

A Call to Commit to the Protection of Women's Rights in Afghanistan

Joint Statement on Taliban Negotiations from



March 8, 2019

Women's rights are "the single most important litmus test of Afghanistan's post-2001 progress."

- Belquis Ahmadi, Senior Program Officer, United States Institute of Peace; Member of the Board of Directors of Women for Afghan Women

"Peace is the demand of every Afghan, but the desperation to end the bloodshed would not be accepted at the cost of their nascent democracy, human rights, women's rights, free media or their vibrant civil society."

- Mariam Safi & Muqaddesa Yourish

"As a mother, I will not give up at any cost, and I will not let my children live my life."

- Murwarid Ziayee, Senior Director, Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan

"Conflict, physical and financial insecurity, and lack of education acts as drivers of harmful gender attitudes and practices in Afghanistan, and perpetuate the cycles of violence against women in Afghanistan. Women must be integrally involved in all aspects of peacebuilding in order to shift these attitudes and break these cycles."

- Najia Nasim, Executive Director, Women for Afghan Women

Summary

We, Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WAfghan) and Women for Afghan Women (WAW), are dismayed at the lack of commitment to preserving protections to women's rights demonstrated by the parties to ongoing negotiations regarding peace in Afghanistan. In the statement below, we outline the current state of peace negotiations, our concern that Taliban promises of more enlightened policies and practices are simply not supported by the evidence on the ground, and the priorities, objectives and grievances Afghan women want addressed through a peace process. This background is followed by an outline of our position on these matters — an immediate cessation of violence, women's rights per the Constitution and international legal instruments are protected without exception, the preservation of Afghanistan's democratic institutions and processes as the only access to formal power available to the Taliban. We conclude with our 10 recommendations with respect to the Afghan peace process.

Background

Current Peace Talks

Negotiations are currently underway between the Taliban and the United States (U.S.), in Doha, Qatar, parallel to separate talks underway in Moscow. To date, the two parties in the Doha talks have been focusing on an agreement that would facilitate the withdrawal of foreign forces in return for Taliban assurances that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for extremism, though a detailed framework or timeline is yet to be agreed upon, and, thus far, discussion of a ceasefire has not been part of the agenda. Despite the fact that some progress has been made, it remains unclear as to what mechanisms would be used to uphold promises made by either side. These talks have excluded the Government of Afghanistan, although several government officials, including two women, participated in their personal capacities as part of the Afghan delegation of about 40 people in informal talks with the Taliban and in Moscow. However, the delegation was mostly comprised of members of opposition political parties to President Ashraf Ghani, including former Afghan President Hamid Karzai. In the Doha talks, neither the U.S., nor the Taliban delegations include any women. This is concerning given well-established [research](#) that demonstrates peace negotiations that exclude women are more likely to fail, as well as long standing demands from Afghan women to be included in the peace process.

These latest attempts at peace have gone further than previous initiatives but have also been characterized by an emphasis on expediency over efforts to preserve and expand the hard-fought gains made in the country since the ousting of the Taliban in 2001—not least of which are the substantial freedoms and rights extended to women and girls. It is also unclear whether the Taliban movement is unified enough to enforce the terms of a peace agreement, including any ceasefire, given the ongoing attacks they have been perpetrating while their political representatives sit with the U.S. in Doha for talks.

Have the Taliban Changed?

While the Taliban have sometimes claimed to have softened their stance on girls' access to education and the brutality of their rule, [evidence](#) from areas in Afghanistan currently under Taliban control proves otherwise—Afghans in these areas have been [terrorized](#) by extrajudicial executions, stonings, floggings, forced migrations, destruction of their homes, denial of access to government and humanitarian services, and extreme repression. In 2017 alone, there were 1,432 verified attacks against schools by armed insurgents. As the Afghan Women's Network [points out](#), “women's experiences from the provinces and communities where insurgencies continue contradicts” any claim of change. Further, the Taliban remain driven by a desire to strictly control women's behavior. As when they took over Afghanistan in the 1990s, they are swiftly imposing similar restrictions on women immediately upon seizing control of an area, shutting women out of public life, restricting their mobility, curbing their access to education, imposing harsh “morality” laws over their personal autonomy, and subjecting them to systemic discrimination and violence.

The Taliban have explicitly [stated](#) their desire that the Constitution—which provides for women's equal rights—be revised, in opposition to the longstanding demands of Afghan women. Afghan women have [criticized](#) the Taliban negotiators' vagueness about women's rights, which have been limited to statements that they will allow women's rights “according to Afghan values” or “according to Islam,” with no precision of how these will be defined, interpreted, or enforced. At the same time, the Taliban have [made clear](#) their vision of the future as an Afghanistan firmly under Taliban rule, and their lack of interest in being part of institutions for the democratic and pluralistic governance of Afghanistan. As Ghizal Haress, a commissioner at the Independent Commission for Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution, [explains](#), “It is imperative that [women's] constitutional rights are not compromised during the peace negotiations, as there has been a broad social and political consensus around the Constitution.”

