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**IAFS 4500**

**28 April 2021**

**Policy Proposal:**

**A Gender Based Framework to Peace Negotiations Between the Afghan Government and the Taliban**

## **Introduction**

Earlier this month President Joe Biden announced his commitment to withdraw the remaining U.S. troops from Afghanistan by September 11<sup>th</sup> in commemoration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The exit of all U.S. forces by September 11<sup>th</sup> ends the two decade long military occupation in the country and will dramatically alter power dynamics as the Afghan government and Taliban work to broker a peace agreement. Members of Biden's administration issued statements confirming U.S. support of diplomatic efforts to achieve a peace deal as well as statements affirming the administration's plan to continue to protect human rights. However, multiple feminist groups and NGOs in and outside of Afghanistan raised serious concerns over the blatant disregard for women's participation in the peace process. The lack of female participation in proceedings between the Afghan government and Taliban regime demonstrates the failure to recognize the struggles of Afghan women. Over the past four decades women in Afghanistan have characteristically been the social safety net to civil society and the first to have their rights sacrificed to reach peace agreements. The importance of women's participation in all aspects of the peace process is crucial to establish national peace and to aid reconstruction efforts. For the purposes of this policy proposal, I will be evaluating previous peace agreements and making policy recommendations through the lens of the Afghan Women's Network; an NGO established to connect underground women's movements in Afghanistan. We strongly recommend the Biden Administration halt its withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan until women are fully represented in the current peace negotiations and that foreign aid to Afghanistan be shifted to smaller grass-roots movements.

## **A Historical Overview of Afghan Women**

In order to fully understand the social landscape in Afghanistan and its vulnerability to change, I will provide contextual background on the challenges overcome by Afghan women. The geographical makeup of Afghanistan consists of small pockets of fertile land separated by rugged terrain, resulting in numerous tribal groups throughout the country. Historically, tribal linkages have trumped central authority. (De Leede 2014, 3). The capital of Afghanistan, Kabul, was the center of social development in the early to late part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while tribal regions resisted efforts to incorporate women in society. Historically, Afghan women have dealt with patriarchal attitudes which restricted their ability to engage in society (Farhoumand-Sims 2007, 655). Categorizing Afghan women into a pre and post-Taliban framework undermines the complex history of gender in the region.

Prior to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1970s, women in urban centers enjoyed social freedoms such as the ability to earn an education and participate in civil society. Measures to advance women's rights were largely concentrated in urban areas while efforts to expand girls' education in rural regions were met with strong opposition from tribal and religious leaders. The first notable measure taken to ensure women's societal integration was enacted in 1921 by King Amanullah, who restructured family code to increase social power of women in the private sphere (Farhoumand-Sims 2007, 656). Following this provision, each successive regime change saw an improvement to the status of urban women in Afghanistan. By the late 1950s women's rights had seen drastic improvements in Kabul with the expansion of coeducational initiatives allowing more women to enter the workforce. Afghanistan sent its first female delegate to the United Nations in 1958 and established universal suffrage in 1965 (Farhoumand-Sims 2007, 657). However, the urban-rural divide prevented large sects of the

population from benefiting from these advancements and underscores the importance of utilizing a localized approach to expand opportunities in rural provinces.

Drastic improvements were made to women's rights in 1973 when Afghanistan became a republic. However, the reforms implemented by Kamal's regime were only benefitted wealthy women in urban areas, as they were strongly opposed by rural tribal authority. Kamal had failed to consider the regional sensitivities of tribal affiliation and ultimately resulted in a proliferation of rhetoric opposing a centralized government in Afghanistan. (Farhoumand-Sims 2007, 657). In 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to support the communist regime, which had largely sought to improve the rights of women throughout the country, while the United States funded Mujahedin rebels in a proxy war against Russia. After a decade of fighting, Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan and left the war-torn country with a collapsed government and fragmented population. (The Economist, 2020). The instability caused by the war between American sponsored Mujahedin rebels and Soviet forces created a power vacuum further plunging Afghanistan into conflict. Gender based violence drastically increased during the period of Mujahedin rule, giving extremist groups like the Taliban a conduit to establish local legitimacy, plunging Afghanistan into prolonged conflict.

