be vulnerable to recruitment by criminal groups or terrorist organizations.”⁶⁹

Even further, representatives from WAW emphasize that continued violence and insecurity pose huge threats to WAW, other social service providers, and several women’s rights organizations operating in Afghanistan. Therefore, reintegration of ex-combatants is not only a likely requisite component of an intra-Afghan peace agreement—as the Taliban and other armed groups are unlikely to agree to a settlement without a reintegration plan for their fighters—but also fundamental to securing the kind of environment essential to both the physical protection and continued operation of organizations like WAW. Lessons learned from past reintegration efforts in Afghanistan underscore that careful policy planning and a multi-faceted approach has the greatest chance at facilitating sustained peace, and the continued operation of crucial service-providers, in Afghanistan.

Past disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration efforts in Afghanistan have fallen short because they failed to prioritize meaningful and lasting reintegration of ex-combatants. SIGAR summarizes, “For more than a decade, DOD and other U.S. agencies primarily saw reintegration as a counterinsurgency tool to degrade and diminish the insurgency by ‘peeling away’ fighters.”⁷⁰ A reintegration policy with the ultimate objective of undermining an insurgency is fundamentally different from one wherein the goal in itself is long-term peaceful reintegration of the insurgency’s former fighters. Reframing reintegration as its own end, rather than a means of counterinsurgency is vital to establishing and implementing policies that produce long-term peaceful reintegration of ex-combatants, and a space where organizations like WAW can not only survive, but expand their reach and deepen their capacities.

It is crucial to recognize that, as both ex-combatants and those displaced by the conflict reintegrate into Afghan civil society, they are each also integrating socially and economically into a local community. **In turn, one way to support sustainable peace and community cohesion is to empower organizations like WAW to assist in the social and economic components of a holistic reintegration effort.** WAW provides an array of services that, given the resources, could be adapted and expanded to support reintegration at the community level. Given the mutual respect that WAW cultivates in the communities in which it operates, their facilities and services are particularly well suited to: assist with educational and vocational training; provide direct psychological support to its clients; create fellowship forums for the wives of fighters who are readjusting to civilian life; and partner with broader economic reintegration programs that package support for ex-combatants with similar assistance for women and rural communities.

WAW’s work with the UNHCR-affiliated Protection and Monitoring Project, a project that works in tandem with WAW’s longer-standing programs to support reintegration of internally-displaced persons and refugee returnees at the community level, makes WAW an ideal partner to monitor the impact of ex-combatant reintegration in the communities they serve. WAW has extensive experience in monitoring protection environments and systematically documenting protection incidents through the Protection and

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 3.

Monitoring Project, as well as intimate knowledge of the communities in which they operate. Therefore, WAW would be an invaluable partner to the monitoring and evaluation of a wide range of reintegration programming.

Recommendations

Leverage WAW’s wide-ranging capacity to support an inclusive reintegration effort. WAW is well positioned to provide a variety of social and economic services that are essential to the robust reintegration effort necessary for sustained peace.

Expand WAW’s monitoring and evaluation capacity to encompass analysis of a variety of reintegration programs. WAW’s local knowledge and relationships, and its expertise and capacity developed through the Protection and Monitoring Project, make it an ideal partner to monitor and evaluate the impact of ex-combatant reintegration.

Physical Expansion

As discussed in Section One, the protection of WAW’s facilities is of immediate concern in the intra-Afghan negotiations and must be prioritized. In the long-run, the organization may wish to consider expansion of its facilities to best serve Afghan women. This expansion could include opening facilities in provinces not currently covered by WAW, as well as increasing the variety of facilities available in places where the organization already operates. WAW currently has physical operations in thirteen provinces with operations in twenty-four. It is important to recognize that expanding into all thirty-four Afghan provinces is both impossible — for reasons discussed below — and unnecessary, as many of WAW’s facilities have the capacity to serve people from multiple provinces. **We recommend that WAW approach the expansion of its facilities with three factors in mind: funding availability, return on investment, and ease of expansion.**

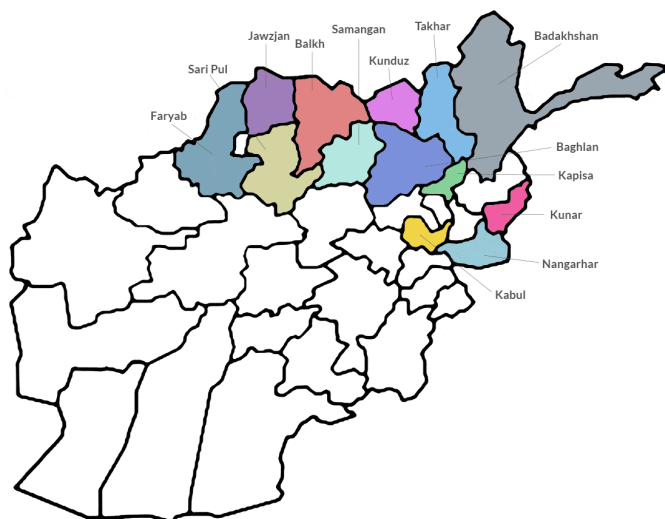


Figure 3 Location of WAW's Family Guidance Centers (FGCs)

