



NCA and UNSC Res. 1325: Women and peacebuilding in Afghanistan

In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted the Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, a first of its kind in setting universal norms to prevent violations of women's rights and to stress the importance of women's participation in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations and peacebuilding. Women's participation in peacebuilding is a key focus of NCA's Global Programme on Peacebuilding, both with a separate global outcome as well as mainstreaming a gender perspective under other outcomes.

For this 2016–2020 strategic period, all NCA country plans with operational peacebuilding programmes stipulate measures for increased participation of women in peacebuilding processes, by overcoming structural and normative barriers in the implementation of UNSCR 1325. This includes NCA's peacebuilding work in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has adopted UNSCR 1325 through a National Action Plan (NAP), launched in June 2015. Under its participation pillar, the NAP aims to ensure women's effective and meaningful participation in the peace process, especially in drafting of strategies and policies on peace and security promoting gender equality. NCA Afghanistan's peacebuilding programme's chief aim is to set up entry points for women's participation in their communities, serving as precedents for women's positive role in peacebuilding processes and establishing horizontal and vertical linkages with existing formal and informal peace structures.

Afghanistan's NAP for UNSCR 1325, in particular women's participation in peace processes, were key topics for in-depth discussions among national and international actors at the 3rd Symposium on Afghan Women's Empowerment in Kabul in May 2016. There was unanimous agreement on the positive and instrumental role civil society in Afghanistan has played to keep the momentum going for women's participation in peacebuilding processes; recommendations were made to maintain civil society's positive influence in this regard.¹

Peacebuilding from below, and all the way up

As the Afghan Women's Network has underscored, women in Afghanistan believe that their engagement with other women at the community level can add a lot of strength and value on peace building efforts.² With assistance from NCA and its partners, women in rural Afghanistan have established community peace structures and District Women Peace Shuras (DWPSs). During the years from 2013 – 2015, 302 women from 120 communities in Faryab, Daikundi and Uruzgan provinces, consisting of various ethnics and tribal groups (e.g. Pashtoon; Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Mohammadzai, Barakzai, Asakzai), were organized into ten DWPSs. Two, and in some cases three women, from each community were selected to be part of the DWPS structure. Subsequently, the DWPS demonstrated increased women outreach and the formation of a common platform for women from various communities experiencing an array of conflict situations. The established platform enabled women to come together and discuss their roles and challenges they face in working as peace actors.

Afghan women emphasize and call on increasing the number of women experts with peace building, conflict resolution backgrounds and who possess negotiations skills, within formal structures across the country.³ NCA's capacity development in conflict resolution, focuses on human rights, particularly women's rights, advocacy, and communication. These skills enabled women from the Faryab, Daikundi and Uruzgan provinces to develop in 2014-2015 almost 130 action plans and to mediate 178 community-level conflicts, over such issues as: irrigation water, land disputes, pasture rights, and inter-tribal conflicts. Family conflicts on, for example, inheritance rights, child and forced marriage were also addressed by these DWPSs.

Establishing linkages between DWPSs and formal peace structures has been a main component of NCA's work in promoting women's participation in peacebuilding. Meetings between DWPSs and formal peace structures (i.e. the High Peace Council (HPC), Provincial Peace Councils (PPC) and the Afghan National Independent Peace and Reconciliation Commission (ANPRC)) have been organized, allowing the DWPSs to convey women's views and concerns from a grassroots perspective to those formal and national-level peace structures. As a result, relationships have been solidified between these bodies permitting them to share their experiences, learn from each other, and share resources for managing conflicts. In 2015, a delegation of DWPSs from Faryab province visited the HPC, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and the ANPRC in Kabul. Besides acknowledging and appreciating the efforts of DWPSs, these authorities assured their support for DWPS initiatives and concrete follow-up actions were suggested. Exposure of DWPSs to relevant formal institutions on provincial and national levels has proven to be an encouraging activity for women, where they recognize the importance of their role and participation in decision-making in peace processes. There is also an increasing realization of the importance of linking formal and informal peace structures to ensure that the grassroots-level issues and problems, which fuel the large scale conflicts, are addressed.

Religious leaders, women and peacebuilding

Religious leaders in Afghanistan are important resources for peacebuilding⁴ as opinion makers, intermediaries, educators and local arbitrators and mediators.

To increase women's participation in peace processes and change people's perceptions of women's roles, NCA works at the community level with religious and traditional leaders and the male heads of households. NCA organizes dialogue sessions with the aforementioned stakeholders to discuss issues pertaining to women's engagement in the socio-economic and political arenas, and particularly their involvement and role in peace processes, in light of Islamic principles on conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. This has resulted in a tangible change on participants' knowledge, understanding and perceptions towards women's role in peace. The women from targeted areas who engaged in confirmed dialogue sessions, helped men understand the role of women by allowing them to take part in community work, and, thus, created a tangible attestation of women's involvement in their communities. This is supported by findings from surveys conducted in 2013 and 2015. In response to the question of women having a role to play in resolving community conflict, in 2015, 51.52% of the targeted population agreed that women have a positive role to play. In 2013, only 29.10% responded affirmatively to this question.

Since 2013, at district, provincial and national levels, 465 religious leaders (of whom 22% are women) have had the



opportunity to explore contentious issues of faith, identity, and peace in alternative, safe, and inclusive platforms in Afghanistan. To encourage the further exchange of ideas and knowledge, Afghan religious actors and other peacemakers have had several meetings with their various counterparts in other countries in Europe and Asia. As a result, the participants have gained a better understanding and knowledge of the key issues related to peacebuilding experiences from within the country, as well as new insights from external religious scholars, providing an impetus for change in the peacebuilding efforts. The participants also developed and implemented action plans for addressing conflicts in their respective communities and provinces. By March 2016, more than 1,100 actions by these religious had been undertaken. Many of these included sermons on women's rights, harmful traditional practices, violence against women, and women's role in peacebuilding.