The Taliban regime operated in Afghanistan's southern region during the early 90s as a response to instability caused by western invasion. The Taliban took to a strict interpretation of Islam and imposed rigid Sharia law and Pashtun customary law. The group was deeply ingrained in Pashtun society which strengthened their legitimacy. (De Leede 2014, 3). Tribal kinship and religious authority in rural regions allowed the Taliban to swiftly gain traction, which ultimately resulted in the proliferation of anti-central government rhetoric in Afghanistan. It is important to note that violence against Afghan women did not originate under Taliban rule. Throughout the

Mujahedin rule, women's social mobility had decreased significantly. However, the Taliban took it a step further banning women from public life. (Farhoumand-Sims 2007, 658). In 1996 the Taliban seized control of Kabul, putting an end to the civil war between the regime and the interim Afghan government designed to replace the former Republic of Afghanistan. Under the guise of religious authority, the Taliban decreed that women were excluded from participating in public society and would remain confined to their homes. Gender based discrimination and violence dramatically increased under the Taliban regime.

In response to the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> the United States invaded Afghanistan in search of members of the hardline extremist group, Al Qaeda, who had been sheltered by the Taliban. Rhetoric in western societies utilized gender to gain popular support for U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, painting all Afghan women as the object of the Taliban's oppression, failing to recognize the restrictive measures women felt under U.S. backed Mujahedin rule. (Farhoumand-Sims 2007, 654). Liberating Afghan women became a central point to leverage support for U.S. attacks in Afghanistan. The war on terror campaigns classify all Afghan women as victims of the Taliban, failing to acknowledge the mechanisms women used to protect and rebuild their communities. Following the defeat of Taliban forces in December 2001, powerful warlords and tribal leaders met with United Nations delegates in Bonn, Germany to establish an interim and centralized government in Afghanistan. The Bonn agreement was enacted to establish a temporary government agency composed of 30 prominent Afghans to transition the country into stability. Members of the Taliban delegation were absent at the Bonn peace talks and this largely contributes to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan today; the Taliban rallied supporter by denouncing the installment of western backed war-lords to rebuild the country. (Farhoumand-Sims 2007, 654). The Taliban additionally used the Bonn agreement's initiatives to establish a

representative government with gender specific initiatives that opposed the new government. While the agreement sought to honor U.N. resolution 1325 by taking a gender based approach, the negotiation table lacked any female representatives. The agreement called for the establishment of a women's ministry with the goal to advance the social status of women through educational and socio-economic development programs. Women's rights groups were initially optimistic over the establishment of this ministry, however the lack of female participation during its construction drastically reduced its operating capability of fulfilling women-centered initiatives.

Over the past two decades the Taliban regime has gained traction and now controls over 54% of Afghanistan. The war in the region has killed over 100,000 civilians within the last decade, most of whom are women and children (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). Since 2002, only a year after the Bonn agreement was signed, human rights organizations have consistently ranked Afghanistan as one of the worst places in the world to be a woman. Approaches taken to integrate women in civil society have ultimately failed and the gains women have made have come at great cost. The U.S. decision to withdraw troops out of Afghanistan with no commitment to a gender based peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban presents a huge risk to the rights of Afghan women. The peace agreement signed between the U.S. and the Taliban in February of 2020 stipulated that in order for troops to withdraw the Taliban would have to meet with officials of the Afghan government to broker a peace agreement, this deal made no mention of initiatives to protect women's rights. A senior Taliban official issued a statement saying, "We together will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by

Islam – from the right to education to the right to work – are protected.” (Barr, 2020) Critics quickly raised concerns over the Taliban’s history of “protecting” women’s rights.

Peace talks between the two kicked off in September of 2020 in Doha where members of both delegations issued statements confirming their commitment to establishing lasting peace in Afghanistan. Only four members of the 20 from the Afghan delegation were women and the Taliban had no female representation present during these talks. The Afghan government again failed to uphold its obligation to UN security resolution 1325, which took place in Moscow in May 2021. The Afghan delegation had 12 members but only one woman, a significant backslide from the talks in Doha. As the Taliban’s influence continues to grow and with U.S. troops expected to be withdrawn by September 11<sup>th</sup> there are serious concerns about the future of Afghan women. The lack of female participation in the current peace proceedings with the Taliban falls drastically short of U.N resolution 1325 and requires immediate attention.

