

DO NOT REPEAT THE HISTORY

Afghan Community Views On Peace Process

Background: For the past decades, Afghan women have been a driving force for change in Afghanistan, with an active voice in the country's peace process. Yet, they still remain excluded and/or underrepresented in official peace negotiations.

This policy brief demonstrates the power of women's leadership and role in their communities, facilitating dialogues for peace. It is based on a series of women-led dialogue forums facilitated by EPD in 10 provinces between 28 March and 12 April 2021 that brought together 1,000 individuals (women and men; young and old) from different walks of life to discuss key conflict drivers, obstacles to the Afghanistan peace process and ways of overcoming them, including the role that could be played by civilian non-state actors in supporting the peace process. Participants included women and youth activists, civil society representatives, community elders, religious scholars, and government officials.

The findings presented here outline those issues where an agreement was reached and demonstrates that women don't stand alone in their vision for peace in Afghanistan and that consensus can be reached without coercion.

(1) Denial of basic women's rights (education or health), which has its roots in the culture, not religion; (2) the negotiations are over-involved around governance module;

(3) Underrepresentation of non-political voices in peace negotiations, i.e., civil society members, religious scholars, or community elders; (4) trust deficit and a wide gap between the republic and the public; (5) disunity and fragmentation among the elites giving Taliban an upper hand in the negotiations; (6) Taliban's inability and unwillingness to compromise in peace negotiations; (7) militarization of communities by both sides of the conflict, impacting the peace environment; (8) rise and publicly vocalization of extremist ideologies in the country; and (9) a transregional dimension to the war in Afghanistan. These were the main points of discussion in these dialogues.

INTRODUCTION

Everyday discussions around Afghanistan's future and the ongoing peace process are coming back to an old Afghan adage: "History repeats itself." It reflects the concerns held by many ordinary Afghans about their future.

For many Kabuli citizens especially, the recent announcement that the United States and NATO will withdraw all their troops from Afghanistan this year is reminiscent of when the former Soviet Union pulled their troops out of the country in 1989, which intensified the civil war and ultimately paved the way for the rise of the first Taliban Emirate.

It is easy to understand this Déjà experience and reasonable fear of an uncertain future. While clearly some historical parallels can be drawn, Afghanistan's past does not have to condemn its peaceful future, especially if we learn from history.

Today, Afghanistan and its people have changed – and this peace process does not need to undo the many positive achievements that have occurred.

In order to assist that history is not repeated, EPD facilitated a women-led dialogue series (28 March to 12 April 2021) with a diverse group of 1,000 citizens in 10 provinces with the representative of the regional diversity in Afghanistan.¹ Key was to facilitate dialogue between individuals who do not frequently come together nor agree on politics

Participants included women and men from different backgrounds (e.g., religious leaders, community elders, scholars, civil society representatives, women, and youth activists) as well as government officials (e.g., governors, women's affair directors, officials from the state ministry for peace) and other public figures. The objectives of these women-led dialogues were three-fold.

1. To demonstrate women's leadership and mobilization capacity for peace more generally, above and beyond defending their own rights and interests.
2. To enhance the cooperation between women activists and other influential groups in society in order to build alliances to further an inclusive society and sustainable peace where human (including women) rights are safeguarded, and differences are peacefully reconciled.
3. To understand the complexities around peace and conflict in Afghanistan by discussing key conflict drivers and obstacles to the Afghanistan peace process, identify recommendations for sustainable peace, and the role that could be played by civilian non-state actors in supporting the peace process.

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL

Over the past decades, despite the lack of vast financial and political resources, Afghan women have played an active role as peacebuilders and mediators in their communities. Locally as well as nationally, they have been working diligently and determined for peace, prosperity, and social justice, defending not only their rights but also that of their fellow citizens, especially minorities and disadvantaged groups. Women's groups are often the most vibrant, active, and consistent part of civil society activism both in the center and provinces.

In more recent years, it has been especially women who have raised their voice consistently for peace in Afghanistan. They are tireless organizers and mobilizers to make their voice and of others heard. Examples of these efforts are numerous. They include the copious work by the Afghan Women's Networkⁱ, a recent report by the Afghan Women's Educational Centreⁱⁱ and a 2020 policy brief by the EPD in partnership with Provincial Women's Network (PWN) and their ability to have collected over 100,000 signatures from 15 provinces in just 3 days supporting a call on NATO member states and women global leaders for protecting women's rights in Afghanistan's peace process.