One of the major successes of the project has been the increased awareness of women's roles in peacebuilding, in communities where limitations and a dearth of awareness were previously predominant. The impact of bringing male and female religious leaders together in trainings, activities and exposure visits may be the most important achievement so far in this project; which was reported as groundbreaking amongst the participants.

Change Story

At the beginning, joining a group of religious leaders and scholars was horrifying and worrying for me. I thought that they would not accept women to be part of the project and question our participation. It was the first day of the training when all the participants got together in the training hall. Not only me, but also the other female participants were very worried and nervous. One of the women participants left the training in the beginning of the workshop, when she saw men and women in the same hall. Me and the other women felt weakened when she walked out from the training.

Our worries increased when one of the religious leaders stood up and requested a separate room for women. His words discouraged but also provoked us. So we started defending ourselves by providing references from the Qur'an and Hadith, showing the role and position of women in society during presentations and through active participation. We also started discussing the issues of women participation with some non-conservative religious actors participating in the project, requesting them to communicate and clarify this with other participants.

As a group we felt very strong, not being disheartened by the challenges, rather using many ways to interact with the male participants in order to build relationship with them. But some of the women held a pessimistic view—"They will never change, no one can change their mind set towards women", they said. Reality proved these women wrong, though: On the last day of the training workshop in Kabul, we could observe a change in the attitude of these scholars. Even the one religious actor who on the first day had asked for separate rooms for male and female participants stood up and supported ideas coming from our group of women.

During the exposure visit this change became even more obvious. It was a good opportunity for both men and women participants to interact more with each other, to talk to each other and to get to know about each other's role. The study tour provided opportunities for male participants to observe the role women have played in the development of another country, making them realize the importance of women's participation, not only in peace, but also in other parts of life. By the end of the visit, the perceptions of the scholars changed so much that I and the other member of the women group got very optimistic about the possibility of changing attitudes of Afghan male religious scholars.

Female participant, May 2014

Advocating for women's inclusion in peacebuilding

NCA Afghanistan supported three round table discussions on UNSCR 1325, one in 2014 and two in 2015, in Daikundi and Faryab provinces. In these round tables, representatives from DWPSs, PPCs, the Department of Women's Affairs, and religious leaders discussed the important roles women play in peacebuilding and the support they need from government and other duty bearers. Two of the aforementioned round tables were broadcast three times through provincial public radio and TV in 2015. These are the largest national media outlets with widespread viewership and listenership in urban and rural areas of Afghanistan. As a result, communities' awareness of women's role and their achievements in peacebuilding activities has increased. Additionally, the confidence levels of the DWPS members received a major boost and they are now encouraged to actively take part in peace processes. A DWPS member said *"The [NCA and partners' project] has been very useful in empowering women to personally engage in resolving community issues and sustain peace. The Round Table Radio discussion is a very useful medium for sharing our personal experiences and all that we have achieved to inspire others, to personally engage with us in peace building or refer to us for help."*

In Daikundi province, the DWPSs advocated for women's inclusion in the PPC, which did not have female representation. With this advocacy effort, the governor of the province promised to appoint two female members from a DWPS to the PPC.

Government authorities at provincial and district levels do not always have sufficient knowledge about national plans and policies, therefore they do not take any actions towards its implementation. This was realized by NCA and partners in Afghanistan when discussing with public servants on implementation of NAP. To address this information deficit, NCA has facilitated dialogue sessions and gatherings where participants were introduced to UNSCR 1325, to better understand its role in Afghanistan and how it will be implemented in the coming future.

Some lessons learned

Overcoming initial resistance to women's participation is always challenging, and in the most conservative communities it can take a long time and many dialogue sessions with male members and community elders. The role of religious leaders as allies for change is a necessary precondition.

Exposure of DWPSs through visits to relevant formal institutions at provincial and national levels was found to be an encouraging activity for women. There is an enhancing realization of the importance of linking formal and informal peace structures to make sure that grassroots level issues and problems, which can fuel the large scale conflicts, are addressed. Beyond the concrete issues brought up, there is also an advocacy dimension in such initiatives: for example, Provincial Peace Councils become aware of the potential of women inclusion in their own structures, and at the same women's voices on peacebuilding are bought to media's attention.



A solid understanding of local conflict dynamics and synergies with provincial and national levels is key to designing and implementing peacebuilding interventions in a conflict-sensitive manner. Creating arenas for interaction contributes to attitudinal changes within and between groups. With the right understanding and grounded work, initial resistance can be overcome and positive change achieved. This not only applies to the inclusion of women, but also of other ethnic, minority, and religious groups.

Notes

¹ Kabul Symposium On Afghan Women's Empowerment And Their Role in Afghan Society - Recommendations. Kabul, Afghanistan, 20-22 May, 2016.

² Afghan Women's Network, 2016, «Voices from Afghan Women», Position Paper, September.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Borchgrevink, Kaja and Kristian Berg Harpviken, 2010, «Afghanistan's religious landscape: politicising the sacred», Policy Brief, Noref, 3 March; Palwasha L. Kakar, 2014, «Engaging Afghan Religious Leaders for Women's Rights», Peace Brief, Peace Brief, United States Institute of Peace, June 18.

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