### **Consequences of Gender-Blind Frameworks**

Afghanistan has been the center of international conflict for more than 40 years and presents a unique opportunity to evaluate the shortcomings of previous peace processes. The most notable failure of previous proceedings is the absence of women at all levels. Women’s perspective and agency in peace processes is critical to resolve conflict and begin reconstruction efforts. Dominant peace building frameworks in Afghanistan failed to adequately address gender specific needs, forcing Afghan women to shoulder the burden of a failed reconstruction (Manchanda 2005, 4743). Approaches that view women solely as victims of war undermine the complex realities women face in navigating a conflict and post conflict zone. In order to fully integrate the unique needs of Afghan women, gender must be a centralized point of focus throughout the peacebuilding and reconstruction process.

In 2000 the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 to create a framework emphasizing the critical need to include gender perspectives at all stages of the peace process. The resolution was a ground-breaking affirmation to address women's agency for decision making. The resolution became customary law and is composed of four main components: it calls for the adoption of gender perspectives in the negotiation process, address unique challenges women face in conflict and post-conflict zones, adopt measures to protect women's rights, and integrate women into all levels of peace building process (Farhoumand-Sims 2007, 654). This resolution endorsed women's ability to act as key decision makers in conflict resolution by enabling them to translate their authority from the informal sector to political decision making. A gender-based analysis allows policy makers to avoid making broad assumptions about populations in post conflict zones and provides analytical tools to understand how gender inequalities shift in wartime.

While there is overwhelming evidence that women's participation in the peace process is critical, popular reconstruction frameworks fail to recognize a woman's ability to protect and rebuild her community during and after conflict. The absence of women in these negotiations is a result of cultural and religious customs that perpetuate them as a subordinate group unable to affect change. Even when women are involved in the peace processes, like the limited number of women in the Afghan delegations in Doha and Moscow, their presence is limited and often overshadowed by men. (Farhoumand-Sims 2007, 660). The U.N. secretary general released the following statement in 2004 in a report on resolution 1325, "... The desire to bring peace at any cost may result in a failure to involve women and consider their needs and concerns." In post conflict regions women's rights are sacrificed in attempts to broker peace agreements. Gender-blind approaches taken in Afghanistan have privileged men while failing to recognize the unique



experience women face in conflict. The absence of women from the 'peace table' leads to their further marginalization in social reconstruction efforts. In Afghanistan measures implemented in the Bonn agreement failed to recognize the historical discrimination of Afghan women prior to Taliban rule and consequently did not implement policies effective in bringing change

In an effort to galvanize support for the invasion of Afghanistan, the United States used the Taliban's gender discrimination and violence to justify their military campaigns. The notion that the United States was invading Afghanistan to liberate women from oppressive sharia law became a key instrument in building support for the war (De Leede 2014, 5). Consequently, efforts from western governments and organizations viewed Afghan women as a unidimensional oppressed group and failed to recognize the important role women played in fighting extremism. Humanitarian discourse classifies women as the victims of war and undermines the important work women in conflict zones do to manage community survival and build peace (Manchanda 2005, 4378). The result was a homogenous approach to save women throughout Afghanistan by large western organizations. This approach failed to address the cultural and traditional discrimination of women in tribal regions and resulted in social agitation. Efforts to remove social barriers to gender equality were rejected by religious leaders and allowed the Taliban to proliferate anti-western sentiments. Scholar Huma Ahmed-Gosh argues that one cannot discern women in Afghanistan into a pre and post-Taliban framework because it fails to account that Afghan women have historically dealt with rigid patriarchal customs. "Women are constituted as women through the complex interaction between class, culture, religion and other ideological institutions and frameworks." (Mohanty 1984, 63). Assuming a bond of sisterhood is shared amongst all women solely on the basis of gender reduces them to the objects of male

dependency. The failure to recognize the historical and cultural discrimination of Afghan women in prior peace agreements led to the further subjugation of Afghan women.