What distinguishes women from other groups is the consistency of their demands and recommendations. They are calling for a humanitarian ceasefire to end violence, a reduction of violence, avoidance of blame game by all parties to the conflict, transparency during the peace talks, strengthening national unity and building bridges between rural and urban communities, investing in local capacities for peace and grass-roots peace dialogues, prioritizing DDR programs, and the importance of involving women in the peace process at all levels (including leadership; at least 30% of the total representation)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Strongly supportive of the peace process, women are also steadfast in drawing a line in the sand and making the safeguarding of basic human rights, including women rights,

non-negotiable. Many times, they are the only ones speaking about transitional justice, good governance, and inclusive peace. Despite all this, women are still being ignored or underrepresented when it comes to official dialogue processes at Track 1 and 2 levels.

Thus, these dialogue series and resulting policy brief wants to emphasize the role women can and should play in facilitating an inclusive and sustainable peace in Afghanistan. It stands as an example of what women can achieve when given their seats at the table.



We furthermore wanted to find out with our dialogue exercises to what extent the views and issues raised by women to date would resonate with a more diverse group of Afghans with a diversity of viewpoints; and where common ground could be found. We felt this would provide an important food for thought on what could be achieved in the intra-Afghan negotiations.

WILL HISTORY REPEAT ITSELF?

Before sharing the findings of our women-led dialogue events, it is worthwhile to indulge in this historical comparison, least to remind Afghan leaders and the international community that there are historical lessons to be learned that can help produce a better outcome this time around. One could sum it up that Afghan society has progressed, but their elites have remained stuck in the past.

Afghanistan today is a vastly different society than 2-3 decades ago. Its population is young, well-educated, and well-traveled. There are numerous achievements that Afghans have appreciated and are willing to defend.

There is a new constitution that guarantees equal rights to all Afghans, regardless of age, gender, and ethnicity.

There is a vibrant media and civil society that continues to work hard to raise citizen awareness across all provinces for transparency and holding the Afghan government and elites to account. In addition to civil society consistently demanding a voice in the peace process, the most recent backlash against the banning

of girls' public singing in Kabul is a case in point of holding government to account and defending constitutional rights.^{iv}

Politics and elections (despite flaws) have become more participatory and given groups that have been traditionally excluded from political processes a voice, especially youth, women, and minorities. Women and youth are a force to reckon with in Afghan society and politics.

Technological revolutions (mobile phones, the internet, and social media) have facilitated some of these changes by increasing connectivity, information-sharing, and dialogues, allowing people from different parts of the country to connect and also learn from the experiences of their peers abroad.

But as a French saying goes: plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose (the more things change, the more they stay the same). Despite some drastic changes in Afghanistan over the past two decades, some things have remained unchanged.



Chief among them is a seeming inability or unwillingness by political elites to put personal differences aside for the sake of peace. This has been the case in numerous past political transitions in Afghanistan and is a major stumbling block in the current peace process. Many proposals that are put forth for the peace process are focused on patronage politics and elite survival. A recent report by AWEC argued that the question is less about peace than maintaining or gaining power^v. Many politicians still seem unable to think beyond their families and political parties. The Afghan government is becoming increasingly isolated and exclusionary, with the affairs managed by an ever-narrowing circle of close confidants of the President.

Many of these individuals come from the Afghan Diaspora and are often disconnected and detached from the Afghan public and influential segments in Afghan society.

LISTENING TO AFGHAN COMMUNITIES – OBSTACLES TO PEACE AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM

The community dialogues facilitated by women across the ten provinces produced rich discussions and a diversity of views. What is highlighted in this policy brief are areas of consensus around the key obstacles to achieving sustainable peace in Afghanistan and possible ways to overcome them.

(1) Conflating Cultural Traditions and Values with Islam When It Comes to Women's Rights: Participants felt that many public (and closed-door) discussions around women's rights ignored two basic facts. First, that Islam and the Quran grant women basic human rights that cannot be ignored nor violated. Thus, denial of women's basic human rights (e.g. education, work, inheritance, forced marriage) has its roots primarily in culture and not religion; and the two are frequently conflated out of ignorance of Islamic jurisprudence. Secondly, that the Afghan government, in line with Islamic beliefs, has signed international treaties that protect the human rights of every individual, including women. These treaties have also been signed by other Islamic countries, and many do not see a contradiction between the protection of human (and women's) rights and Islam.

→ **Raise awareness (especially amongst men) about women's rights as enshrined in Islam.** Religious leaders and community elders are open and willing to collaborate with women in educating men and women in communities about women's rights and the responsibility of family members and community leaders in granting and protecting these rights.

