Women's Peacebuilding Roles in Afghanistan: Potent Approaches for Social Transformation

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Abstract

Before the return of the Taliban, women's roles in peacebuilding had been expanding in Afghanistan and this study focused on such roles from a social transformation perspective. The views of ten Afghan individuals familiar with the peacebuilding process were collected through a questionnaire survey to identify the paths to strengthen such roles. While a visible public process such as appointing women to influential positions is not perceived as bearing fruit, women's peacebuilding roles in the private sphere are commonly supported. Combining survey data with desk research, we argue that when the political context changes, multiple approaches should be taken simultaneously, since power relations permeate both private and public spheres and each impacts the other through the transformative peacebuilding process.

Key words

Afghanistan, women's rights, peacebuilding, political participation, social transformation

Introduction

More than twenty years have passed since the signing of the Bonn Agreement (Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, 2001), establishing a roadmap and timetable for peace and security in Afghanistan. The Afghan War was branded as the "War on Terror," and the United States government also justified it as an action intended to rescue Afghan women (Sultan, 2005). While a number of feminist advocates welcomed this policy, some scholars strongly questioned the fram-

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ing in which the "burqua," the Islamic head-to-toe garment, played a symbolic role. Their critique was that the international community needed to first understand the real needs of Afghan women before military intervention in the country and the worsening of their living conditions (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002; Khattak, 2004).

In the peacebuilding process, the international community implemented various projects to empower women and promote their active participation in society. While much progress was made, Afghan women continued to face significant challenges in exercising their rights. However, the situation worsened with the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban on August 15, 2021. The Taliban's announcement on May 7, 2022, that women should cover their faces in public and stay home, except in case of need (United Nations Mission in Afghanistan, 2022), shows how the challenges have increased.

This study was conducted prior to the political change to understand the views of Afghan men and women familiar with the peacebuilding process in the country regarding women's involvement in peacebuilding. How women's peacebuilding engagement affects power relations in society and may or may not lead to positive social transformation has not yet been scrutinized from an internal perspective. Through the participants' voices, we identified the obstacles women face in playing peacebuilding roles and considered how those roles could be enhanced. To that end, a questionnaire was used to collect data from ten participants during October and November 2016. While recognizing that the small number of participants limits the potential for generalizability, our main aim was to distill the views of the people at the frontline of peacebuilding. In addition, the data were triangulated with the existing literature and surveys. This study was part of a larger project that contained an online survey with a larger number of participants, which also assured data reliability. With the significant changes in the political context, Afghan women today are facing increasingly more difficult obstacles to participation in peacebuilding. In this context, the study contributes to recording the progress made and challenges faced by Afghan people in terms of women's participation in the peacebuilding process. It will also function as a baseline for assessing the Taliban administration's approach to women's participation.

We argue that women's roles in peacebuilding are intertwined with the transformative process in Afghanistan. Women's active involvement in the process itself will strengthen their position in and change their relationships with society. Women's participation needs to be understood in the context of a violent environment that entails different types of violence: direct, structural, and cultural

(McLeod & O'Reilly, 2019). By counteracting this violence, inclusiveness will accelerate the peacebuilding process, although this process is stalled for now.

The following section reviews the literature on women and peacebuilding. We then briefly cover the history of the status of women in Afghan society and related legislation, as well as national policy on women's rights before the Taliban's return, and the reality that Afghan women then faced. The following section presents our viewpoints on the social transformation for peace. Following the description of the research methods, the survey results are presented, followed by their analysis with reference to other academic work. The final section summarizes the way forward.

Previous Research on Women and Peacebuilding

One year before the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, celebrated as a landmark document for women, peace, and security (United Nations Security Council, 2000). First, it pointed out the need to include women in conflict resolution and peace processes, and second, it demonstrated the awareness and concern of the international community regarding the victimization of women during armed conflicts, particularly by sexual violence. This resolution was followed by numerous resolutions on women, peace, and security, reflecting the slow progress in both protection and participation. "Women, Peace and Security" became both a practical and academic agenda. Research scholars reacted by focusing on the protection and participation aspects, exemplified in a book edited by Schnabel and Tabyshalieva (2012) covering cases in the Balkans, Asia, and Africa. They offered examples of women's victimhood during conflict and of their positive engagement in peace activities. They positively considered the post-conflict stage, as

> ··· windows of opportunity during which gender relations can and should be rethought and which, ··· can serve as the right moment to "rewrite" the rules and practices that previously served as obstacles to the participation of women in society. (p. 133)

Sandole and Staroste (2015) also discussed ways to facilitate the inclusion of gender and women in conflict analysis as well as in peacebuilding, based on their contention that women's equal participation and leadership significantly contribute to peacebuilding.