What Afghan Women Are Saying

Afghan women are unequivocally demanding to have a voice in the peace process and are seeking guarantees that their rights will not be bargained away in a negotiation process that lacks transparency and excludes them and their government. Among the chorus calling for women's inclusion and the protection of women's rights, the [#time4realpeace campaign](#) released a letter with 700 signatories, including leading Afghan women and international rights advocates who voiced their alarm that current negotiations “do not include the voices of Afghan women, they do not include the voices of our country's youth, [and] they do not include the voices of civil society nor the democratic structures, government, and institutions.” These activists assert that “the gains made from these hard-won battles are now being threatened by a deal that excludes our interests and voices and ignores the representation we have fought for.”

The Office of the First Lady of Afghanistan, in coordination with the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Afghan Women's Network, the High Peace Council, and members of civil society came together in an initiative, entitled [Afghan Women 4 Peace](#)^{[1] [2]} [e\[WU3\]](#), which convened 3,500 women representing all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces in Kabul, where they voiced their demands for peace and for inclusion in talks. The convening exercise was preceded by consultations held with 15,000 women across Afghanistan organized by the Women Consultative Committee for Peace. Similarly, the Afghan Women's Network consulted with women from all walks of life throughout the country and found consensus that women are unwilling to relinquish their constitutional rights, [declaring](#) that “While we are not a homogenous group, we believe that the democratic system has been the most conducive to our growth, and empowerment. Now that various parties are talking with the Taliban, we fear the loss of our hard gains.”

These most recent efforts build on longstanding initiatives by Afghan women to demand inclusion in negotiations and to preserve and expand their rights. Women participated in the government peace jirga in 2010, serve on the High Peace Council that was formed out of that event, and continue to proactively continue this advocacy through civil society, as well as campaigns directed at the government and international community. Their demands have been consistent and unified for over a decade and a half: do not use our rights as a bargaining chip; do not change the Constitution, created out of an inclusive, democratic process; and do not exclude us from decisions about the future of our country and our lives.

Our Position

We, the undersigned, welcome the efforts seeking to end to the war in Afghanistan. All Afghans, including women, have paid a heavy price for the nearly four decades of violence. However, as one Afghan woman [said](#), “Peace is not only to stop the firing and shooting and all these wars; peace is that we have the rights to education, to vote, and to have our equality.” Similarly, Zarlashat Halaimzai, of Time4RealPeace [points out](#) that peace and security at the expense of democracy is “a false choice.” Afghanistan has already experienced life under Taliban rule. Afghan women know well what is at stake, and that a peace that empowers the Taliban at their expense will not be peace at all.

Afghanistan will only be truly peaceful, stable, and devoid of terrorists through efforts to uphold and build upon the progress already made in establishing democratic institutions, protecting rights and freedoms, and supporting the inclusion and participation of all its citizens. This progress, including the important gains made in improving the status of women, has come at a profound cost—Afghan women have not only worked tirelessly to achieve these changes, but also died for their courage in speaking out despite grave threats in the struggle against discrimination, gender-based violence, and oppression.

The current approach to peace negotiations may lead to a short-term peace, but a true end to war in Afghanistan will only come from playing the long game. There can be no shortcuts to a sustainable peace. To that end, we insist that the following parameters must define negotiations:

The violence must stop. As a precondition to further negotiations, the Taliban should immediately cease armed attacks, which overwhelmingly affect civilians. In previous negotiation efforts, including the most recent round of talks in Doha, the Taliban continued to wage war on the Afghan people, intentionally and consistently targeting civilians, including women and children; targeting schools, students and teachers; and targeting NGO workers such as female healthcare workers and vaccinators. Despite multiple overtures toward reconciliation by the government, they have failed to uphold or extend ceasefires. If the Taliban cannot be trusted to give up the use of violence as a means to advance their agenda, all peace talk efforts are in vain.

Peace talks are illegitimate without the meaningful participation and leadership of Afghan women. All negotiation phases must include women at the table. A sustainable peace cannot be created within a country when the process excludes half of its population, particularly while making decisions of great consequence for that very population.

Women's rights and freedoms cannot be used as bargaining chips during peace talks. Women's rights must be "red lines"—they are non-negotiable under any circumstances, and at all phases of the peace talks.

