



Women and the Afghan transition

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There has been a lot of concern that Afghan women will be the main losers in the next few years as international forces withdraw and the Kabul government negotiates some sort of accommodation with the insurgency.

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1 Women's rights in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has a history of very poor protection for the rights of women. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office gives some examples of the problems facing women in the Helmand province:

The situation for women in Helmand province is particularly difficult. As one of the most conservative regions, women are almost entirely absent from public life outside the provincial capital; there are no prominent women politicians, community leaders, businesswomen and no female judges or lawyers. In Sangin district, no women registered to vote in the Presidential election in 2009. The transfer of daughters as a means of settling disputes is still prevalent in some districts and there is no provision for safety for women or girls fleeing violence. Harmful cultural practices, such as forced and early marriage, are endemic across the province.

Girls' education is minimal. In Nawa district, no girls go to school. Maternal mortality is amongst the highest in the world while women's literacy in Helmand stands at around five per cent. Health provision for women is minimal, with very few women doctors or nurses and no consistent, free, midwifery service. The absence of women from public life, including decision-making at provincial, district and community levels, means that women are not in a position to advocate change in areas that affect their lives, such as education, health, trade, land and housing. However, four places are reserved for women on the provincial council and the recent elections seven women stood for these places.¹

Some progress has been made, for example in health and education provision for women and girls, and many worry that this progress is in danger. When discussing the national reconciliation process, which is intended to bring the insurgency to an end, western leaders have stressed that women's rights are not negotiable.

Foreign Office minister Alistair Burt said in October 2011 that the British government has reminded the Afghan government of its commitment to human rights and the protection of women:

We have made clear that any political settlement should be inclusive and address the concerns of all Afghan citizens. We welcome the work of the Government of Afghanistan to take forward a political process of reconciliation and reintegration for Afghans who meet its end-state conditions of renouncing violence, breaking ties with al-Qaeda and abiding by the Afghan Constitution, including its protection for all Afghan men and women. We continue to remind the Afghan Government to uphold its commitments to protect the human rights of all Afghans.²

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton took a harder line in a hearing at the House of Representatives, also in October 2011:

Insurgents must renounce violence, abandon al-Qaida, and abide by the laws and constitution of Afghanistan, including its protections for women and minorities. If insurgents cannot or will not meet those redlines, they will face continued and unrelenting assault. And I want to stress, as I did in Kabul, that the hard-won rights of

¹ British Embassy in Kabul website, [Women's rights](#) [visited 22 November 2011]

² HC Deb 17 October 2011, c610W

women and all Afghans cannot be rolled back, and the growth of civil society must be not be quashed.³

Despite these assurances, there has been mounting concern that women's rights are indeed in danger of being rolled back. Commentators have questioned the Afghan government's commitment to its national Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, which was intended to work towards the gender equality set out in the constitution, and have pointed out that there are very few women on the

2 National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan

The Afghan government published its action plan in 2008. In a foreword, President Karzai pledged to support the objectives of the plan:

The advancement of women has always been central to our pursuit of national peace and reconstruction. From the Bonn Agreement to the Constitution, Afghanistan Compact and Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy (I-ANDS), we have remained steadfast in our commitment to pursue gender equality and the empowerment of women in all spheres of life.

As articulated in the I-ANDS, it is the goal of Government to eliminate discrimination against women, develop their human capital, and promote their leadership in order to guarantee their full and equal participation in all aspects of life.⁴

In October 2011, Actionaid published a report on the prospects for women in Afghanistan. Actionaid said that the action plan had not been acted on, partly because of a lack of encouragement from the international community:

In 2008 the Afghan government launched the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) – a 10-year plan to implement commitments to women. At the time it was hailed as a success for women by donors, but critics say it has since lain dormant without support from the international community, including the UK.⁵

2.1 UK government action

When asked about the government's attitude towards the national action plan, Lord Shutt of Greetland said last year for the government that they were supporting the action plan by helping set up a human rights unit in the Afghan Ministry of Justice:

The UK is fully supportive of the Afghan Government in their work to protect and promote women's rights. We are supporting the establishment of a Human Rights Support Unit in the Ministry of Justice. This unit will strengthen the capacity of the Afghan Government to fulfil their human rights obligations. Its mandate is to co-ordinate human rights policy and legislation across the Afghan Government. The unit will be instrumental in assisting ministries and line ministries in implementing their human rights responsibilities, including under the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan.⁶

Under the previous British government, the Department for International Development developed a gender equality action plan for Afghanistan, which aimed to support the implementation of the NAPWA:

³ "Clinton's Remarks at House Hearing on Afghanistan, Pakistan", Transcript, 27 October 2011

⁴ *National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan*, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2007, Foreword

⁵ *A just peace? The legacy of war for women in Afghanistan*, Actionaid, September 2011, p4

