

AFGHANISTAN PEACE TALKS: THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

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Peace talks between the United States and Taliban come as a harbinger of hope in Afghanistan. However, the Afghan government is not happy with the on-going negotiations with Taliban. They fear that these talks will give legitimacy to Taliban and power sharing with them will not be easy as it seems. On the other side, the lack of participation of women in these talks is also a factor which is raising concerns in the Afghan society. Afghanistan, as a society has evolved with respect to the role played by women, which has become increasingly significant. Today, women are seen in the role of ministers, ambassadors, deputies, district chiefs and in other high ranked positions.¹ Data from the United Nations Development Program show that gender inequality has dropped by ten percent between 2005 and 2017². Women have strengthened their political, economic and social presence through efforts to advance their status and respect for their rights. Girls have been able to go to school, while women have become members of parliament, governors and police. Despite gradual improvement, women's rights in Afghanistan remain a serious concern. Women's participation in politics is low at both local and national levels. Illiteracy and a general sense of insecurity felt by women are still common. According to the WPS index which provides measures of various indicators on women's rights, well-being and empowerment, Afghanistan ranks at the bottom, in the 152nd position out of 153 countries.³

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Since 2010, when President Hamid Karzai organized a three-day National Consultative Peace Jirga to pave the way for a political settlement, women, who comprised almost 20 percent of the peace Jirga, demanded that they be included in peace processes. As a result, 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. However, women representation in Afghan peace talks has been next to none. The absence of Afghan women in the talks failure of political correctness. It means that women in the country do not know what the future holds for their lives; the days of Taliban oppression of women could return if they do not guarantee that women's rights, enshrined in the constitution, will be upheld in any future power-sharing arrangement. The absence of women and their voices in the process casts doubt on the type of peace that these talks would bring to the country.

¹ Report from Frontier post. (2019, February 27), Afghan women say no to symbolic role peace talks. Retrieved from; <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghan-women-say-no-symbolic-role-peace-talks>

² Hutchinson, S. (2019, February 18), A peace agreement in Afghanistan won't last if there are no women at the table. Retrieved from; <https://theconversation.com/a-peace-agreement-in-afghanistan-wont-last-if-there-are-no-women-at-the-table-111820>

³ *ibid*[^]

As explored in a recent study by SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), the inclusion of women and their meaningful participation in peace processes is central to having a gender perspective⁴, which is integral to the overall development of the country. Drawing on previous research, the study suggests different modes of participation in peace processes that can increase women's inclusion. These range from direct representation, consultative mechanisms, commissions and high-level problem-solving workshops, to public decision-making and mass action. Furthermore, a peace process is more likely to be successful and lasting when a combination of modes of inclusion are introduced throughout the process.

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Shinkai Karokhel, a former Afghanistan envoy to Canada and a candidate in the Wolesi Jirga elections, in an interview with Pajhwok Afghan News said that, “the number of women who participated the peace talks was very limited or their presence was symbolic.”⁵ The Taliban and a number of Afghan politicians, including women representation held a meeting in February about the Afghan peace process in Moscow⁶. Taliban did not talk much about their rights in meetings with the US special representative, Zalmay Khalilzad, Karokhel said. She further stated that “a Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid had told a media outlet that they would define what women activities could do after peace is established in the country. But it is a matter of concern, they should make it clear what type of women's jobs they oppose and should not speak generally,” “Peace with the Taliban is a serious risk, we fear the Taliban would again stop women from work and education” she added. At the Moscow talks, Taliban's chief negotiator has stated the group's commitment to all rights given to women by Islam, saying that *“Islam has given women all fundamental rights — such as trade, ownership, inheritance, education, work and the choice of partner, security and education, and a good life.”*⁷ Considering Taliban's oppression in the past, Afghan women have questioned the authenticity of this statement.

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⁴Jung, Y. & Cobar J. (2019, March 8,) Unpacking the Afghan peace talks: Inclusion of women in the process and achieving durable peace, STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE. Retrieved from; <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2019/unpacking-afghan-peace-talks-inclusion-women-process-and-achieving-durable-peace>

⁵Report from Frontier post. (2019, February 27), Afghan women say no to symbolic role peace talks. Retrieved from; <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghan-women-say-no-symbolic-role-peace-talks>

⁶ Ahmadi, B. (2019, March 1) Afghanistan Talks; No women, No peace. Retrieved from; <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/03/afghanistan-talks-no-women-no-peace>

⁷ Jung, Y. & Cobar J. (2019, March 8,) Unpacking the Afghan peace talks: Inclusion of women in the process and achieving durable peace, STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE. Retrieved from; <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2019/unpacking-afghan-peace-talks-inclusion-women-process-and-achieving-durable-peace>

History has shown us how the exclusion of women in peace processes has serious repercussions for women's rights post-conflict. Many cases of exclusive peace processes also provide examples of fragile peace at the expense of women. For example, the Sudan-South Sudan peace process shows how exclusion and marginalisation of women has led to gender-blind institutions in the post-war period—women in South Sudan remain largely absent from decision-making and political power. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) provides another example: low levels of women's participation in the peace process and gender inequality, among other factors, partly contribute to legal discrimination and violence against women.⁸ In Afghanistan, where women's rights remain fuzzy, failure to consistently address women's opportunities and rights will reinforce gender injustice. Including women at the negotiating table and in consultations beyond the formal talks is a necessary step towards a lasting and legitimate peace in Afghanistan. Raihana Ahmadi, a police officer in Kabul, said *“the Afghan women were tired of the war and they wanted peace in the country – a peace which could protect women's achievements and freedom”*.

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⁸ Ibid^