→ **Defend women's rights using Islamic principles during peace negotiations with the Taliban** by including eminent religious figures into the negotiating team, especially women well versed in Islamic jurisprudence.

(2) Getting (Too) Stuck on the Governance Model: Participants felt that too much discussion revolved around the role of Islam in Afghanistan's future governance system. Afghanistan is a religious and conservative society. People are willing to sacrifice their lives in the name of religion. The Afghan Constitution acknowledges

this very true. It starts with the acknowledgment and praise of the one and only God – Allah. It declares Islam the national religion of Afghanistan and that all laws have to align with Islam. Nowhere in Islam is there a stipulation of specific governance systems such as an Emirate. As a matter of fact, Islam provides every country the right to adopt a governance model that is most compatible with their social and political context as long as it follows Islamic principles. Furthermore, there are countless examples of other Islamic countries, especially those without a monarchy, that have adopted an Islamic republic model to ensure greater public participation, inclusivity, and accountability, as well as prevent conflict and facilitate a peaceful transfer of power. Thus, the governance model should not be a sticking point in the intra-Afghan dialogue.

→ *Raise awareness and discuss about the diversity of successful governance models among Islamic countries*

(3) Underrepresentation of Non-Political Voices in the Peace Process: Inclusion in peace processes matters. Dialogue participants commented on the fact that the Afghanistan Negotiation Team (ANT) and High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) didn't reflect a complete representation of Afghan society. Although the two bodies demonstrated a representation of all major political parties in Afghanistan, they lacked proper representation from civil society, religious groups, youth, and women. Furthermore, given Afghanistan's long history of displacement, it is important that the Afghan Diaspora also has a voice in the Afghan peace process, but this should not come at the expense of community leadership, who are the ones that ultimately have to live with whatever is agreed to. One religious leader felt that currently, Diaspora representatives were usurping the space of local leadership: ***"They bring their friends with turban and beard from abroad and allocate our seat to them."***

→ *Negotiating teams should include representation from all segments of society, including civil society, youth, women, religious scholars, and community elders.*

→ *Members of negotiating team should be Afghans living in Afghanistan with their families so that they can feel ordinary Afghan's pains and losses and can speak for them.*

(4) Legitimacy and Trust Deficit: While the government with a diverse team is currently leading the intra-Afghan dialogue on behalf of Afghan citizens, they still do not have the trust of the very people they claim to represent. For a country to function, the social contract between leaders and citizens need to be strong and resilient, with agreement on "how to live together, how power and how resources are distributed" .^{vi}

Community dialogues highlighted the widening gap between the current Afghan government and the Afghan people underscoring the lack of a resilient social contract. Dialogue participants revealed several key reasons for this: widespread

corruption in public institutions, poor service delivery, and a self-serving centralized elite that acts with impunity, despite civil society and media working hard to hold them to account. A participating religious leader summed it up" ***Instead of prosecuting the corrupt, delivering services and fighting corruption, they [Afghan government official and politicians hold gatherings for us where we go to listen to their speeches and list of empty promises with no chance to speak [ourselves]."***

These complaints resonate with wider public opinion polls that see corruption as a significant problem in Afghanistan; and strong documentation by media and civil society organizations such as Integrity Watch.^{vii} A recent opinion piece in Foreign Policy echoed a key dilemma that has troubled Afghan politics from day one: "Afghanistan is among the most highly centralized states in the world with an extremely strong presidency that has left little room for formal local structures to fill the vacuum."^{viii} The COVID-19 pandemic has only brought these problems into focus, with a majority of people in provinces no longer able to afford basic necessities. People are frustrated at the government's inability to deliver basic services, provide for security and create employment. Due to highly centralized systems, restrictive policies, and an uncertain future, even Afghan investors are no longer confident in investing in their own country. According to the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce, numerous businesses have shifted from Afghanistan to Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Central Asia.^{ix}



Despite all these misgivings, dialogue participants still like the idea of a democratically elected government but hope that the peace process can be an impetus for a more citizen-centric governance model.