From a scholarly feminist point of view, Duncanson (2016) argued for the theorization of women's economic rights, which have been neglected in peacebuilding, to challenge neoliberalism. For its practical application, she advocated for the use of gender impact assessments and gender budget initiatives in peacebuilding through a participatory approach. The Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative (IPTI) led by Paffenholz has carried out more than a dozen case studies under the theme of women's roles in peace processes. Based on these case studies, it is suggested that the modalities of participation can be varied, from official peace agreement negotiations to consultations and commission, as well as mass action. Other findings which have particular relevance to this research are the importance of women's coalitions and of conflict parties and mediators adopting inclusive attitudes (Paffenholz, Ross, Dixons, Schluchter, & True, 2016).

A growing number of studies have examined the empowerment of Afghan women and their peacebuilding work. Moosa, Rahmani, and Webster (2013) analyzed women's roles in peacebuilding at the community level in five conflict-affected countries, including Afghanistan. The authors highlighted barriers to women's participation in public life, such as patriarchal social norms, violence against women, simultaneous household and labor force participation roles, poverty, educational inequalities, and low literacy levels. They also described the work of women's rights organizations in Afghanistan and Nepal, which were expanding women's public spheres. A number of researchers have examined the progress (and lack of progress) of women's rights in Afghanistan, rather than their peacebuilding roles. Writing in the pre-election period of 2014, Van Wie (2014) highlighted the problems that female politicians face: obstacles, including threats to life, and the nominal inclusion of women by political parties to receive international support. Sultan's *From Rhetoric to Reality* (2005), based on an extensive literature survey as well as fieldwork, describes the development of the mechanisms for women's political and social participation, international aid, and assistance for women, as well as women's actual contributions in Afghanistan. Her findings include women's moderation potential and the varied levels of progress in women's empowerment in urban as compared to rural areas.

Increasingly, the literature has highlighted some progress in women's participation in Afghanistan's public sphere, but has also pointed out the significant obstacles women face. However, no research so far has focused on how women's peacebuilding roles are perceived within Afghanistan. The perception of and reaction to women's engagement in peacebuilding forms a process of social transformation within the peacebuilding context. Grounded in the existing literature on

women's rights in Afghanistan, this study specifically uncovers local perceptions of women's peacebuilding roles and investigates the measures that might enhance such roles.

Historical Context, Legislation, and Contemporary Reality of Women's Rights in Afghanistan

Historically, women's societal participation in Afghanistan has not been as restricted as in recent years. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Amir Abdur Rehman Khan's modernizations included the protection of women's rights under Islam (Khattak, 2004). Under King Zahir Shah (1933–1973), women had active and passive voting rights, and teacher training for women began in 1957. Mohammad Daoud Khan (1973–1978) followed this lead, and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) also promoted women's rights, particularly their political and economic participation. However, after the period of Soviet influence (1979–1989), the *mujahideen* factions reversed women's increased participation in the public sphere, forcing female teachers, civil servants, and doctors back into the home. Many women suffered from sexual violence during the civil war. The Taliban, who then took power, mandated the *burqah*, and women's activities continued to be restrained in the private sphere (Kandiyoti, 2007a; Sultan, 2005). This is what we are witnessing again under the current Taliban control.

Afghan laws seem to guarantee women's rights, in contrast to the reality that we will consider later. The laws relevant to gender are primarily based on Islamic principles. Article 22 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan guarantees the rights and equality of men and women and states: "Any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law" (Constitution of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, art. 22). Accordingly, a woman's right to inherit and own property is provided for under the constitution and Civil Law (Civil Law of the Republic of Afghanistan, 1977). Furthermore, the Civil Law states the minimum age of marriage (Articles 70 and 71). Based on Islamic principles, the Afghan Civil Law gives a woman the right to choose her husband (Article 80) and to appeal for divorce. The Afghan Election Law gives women the right to vote (Articles 3 and 5) and sets quotas for female representatives in the National Assembly (Article 23) (Electoral Law, 2004).

