



United States Institute of Peace

“Women in Conflict: Advancing Women's Role in Peace and Security”

**Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on
Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security,
Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues**

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Introduction

Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Cardin and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on “Women in Conflict: Advancing Women’s Role in Peace and Security” and particularly on women’s involvement in the Afghan peace process. The timing for this hearing is especially important given the escalation in violence in Afghanistan over the past few weeks and the heightened drive for a peaceful solution of the country’s conflicts in the near future.

I am a Senior Program Officer on Religion and Inclusive Societies at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), although the views expressed here are my own. I have over 10 years of experience working in Afghanistan on women’s inclusion, religious engagement, governance and education. I focus at USIP on a comparative country approach analyzing women, religion and peacebuilding in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Syria, Iraq and Burma. Specifically, based on my experiences in Afghanistan where I have studied religious women who have successfully negotiated with Taliban, women are brokering local ceasefires, helping release hostages, and negotiating to keep girls’ schools open.

Today’s hearing also comes at an opportune moment with the release earlier this week of the U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security and while the U.S. has committed to a peace process with the Taliban on Afghanistan.

Three Main Points

I would like to highlight three main points for the Subcommittee as you consider advancing women’s role in peace and security in the case of Afghanistan:

1. Afghan women are essential to the success and sustainability of a peace process -- from peace talks to monitoring agreements.
2. Afghan women are adamant in calling for a peace process that protects their rights and gains made over the last 18 years. **#AfghanWomenWillNotGoBack**
3. Most Afghan women, men, young, old, activists, religious scholars and civil society call for an immediate ceasefire and an end to the bloodshed in Afghanistan. Afghans are urging the international community, particularly the United States, to work with the Afghan government to strengthen security and rule of law, continue funding to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the police, and provide funding for the protection of women and girls. They support a responsible and gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan to ensure security and stability prevail on the ground. **#CeasefireforPeace**

Afghan Women are Essential to the Peace Process

Afghan women make up more than 50 percent of the population and have experienced the war in a myriad of different ways than men. Yet, in the face of all the challenges, Afghan women have

made gains in the past 18 years. They have been involved in key, successful peace settlements at national and local levels. Afghan women have the skills and technical expertise in negotiation, mediation, constitutional reform, transitional justice, and ceasefire monitoring. Currently, Afghan women are well organized and have taken concrete initiatives towards the peace process.

Women in Afghanistan, as in so many countries around the world, have felt the brunt of war. They have been and continue to be attacked, raped, maimed, kidnapped, bought and sold as well as being killed in suicide bombings and general attacks on schools, markets, government buildings and places of worship. Amid all of this, women are expressing their leadership and convictions throughout Afghanistan. Women, who comprised almost 20 percent of the Afghan peace jirga in 2010 and 30 percent this May in 2018, continue to demand they be included in peace processes. As a result of the 2010 jirga, nine women were appointed to the 64-member High Peace Council that came out of the gathering of tribal leaders.

Women's groups since then have proactively consulted with women across the country to identify their needs and expectations regarding the peace process and communicated their findings to the Afghan government, political leaders and the international community. Women have reached out to Taliban fighters, pleading with them to stop the bloodshed. This is reminiscent of 2014 when the female members of the High Peace Council collected 300,000 signatures calling for peace and cessation of armed hostilities.

Last year, the largest Afghan women's coordination body, the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), worked with Afghanistan's First Lady, Mrs. Rula Ghani and her office, to coordinate nation-wide consultations with women in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. That effort culminated in a "Declaration of Afghan Women's National Consensus for Peace" that captured women's perspectives across the country.

The Afghan Women's Network consulted with their member organizations and beyond, from all the provinces of Afghanistan, to construct a declaration of women's demands and their "red lines" leading up to the Moscow talks in February 2019, the subsequent U.S. Taliban Doha talks and the intra-Afghan Doha talks in April and Moscow talks in May. In the run up to intra-Afghan talks with the Taliban in Doha that fell apart in April, the AWN had prepared a delegation of 41 women from diverse backgrounds and the political spectrum, including the government, to participate in the peace talks. When the process for developing a delegation broke down between the male political opposition party members and the government in Kabul, the women went to all the groups to urge the parties to come to an agreement to move the peace process forward while conveying women's demands. Eventually, the parties were able to draw up a list of delegates and move forward on the process before it fell through. However, women's civil society organizations did not give up. They came together from across geographic, ethnic, and religious divides to put together a diverse roster of women civil society experts that the U.S. or other international mediators could draw upon for participation and expertise in the peace talks.

Looking back, Afghan women have been part of successful peace processes throughout Afghanistan's history. Although Ahmed Shah Durrani is credited with founding the modern state of Afghanistan in 1747, it was his mother, Nazo Anna, whose contribution to uniting the warring tribes became the lynchpin to bringing peace and stability in the founding of the Afghan State.

When the Taliban were driven out of power in 2001 by U.S. troops and allies, women were part of the successful political settlement in the Bonn process and constitution drafting that has led to 18 years of a stable, democratic government - albeit still under attack from the Taliban who were not included in the Bonn process.

Afghan women's role in the Bonn process was successful and led to the formation of important institutions, including the Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Both were created to address the specific experiences and concerns women had from the conflict. Women were also involved in the constitution drafting processes, including being a part of the drafting council, committee and consultations that ensured women's equal citizenship, access to education, health care and representational quotas in Parliament.