- *Renew a resilient social contract between the Afghan government and people based on a strong citizens-centric and responsive governance model.*
- *Address corruption and hold government officials to account.*
- *Improve quality and efficiency of key service delivery (e.g. education, health care etc.)*
- *Strengthen provincial governance vis-à-vis the central state and create a balance between them.*
- *Provide media and civil society with a prominent role to monitor government processes and outputs*

(5) Mistrust and Societal Fragmentation: Dialogue participants see a key problem with how the political elite have contributed to the fragmentation of Afghan society, increasing disunity and mistrust. This lack of unity among Afghan elites has provided the Taliban with an unfair advantage and an upper hand in the peace process. Dialogue participants argued that the Taliban are not strong, but the republic side is fragmented and weak. Focusing on internal power-struggles, self-centered elites have missed the opportunity to build a united front by engaging communities, women groups, civil society, media, religious groups, youth, and others to speak from a strong and publicly supported position. The growing disunity among Afghan elites has clearly been visible during the past two presidential elections, with candidates building their campaigns on personal agendas, ethnicity, and tribalism. Some participants feared that the disunity and fragmentation among elites have started to spill over into the Afghan population, providing a grave obstacle to national unity and peace. Many expressed an urgency to address the problem of mistrust, disunity, and fragmentation before it would destroy the very fabric of Afghan society that to date has survived over four decades of war.

Participants noted that the time has come to put aside small differences and focus on what unites Afghans, such as fighting injustice, corruption, and defending women's Islamic rights.

- *Support a confidence-building process or national unity campaign in parallel to the peace process and ensure it continues post agreement. This should be done both at elite and societal levels.*
- *Develop reconciliation processes that can address national unity to be rolled out after a peace agreement has been reached.*
- *Build awareness around citizen rights and obligations in a peaceful society, including defending the rights of women, minorities and other marginalized groups.*

Being impartial, participants believed women could be great agents for facilitating the above processes.

(6) Taliban's (In)ability and (Un)willingness to Compromise: While most of the dialogue participants, including women, have accepted the Taliban as one of the realities of their society and are willing to make peace with them, many feel that the Taliban has failed to recognize that Afghan society has changed. Their continuous demands to return to their past governance model, without concessions or cessation of violence, show that they are either unwilling or unable to understand that Afghanistan is now a vibrant society, where women, youth, civil society groups and media are actively working to serve their people and hold their government to account. More concerning to dialogue participants is a perception that Afghan elites and international actors are rolling out a red carpet for the Taliban, rather than applying pressure, in a belief that they have won the war and can negotiate from a position of strength. There are grave concerns that there is a willingness to make concessions over basic human rights. The Afghan population has not agreed to hold the Taliban to account.

This lack of accountability mechanisms in the Afghan peace process was visible in the US-Taliban peace agreement. The Taliban demanded the release of 5,000 prisoners to start intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha and expected the Afghan government to comply while failing themselves to curb violence against civilians. Nobody has held them to account for this failure.

- *The Taliban need to demonstrate their political will for peace by attending the Istanbul conference, restarting the negotiations and agreeing to a humanitarian ceasefire.*
- *International actors need to use their power and influence to pressure the Taliban to come to the peace table and agree to a ceasefire.*
- *Building alliances among religious scholars, women and civil society leaders. The Taliban presently see themselves as sole defenders of Islam. This necessitates the strengthening of alternative religious narratives where religious leaders unite and speak up for the country and women's rights under Islam.*
- *Civil society actors, supported by international actors, should be empowered to monitor the peace process and call all parties to the conflict to account.*

(7) Community Militarization and Lack of Community-Level Peacebuilding and Monitoring Mechanisms:

The participants claimed that the security situation in their provinces has deteriorated since the initiation of the peace talks, with growing extremism and militarization. Community members were particularly concerned about the proliferation of armed groups on both sides of the conflict as well as non-aligned local commanders. Dialogue participants reported gatherings by well-known local jihadi and militia commanders where thousands of armed men showed up. One reported: ***"We see many armed groups in our communities, commanders' militias have expanded and are freely roaming around in villages. No one is asking, who are they and who is supporting them."*** These new armed groups see themselves above the law, commit crimes with impunity, and are not accountable to anyone.

These developments do not only serve as a stark reminder of what had happened during the Afghan civil war but are also having a negative impact on community cohesion, crime rates, the rule of law, sense of security, especially for women.

One dialogue participant observed: ***"In other countries, not all citizens are happy with their governments. There is opposition, but these do not become armed, kill the innocents and destroy the schools and clinics. They choose civic ways to fight their cause."***

Many participants felt Afghanistan was at a critical juncture where it could take a turn for peace or descend further into

a spiral of protracted conflict and civil war. Many community participants feared that they were losing their youth to armed groups. They also reported lacking support for grass-roots community mechanisms that could bring community leaders from different walks of life together to discuss these issues and explore possible local solutions instead of waiting for the central government or international community to do something.