The National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), administered

by the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), was developed to empower women and achieve gender equality in Afghanistan. NAPWA envisions Afghanistan as "a peaceful and progressive country, where men and women enjoy security, equal rights, and opportunities in all aspects of life" (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2007, p. 13). In January 2002, the then President Hamid Karzai signed the Declaration of the Essential Rights of Afghan women. This declaration was drafted in June 2000 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, by a diaspora of 300 Afghan women (Sultan, 2005). It states that men and women have equal protection under the law, equal rights to education and political participation, are entitled to just and favorable conditions for work, freedom of movement, and freedom of speech, and that the *burqah* or scarf is optional. In August 2009, the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women was adopted (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Justice, 2009).

With regard to Afghanistan's adherence to international norms, Article 7 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan sets forth the following: "The state shall observe the United Nations Charter, inter-state agreements, as well as international treaties to which Afghanistan has joined, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights". Afghanistan is a party to seven United Nations human rights treaties and three optional protocols. It ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2003.

There was an improvement in women's social participation, albeit limited. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan National Statistics and Information Authority (2019) reported that women filled 86,919 (21.5%) of the 404,151 government employee positions, 96 (21.3%) of 451 provincial council members, and 261 (12.7%) of 2,061 judges were women (pp. 21, 54). In the field of politics, as of 2019, 63 of the 320 members of parliament were women, and there were 18 female ministers and deputy ministers, as well as 4 ambassadors (Ahmadi, 2019).

Afghan women's perceptions of their conditions have been reported by the Asia Foundation. According to its 15th Annual Public Survey, which included 15,930 respondents across the country, the top five challenges that Afghan women perceived as most significant were lack of educational opportunities (43.2%), lack of employment opportunities (24.1%), violence (18.1%), lack of services/infrastructure (13.7%), and economic concerns (9.6%) (Asia Foundation, 2019, pp. 229−230).[1] The country was ranked 170th in the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index in 2019. Women who actively promote gender equality and women's empowerment are harassed and their lives threatened (Sultan, 2005). Sexual and gender-based vio-

lence (SGBV) continues along with increasing levels of misogyny (Ahmad & Avoine, 2018).

Transformation of Society for Peace

Peacebuilding has been defined in various ways, yet many scholars have focused on its role in building the foundation of a society that fosters peace (Boutros-Ghali, 1992; Call & Cousens, 2008; OECD, 2012). In liberal peacebuilding, institution-building activities, such as security sector reform and democratization, have been emphasized to build the foundation (Paris, 2004; Samuels, 2005). In post-liberal peacebuilding, more attention is given to the bottom-up transformation of society (Richmond, 2010) and everyday peace receives attention through a "local turn" (e.g., Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). However, as criticized by Kappler and Lemay-Hébert (2019), peacebuilding research tends to fall into adopting a binary view, such as international and local, or national and local. Distancing ourselves from the binary perspective, we consider that peacebuilding includes the transformation process as a part of the foundation, as discussed by Lederach (2003) in the context of conflict transformation. In his view, transformation involves building better human relationships and communities. He advises the importance of concentrating on less visible dimensions of relationships in transforming conflict, which can be understood as dimensions not directly disputed among conflicting parties.

The alleged obstacle to transformation is patriarchy. According to Kandiyoti (2007b, p. 179), to simply define Afghan society as "patriarchal" would miss the actual intersections of gender and violence. She differentiates the "privatized violence exercised by kin groups and families in the service of honour and reputation" and the sexual violence systematically used by the Taliban for purposes of social control. On the one hand, the violence in public spaces demonstrates the intersectionality of economic, racial (ethno-national), and sex/gender powers as explained in feminist scholarship (Cockburn, 2010). On the other hand, Kandiyoti (2007a, 2007b) suggests that some apparently patriarchal actions could be the survival strategies of ordinary people in everyday life in a conflict-affected society. In both private and public spheres, the structure behind the violence is not only the gender dichotomy but also the complex power relationships between state and

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[1] Due to the political situation, Asia Foundation has suspended its work in Afghanistan.

armed factions, ethnic groups, family, and community, as well as between family members.

Therefore, transformation in peacebuilding in this study is considered to take place at various levels of society, not only in the state political dimension (public sphere), but also at the village level or in households (private sphere). For the transformation to address the structural and cultural violence that Afghan women suffer, their voice needs to be included in the peacebuilding process and, in turn, their participation will have a transformative effect on the prevailing power relations between men and women. As discussed by Wilén (2021), their participation should not be a nominal one, subordinated to a gendered system, but a reformation of the system in a way that enhances positive peace.