Traditional humanitarian and security responses to reconstruction disempower the roles women take on during conflict to manage community development and family safety. In typical frameworks for peace processes the trend to downsize the role of government and invest in the private sector for growth privileges the male experience and marginalizes women working in the informal sector. The feminization of this sector in post conflict society means that women are the first to be removed from the workforce, confining them to male dependency (Manchanda 2005, 4378). The failure to address shifts in gender inequalities as a result of conflict leads to the feminization of poverty. Most notably, women who become heads of household during conflict are the most affected by gender blind reconstruction frameworks. Women who become widows are consequently thrown into a position to support their family in societies that marginalize women. “The Taliban’s decrees excluding women from working outside the home forced widows to beg for family survival or go into prostitution.” (Manchanda 2005, 4378). Afghan women who became the head of household during the war were thrust into a position to ensure their families survival, often meaning prioritizing resources on surviving male family members while sacrificing their own rights. The current narrative describing Afghan women as vulnerable welfare recipients fails to address their tenacity to cope with this new position in a society that disempowers them. As the Taliban began scaling up recruiting methods through violence, many Afghans attempted to flee forcing women to adopt decision making roles to optimize chances of survival. (De Leede 2014, 8). According to the organization Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) women play a critical role in countering radicalization, so much so that the values of mothers in patriarchal societies should be capitalized on.

The initiatives to establish a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban must take a multifaceted approach with gender at the forefront of its reconstruction efforts. Two decades of failed attempts to reach lasting peace in Afghanistan yield critical insight to the importance of including women throughout the entire peace process. Without addressing the unique needs of women in post conflict areas attempts to broker peace will threaten further social agitation and provoke violence.

### **Suggested Policies**

Gender considerations in peace processes seek to fully address the unique experiences and needs of women in post conflict zones. Frameworks that approach reconstruction through the lens of society as unidimensional entity fail to implement sustainable measures to promote lasting peace. The impacts of war on women drastically differ from that of men; shifting gender relations sustain a culture of violence that affects women in both public and private settings. (Manchanda, 2005). It is critical to approach peacebuilding through a lens that does not define women as the victims of male violence. The importance of implementing policies that recognize the gendered experience of war cannot be understated if Afghanistan is to construct lasting peace.

The Afghan Women's Network strongly urges the Biden Administration to halt withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan until the Afghan government follows through with its commitment to resolution 1325. Prior to withdrawing forces in the region, the United States must ensure that a gendered approach must be followed at all stages of the peace process. Afghan women have survived 40 years of war and fought tirelessly for peace and equality and without support from the international community the gains that have been made could be lost in the attempts to reach a peace agreement. In the deal brokered between the Trump Administration

and the Taliban in February 2020 no attention was paid to women's rights. Zalmay Khalilzad, the former US envoy to the negotiations, issued a statement asserting that women's rights should be focused on in subsequent talks with the Taliban (Barr, 2020). The blatant disregard for the implications of U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan demonstrated under the Trump Administration cannot carry over into further initiatives in the region. It is critical that the Biden Administration set the precedent that peace processes between the Afghan government and the Taliban must adopt gender perspectives in all aspects of the process.

The Biden Administration must also recognize the previous failures of western powers to invest in broad programs designed to elevate the social status of Afghan women. By neglecting to take a localized approach in these initiatives, previous investments resulted in further social agitation and violence. The war on terror campaign did not address the cultural and traditional foundations of gender discrimination in Afghanistan. "Male violence must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies, in order both to understand it better and to effectively organize to change it." (Mohanty 1984, 58). In order to take a comprehensive approach that addresses the complex dynamics of Afghan women, the Biden Administration should invest in grassroots movements which are supported by regional networks. Throughout the Taliban's reign in Afghanistan, women created underground networks to counter the spread of extremism and to optimize chances of survival. (De Leede 2014, 9). Support from western powers to large organizations to provide social assistance to Afghan women tends to be counterproductive because opposition groups assert a narrative that western support is countercultural and anti-Islamic. This specific tactic used by groups like the Taliban underline the importance of taking localized approaches and supporting grassroots movements. The very geographical landscape of Afghanistan is reason enough to approach peace processes with a gendered approach. The tribal

kinships and religious authority differ throughout the country and broad-based approaches tend to create an ideal third world woman without acknowledging the complexities that women in tribal regions face compared to women in urban centers. Organizations like SAVE and the Revolutionary Afghan Women's Association (RAWA) are able to identify key cultural nuances and draft policies to address those complexities that a broad-based approach cannot.

