

Women and the Afghan peace and reintegration process

ALTHEA-MARIA RIVAS AND MARIAM SAFI\*

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The way that women have been constructed and spoken about in relation to the conflict, violence, peace and the peace process in Afghanistan needs to be re-envisioned. In many ways Afghanistan is an archetype of a post-imperial dream of western powers. The cycle of foreign intervention, failed occupation, civil war and internal conflict that has played out in Afghanistan over the past 40 years has been accompanied by discussions about the appropriate pathways to peace. As 2021 ends, a main point of discussion in the widespread and confused international conversation over the fate of the country has focused on the impact on women of the Taliban's taking control. This article focuses on a period in the recent history of the country (2010–2014); however, many of the essentialized tropes of Afghan women that are discussed throughout the article have resurfaced in the current analysis and international dialogue on Afghanistan as the country becomes enmeshed in another iteration of a seemingly chronic cycle of uncertainty, violence and the struggle for peace.

Throughout the various phases of war, conflict and attempts at peace in Afghanistan, the symbol of Afghan women has loomed large in international policy discussions and scholarship. Common representations, such as the victim, the modern politician and the peace warrior have been used to justify violence, intervention and calls for peace. These tropes are also too often found embedded in scholarship on Afghanistan. These essentialized gendered tropes, however, have failed to recognize the political and social complexity of women's lives, diminished their intellectual contributions and consigned their voices to inaudibility. Ultimately, they have offered little insight into the everyday intersectional realities of Afghan women experiencing the impacts of violence or engaging with the potential of peace. Instead, they have served as manifestations of patriarchy and global hierarchies of knowledge production that constantly flatten the subjectivities of women, particularly in areas affected by conflict and violence, in the global South.

During the past 40 years, numerous actors involved in the conflict have flirted with the idea of establishing a peace process in Afghanistan at varying intensities{1}. In 2010, a few key advances were made which led to the establishment of formal structures dedicated to working on the peace process, including a High Peace Council (HPC), focused on reconciliation, and the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP), focused on re-integration of combatants{2}. As a result, there was a flurry of discussions among stakeholders and citizens alike about the potential for a peace process to begin taking shape in Afghanistan, how the

peace process should unfold, what constituted real progress and who was leading it{3}.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, discussions about the role of women in this process became a hot topic. Commonly heard calls included: ‘Women must have a place at the table,’ ‘The process must be inclusive’ and, conversely, ‘Peace cannot be derailed by gender concerns.’<sup>2</sup> Ironically, the discourse on women’s participation offered little consideration of the hopes and concerns of Afghan women themselves, nor of the structural and intersectional{4} dynamics that influenced their engagement with the peace process in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2014. Notably, in the past few decades, there has also been an increase in scholarship that calls for attention to the lived experiences of Afghan women during the war and, to a lesser extent, their role in peace-making processes. Even scholarship drawing upon critical theory, however, while making compelling critiques of international gender policy and intervention, often does not move beyond questions of representation. Therefore, with important exceptions, as more work is produced that seeks to explore the experiences of Afghan women, the voices of the women themselves often remain absent, and work that engages with their everyday realities is still too rare.

Drawing on feminist and decolonial theory, this article challenges the simultaneous hyper-visualizations and silencing of Afghan women found in international policy, programming and research. It aims to recentre their perspectives through an exploration of the complex ways in which women have positioned themselves in relation to the peace and re-integration discourse and the APRP’s activities. The main argument of this article is that work, in both policy and research forms, on Afghan women affected by conflict and violence and involved in peace processes needs to do more to recognize the varied ways in which intersectionality shapes their perspectives, and their relationships to one another and to the social and political world around them.

The article brings together findings from three consultative research projects on women and peace conducted from 2010 to 2014 across eight provinces in Afghanistan. The analysis highlights the insights shared by the participants and demonstrates the ways in which the marginalization of women, the colonial mechanisms of intervention and the global hierarchies of knowledge production work to limit our understanding of the realities of

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<sup>1</sup> Mariam Safi and Mariam Yourish, ‘What is wrong with Afghanistan’s peace process’, *New York Times*, 20 Feb. 2019.

<sup>2</sup> United States Institute of Peace (USIP), *The Afghan Peace Jirga: ensuring that women are at the peace table*, peace brief no. 29 (Washington DC, 12 May 2010).

Afghan women.<sup>3</sup> As we identify and dislocate{5} these obstacles, we construct a prised{6} view, one rooted in the intersectional realities of women's lived experiences. Ultimately, the article seeks to encourage western policy-makers and scholars who want to embark on acts of solidarity with women in Afghanistan to begin to recognize and engage with these complexities.

The article begins with a short section of background on the development of the peace process in Afghanistan from 2010, followed by a word on our methodology. Next, we outline the importance of intersectional analysis for understanding women's experiences of conflict and peace, and present a brief history of Afghan women's agency in the struggle for peace. The remainder—and the main part—of the article presents a discussion of our research findings. These sections explore the various subjectivities of Afghan women, including their diverse articulations of peace, the spatial dynamics, the social and political cleavages among women, the relationships between women, and obstacles faced by women involved with the formal mechanisms established as part of the peace and re-integration process. We conclude with some thoughts on what our findings might mean for Afghanistan today.

### **Background: the Afghan peace process and structures**

In 2010, almost one decade into the American-led military intervention, public and concrete steps were taken to initiate a peace dialogue between various parties to the conflict in Afghanistan. The peace talks were declared as an initiative aimed at breaking the cycle of violence in the country. In June 2010, Afghanistan's National Consultative Peace Jirga (hereafter 'Peace Jirga') brought together over 1,600 delegates to debate and discuss a plan of action for the Afghan government to end the conflict. Women's groups were initially not considered an important part of the Peace Jirga. Their participation in the process was reconsidered, however, after a successful advocacy campaign led by women's organizations based in Kabul, which included a meeting of Afghan activists in Dubai and a civil society meeting that paralleled the London International Conference on Afghanistan, both taking place in early 2010. As a result, the number of female delegates to the Peace Jirga was increased from 100 to over 300. Nevertheless, as we discuss below, the representation of women in the Peace Jirga was more symbolic than substantive.