Method

As mentioned in the Introduction, this study was based on a combination of desk research and a questionnaire survey. Through a purposeful sampling approach, we selected five women and five men who were either in official or leadership positions, or knowledgeable about peacebuilding, or both. One of the authors approached each respondent either personally or through an acquaintance with the necessary access. The respondents included the Deputy Chairperson of the Afghan High Peace Council, a member of parliament, election commissioners, a provincial governor, and civil society activists. The age, gender, and position of each respondent are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
List of Respondents

Respondent code	Age	Position
F1	58	Deputy Chair, the Afghan High Peace Council
F2	45	Commissioner, Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan & lecturer in law at Kabul University
F3	37	Member, National Assembly
F4	32	Civil Society Activist
F5	29	Civil Society Activist
M1	68	Political analyst, retired professor of law and political science
M2	55	Head of a political party
M3	45	Provincial Governor
M4	50	Lecturer at Afghanistan National Defense University
M5	58	Commissioner, Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan

The questionnaire comprised open-ended questions with written responses. It was bilingual, in English and Dari, and all but one respondent answered in the latter. Our aim is to highlight the views of people who can have a noticeable impact on society, and we do not assume that the views collected in the targeted survey represent the general perceptions of the Afghan people.

The survey aimed to understand respondents' perceptions of women's roles in peacebuilding. While the Asia Foundation's surveys provided us with rich data on Afghan people's general perceptions of security, development, and political participation, our survey specifically focused on women's roles in peacebuilding. Our questions included the following: *How do you see women's political participation? Do you have any suggestions for promoting the role of women in peacebuilding in Afghanistan? What are the "key issues" of importance and challenges for women to participate in peacebuilding in Afghanistan?* We used a qualitative data analysis approach, and the results are presented below, focusing on the four themes derived from our data: ways to promote women's participation in peacebuilding roles, obstacles to women's participation in peacebuilding, political participation, and culturally acceptable peacebuilding activities for women. Our discussion will focus on the differentiation between the public and private spheres, since these appear as key words in the responses.

Results

Respondents were generally positive about women's participation in peacebuilding. Some envisioned roles for women in public spaces. A provincial governor (M3) stated that the best way to involve women in peacebuilding would be to include them in decision making with the right to speak and be heard. The Deputy Chair of the Afghan High Peace Council (F1) was of the opinion that, without women's involvement, peace would not be possible for Afghanistan. A female civil activist (F5) pointed out that women tend to have soft voices and gentle attitudes, and stated that it would be easy for women to connect with youth through social media and other communication tools to raise awareness and convince them to attend school and choose the path of peace and tolerance. These responses suggest a variety of possible peacebuilding roles for women.

How to Promote Women's Participation in Peacebuilding

A number of the survey respondents occupied policymaking positions in

Afghanistan, and they offered suggestions for promoting women's roles. One suggestion was that women's representation should be secured throughout the peace process and in negotiations and discussions with the opposition, particularly the Taliban. That involvement should not merely be symbolic, but women should actually engage in negotiations to ensure that their issues are addressed. Furthermore, women's participation is also required at the local government level:

> The Ministry of Women's Affairs must work in rural areas and appoint or select educated women to be members of community/village/district councils and also choose qualified women for provincial development councils. (F5)

One respondent commented that women's rights and privileges must be specified in the peace process. The fact that women should be made aware of their rights was highlighted. Based on such awareness, "women should . . . always raise their voices against the ruthless and use different ways for peacemaking, such as raising awareness and educating youth" (M2). Another respondent suggested, "Women, as mothers and sisters, if empowered, can play a crucial role in convincing the family to behave peacefully" (M1). It was also pointed out that Afghanistan must launch public awareness campaigns about women's participation in peacebuilding (M4).

The responses pointed to two different spaces, public and private. With regard to the former, the paths indicated by these answers are, first, to raise awareness of women's rights, and then to provide opportunities for women to present their opinions and engage in the peace process. The latter points to women's peacebuilding roles at home, which is to influence their family members.