To optimize the effectiveness of the strategies recommended above, we strongly urge the Biden Administration to work to reframe the narrative around Afghan women from victims of the war and focus on viewing them as allies. Afghan women are consistently frozen into a homogenous group that is characterized as powerless. This cultural domination of looking at women in the developing world as the object to be saved by white westerners prevents women from having a seat at the table. In order to ensure that women's rights are upheld the rhetoric describing Afghan women as powerless must be corrected. In a recent interview with CNN anchor Dana Bush, she categorized all Afghan women as the object of the Taliban's oppression saying they would be "helpless" without the help of the United States. This type of rhetoric assumes that all third world women share problems and have the same goals (Mohanty 1984, 63). In order for women in Afghanistan to have their contributions measured outside of their relationship to the Taliban, the rhetoric must include the work done to reconstruct their communities in a society that disempowers them. We recognize that there is no path to peace without negotiations of the Taliban and the more moderate rhetoric from the regime over the past few years presents an opportunity to reduce violence in the region. However, the group's deep-rooted misogyny and strict interpretations of Islamic law will be challenging to overcome. The United States must ensure that protecting women's rights is at the forefront of current peace proceedings between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

## **Likelihood of Success**

The policies we have recommended seek to drastically change the social stratification of women in a society with gender discrimination rooted into its core. The analyses and policy recommendations in this paper are no way asserting that Islam is inherently misogynistic. However, the interpretations of Islam in Afghan society have historically been used to justify the marginalization of women. We realize the decades of conflict and deep-rooted mistrust between actors involved will present serious challenges to the roll out of our recommendations and to establish peace in the region. The pervasive urban and rural divide in Afghanistan has prevented efforts to integrate women into society for decades. The lack of women represented in the decision-making process has only exacerbated these failures. Backlash in response to the commitment to keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan is to highly expected. We not only expect the Taliban to react unfavorably to this, but we expect the Afghan government and American population to react in a similar fashion. The condition to include women in peace proceedings would likely evoke unrest in the Afghan delegation which has been an unreliable supporter of women's rights. Prominent figures in this delegation have ignored demands to include a gender-based approach in all aspects of the peace and reconstruction process. Additionally, we expect the American public to express anger at the administration for halting efforts to withdraw troops. Prominent U.S. politicians and political pundits expressed support for the administration's commitment to bringing troops home. We acknowledge the difficulty of the decision to withdraw troops from the region, but the rights of Afghan women cannot again be compromised to reach a peace agreement.

We expect that the administration will be willing to shift its focus from broad initiatives to support localized groups. It is worth nothing that international organizations have been

unreliable to fully commit to support the rights of Afghan women when a more expedient process to peace is available. “Foreign donors have been more willing to engage in photo ops and grant agreements than to extend political capital to press for Afghan women to be in the room, at the table, during negotiations.” (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The absence of female participation in Afghanistan’s peace process has resulted in a lack of accountability for international donors and risks further compromising the gains women have made thus far. While we are optimistic the Biden Administration will understand the value of supporting localized and grassroots movements, we do expect pushback from larger organizations operating in Afghanistan.

The most effective tool to ensure women are present throughout the entirety of the peace process will also be the most difficult to achieve. A paradigm shift in the rhetoric used to characterize Afghan women extends far beyond the scope and capabilities of the Biden Administration. The classification of third world women as a homogeneous group is not specific to Afghanistan nor solely done by the United States. It is a framework ingrained into the international system. An entire shift from this rhetoric is not plausible within the timeline of the current negotiations and would likely take generations to break down. However, the Biden Administration can set a strong precedent for other actors to follow; one that focuses on the achievements of Afghan women rather an approach that takes an ahistorical view of women based on the generalized notion of their subordination (Mohanty 1984, 59). Afghan women have played a critical role in the reconstruction of Afghan society over the past two decades and we are optimistic the Biden Administration will recognize the importance of support for women’s representation in the peace process.

## **Conclusion**

The international attention drawn from feminist organizations and other NGOs around the world in response to the U.S. withdrawal of troops in Afghanistan presents a unique opportunity to pressure the U.S. government to address the needs of all Afghan women. The Biden Administration must ensure that a gender-based approach is used to establish a peace and reconstruction framework between the Afghan government and the Taliban. We are confident that the implementation of the policies in this analysis will yield further female integration into Afghan society and lasting peace in the region.



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