The plan that emerged from the Peace Jirga laid out the first steps in a formal peace process for Afghanistan. The process was to take place on two levels. First, strategically,

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<sup>3</sup> Meera Sabaratnam, *Decolonising intervention: international statebuilding in Mozambique* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

reconciliation would result from high-level negotiations between the Taliban movement leaders, the government and the international community. Second, on a tactical level, re-integration would involve disarmament efforts to entice foot soldiers and mid-level commanders to end the conflict by offering job programmes and other economic incentives.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, in 2010, the APRP and the HPC, a body of 70 appointed members, were created to carry out the two-pronged mandate. While reconciliation efforts were envisioned as part of a long-term peace initiative taking place between the government and the insurgency, re-integration—and specifically, the APRP, targeted at the subnational level—was envisioned with a duration of five years, running from 2010 to 2015. Under the APRP, the fourth post-2001 re-integration programme,<sup>5</sup> to reward disarmament, grants were made available to communities for local projects, and other incentives were offered to combatants and their families. International donors pledged \$220 million for these kinds of projects.<sup>6</sup> Though reports vary as to how many provinces implemented the APRP, most of the 34 provinces in Afghanistan seem to have participated, and between 2010 and 2015, 9,512 combatants were registered as being re-integrated, of which 871 were commanders or leaders.<sup>7</sup>

In principle, under the new initiatives set out in 2010, Afghan women had a seat at the peace table. At the time of our research, women made up just nine of the 70 members of the HPC at the national level. At the provincial and district levels, similar, smaller peace councils, each consisting of between 25 and 34 people, were set up to oversee the re-integration process. These small councils, called provincial peace committees (PPCs), represented the HPC's provincial arms. Each PPC was mandated to include a minimum of four women: a female

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<sup>4</sup> Government of Afghanistan, *Declaration of the Afghan National Consultative Peace Jirga* (Kabul, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> There were four post-2001 programmes aimed at re-integration, each with its own specific focus. The first two were the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR), 2003–05, and the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) Programme, from 2005, both of which dealt with pro-government armed groups. The second two were the Program-e Tahkim-e Sulh (PTS) or Strengthening Peace Programme (2005–10) and the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme or APRP (2010–16).

<sup>6</sup> UN Development Programme (UNDP), *Afghanistan peace and reintegration programme (Window B): 2014 second quarter progress report* (Kabul, {?}).

<sup>7</sup> Government of Afghanistan, *Declaration of the Afghan National Consultative Peace Jirga*.

director of the Department of Women's Affairs (DoWA), a member of civil society, and two women actively involved in the community. These council quotas were largely the result of campaigns by Kabul-based women from civil society organizations or political families, backed by western public figures and intellectuals. They were also presented as an achievement of the APRP and the Afghan government's implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) 1325 and 1889.<sup>8</sup> Despite the formal commitment to women's rights, however, in practice, elements within the Afghan government, the wider community and international actors have tried to monopolize decisions over how and to what extent women should be allowed to participate in public and private life, including the peace process. In addition, this rhetorical landscape hindered the inclusion of a broader array of voices needed to inform visions of gendered peace in Afghanistan.

### **Methodology**

This article brings together the findings from three separate but related research initiatives on women and the peace process that were conducted in Afghanistan from 2010 to 2014. The first project was a research study that included 106 women from eight provinces of Afghanistan: Kabul, Balkh, Laghman, Nangarhar, Herat, Ghor, Wardak and Kunar. In total, 19 focus group discussions and ten semi-structured interviews were conducted by a small research team with the women in these provinces. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out with women in official positions with the UN, civil society organizations and the Afghan government. The second and third initiatives were both organized in Kabul by the Afghanistan Justice Organization (AJO).

The second initiative, a half-day seminar that included members of the HPC, female parliamentarians, female officials from the Afghan ministries of defence and interior affairs, and female representatives of civil society and the media. The aim of the seminar was to identify the challenges faced by women who were directly involved in the formal peace process and to suggest ways to overcome these obstacles. The third initiative was a round-table discussion on the role of women in Afghanistan in the light of the post-2014 NATO drawdown; this included female parliamentarians, government officials, and Afghan women working in the aid sector with local and international NGOs. It is important to note at this point that the narratives arising from these three initiatives are not a representative sample of all Afghanistan, and that we do not aim to make any such claim. Indeed, one of the factors contributing to the distorted picture of the conflict landscape in Afghanistan is the tendency

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<sup>8</sup> UN Security Council, Resolutions 1325 (31 Oct. 2000) and 1889 (5 Oct. 2009).

in the literature to claim to speak for all Afghans, rather than focusing on depth and diversity as we do here. In fact, the women and communities were not selected to be representative of anything other than themselves and as a cross-section of urban and rural districts where re-integration events were under way.

### **Gendered peace and intersectionality**

There is a longstanding tradition of feminist peace scholarship that takes the examination of women's everyday lives as a starting-point from which to probe the realities of conflict, justice and peace.<sup>9</sup> Feminist peace scholars have highlighted the necessity of employing a gendered lens to create a deeper understanding of the processes and possibilities of peace.<sup>10</sup> They have long highlighted the centrality of women to peace processes, as well as the challenges they face and the material conditions and structural factors that work to hinder their agency and reinforce gender inequality.<sup>11</sup> There is now a growing literature calling for a 'gendered peace' and seeking to interrogate what this might look like in different contexts around the world.<sup>12</sup> More recently, feminist scholars of peace and conflict have begun to argue that intersectionality is central to our understanding of gendered peace.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: the international politics of militarizing women's lives* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000); Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, beaches and bases: making feminist sense of international politics* (London: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Maria-Adriana Deianna, 'To settle for a gendered peace? Spaces for feminist grassroots mobilization in Northern Ireland and Bosnia-Herzegovina', *Citizenship Studies* 20: 1, 2016, pp. 99–114; Ann Runyan and Spike Peterson, *Global gender issues in the new millennium* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2013); Diana Pankhurst, *Gendered peace: women's struggles for post-war justice and reconciliation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Nicola Pratt and Sophie Richter-Devroe, 'Critically examining UNSCR1325 on Women, Peace and Security', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13: 4, 2011, pp. 489–503; Laura Shepherd, 'Sex, security and superhero(in)es: from 1325 to 1820 and beyond', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13: 4, 2011, pp. 504–21.

<sup>12</sup> Pankhurst, *Gendered peace*; Cheryl de la Rey and Susan McKay, 'Peacebuilding as a gendered process', *Journal of Social Issues* 62: 1, 2006, pp. 141–53.