Challenges to Women's Participation in Peacebuilding

Respondents were asked for their opinions on the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding and the challenges they face in their efforts to participate. Interestingly, most answers focused on these challenges. All the respondents mentioned security issues and cultural factors as limitations on women's participation in peacebuilding activities. One respondent stated,

> Many people think if a woman from their family learns or works beyond the house, it shames the family, so they don't allow women to learn or work outside. (M4)

The respondents also underlined the challenges posed by men and a male-domi-

nated (patriarchal) society in which men do not trust the outcomes of empowering women, and that the patriarchal Afghan society restricts women and devalues their voices and suggestions, even in peace negotiations.

There were also responses referring to women's failure to organize themselves and others that considered society in general as a challenge because of the widespread perception that women are weak and less productive than men. In addition, two major challenges pertained to the government: the lack of a clear vision, strategy, and mechanism for the peace process, and insufficient representation of women.

Political Participation

All respondents agreed that although women's political participation has increased since 2002, it remains insufficient. However, opinions regarding the extent of this insufficiency varied considerably. A parliamentarian (F3) stated that about 28% of the seats in parliament are occupied by women, and the several ministerial, deputy ministerial, and provincial governor positions held by women indicate remarkable progress toward gender equity in the social structure, but that the progress has been insufficient. She criticized the National Unity Government for its incompetent governance, but she appreciated the fact that there were women in decision-making positions.[2]

The Deputy Chair of the High Peace Council (F1) was of the opinion that women's level of political participation was satisfactory, but stressed that it should not merely be assessed on physical presence. She argued that women should have strong voices, be politically supported, and be trained in lobbying and advocacy.

An Afghan Independent Election Commission commissioner (M5) pointed out that, in the "current" government, women were ministers, deputies, ambassadors, parliamentarians, provincial council members, and members of security organs, but that their role in the peace process was invisible. Another commissioner (F2) was more critical, stating that women have never been involved in decision-making, and asserting that women represented in the National Assembly are only symbolic. Some of the respondents stated that nominating a woman to a high-level position is merely a symbolic gesture or a self-publicizing act.

The respondents were asked to share their opinions about the representation of

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2 The figures and references to the government are as of the time of survey, mentioned by the respondents.

women, specifically in the National Assembly, and their effectiveness in the peace process. They all agreed that the almost 30% representation in the National Assembly achieved by women is a good step toward empowerment. However, some respondents offered critical comments and suggestions for further improvement. First, female parliamentarians need to improve their bargaining skills because of their under-representation in the government. To date, female parliamentarians have not effectively pressured the government to increase the number of women in government (F1). Second, women parliamentarians do not fight for women's rights and do not argue against members who think women are weaker than men (M5). This means that a women's representation of almost 30% in the National Assembly has not been effectively used to improve the peace process or the status of women in Afghanistan. The third point is that women could have established a caucus in parliament but failed to do so. A unified women's block might achieve more than individual women would on behalf of women's rights (M1).

One interesting comment was that some women parliamentarians are skilled in bargaining at the international level, but at the national level, they pursue their personal interests and work only for their ethnic groups. Perhaps women parliamentarians are constrained by the societal structure in relation to domestic issues, whereas they feel comfortable asserting their views in the relatively free and flexible international environment.

The respondents agreed that if women were sufficiently qualified, they might be viewed as good partners for the government in the reconciliation process and they might be able to influence political decisions. A respondent (M3) shared the following example from his personal experience: One of his provincial government staff members was the Director of Women's Affairs, who attended meetings with opposition groups. She impressively and convincingly delivered her message to the anti-government factions. He stressed that women's involvement in the reconciliation process and peace talks is very effective and helps achieve positive results.

In sum, all respondents, regardless of gender, offered positive opinions of women's roles in the peace process, particularly regarding reconciliation. However, their level of expectation varied, and some criticisms highlighted the weaknesses of women's current roles in the political arena.

Culturally Acceptable Peacebuilding Activities for Women

In the survey, only female respondents were asked to indicate culturally acceptable peacebuilding activities available to women in Afghanistan. All the female re-

spondents agreed that obtaining knowledge and education about peace and then disseminating that information at home to their family members would be an effortless and harmonious way to work for peace that would be, to some extent, culturally acceptable. This has also been reported in previous studies (Barakat & Wardell, 2002; Moosa et al., 2013).

The female respondents agreed that women living in rural areas could work within their households to promote peace and guide their sons to choose peaceful paths. In Afghan society, the mother's role is extremely important and respected; in most families, sons never ignore their mothers. Therefore, as mothers, women influence and are able to educate and lead their children toward peace. In urban areas, women are more likely to be able to work outside the household to teach youth about peace, participate in public discussions about peace, and speak out for women's rights. One respondent (F4) commented that educated women with access to the Internet could use social networking sites to communicate about peace.