International aid money to Afghanistan is shrinking and funding is a major concern for WAW, especially with regards to expensive undertakings like facility expansion. As the organization seeks to continue its current funding sources and grow to include new sources, prioritizing projects that attract donors would be beneficial in the long-run. Representatives from WAW have expressed that donors focus on tangible results and that services — especially those countering GBV — are considerably easier to find funding for than constructing new facilities. The FGCs are an attractive option for expansion, particularly as they administer many of WAW’s significant outreach services. **The construction of FGCs in new areas could greatly increase the amount of fundable services offered.** WAW has also indicated that facilities like the Children’s Support Centers (CSCs) are particularly attractive to funders. The greater willingness of donors to fund this type of project could be leveraged to expand WAW’s reach as far as possible.

Prioritizing the expansion of specific types of facilities would have operational benefits in addition to the financial enticements for international funders. CSCs are able to support incarcerated mothers and children in provinces outside of where they are located. **Given the fact that the number of women’s prisons in Afghanistan is limited, expanding the number of CSCs by even one or two could greatly extend WAW’s ability to serve incarcerated mothers and their children.**

Finally, WAW may wish to first focus on opening facilities in places where it is easier to do so. Security concerns prevent WAW from operating in many Afghan regions, particularly those controlled by the Taliban. In the short- and medium-term, expanding WAW’s operations to these regions would likely be impossible. For that reason, focus should be on expanding as much as possible in places that either already have some WAW presence or would be open to allowing the organization to operate there. By continuing to establish WAW’s credibility as a vital service provider through its programs and facilities, expansion into “trouble areas” could then be more likely in the long-term.

Recommendations

Focus on expansion in more “friendly” areas. This would have the dual benefit of delivering palpable results, which is attractive to international funders, and would continue to establish WAW as a crucial service provider for Afghans, which, in the long-term, could facilitate expansion into less “friendly” regions.

Prioritize the construction of certain types of facilities, namely CSCs and FGCs. This has the potential to attract funders with palpable results related to GBV and positions WAW to maximize outreach with fewer facilities.

Methodology

This report presents research and recommendations produced by a team of eight Georgetown students studying in the Master of Science in Foreign Service program. With guidance and support from Women Forward International, this team worked with Women for Afghan Women (WAW) as a client to identify areas where the organization can expand and deepen its already considerable presence in Afghanistan.

The team conducted interviews with experts on negotiation, countering terrorism and gender-based violence, foreign aid, and diplomacy. Among these were professionals from the U.S. Departments of State and Defense, Brookings Institution, Light of Afghanistan, Council on Foreign Relations, United States Institute of Peace, Wilson Center, and World Bank, among other institutions. In addition to consulting these experts, the team heard from and spoke with U.S. Ambassadors Molly Phee, Richard Olson, and Marc Grossman; Professors Carla Koppell and Sohaira Siddiqui; and Afghan Ambassador to the United States Roya Rahmani. Guidance from WAW representatives Megan Corrado, Najia Nasim, and Masuda Sultan was crucial to the success of the report.

Following the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic, planned field research in Qatar involving interviews of Afghan women was unfortunately cancelled. The team adapted their research plans for the semester and set out to continue to pursue this important work under new constraints. Through Zoom technology and strong communication, the team of student researchers was able to produce this final report.

Note of Acknowledgement

Research for this project was supported by the Embassy of the State of Qatar's Women Forward International delegation trip to Doha in December 2019. During this trip, WFI and Georgetown University representatives had the opportunity to meet with key officials and stakeholders involved in the peace process in Afghanistan and attend the Doha Forum. In addition, the Embassy planned to support a delegation of the entire Georgetown class of capstone students along with WFI's Light of Afghanistan women changemakers to meet in Doha in March 2020 to continue their research, although the delegation had to be postponed due to the global pandemic.

This team remains grateful to the representatives of Women for Afghan Women for their steadfast commitment and support to the team as they crafted the final report. The students also express thanks to all who advised on the project, especially senior advisers Dr. Carla Koppell and Ms. Palwasha Kakar. Finally, the team conveys its sincere gratitude to Women Forward International for their overarching support, as well as Ambassador Nancy McEldowney for her continued guidance. The group looks forward to staying in touch with WAW and the essential work they conduct on supporting the rights and protections of women in Afghanistan.

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