<sup>13</sup> Marsha Henry, 'On the necessity of critical race feminism for Women, Peace and Security', *Critical Studies on Security* 9: 1, 2021, pp. 2–5; Toni Haastrup and Jamia Hagen, 'Racial hierarchies of knowledge production in the Women, Peace and Security agenda',

Though having a much longer history,<sup>14</sup> intersectionality entered the academic lexicon in the late 1980s through the work of Crenshaw, who used it as an analytical tool to assist in understanding experiences of injustice in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, intersectionality used black women's experiences as the litmus test for justice in examining the injustices experienced by those at other intersections of disadvantaged groups and assessing whether they too will have their needs met.<sup>16</sup> Over time it was further developed and explored by black, indigenous and Latina feminist scholars,<sup>17</sup> who employed the example of black

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*Critical Studies on Security* 9: 1, 2021, pp. 27–30; Elena Stavrevska and Sarah Smith, 'Intersectionality and peace', in Oliver Richmond and Gezim Visoka, eds, *The Palgrave encyclopaedia of peace and conflict studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. {?}; Stephanie Kappler and Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, 'From power-blind binaries to the intersectionality of peace: connecting feminism and critical peace and conflict studies', *Peacebuilding* 7: 2, 2019, pp. 160–77.

<sup>14</sup> Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of fire: an anthology of African-American feminist thought* (New York: New Press, 1995); bell hooks, *Feminist theory: from margin to center* (Boston: South End, 1984); bell hooks, *ain't i a woman* (New York: Pluto, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Kimberlie Crenshaw, 'Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review* 43: 6, 1991, pp. 1241–99.

<sup>16</sup> Kimberlie Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1, 1989, art. 8; Crenshaw, *Mapping the margins*; Gabriella Beckles-Raymond, 'Revisiting the home as a site of freedom and resistance', part 2: 'Emotions, affect and intimate relations', in E. Akwugo and F. Sobande, eds, *To exist is to resist: black feminism in Europe* (London: Pluto, 2019), pp. 91–102.

<sup>17</sup> bell hooks, *all about love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000); Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Patricia Hill-Collins, *Intersectionality as critical social theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Sirma Bilge, 'Recent feminist outlooks on intersectionality', *Diogenes* 57: 1, 2010, pp. 58–72; Jennifer Nash, 'Intersectionality and its discontents', *American Quarterly* 69: 1, 2017, pp. 117–29; Jennifer Nash, 'Re-thinking intersectionality', *Feminist Review* 89: 1, 2008, pp. 1–15; Diane Farmer, 'Feminism, intersectionality and black women's lives', in {?} *Black women in management* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Maxine Baca Zinn and Ruth Enid Zambrana,



women's experiences with systems of structural violence as a means through which to elucidate the realities of women in different spaces. Intersectionality has come to be regarded as a fluid theory that can provide a lens for the analysis of social categories or 'identities' in different national contexts.<sup>18</sup> In this sense it pushes back against the monolithic colonial construction of 'Third World women', forcing a recognition of historical, contextual and individual difference.<sup>19</sup>

Too often, however, the goal of intersectionality is reduced to being the additive compilation of a list of identities. As Rivas and Beckles-Raymond explain, 'intersectionality is a framework which involves identifying and analysing numerous factors across multiple hierarchies at the same time and then requires locating categorical inequalities and injustices as structural and systemic, using experiences as the litmus test for justice'.<sup>20</sup> An intersectional analysis allows the development of a deeper appreciation of the complex set of power relations that are often located in violent structures constructed to marginalize certain bodies in situations of conflict as well as in struggles for peace. Therefore, fundamental to unravelling the intersectional gendered dynamics of peace is a recognition of the nuanced and differentiated nature of these power relations. This involves an exploration of the multiple ways in which power circulates among women and how their positionalities allow them to imagine, interact, and access different aspects of peace processes in different ways. In this

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'Chicanas/Latinas advance intersectional thought and practice', *Gender and Society* 33: 5, 2019, pp. 677–701; Vivian M. May, 'Intersectionality', in A. Braithwaite and C. M. Orr, eds, *Rethinking women's and gender studies* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. {?}; Tess Ryan, 'The intersectional challenges of indigenous women's leadership', *Ab-Original* 3: 2, 2020, pp. 149–71.

<sup>18</sup> Fionnuala Ní Aoláin and Elish Rooney, 'Underenforcement and intersectionality: gendered aspects of transition for women', *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1: {?}, 2007, pp. 338–54.

<sup>19</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "'Under western eyes" revisited: feminist solidarity through anti-capitalist struggles', *Signs* 28: 2, 2003, pp. 499–535; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', *Boundary* 2: 12–13, 1984, pp. 333–58.

<sup>20</sup> Althea-Maria Rivas and Gabriela Beckles-Raymond, *BAME researcher practices, policies and processes at UK higher education institutions: a scoping report* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 2021).

article we employ an intersectional analysis in the way in which it was conceptualized by Crenshaw as a *prism* through which to cast light on the dynamics of discrimination and inequality experienced by certain bodies that structures are often unwilling to recognise and often reinforce’{8}.<sup>21</sup> In the following sections of the article, we explore these prised realities and relationships of small constituencies of women in the context of the Afghan peace process.

### **Prised histories**

For decades, Afghan women have been at the forefront of calls for recognition of the gendered nature of peace and conflict, and for the protection of women’s rights.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, there has been little contestation over the argument that women are best able to speak to their own experiences and the toll that the conflict has had on them. However, stereotypes such as the permanently subordinated Afghan women walking through dusty hills, caged in the oppressive image of the blue burqa, or the strong vocal woman speaking out for women’s rights in only a headscarf that is slightly pulled back, are all too common. The colonial resonance of the use of Afghan’s women subordination as a constant trope of the rationale for the US-led post-9/11 intervention has been widely interrogated.<sup>23</sup> A material response to this all-too-common imaginary has been the allocation of dedicated pockets of funding for the

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<sup>21</sup> Jane Coaston, ‘The intersectionality wars’, interview with K. Crenshaw, *Vox News*, 28 May 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Pamela Collett, ‘Afghan women in the peace process’, *Peace Review* 8: 3, 1996, pp. 397–402.