Discussion

In this section, we first discuss the results in the context prior to the Taliban's return in August 2021 and then touch upon today's context. In our survey, all the respondents with extensive knowledge of peacebuilding supported women's involvement in the peace process, including five men in leadership positions. However, the respondents pointed out that women continue to face problems and challenges, the most significant of which is the male-dominated society's distrust of new roles for women, male perceptions of women's capacities and abilities as weak, and women's low participation in peacebuilding. All respondents acknowledged that women's political participation has increased since 2002. At the same time, some voiced dissatisfaction with those women's performance due to a lack of substantial contributions. The reasons they offered included the limited capacity of women in important positions, lack of connections between women parliamentarians and other women, and absence of solidarity among women parliamentarians.

In addition to the reasons presented by our respondents, we may add the lack of support given to women in supposedly influential positions. This is described by Nijat and Murtazashvili (2015), based on interviews and focus group discussions in Afghanistan, as "little or no political support" and "little or no access to sources of both financial and human capital" (p. 5). Their study further re-

vealed that it is not only a lack of support but also harassment and threats that weaken women's positions. Such a condition "compels most of the few women in senior positions to focus on survival in the system rather than making a difference" (p. 8).

On the issue of a lack of solidarity among female parliamentarians, Cortright and Persinger (2010, p. 6) mention a complaint made by activists that many of the female members of parliament (MPs) are "aligned with warlords and vote according to their sectarian and factional interests, rather than in support of women's rights issues." An interview with a former Afghan MP and civil society activist by Nijat and Murtazashvili (2015) affirmed female MPs' ethnic, religious, political, and financial loyalties. To overcome such fragmentation and enhance solidarity, our respondents mentioned the idea of forming a caucus. The experiences of Iranian female MPs could serve as an example. Thirteen female members of the Iranian parliament with a background in civil society activities formed a caucus and succeeded in pushing for ratification of the CEDAW. Moghadam and Haghighatjoo (2016, p. 194) assert that, with a higher level of education, global connection, and increase of the middle class, together with women's higher attainment of education and political participation, "one can expect pressure to transform entrenched institutional barriers to greater political inclusion." As a result, they foresee that "cultural attitudes and gender equality norms could move in an egalitarian direction and could help to shift the gendered balance of power, which thus far has been highly masculine."

Even though female politicians in Afghanistan are assessed as weak, the 2019 survey by the Asia Foundation (2019) showed that women are generally supportive of women taking leadership positions. In response to a question about whether it is acceptable for women to have ministerial or cabinet positions, only 51.7% of male respondents gave positive responses, in contrast to 60.8% of female respondents. This trend has been consistent throughout the Asia Foundation's surveys. Women's support of leadership positions for women could be the driving force behind the transformation of society. However, we need to be aware that female politicians are disadvantaged because they do not enjoy freedom of movement, which prevents them from entering into dialogue with constituents and building support. Increased security and improved mobility will enable them to be more active and better connected to the broader base of constituents.

Unlike the public sphere, there is wide support for women's peacebuilding roles in the private sphere, meaning households, as underlined by our survey results and the literature. Through this discussion, we do not take an essentialist position but

underline how this type of women's peacebuilding role is accepted by society. Wibben and Turpin (2010) used the term "The Politics of Motherhood" to explain that a woman, as "mother," might have a great deal of influence on her children's decisions to participate or not in a conflict. Women could use their roles as mothers to be peacebuilders, which might lessen violence through their children's cumulative non-violence (Anderlini, 2007). Particularly in Islamic societies, mothers command high levels of respect and it is very difficult to challenge them. Barakat and Wardell (2002) emphasized a woman's influential position in her family as follows:

> ⋯ It is usually a mother who decides whether sons should or should not be allowed to go to the front line. In Qu'ranic teaching, the mother is the gateway to heaven, sons need the forgiveness of their mother before they can enter heaven; the power and value of a mother's *chaddar* (head covering) is critical in the mobilisation of men. (p. 920)

In this context, one interesting NGO activity, including the Western Afghan Women's Network, is to train midwives in rural Herat to advise local women to influence their sons and brothers and prevent them from joining insurgencies (Larson, 2017).