The terms of a peace agreement should reflect the views and needs of the people of Afghanistan, and enjoy their broad-based support. Afghan citizens must be the final arbiters of decisions that will shape the conditions of their lives. Parties that were not elected nor representative of the Afghan population should not be endowed with the power to decide the fate of the Afghan people. Much blood and treasure were invested in building nascent democratic institutions in Afghanistan. The only acceptable fora for decision-making related to the terms of peace must be through these Afghan institutions.

The Taliban cannot bypass Afghanistan's legitimate political processes and institutions. Should the Taliban wish to have a role in the governance of Afghanistan they should seek representation by running in free, open, and fair elections in parliament and other existing political structures. Taliban members should not be handed power by means that circumvent the normal processes and institutions that other political actors must use. Anything less would be a betrayal of the Afghan women and men who suffered to establish freedom and peace for future generations.

Recommendations

We, the undersigned, put forth the following recommendations with respect to the Afghan peace process:

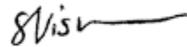
1. Afghan women should meaningfully participate in all formal and informal peace negotiation mechanisms, and the voices of the female population at large should be included in every phase of the process in order to shape Afghanistan's future.
2. A peace process must involve the Afghan Government, as well as representatives of the victims of Taliban violence, such as family members of those who were killed by the Taliban, individuals who were forced to flee their homes due to Taliban attacks, or those who lost access to education, work, and other opportunities due to Taliban restrictions.
3. We join Afghan women's [call](#) for an immediate ceasefire between the Taliban and government forces as an urgent and necessary item to include in the agenda of the peace talks, and as a condition of any agreement, so as to determine the extent to which the Taliban are capable of and committed to following through on promises made during negotiations.

4. The Constitution of Afghanistan, voted on and approved in 2004, shall not be amended as related to women's rights and representation in government and all levels of society, as well as with respect to the rights of minorities and the Afghan people to participate in the democratic process.
5. Similarly, Afghanistan must uphold legal protections adopted since 2002 aimed at protecting women from violence and discrimination, and improving equity, such as the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law adopted in 2009. Afghanistan must further remain a party to international agreements and conventions aimed at protecting the rights of women and other vulnerable segments of the population, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).
6. Any participation by the Taliban in the governance of Afghanistan must be through democratic mechanisms so that it is subject to the will of the people of Afghanistan. They should receive no special treatment that allows them to bypass democratic processes to which other political actors are required to adhere.
7. Presidential elections should be held as planned. Elections must continue to be the only means by which a monopoly of power is granted to those who control and lead the country's government.
8. There must be no amnesty for members of the Taliban who carried out crimes against the Afghan people. Afghanistan must create justice, truth-telling, and reconciliation mechanisms to facilitate accountability for crimes committed towards civilians, particularly women and children.
9. The negotiation process should be open and transparent, and the U.S. Administration should ensure ironclad accountability mechanisms to hold the Taliban to the outcomes of any agreement.
10. We echo and reiterate the [recommendation](#) of Mariam Safi and Muqaddesa Yourish: "To arrive at a sustainable peace, the withdrawal of forces, the negotiation process, and the implementation of any potential agreement must be monitored by a neutral third-party observer, such as the United Nations or European Union, which can establish an enforcement mechanism that can ensure all parties deliver on their commitments."

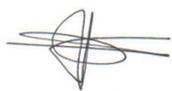
Signatories:



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About CW4WAfghan

Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WAfghan) is a non-religious, non-political, federally registered charity in Canada (Canada Revenue Agency #887718203RR0001) founded in 1998 to advance education and educational opportunities for Afghan women and their families and to educate Canadians about human rights in Afghanistan. Our programs in Afghanistan include: (1) Investments in Basic Education; (2) Community Libraries, Literacy and Books Program; (3) Technology for Education; and in Canada, (4) Public Engagement.

CW4WAfghan's mission is: Canadian members taking action, in partnership with Afghan women, towards improving conditions of human rights, ending women's oppression, and providing opportunities for Afghan women to live their lives with dignity, certainty and purpose.

Learn more: www.cw4wafghan.ca

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About Women for Afghan Women

Women for Afghan Women (WAW) is a grassroots, non-profit organization dedicated to securing and protecting the rights of disenfranchised Afghan women and girls in Afghanistan and United States, particularly their rights to develop their individual potential, to self-determination, and to be represented in all areas of life: political, social, cultural, and economic. WAW advocates for women's rights and challenges the norms that underpin gender-based violence wherever opportunities arise to influence attitudes and bring about change. With over 800 local staff working in 34 centers mainly throughout Afghanistan, as well as in the U.S., WAW is now the largest human rights organization protecting and empowering Afghan women and children in the world.

Learn more: <https://womenforafghanwomen.org/>

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