<sup>23</sup> See Helen Zeweri, ‘The specter of failure: rendering Afghan women as sites of precarity in empowerment regimes’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19: 4, 2017, pp. 441–55; Axel Heck and Gabi Schlag, ‘Securitizing images: the female body and the war in Afghanistan’, *European Journal of International Relations* 19: 4, 2013, pp. 891–913; Torunn Wimpelmann Chaudhary, Orzala Ashraf Nemat and Astri Suhrke, ‘Promoting women’s rights in Afghanistan: the ambiguous footprint of the West’, in Susanne Campbell, David Chandler and Meera Sabaratnam, eds, *A liberal peace? The problems and practices of peacebuilding* (London and New York: Zed, {?}), pp. 106–20; Kevin Ayotte and Mary Husain, ‘Securing Afghan women: neocolonialism, epistemic violence, and the rhetoric of the veil’, *NWSA{?} Journal* 17: 3, 2005, pp. 112–33; Lila Abu-Lughod, ‘Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others’, *American Anthropologist* 104: 3, 2002, pp. 783–90.

capacity-building and training of Afghan women's rights and advocacy organizations by a range of actors including donor governments, international organizations, NGOs, churches and philanthropic foundations, among others.

Since 2010, many public statements of support by international funders have highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity and local ownership as important factors in supporting Afghan women's organizations in the peace process.<sup>24</sup> Western engagement with women's rights in Afghanistan, however, has tended to oscillate between women's rights as universal human rights and feminism-as-imperialism.<sup>25</sup> The former refers to those who argue that women's advancement must be firmly grounded in a universalist human rights framework, and the latter argues for contextualized rights that are negotiated on the basis of Afghan values. Ironically, therefore, externally funded partnership and capacity-building spaces were characterized by a 'general caution against sweeping generalizations about "Afghan women"', which existed alongside a very uneven attention given to the possibility that there might be dissenting views about Afghan values among Afghan women'.<sup>26</sup> Even on occasions where the latter possibility is explored, insufficient work has been done to support Afghan women in developing a gendered language that might indeed better reflect their own challenges and experiences.

Moreover, efforts to include women in formal processes and consultations were uneven at best. Civil society representatives reported that, while being formally invited to participate 'in meetings addressing priorities for peacebuilding, they are left out of the formal proceedings despite being prepared and present at the location of the conference'.<sup>27</sup> Women were also

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<sup>24</sup> EU, *Strengthening EU action in Afghanistan: third implementation report on the EU Action Plan* (Brussels, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Naila Kabeer Ayesha Khan and Nasan Adlparvar, *Afghan values or women's rights? Gendered narratives about continuity and change in urban Afghanistan*, working paper 387: 11 (Brighton: Institute for Development Studies, 2011), pp. 1–39; Daina Kandiyoti, 'Old dilemmas or new challenges? The politics of gender and reconstruction in Afghanistan', *Development and Change* 32: 2, 2007, pp. 169–99.

<sup>26</sup> Khan and Adlparvar, *Afghan values or women's rights?*, pp. 169–99.

<sup>27</sup> C. Koppell and J. O'Neill, *Gender symposia during donor conferences: a model to guarantee women leaders a voice in setting priorities for reconstruction* (2010), pp. 1–2, as cited in UN Women, *Global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (New York, 2015) p. 379.

largely excluded from formal peace talks as key actors, including at the UN, which has approached the discussion of women and the inclusion of women in the process with great caution. In fact, between 2005 and 2013, Afghan women's inclusion in the 23 officially recorded peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban was confined to two meetings held in the Maldives and three in France.<sup>28</sup> Until 2013, no women were included in any discussions between international negotiators and the Taliban, and it is unclear whether or to what extent women's interests were represented by others.<sup>29</sup>

Despite calls for participation, the lack of space for the articulation of these experiences, and the lack of importance they are accorded in practice, in public and international decision-making forums, act simultaneously to silence their perspectives. The conversation on Afghan women and peace has stressed the need to include women in the peace process, particularly to ensure the 'rights of women' are not rolled back. Beyond this call, however, there has been little exploration of their different perspectives on peace and experiences with the process. Where specific perspectives have been included, they tend to be from a limited number of women who are highly educated and politically visible in government or civil society. However, even among this small cohort of women, the space for open dialogue is sometimes limited. While these perspectives are important and have been hard won, they run alongside a broad array of experiences of women in Afghanistan.

Parallel to these narratives, which have received much attention, there exist multiple voices that have gone unheard. This siloed analysis has diminished understanding of the complexity of women's engagement with peace processes in Afghanistan. This is because, first, it does not interrogate the importance of their multiple realities rooted in differences of gender, class and ethnicity. Second, it relies on universalist gender dichotomies which invisibilize the relational dimensions of women's engagement with one another. These silenced narratives demonstrate a range of positions and agency. In the following sections we explore the diverse voices shared with us by groups of Afghan women in relation to their understandings of peace, their experiences with and participation in the process, their relationships, and their reflections on the obstacles to achieving peace.

### **Imagining peace**

After many years of conflict and displacement, all of the women who participated in the research project said they wanted peace in Afghanistan and in their communities. Although

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<sup>28</sup> Oxfam, *Behind closed doors* (Kabul, 2014), pp. 31–4.

<sup>29</sup> Oxfam, *Behind closed doors*, pp. 31–4.

few women participated as in the conflict as fighters, they have felt the weight of the conflict. Between 2010 and 2014 there was a 40.0 per cent increase in the number of female civilian casualties in Afghanistan, including a 33.0 per cent increase in women who were injured and a staggering 70.0 per cent increase in female fatalities.<sup>30</sup> Threats, intimidation and night letters{9} are also regularly employed against women in public office, schoolteachers, government workers and civil society activists.

The broader effects of the armed conflict—which has exacerbated vulnerability to marginalization, poverty, discrimination and violence—also disproportionately affect women. For example, the loss of children and male family members, hindrances to employment, restricted access to health and education services owing to active hostilities, forced migration, and a heightened sense of fear for their physical safety and that of their family arising from armed attacks, ongoing fighting or explosions, are just some of the commonplace consequences of war for Afghan women. Years of conflict have had profound negative impacts on their mental health, and on their productive, reproductive and community roles.<sup>31</sup> Given the crushing burden of the violence, the unanimous support for an end to the conflict among the women we spoke to is unsurprising. When we began to discuss peace processes, however, differences emerged regarding the definition of peace itself, who should lead the process and what the key issues were. Moreover, the urban–rural divide manifested itself in unexpected ways.