⁶ HC Deb 27 September 2010, c459WA

The Department for International Development (DFID) has drawn on the findings of the research commissioned last year, titled 'Understanding Afghanistan', to develop a detailed Gender Equality Action Plan for Afghanistan. This plan supports the 10-year National Action Plan for Women in Afghanistan (NAPWA) by ensuring gender equality is an integral part of our programme. The UK Government are working closely with the Afghan Government to ensure that gender equality is integrated into its own policies. We have provided an adviser to the Afghan Government to ensure the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) has integrated cross-cutting issues such as gender equality into sector plans. We invested £60 million (2008-09) through the Government of Afghanistan's Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF): this helps pay the salaries of over 165,000 teachers. 28 per cent. of teachers are now women and this has helped to ensure the number of girls enrolled in school continues to grow. 35 per cent. of all enrolled students are now girls, up from virtually none under the Taliban. In addition, the Department for International Development (DFID) is providing funding to Womankind and UNIFEM and £40 million of support over five years to the Micro-Finance Investment Support Facility in Afghanistan, which provides small loans to poor individuals to invest in businesses. Nearly 65 per cent. of those receiving loans are women.⁷

The Gender Equality Action Plan expired in March 2011. Stephen O'Brien, a minister at the DFID, was asked in January how the goals of that programme would be pursued after the expiry:

The Department for International Development's (DFID's) business plan sets out how we will lead international action to improve the lives of girls and women in the period 2011-15 including by: "improving maternal health and access to family planning;" "increasing the number of girls completing primary and secondary education;" "promoting their economic empowerment through jobs and access to financial services; and" "tackling violence against women and girls."⁸

The DFID continues to support the empowerment of women through its programmes in Afghanistan, although these programmes do not necessarily work through the Afghan government. International development secretary Andrew Mitchell outlined recently how the department helps women's civil society organisations:

The UK Government places women at the heart of our development agenda. The Department for International Development (DFID) takes careful account of the impact on women and girls in the design and implementation of all its projects and programmes. DFID's global Civil Society Challenge Fund is supporting Womankind and the International Planned Parenthood Foundation to address the human rights and practical needs of women and girls in Afghanistan and elsewhere. DFID is also supporting Zardozi', a local Afghan partner, which helps women tailors and cloth merchants sell their products to markets, working through female agents. This programme has worked with more than 2,000 Afghan women to date and its reach is to be extended. During my recent visit to Afghanistan I launched a major new civil society programme that will provide grants to Afghan organisations to help them hold their government to account. The programme will have a strong focus on women's rights and it is hoped that many women's organisations will directly benefit from this programme.⁹

⁷ HC Deb 19 May 2009, c1307-8W

⁸ HC Deb 27 January 2011, c397W; [Business Plan 2011-2015](#), Department for International Development, May 2011

⁹ HC Deb 7 November 2011, c144W

Also important to the UK's support for Afghan women is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's National Action plan on Women, Peace and Security. This plan aims to fulfil the obligations set out in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security. Afghanistan is one of the three countries singled out for the importance of the work done under the National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security:

Afghanistan - includes actions to support Afghan women's civil society organisations, the influence of Afghan women in public life and to enhance their protection through support to legal reforms and SSR programmes.¹⁰

The chapter on Afghanistan in the UK UNSCR 1325 plan lists such actions as providing funding and visible political support to female MPs and Ministers in Afghanistan, supporting the development of women's civil society organisations and participating in the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission donor group.¹¹

3 Women's participation in the reconciliation process

3.1 Afghan High Peace Council

Only nine of the members of the Afghan High Peace Council are women. It is also reported that those women are largely marginalised on the council and are not taken seriously by their male colleagues. An Afghan woman MP said that the women on the council will be ineffectual: "These people do not represent the women of Afghanistan. They're negotiating for our rights - for my rights, for the rights of my daughters - from a position of weakness."¹² Najia Zewari, one of the nine female council members, is defensive of the women who are on the council, saying that women's views will be represented:

The women on the council - we want to know that the Taliban will respect our rights, that progress will continue. We also want the women of Afghanistan to know that we can be their voice.¹³

The British government says that it is aware of the problem. In October 2011, Foreign Office minister Alistair Burt said:

This issue is very important to the United Kingdom, and to the many Members who have written to me about it over the past few weeks. Women are represented on the High Peace Council; nine of its 70 members are women. They have also been represented in Parliament and in last year's peace process. We continually stress to the Afghan Government that the commitment they have made to the equality of all their citizens and the inclusion of all in future processes must be met by action as well as words, and we will continue to take that forward as we look towards the Bonn summit.¹⁴

President Karzai denies that the peace negotiations will be in any way damaging to the interests of Afghan women:

¹⁰ FCO website, UK National action plan on women, peace & security - [executive summary](#). Full report available here: [UK Government National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 Women, Peace & Security](#)

¹¹ [UK Government National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 Women, Peace & Security](#), Afghanistan

¹² "Afghan women fear losses in Taliban talks", *Washington Post*, 26 July 2011

¹³ "Afghan women fear losses in Taliban talks", *Washington Post*, 26 July 2011

¹⁴ HC Deb 25 October 2011, c165

Be confident my sisters, our achievements made on the basis of the Constitution, achievements towards the progress of the country and towards the better condition of our women will not be damaged or slowed down by any peace deals.¹⁵

Some commentators have suggested that any kind of negotiations with the Taliban will entail compromises on women's rights and is likely to result in significant setbacks in any agreed formula at the end of such negotiations. Whether the Taliban would then fully respect any agreement is also open to question.

