



The Role of Women in Peace-building: Afghanistan's Awakening?

By Anne Marrillet

Women in Afghanistan have been silent, yet vulnerable victims of civil wars and violent conflicts for years. Since the military coups of 1973 and 1978 that brought political instability and after the fall of the Soviet regime back in 1989, women have been excluded from society and merely deprived from all rights. Their status became non-existent and their role as citizens made little sense in a society largely made for and by men. In the light of the past few years, and the multiple efforts by the international community to bring peace to Afghanistan, this article aims to assess the role of Afghan women in conflict resolution and peace building. The key questions are the following: has women's role evolved or changed recently? Do they have any real impact on conflict resolution? What room is there for their involvement in the peace process?

One of the central roles of peace workers, may they be activists or professional 'peacemakers', is to raise awareness of the situation they are dealing with every day, which implies a strong advocacy strategy. Often, when one brings an issue to the open, this can contribute to resolve it. In Afghanistan, peace workers have tackled numerous issues over the last few years, including those pertaining to women rights. The Afghan case is interesting in the sense that it seems to stand for a real "awakening" of women's role in this post-war society. Women tend to have taken control of their own lives, which they were deprived of for long decades. In a way, such a situation is a first of its kind in the country. After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2002, women were [excluded](#) from crucial discussions and from conflict resolution initiatives¹; there was apparently a partial exclusion within the household as well as at the local level in community mediation². In addition, there has been [minimal space](#) for women to influence decision-making at the highest levels of the society even during Hamid Karzai's Presidency from 2003 to 2010.

Despite this negative representation of women in the peace building process, a trend has appeared in recent years amongst both international and Afghan civil society actors. They are now focusing on the real need for women and young girls to play a role in the peace process. As a result, these latter began to be increasingly active in the reconstruction process and also more involved in most political events. Some Afghan women reportedly competed against official candidates during the course of the last presidential elections in 2014³. Moreover, 250.000 signatures were gathered from literate women for a [petition](#) on peace in early 2014. Meanwhile,

¹ "Women in Conflict and Peace", Afghan Report, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance(IDEA), 2015.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

some female civil society activists in Afghan NGOs have increasingly developed interesting projects dealing with the room of women in peace building not only in the public place but also within their own families, at home. This is because women can intervene in talking to their sons, brothers or husbands, building useful conversations and setting up a platform for dialogue, namely in convincing their fellow men not to take part in violent conflicts, since women are seen as having a strong influence on them. At the same time, courageous and capable Afghan women now take part in the newly established Peace Committees throughout the country⁴. [Women's involvement in peace](#) is becoming increasingly visible as UN Women supports a programme to encourage women's involvement in dispute resolution.

To build an inclusive Afghanistan, women and women's concerns must also be considered in all community projects. Hence, civic education workshops for men have specific emphasis on gender and women's rights as well as human rights in general. According to an association called the Welfare Association for the Development in Afghanistan ([WADAN](#)): *"Civic education workshops for women have the same content as those for men, and such events have been well-attended by women in the Helmand, Zabul and Kandahar provinces. Indeed, a pre-presidential election awareness event drew hundreds of women in Kabul, and a pre-parliamentary election event with information for potential candidates was similarly well attended in 2013."*

Years of warfare and misguided government had a negative impact on education. Hence, in many areas of the country, an entire generation of girls grew up without any schooling. This problem currently persists despite the emphasis and efforts to educate children in government schools. As WADAN states: *"around 107 community based non-formal schools serving about 3,500 students have been organised by local peacemakers and community leaders in eastern Afghanistan. In this system, primary education is provided to children in both girls' and boys' schools. Generally speaking, teachers tend to come from the communities and the numerous associations often train them in current methodology and educational philosophy, which is critical."*

Finally, even if women and young girls remain excluded from important negotiations, it should be noted that they intend to be deeply involved in the political realm. The High Peace Council (HPC) which was established in 2010 by President Karzai to "guide the peace process and ensure the good participation of community members, including women", has officially 9 women among its [70 members](#)⁵. Those women are already playing a useful [role](#) and have the potential to provide expertise to the core national process. In the various Provinces Peace Councils (PPCs) established by the HPC, there are also active women members. Similarly, Afghanistan prepared a special Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan (NAP), stressing the importance to implement [UNSC Resolution 1325](#) and "ensuring that women's rights are fully included and respected in the peace-building processes, including through participation in [negotiations](#)". The new President Ashraf Ghani launched this Plan in June 2015 and strong signs of change and a deep involvement from women in all

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Human Rights Watch Report, « Accept Full Role for Women in Talks », 2015

steps of conflict resolution are already being perceived. Nonetheless, the Plan is far from being a complete solution and according to numerous civil society organizations, there should be more efforts to include women into the “inner circle” of national political decisions as well as to ensure that they are fully represented at the negotiation table and present in international meetings where discussions about the future of Afghanistan are usually taking place.

Although it is true that women’s role in peace talks seems to be rather the exception than the rule and is often perceived as “symbolic” for a lot of Afghan people, the awakening of Afghan women against violence and their willingness to be a part of the reconciliation efforts are very significant. Far from being simple watchers of the events, women and young girls are in fact the real actors and contributors to peace. They claim the right to have their say in conflict resolution as citizens, most specifically in the reconciliation and reconstruction process. With regard to women’s involvement in peace building initiatives, Human Rights Watch has recently [reported](#) on the situation, saying that: *“Afghan’s women’ rights activists have persistently demanded to be full participants in peace talks, as set out in the United Nations Security Council 1325 and later resolutions”*. The recent efforts to foster peace and security for all communities as well as the statement of President Ghani who promised in 2014 to *“include women in negotiations with the Taliban at the ‘right time’”* seemingly set the stage for a deeper involvement of women in the peace process. However, even if the era is propitious, there is still much to be done to fully include women in conflict resolution measures. This points to the necessity of more efficiently including women into the real negotiations through international forums such as UN or NATO Summits. It also remains to be seen whether the presidential impetus will be followed by important and historical decisions regarding the room of women in the peace negotiations with all the Parties.

As we can observe, women and young girls have an important role to play in participating in debates, thus creating conditions for the establishment of a sustainable peace. These days they are willing to contribute to building a better society as well as a meaningful political scene in Afghanistan. Judging by the findings on the ground and the reports of various civil society organizations, women indeed make a real impact on conflict resolution and play a larger role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and even beyond. This is a major hope for an entire generation of young girls and young women who consider their participation as a chance for the future and an outstanding opportunity to change the mentalities.

About the author

Anne Marrillet holds a Master in History as well as a Master in European Studies with a major in International Politics from the European Institute of the University of Geneva. After working as Project Officer and Coordinator at the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, she specialized in Conflict Prevention and Resolution issues.