Among the focus group participants, knowledge about the formal peace process varied, but not significantly. Although there is a clear urban–rural divide within Afghanistan in terms of women’s levels of education and access to information, the majority of women in both urban and rural areas were aware that formal negotiation structures and a peace process were in place. Women in the cities of Kabul and Herat and in the provinces of Nangarhar and Wardak were well aware that a formal peace process was under way. Only a small minority of women in the province of Ghor and the outlying districts of Kabul were unaware of the formal

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<sup>30</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, *Afghanistan protection of civilians report* (Kabul, 2018), pp. 9–11.

<sup>31</sup> Althea-Maria Rivas, *Security, development, and violence in Afghanistan: everyday stories of intervention* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020); Althea-Maria Rivas, *Health and education in Afghanistan: ten years after—quantity not quality* (Kabul: Afghan Co-ordinating Body for Relief, 2011).

process that was taking place. Focus group participants made little distinction between reconciliation and re-integration, however, as both were seen as part of peace talks generally. The relative social isolation and exclusion from public decision-making forums faced by women may have contributed to levels of knowledge about social and political developments.<sup>32</sup> For example, in one of the Land Allocation Schemes (LAS) outside Kabul, the male *shura* in the village knew about the peace process but decided not to discuss it with the women.<sup>33</sup> They felt it would worry them unnecessarily; given that the day-to-day living conditions in the village were already difficult, they thought that the uncertain peace talks might add another layer of worry to the women's lives. In addition, women in the focus groups from more rural areas tended quickly to profess a lack of knowledge about the issue, often initially responding that they 'didn't know anything'; but as the conversation developed, they spoke about things they had heard, or thought might be happening. In Ghor, for example, after a bit of discussion, women said that they knew that there had been a big meeting in Kabul to discuss peace with the Taliban but were not sure what came of it.<sup>34</sup> The political awareness of women in rural areas challenges several reports at the time, which largely excluded rural women from consideration, arguing that they are so absent from public life that they do not have opinions on the process.

Both women involved in the formal process and those outside it questioned how state actors were defining the type of peace that was to ensue from a potential political settlement with the insurgency. Round-table participants agreed that the definition of peace was problematic and that there was no national consensus on the type of peace that should prevail. Several women argued that, since the future of women's rights was tied to the outcomes of the peace process, any settlement with the insurgency had the potential to jeopardize women's rights. Therefore, it was imperative to define the type of peace that would be produced from

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<sup>32</sup> Peace Training Research Organisation (PTRO), *Unheard voices: Afghan views on the challenges of the peace process* (Kabul, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Land Allocation Schemes (LAS) were launched in December 2005 by the Afghan ministry of refugees and repatriation (MoRR) through presidential decree no. 10 to address the issue of landlessness among returning refugees by allocating them plots of government land. See Nassim Majidi, 'Home sweet home! Repatriation, reintegration and land allocation in Afghanistan', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, no. 133, 2013, pp. 207–25.

<sup>34</sup> Focus group, Ghor, 2011.{?}

negotiations. To this, participants explained that positive peace should become the goal that the government and all other actors must strive to reach, and this would mean an end not only to armed violence but also to everyday and social violence. A civil society activist argued ‘that peace should not simply mean the absence of war but also an end to torture, illiteracy, poverty, and [should go further than] symbolic gestures towards women’s empowerment’.<sup>35</sup> Another participant explained that the type of peace that emerges from the peace process should be one that creates an ‘enabling space for women to participate in politics and in the economy and that any process that takes this enabling space away from women is not a peace but rather a process of war’.<sup>36</sup>

There were different views as to which belligerent groups should be involved in the reconciliation talks. Participants in Mazar and Ghor highlighted the fact that many groups had been left out of the process. They expressed concern that conflicts between the armed men beholden to local commanders were more problematic in their areas than the Taliban, but that peace talks ignored the spectrum of armed groups that existed. Conversely, in the eastern and southern provinces, women often spoke of members of armed groups as brothers and family members, and felt it was time that Afghans made peace among themselves and welcomed armed fighters back into their communities. Project participants expressed their desires to see male members of their families come home and lead normal lives. This desire, however, existed alongside a desire to retain some of the freedoms that had become more readily available to them since the fall of the Taliban, in particular greater access to education and medical care.

Focus group participants in Kabul and Herat, mainly from civil society organizations, felt that the current peace process with the Taliban and other armed groups should be stopped. The depth of the women’s uncertainty and fear concerning the peace process with the Taliban had two aspects. First, the collective memory of women under the Taliban regime is one of suppression, subordination and violence. Under the Taliban, women were forced to adapt to the strict interpretation of shari’a law and forbidden to take part in any form of public life. Consequently, women’s groups worried that if the Taliban were to be reincorporated into Afghan society and politics, they would roll back the advances made since they were ousted with respect to gender equity and equality. As one young woman stated: ‘Peace, yes, of

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<sup>35</sup> Afghanistan Justice Organization (AJO), *The role of women in post-2014 Afghanistan: opportunities and challenges*, round table held in Kabul, 21 Jan. 2013.

<sup>36</sup> AJO, *The role of women in post-2014 Afghanistan*.

course we all want that, but with the Taliban . . . no. I just don't know what else there can be but not them.'<sup>37</sup>

Second, these fears were reinforced by the preamble of the National Consultative Peace Jirga, which failed to provide any concrete assurances that such a crisis would not supervene. Article 3 of the preamble stated: 'No peace efforts should bring to question the achievements made so far and its legal values and should not lead to a new crisis in the country.'<sup>38</sup> This statement is contradicted in article 5, which read: 'We call on all the parties involved to avoid setting such conditions that can make it impossible for the understanding and negotiations to start, but rather express their goodwill by taking constructive and flexible approaches for the dialogue to begin.'<sup>39</sup> This meant that the Afghan government would not enforce conditions when engaged in dialogue with the insurgency; rather, the debate on so-called 'red lines' would be opened only once all parties were ready to negotiate, after initial talks had concluded. The negotiation process is multilayered, and talks alone did not mean that a negotiation was taking place, but were a mechanism that could lead all parties to the negotiating table. Thus, if women's constitutional rights were not identified in the initial talks and dialogues, then there were no guarantees that they would be upheld later.