On 3 October, Amnesty International released a report calling on the Afghan government and the International community to fulfil its responsibilities towards women.¹⁶ The report made some recommendations to concerned governments and the United Nations:

- **The Afghan government and the international community** must ensure women's rights are not sacrificed and make a genuine commitment to meaningful participation of women in all phases and levels of any peace processes.
- **The Afghan government** must enhance efforts to increase representation of women in elected bodies and government institutions at all levels to 30 per cent; encourage religious leaders to speak out on women's rights in Islam; and intensify efforts to promote female access to education, health, justice, and other basic services.
- **The Afghan government** must improve awareness of women's rights and human rights law in the justice and security sector, and ensure effective implementation of these laws; and increase substantially women recruits in the security and justice sectors.
- **The international community** must support expanded civic education programs to raise awareness of women's rights at community level and support efforts to improve female leadership
- **The international community** must intensify support to promote access to education and other key services, and ensure this support will continue at current or increased levels even as international military forces prepare to withdraw.
- **The UN** must continue to monitor all government actions including the peace processes and provide increased support to the Afghan government on all negotiation, reconciliation, and reintegration processes.¹⁷

On 8 October, a number of high-profile women wrote to the *Times* asking world leaders not to sacrifice the gains that have been made over the last 10 years.¹⁸

3.2 Conference in Bonn

The conference in Bonn, scheduled to take place on 5 December, has also been criticised for excluding women's representatives. There seems to have been little or no provision made for women's representatives at the conference and the Afghan government has not confirmed the presence of any women in its delegation. Human Rights Watch said:

¹⁵ "Peace efforts will not derail women's gains, Karzai and UN officials stress on Women's Day", UNAMA press release, 8 March 2011

¹⁶ [A Place at the Table: Safeguarding women's rights in Afghanistan \(full report\)](#), Oxfam, 3 October 2011

¹⁷ ["A Place at the Table: Safeguarding Women's Rights in Afghanistan"](#), Oxfam press release, 3 October 2011

¹⁸ "We will wear green scarves"; Letters to the Editor", *Times*, 8 October 2011

The Afghan government and its international backers say that women's rights are one of their 'red lines' as they plan for the withdrawal of international forces. If this is the case, why are Afghan women struggling to get a seat at the table in Bonn?¹⁹

The group called for the German government, as host of the Bonn conference, and other western governments to put pressure on the Afghan government to increase the participation of women in the government delegation to at least 25%.

The matter of representation at the Bonn conference has also been raised in Parliament. On 18 October, Alistair Burt said for the Foreign Office that the British government was working closely with the government of Afghanistan:

We have made clear that it is important that women participate as fully as possible in the political process in Afghanistan. We are following closely the preparations for civil society participation in Bonn which are being led by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. We welcome the work of the Afghan Women's Network to co-ordinate roundtable discussions between Afghan officials and civil society in the run up to the conference. We continue to work closely with the Government of Afghanistan, local and international non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations and international partners to improve the status of women in Afghanistan, so that they can play a full role in a future, peaceful Afghan state.²⁰

Mr Burt later elaborated on the British government's position on both the Bonn conference and on Afghan women's rights in general:

I recently met Fawzia Koofi, an Afghan woman MP who was outspoken in her determination to ensure that she and others like her should be properly represented, both at the Bonn summit and in other aspects of life. She reminded all of us that Afghan women have traditionally taken part in a great deal of decision making at local and provincial level, and she was keen to ensure that the gains made over the past 10 years in women's lives should not be lost. We should stand absolutely beside those who believe that.²¹

This is a topic that has attracted a lot of attention in recent months from NGOs and others. Human Rights Watch has published a comprehensive report on the dangers to women's rights in the forthcoming transition. HRW said:

The Afghan government and its international supporters have ignored the need to protect women in programs to reintegrate insurgent fighters and have not guaranteed that women's rights will be included in potential talks with the Taliban.²²

¹⁹ "Afghanistan: Key Conference Sidelining Women", Human Rights Watch press notice, 30 October 2011

²⁰ HC Deb 18 October 2011, c892W

²¹ HC Deb 25 October 2011, c165-6

²² "Afghanistan: Talks Shouldn't Ignore Taliban Abuse of Women", Human Rights Watch press release, 12 July 2011. Full report available [here](#)