There were prominent women's rights activists who boycotted the Bonn process because they wanted the bombing to stop and a lasting peace to be built that included the Taliban in the peace process and political settlement. Many of those women predicted the Taliban would continue to fight and cause instability in the country. According to some Afghan women, as a result of not including the Taliban in the Bonn process¹, the Taliban are now demanding a clean cut from the Afghan constitution and the political system that was built without their inclusion, despite experts calling it the most Islamic constitution in the world.

After the fall of the Taliban, many Afghan women, especially in the urban centers, saw major and immediate improvements in the quality of their lives and their access to basic rights. In short, after 18 years of American-backed governments, Afghan women and the society have changed significantly for the better with the emergence of female entrepreneurs, political leaders, and even nightly news anchors. The Taliban, by contrast, has made very little progress on women's issues since being pushed from power in 2001, despite persistent claims to the contrary. The group's record is spotty at best in the areas of Afghanistan it controls, and its leaders continue to make ominous statements on gender, such as calling for girls' education to end by age 12 years of age.²

Women have also been successful at negotiating on behalf of their communities at the local level. Women are able to navigate across lines of conflict and negotiate settlements using traditional and moral authority. These courageous women have negotiated with Taliban and other armed groups on behalf of their communities to end violence and bring peaceful settlements to issues of conflict around hostages and access to land. At the national level, four women were part of the peace negotiations that ended in a settlement in 2016 between the government and Hekmatyar's Hezbi-Islami that has so far been successful. This peace agreement

¹ According to 2019 interview with Palwasha Hassan, Executive Direct of Afghan Women's Education Center and co-founder of Afghan Women's Network for USIP blog piece: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/02/how-can-we-negotiate-taliban-afghan-women-know>.

² Belquis Ahmadi, "Afghan Talks: No Women, No Peace" USIP Analysis and Commentary (Washington, DC: USIP March 2019) <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/03/afghanistan-talks-no-women-no-peace>

was seen as a possible model for the Taliban to follow or at least to see if the government would keep its promises.³

Despite these achievements, women continue to be absent or remarkably underrepresented in peace talks. Women's experiences of exclusion from peace agreements from 1992 to 2001 under the Mujahedin and Taliban regimes show that what is power sharing and peace for men is not peace for women or others left out of the equation, nor is it sustainable. In response, women rights advocates and civil society activists have taken to traditional and social media as well as to international community to express their dismay about their exclusion from dialogues between the government and the representatives of the Taliban.

#AfghanWomenWillNotGoBack

After nearly 40 years of war, Afghanistan and the international community are urgently seeking paths for a peace process. But amid the tentative efforts -- a three-day ceasefire last June, the peace march across the country by hundreds of Afghans, the Afghan Women's Peace Movement and talks by led by U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad -- a somber question hangs for women and human rights advocates: *How can Afghanistan make peace with the Taliban while protecting democracy and women's rights?* While that question is universal in peacemaking, Afghanistan's history of abuses against women, including by the Taliban, makes it a tough case. In response, a two million strong social media campaign has taken off with the hashtag:

#AfghanWomenWillNotGoBack.

Afghan women have expressed their demands for a peace process that is inclusive and respects the constitution and rule of law through the large national consultation process and civil society leaders' consultations process. Afghan women want meaningful participation at all levels of the peace process. They firmly reject any backsliding on rights enumerated in Afghanistan's constitution and legal code. Enforcement must be guaranteed for laws that bar violence against women and abolish discriminatory and unjust practices and traditions.

There is clear consensus by women's groups that Afghan women's participation at all levels of the peace process should guarantee that women's rights be protected in any agreement and there be proper mechanisms and incentivized resources to ensure the agreement is upheld, including women's monitoring of the peace agreement. Furthermore, they are calling for an immediate ceasefire to create space for a meaningful peace process to begin.

#CeasefireForPeace

Afghan women across the country in solidarity with Afghan men, peace marches, Afghan Ulema and broader civil society are calling for a hashtag **#CeasefireForPeace**. They are calling for an end to the bloodshed and demanding that the violence stop immediately. This call for a ceasefire is a call for trust building with the Afghan public to create room for meaningful dialogue and reconciliation to begin as part of the peace process.

³ Palwasha Kakar, "How can Afghans make peace AND protect women? Meet Ayesha Aziz." USIP Analysis and Commentary (Washington, DC: USIP March 2018)

All recent surveys, including the Survey of the Afghan People, have shown that women are most concerned about security. This does not mean that they want the U.S. military to stay in Afghanistan forever. What they are asking for is a responsible withdrawal that leaves behind a well-trained Afghan security force and an inclusive and sustainable peace agreement that protects women's rights, democratic institutions and the constitutional order.

Afghan women are urging the international community, and the U.S. specifically, to ensure women and girls are protected through this precarious transition process by supporting and funding the ANSF and police. They fear that if the U.S. pulls out its military without these safe guards, more instability will arise in the vacuum and women will again be disproportionately impacted. They fear an irresponsible pull out of the military will perpetuate the war, similar to the effect of the Soviet's pulling out its military in the 1990s that led to even more war. Afghan women fear this possibility, but they are not asking the U.S. military to stay forever, but to leave responsibly and with systems in place in Afghanistan that protect women and establish stability and security on the ground from possible future extremist threats.

In conclusion, Afghan women are essential to a successful process and are demanding meaningful participation in the peace process at all levels, respect for their rights in the constitutional order and protection from violence through this process to ensure a sustainable peace for their homeland.

The view expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.