Sultan (2005) highlighted women's roles in reconciliation: "As mothers, wives, and sisters of combatants, as victims and survivors, and as individuals with powerful community networks, women play essential roles towards rebuilding society, establishing justice, and promoting reconciliation" (p. 1). This point was mentioned by several respondents as a suitable way for women to contribute. Women's leadership roles in this field will also increase their capacity. We can also refer to Ruddick's (2001) research on "mothering" and later "parenting" as a source for a culture of peace. The nurturing of culture and the transformation of society need to take place in multiple dimensions. Protecting and promoting the human rights of all individuals, including women, is a step toward the social transformation that sustains peace.

Under the Taliban regime, many of the above discussions have lost applicability because women are disappearing from the public sphere. In a gathering of about 3,000 influential Afghans held on June 30, 2022, women were not invited, but Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi explained that women were "somehow involved" as their sons would be part of the gathering (Scollon, 2022). For the immediate future, women's peacebuilding role will be limited to the pri-

vate sphere.

Conclusion

Based on the survey results and discussion above, this paper concludes by iden-
tifying the paths for stronger roles for women in Afghan peacebuilding while rec-
ognizing that most of the paths currently seem to be blocked under Taliban rule.
One dimension of the public sphere is the relationship between women and the
state government. The appointment of capable women to decision-making posi-
tions is an important measure the government could take. To perform their tasks,
the appointed women need practical support, including budget and mobility.
Access to public office should be broadened through education, including for
women of all ages, so that more women will be eligible to fill the various public of-
fices that contribute to peacebuilding. Before the return of the Taliban, the gov-
ernment had been involved in such efforts with donor support; for instance, train-
ing hundreds of new female police officers (Strand, Suhrke, Wimplemann, &
Hamidi, 2017). To some extent, women in civil society also engaged in such ef-
forts through informal education organized by women (Rostami Povey, 2003).

In the women-to-women dimension, women in leadership positions need to
build relationships among themselves and with other women, including those who
may not come out into the public sphere. Afghan women live in a society where
people are divided along ethnic and ideological lines. Relationship building was
notable earlier, as shown in the initiatives of the female members of the High
Peace Council through the collection of 300,000 signatures demanding peace and
the cessation of armed hostilities (Ahmadi, 2019), and the organization of the
"Peace Mothers' Conference" (Omar, 2019).

In the private sphere, all Afghan women can use their high status in their house-
holds to lead their husbands and sons away from militancy. While the changes in
both public and private spheres are expected to transform gender relationships in
society in general and expand the space for women's contribution to peace-
building, the present conditions are likely to enable only activities in the private
sphere.

When support for women's peacebuilding roles resumes, the government as
well as the international community may also consider supporting men's needs,
such as income generation projects. Changes in women's roles in the public sphere
are likely to be perceived as threatening to men's roles. Men may also feel ne-
glected when observing the support that women receive (Nijat & Murtazashvili,

2015). Support for men would not only benefit them but also women by reducing objections to women's participation in peacebuilding. The various serious challenges faced by Afghanistan require the combined efforts of all Afghan men and women through multiple approaches.

However, the harsh reality is that it may take a long time before we can see the expansion of women's peacebuilding roles in Afghanistan. Shortly after taking over Kabul, the Taliban abolished the Ministry of Women's Affairs and opened the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (BBC, 2021). It is now about a year since girls were excluded from secondary education. On July 1, 2022, the UN Human Rights Council held an urgent discussion on the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan, in which various statements showed anxiety over the backlash against their rights (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2022).

The diversity of Afghan women's lived experiences was underlined by Barakat and Wardell (2002) long ago, but it is still difficult to understand the complex reality on the ground, particularly in the present security situation. Our study focused on the views of urban-dwelling people in leading positions or knowledgeable about peacebuilding. This was based on the assumption that social change in urban areas has the potential to lead to countrywide change. Because of the unexpected political turn, this study serves as a record of the situation prior to the Taliban's second period of rule, and as such, the Taliban's treatment of women and girls can be compared with the picture described here. When women start returning to the public sphere, the measures discussed in this study can be applied simultaneously so that their peacebuilding roles can be efficiently reintroduced. Although the parallel emphasis on private and public spheres may appear ambivalent, the power relations between men and women permeate both spheres, and the two spheres impact each other. It is therefore important that future research into this process is carried out through the lens of intersectionality.

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