### **Urban–rural dynamics and representation**

A common reading of the history of gender politics in Afghanistan maps the urban–rural divide as part of an ideological struggle between modern, educated and urban elites and a conservative, rural and tribal population tied to various versions of customary law and shari'a law.<sup>40</sup> Our research findings, however, suggested a much more complex picture. While women in many of the rural areas tended to speak of peace as an end to violence, it was rare that they excluded concerns about gender relations and the subordination of women from their comments. Women in the rural areas of Kabul and Ghor focused on peace as an end to

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<sup>37</sup> Classroom discussion, Kabul, 2011. The participant went on to explain she saw the Taliban as using violence as a tool of governance, and therefore could not see a peaceful society as one where they were involved in the leadership.

<sup>38</sup> Government of Afghanistan, *Afghanistan: the National Consultative Peace Jirga resolution* (Kabul, 8 June 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Government of Afghanistan, *Afghanistan: The National Consultative Peace Jirga Resolution*.

<sup>40</sup> Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell, 'Exploited by whom? An alternative perspective on humanitarian assistance to Afghan women', *Third World Quarterly* 23: 5, 2002, pp. 909–30.



violence, commonly understood as negative peace. In areas heavily populated by returnees and internally displaced areas{10}, participants suggested that peace should involve an end to armed fighting, military operations and patrols, and regular explosions in their communities. In Ghor, women faced relative seclusion from other communities and wider society, which was in part due to patriarchal norms but also a consequence of the remoteness of the area and the stark reality of constant violence there. An end to the violence could provide an opening to navigate the other two factors in different ways. The majority of the families{11} were returnees from Pakistan and Iran, where several of the women had been able to move more freely and attend school. The ongoing violence in the area had buttressed the position of family members who already inclined towards restrictions on women's movement. The cessation of armed violence would by no means circumvent the layers of subordination of which these women spoke; it could, however, enable the women to move more freely within the local area, to see their families more often and to send their daughters to girls-only schools. Thus it would potentially open the way for fuller participation in the social life of the community and relative shifts in gender relations, which could improve women's lives and the well-being of their families.

During the course of our focus group conversations, an interesting debate arose regarding who represented women in the process. In Ghor, participants showed respect for well-known women's rights advocates but pondered whether the Kabul, or even provincial, elites could understand the realities of their lives. Furthermore, the physical distance and lack of communication between the women in the two locations presented a significant obstacle to women in Ghor and limited their opportunity to evaluate not only if, but how, they were being represented.

Civil society activists in Mazar and Herat, however, highlighted the consultations that had been held at the subnational level with women involved in the formal process and prominent women's rights advocates based in Kabul. These women felt that, as members of national networks, their leaders were actively engaging with women in the provinces and incorporating their views in national discussions. A few participants in Wardak, however, suggested that more accountability was needed by women in Kabul involved in public forums. A local educator explained: 'We have many consultations and always give our views, but we get very little information on what is said and are rarely invited to Kabul to speak for ourselves while we face violence every day.'<sup>41</sup> Indeed, key civil society representatives in

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<sup>41</sup> Focus group, Wardak, 2011.{?}

Kabul said that it might not be important formally to include women in rural areas in the peace process.<sup>42</sup> These participants suggested that the peace process would not bring much change in the lives of rural women and that resources would be better spent engaging educated women in the urban provincial centres and Kabul. One member of a leading women's network explained that these were the ones who needed support if they were going to successfully influence the pathway to peace, but that other women would benefit from their efforts.<sup>43</sup>

These comments reflected not only the impact of spatial and class differences between the participants but also two other recurrent findings. First, the resistance to involving women in the process, on the part of both wider Afghan society and the international community, meant there was limited space for any women to be involved, contributing to debates over who the right women representatives were and their motives. Questions regarding whether the right men were leading the process did not revolve around their ability to represent the interests of their affiliated groups or their capacity, but rather around whether they had a legitimate interest in the peace process. The relatively minuscule numbers of women involved in the process were regularly criticized for not speaking with a single consistent voice and simultaneously for not representing vastly different experiences. Second, they spoke to the disconnect that occurs when consultations occur without clear accountability mechanisms and information flows. The lack of transparency and accountability in the formal mechanisms was highlighted as a major problem in terms of public support for the process.

Conversely, women from rural districts showed little interest in being part of the Kabul elite involved in national deliberations. In discussions about their role in the peace process, women from rural areas and the eastern provinces tended to focus on community and informal structures. For example, they were concerned with being part of the community-led process of deciding how to accept fighters back into the community and discussions around their return. On the question of re-integrating ex-combatants, the participants, particularly those living in rural areas, expressed fear of an escalation of violence against and renewed suppression of women.<sup>44</sup> How those re-integrated would be monitored after a peace agreement was and is a source of huge concern. A number of women who were married to

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<sup>42</sup> Seminar, Kabul, 2013; interview, Kabul, 2011.{?}

<sup>43</sup> Interview, Kabul, 2011.{?}

<sup>44</sup> Mariam Safi, 'Struggling for representation in the peace process', *Peace Policy*{?}, University of Notre Dame, 5 Sept. 2012.

insurgents expressed great concern about being accepted by the communities to which their families would return.<sup>45</sup> They stressed the need to create dialogue but also to have assurances around those social structures that women tended to dominate. There was a strong focus on justice, forgiveness and healing, and activities that could address the psycho-social as well as practical aspects of re-integration and peacebuilding. These affective, individual and community-level aspects of making peace, which are essential in building and sustaining peace and encouraging non-violence, have been largely left out of the conversation about peace in Afghanistan.

### **A seat at the table**

The APRP was framed as a means to build a future of lasting peace and stability by alleviating legitimate grievances, addressing the causes of violence and insurgency, and paving the way for a genuine political process of re-integration and reconciliation with the insurgency. Though it has made some achievements towards these goals, it has also been faced with a number of factors that have operated against its success. Key to the perspectives that follow is the fact that women were in principle included in but in practice largely excluded from the national decision-making processes involved in peace talks and negotiations.<sup>46</sup> These factors have combined to shaping the APRP as an exclusive and non-participatory process lacking a broad base of support.<sup>47</sup> At both national and subnational levels, regardless of their numbers, women were regularly marginalized and excluded. In principle, in 2010, women had a seat at the table; but while the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and related resolutions call for the full participation of women in the decision-making mechanisms of peace processes, in practice, women's role in reconciliation and re-integration was severely limited. Among the PPCs there was variation in the implementation of the gender requirement for membership. In those PPCs that had female members, there were approximately between one and three women to 30 men. Some subnational councils were chaired by women—a few included only the head of the DoWA—but the majority did not include any women. Female PPC members were severely limited in the activities in which they could participate, despite having a broader mandate.