All participants acknowledged that community peacebuilding needed time and would need to continue after a negotiated settlement. As one dialogue participant highlighted: ***"A four decades war cannot be settled in one year peace negotiations."***

- *Develop community mechanisms to report on the militarization of communities and develop solutions to address the problems. Profiling of the different armed groups in each province can help understand who they are, what their objectives are, who is funding them, and how they could be managed.*
- *Strengthen community capacity for peace to resolve local conflicts and address community militarization*

(8) The Rise of Extremist Ideologies: While Afghanistan is a deeply religious country and many community leaders are conservative, extremist ideologies have until recently been an exception. Dialogue participants raised their concern that these voices are increasingly taking hold in the country, possibly as a way of appeasing the Taliban or simply because these actors feel empowered in the absence of a strict rule of law. For example,



recently in one of Afghanistan's most peaceful province (Bamyan), the office of a district governor issued an order, instructing all public and private hospitals, clinics and pharmacies not to provide health services to women unless they are accompanied by a male chaperone (mahram)^x. Similarly, in Kandahar, girls are actively prevented from going to schools.^{xi}



There was a sense among dialogue participants that as extremist groups supporting Taliban ideology were becoming more vocal, increasing their public campaigns and activities with support from neighboring countries and other

sympathizers, more progressive religious groups lacked support to counter their extremist campaigns and narratives. The lack of protection for dissenting community leaders was strongly felt. One religious leader noted ***"We have more fear of the Taliban's return than you [women]. In your case, they will force you to sit at home. In our case, they will just simply get rid of [kill] us."***

→ ***Provide support to local community elders and religious leaders in developing counter-narratives to religious extremism***

(9) Trans-regional Interferences: Many dialogue participants felt that Afghanistan is increasingly besieged in a global war on terror. As already noted, extremist ideologies and a proliferation of armed groups were strongly supported by external actors in the neighborhood and region. Many felt they were living in a furnace that was warming others while killing Afghanistan's youth. A key problem seems, Afghanistan's strategic location that has placed it at the center of the great game of powers in the past.^{xii} This has contributed to the complexity of the conflict and the peace process, which cannot be fully resolved unless spoilers of peace are addressed.

→ ***All stakeholders of this conflict, including Afghans, neighboring and regional countries, and the international community, need to come to a consensus to support the peace talks by stopping their proxy wars and encouraging all parties to participate in the negotiations***

→ ***There should be an international mechanism guaranteeing and monitoring the implementation of the peace agreement and holding the violators accountable***

CONCLUSION

The announced withdrawal of all international troops by the end of this year in the absence of a finalized peace process is of deep concern to the Afghan people. Dialogue participants highlighted that after two decades of international engagement, Afghans are being deserted at a time when violence is at an all-time high, targeted killings and assassinations have become a daily experience. Some feel that they are worse off now than before as US-led intervention toppled the Taliban but empowered Afghan warlords that had been weakened during the civil war. The announcement is a clear wake-up call and opportunity for Afghan leaders and citizens, men and women, to reduce their dependency on the international community, understand the sensitivity of the time, acknowledge the role of influential actors in the society and find ways to address what is tearing Afghanistan apart.

While Afghan women long had allies and supporters among international actors, this dialogue series demonstrated that they also have strong support in their own communities. All dialogues sessions were attended peacefully and openly by religious leaders and community elders alongside civil society, youth, and women. None had a problem participating in an event facilitated by women, and many even welcomed the opportunity. Moreover, many came out in support of their Afghan sisters and the efforts for peace. They felt solidarity over being victims of bad governance, corruption, lack of the rule of law, deteriorating security and human rights. They felt united in their concerns about the safety of their communities and the future of their country.

In addition to being open to collaborating with women to protect their rights, they also encouraged women to come up with a community-based mechanism where they can jointly raise communities' awareness about peace, strengthen unity and social cohesion and develop non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms. They can also

jointly document the evolving situation in their communities and present these monitoring reports to local actors and policymakers to keep them informed of the situation on the ground and hold them to account.

It is therefore important for women to continue to build alliances with religious leaders, community elders, youth, and others and together advocate for a just peace, good governance, democracy, and women's rights.

The building of alliances between women, religious leaders, and community elders to defend women's rights under Islam itself will encourage communities to listen and collaborate. Through a united front, it will be hard for the Taliban and other hardliners to find counter-arguments.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ We would like to thank USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) for their generous support of this dialogue series. We also thank Dr Susanne Schmeidl for providing helpful comments and editorial suggestions on an earlier version of this policy brief.

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