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<sup>45</sup> Focus group, Nangarhar, 2011. {?}

<sup>46</sup> Mariam Safi, 'Struggling for representation'.

<sup>47</sup> Mariam Safi and Sameena Imtiaz, *Women, Peace and Security, Afghanistan–Pakistan: Women's Policy Brief* (Kabul: Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies, PEAD Foundation and Diplomatic Courier, Jan. 2017).

In recognition of the growing emphasis on women's participation in all decision-making processes, a gender unit was created within the APRP.<sup>48</sup> This unit was intended to ensure that women were involved in all APRP programmes, such as community engagement, outreach, awareness and programme development. It was supposed to work closely with all four units of the APRP (Policy, Development, Operations and Communications). A Joint HPC–APRP Women's Group was also formed to meet regularly to review progress on programme delivery and make necessary recommendations. The group organized forums and meetings with civil society organizations, women's networks and other national and international agencies; it also participated in outreach visits to provinces. In 2011, the group developed a three-month plan that promoted peace and targeted women and young people through political and social engagement.

In 2014, the HPC, in coordination with civil society bodies, and women and youth networks, began a nationwide campaign to call for peace and an end to the conflict. They circulated a petition entitled 'Women call for ceasefire and peace', which collected 250,000 signatures from women in 34 provinces across Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup> The petition was used to appeal to the government, the international community and the insurgency to find common ground as a basis for reaching a peaceful settlement. This initiative marked the 'most visible activity related to women's participation in the peace process organized by the APRP' since its inception.<sup>50</sup> In principle, these efforts were supposed to generate momentum at the community level, establishing trust between the government and local populations; however, their impacts on women at the community level are not clear; nor is it clear whether any trust-building outcomes were established between local women and government institutions leading the peace process.

The HPC, with the assistance of its subnational arm, the PPCs, focused primarily on encouraging insurgents to renounce violence, increasing security in districts and provinces (as the threat and presence of insecurity were most evident at the subnational level), initiating a countrywide debate on the political approaches to peace and promoting regional cooperation for peaceful coexistence. These activities were carried out through various channels, such as 'field operations' that saw the re-integration of fighters; 'development', including socio-economic development programmes helping communities to absorb re-

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<sup>48</sup> Mariam Safi, 'Struggling for representation'.

<sup>49</sup> UNDP, *Afghanistan peace and reintegration programme*.

<sup>50</sup> UNDP, *Afghanistan peace and reintegration programme*.

integrated combatants; and ‘communication and outreach’ at the national and subnational levels to promote the APRP’s efforts. Within these channels, female PPC members have been allowed to participate only in communication and outreach programmes, and were often excluded from decisions regarding the acceptance or rejection of the re-integration of insurgents at the local level. Travel restrictions, lack of awareness of the APRP and shame and honour factors prevented women working in the PPCs from participating in negotiation and grievance resolution efforts. A report from a well-known Kabul-based think tank describes how re-integrated combatants expressed their unwillingness to talk to women, commenting that ‘women are simply incapable of doing work around re-integration’, and arguing that this is the ‘domain of men’.<sup>51</sup> Attitudes like these among insurgents and former insurgents do not necessarily change upon their re-integration back into civilian life.

### **Reconciling participation and gender**

The key debates that arose among women in Kabul directly involved in the formal reconciliation process and government officials centred on the structural and personal obstacles the women faced. Discussions focused on four key issues: the formal mechanisms themselves, representation, capacity and internal opposition. These discussions highlighted a recurrent theme during both the seminar and the round table regarding the lack of support women felt they had in the formal process, even from other women, and the perceived lack of accountability of women in the formal process to other Afghan women. The absence of these constituencies of support and mechanisms of accountability served as a major disempowering factor for women in various positions and locations. Ultimately, the discussions reflected the overlapping and multiple layers of inclusion and exclusion that existed even among a relatively small group of women based in Kabul and holding key positions in the formal process, government or civil society.

A lack of clarity on the process, a recurrent theme throughout all three components of the research, made it challenging for women to identify how the process should be led. The reconciliation process was criticized for being neither broad-based nor inclusive, and for the HPC’s inability to engage parliamentarians, civil society organizations, media and other non-state actors working on the issues surrounding the peace process. The chair of the Women’s Political Participation Committee suggested that a fundamental problem of the process was its lack of transparency. She argued that a transparent process was essential to ensuring that the public was fully aware of the issues that were being debated. Transparency was also a key

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<sup>51</sup> PTRO, *The home front*, research paper (Kabul, 2014).

concern to civil society members from Herat, who emphasized that the peace process could not be separated from the legacies of violence, rampant patronage and corruption. They questioned whether those leading the process, who had gained so much power through violence, could now adopt the role of peacemakers.

The majority of round-table participants expressed the need for more women to be involved in the re-integration process, and, despite the flaws identified above, similarly called for a substantial role for women in the peace talks. According to one participant, increasing women's presence at both the national and provincial level should take priority above all other issues. She argued that 'having women adequately represented could help create an effective lobby group'.<sup>{12}</sup><sup>52</sup> An alternative view was presented by one female parliamentarian who explained that many of her constituents felt that the peace process should be led by men and not women. This perspective is related to the notion that women did not start the war so it should not be their responsibility to bring peace. Such thinking, according to this parliamentarian, played a role in curtailing increased roles for women in the process.

In both the round-table event and the seminar, a consensus was reached not only that women were marginalized, but that the diversity of women from all sectors was not adequately represented in the existing composition of peace structures. The women in the security sector noted frustration at the omission of their perspectives from the process. A female lieutenant from the ministry of interior stated that some women, who had been placed in positions of authority by their male counterparts, 'were nothing more than men in the clothing of women'.<sup>53</sup> This, she felt, made it pertinent to focus on the quality of women appointed to decision-making positions and their ability to represent other women, rather than focusing solely on quantity.<sup>54</sup> A participant from the ministry of defence described how the peace process had, in fact, neglected all the women involved in the security sector. It became apparent during the discussions that women in the security sector were excluded not only by the peace process and its female leadership, but also from the wider gender discourse promoted by women outside the process. Participants argued that the absence of female security experts/personnel in the peace process meant that women's perspectives on security matters were not included in the process.

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<sup>52</sup> Reference to come. {?}

<sup>53</sup> AJO, *The role of women in post-2014 Afghanistan*.

<sup>54</sup> Round table, Kabul, 13 Dec. 2012.

The issue of the capacity and knowledge of women involved in the APRP and HPC was fiercely debated at both the round table and the seminar. Participants felt not only that they were under-represented, but that women involved in the formal structures lacked awareness of the process and the necessary skills needed to carry out their responsibilities as PPC and HPC members. Participants representing the media sector argued that women working at decision-making levels lacked the skill to use the opportunities offered to them in these positions and, as a result, could not bring about sustainable change. Participants from government, civil society and media who were outside the process commented that women with positions in the formal process lacked not only the awareness but also the will to change how they carried out their work in ways which would facilitate greater participation of women in the peace process.

A member of parliament cited the absence of a gender strategy by the female HPC members as an illustration of their lack of capacity. Indeed, three years after the inauguration of the HPC, female members had still not developed a gender strategy outlining their role, objectives and mechanisms for activities and coordination with women outside the formal process.<sup>55</sup> The MP explained that such a strategy could help inform the HPC women's action plan and explain how they hoped to foster engagement with civil society, parliament, media and other women working in the area of peacebuilding outside the HPC. Interestingly, while some HPC women refuted criticisms of incompetence or lack of effort, others did not. One female HPC member emphasized that 'the incorporation of women in the HPC should be considered an achievement in itself'.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, when asked if HPC women had a seat at the negotiating table, she replied: 'Our interactions and coordination have not yet reached a level whereby HPC women can participate at the negotiation table.'<sup>57</sup>

Deliberations on the capacity of female HPC members could not be divorced from the persistent marginalization faced not only by them, but also by other women in official positions outside the peace process. Several of the female officials involved in the formal process commented on the sidelining of women in the PPC and HPC, highlighting the significant differences in the respective representation of men and women in these bodies. Two MPs argued that, regardless of the numbers of women in the HPC, the women were reputable and capable of carrying out their responsibilities. Their efforts, however, were

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<sup>55</sup> PTRO, *Unheard voices*.

<sup>56</sup> Round table, Kabul, 13 Dec. 2012.

<sup>57</sup> Round table, Kabul, 13 Dec. 2012.

hampered and they were often absent from the negotiating table because of obstacles created by male members of the HPC. Another MP argued that while it was easy to define women's role in the peace process as weak, it was more complicated to identify the source of this weakness: 'It is not because we think women are weak but rather, within the HPC, the nature of your work is such where not enough importance is given to your role.'<sup>58</sup> Many of the participants in political or administrative positions related personal stories of struggles to get their opinions and voices heard in their own fields, being left out of important meetings and decision-making forums, or being treated like secretaries in public forums despite holding senior positions.

### **Concluding remarks**

This article highlights the ways in which neo-colonial knowledge production in policy communities and academia, violent external intervention and systems of patriarchy have combined to marginalize Afghan women, contributed to negative material consequences for the women, and hindered the possibilities of a gendered peace. The study challenges the essentialized framings of Afghan women, supported by these various systems of unequal power relations, that have failed to recognize the political and social complexity of women's lives, diminished their intellectual contributions and rendered their voices inaudible. As a counter-narrative, the article has employed an intersectional framework to explore the prismatic lens through which peace and the peace and re-integration process were conceptualized and experienced by a diverse group of Afghan women during the period from 2010 to 2014.

The full diversity of Afghan women's voices cannot be represented here, nor is it our intention to try to do so. Instead, we have aimed to highlight the intersectional realities that existed among a small number of women. Explorations of this nature contribute to the movement away from the essentialized monolithic representations of women from conflict-affected societies often resorted to by policy-makers and academics alike. The political complexity of the diverse subjectivities shared by the participants in these research studies challenge the persistent and unrealistic demand that Afghan women speak with a single consistent voice. Our findings highlight the necessity of creating a platform for dialogue and contestation among women that may also facilitate the development of greater constituencies of support and facilitate communication among women, the varied spaces they occupy and the intersectional realities of their lives.

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<sup>58</sup> Round table, Kabul, 13 Dec. 2012.



At the time of writing of this article, Afghanistan has entered a new political phase with the recent takeover by the Taliban. In 2018 the US began talks with the Taliban. Soon after that, discussions began on setting out the criteria for a peace dialogue, this time involving the Afghan government and other international actors. After nearly three and a half years of negotiations, little progress had been achieved and the Afghan population was facing the unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country by 11 September 2021, with no peace agreement between the Taliban and Afghan government in place. In August 2021, these events culminated in the fall of the Afghan government led by Ashraf Ghani and the takeover of the country by the Taliban.

The current situation has mired the country in a new wave of uncertainty. Among the numerous concerns over its future, the impact on the role of women in social and political life looms large. The short-term amnesia of the international community, so characteristic of its past engagements in Afghanistan, seems to be replaying itself, as the gendered tropes that we problematized at the beginning of this article have again framed news headlines, broadcasts and international appeals for funding. A review of current newspapers, policy reports and social media reveals that many of the same messages referred to at the beginning of this article are once again being broadcast. The rhetoric of those messages, however, must be challenged, as must the disjuncture between these narratives and the lived experiences and contributions of Afghan women.

The precarious position that Afghan women are facing now, however, is not only a consequence of the recent takeover. Undoubtedly, the international intervention contributed to some improvements in everyday material conditions for many Afghan women. This is particularly true in terms of education and health outcomes. However, we must recognize that the marginalization of women by both domestic and external forces, the colonial logics of the 20-year intervention and the global hierarchies of knowledge production within the academy, which have been outlined here with reference to the period between 2010 and 2014 and the APRP, have also consistently undermined and invisibilized Afghan women over decades. Too often, our findings suggest, women have been set up to fail by both national and international actors. As a result, gains were too superficial; and, as the façade of the post-imperial dream falls away once again, Afghan women may find themselves facing a difficult future. Ultimately, given the dearth of literature which speaks about Afghan women, we still know little about their lived realities. We must hope that, in both scholarship and policy, in the coming years there will be greater recognition of these diverse and connected realities and challenges—a recognition that is necessary to facilitate and strengthen the platforms for

women's engagement in the peace. Ultimately, the potential for a gendered peace is dependent upon an intersectional analysis of the obstacles that women face, the agency they hold in the varied spaces they occupy, and the realities of their lives.