SURVIVING WAR AND TRANSITION

PERSPECTIVES FROM AFGHAN WOMEN

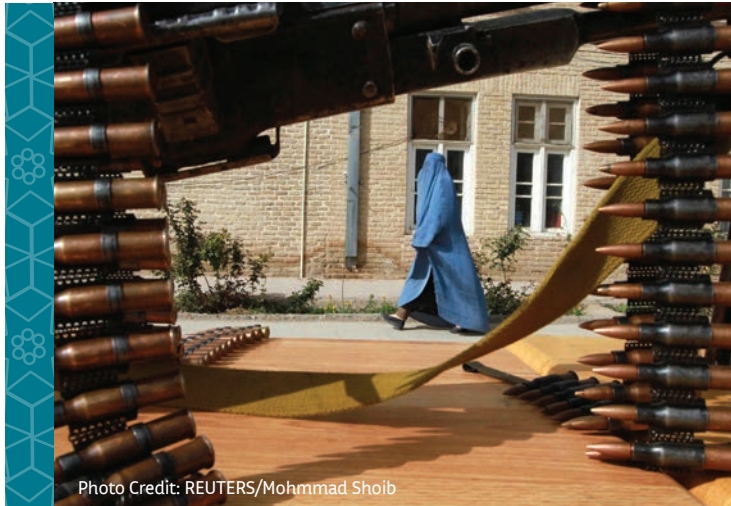**WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK**
AFGHANISTAN · PAKISTAN · INDIA

Photo Credit: REUTERS/Mohmmad Shoib

Afghan women are extremely concerned about their status and safety in this period of transition. They acknowledge that some progress has been made since 2001, especially since the 2004 constitution and the 2009 law on violence against women. They are emphasising the importance of education and awareness-building; the transformative roles of civil society and religious leaders, and the need for women's active engagement in the public sphere. The women were unanimous in their view that Afghans should drive reconstruction and development if Afghanistan is to secure a sustainable future.

PROCESS OF DOCUMENTING COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

In Afghanistan, WRN members envisioned a dialogue-based research process. They partnered with Equality for Peace and Democracy (EPD). A total of 40 Focus Group Discussions were organised, each featuring between four and six participants. Five discussions were held in each of eight provinces of Afghanistan—Kabul, Balkh, Bamyan, Faryab, Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Kunduz. In other words, the Afghanistan Community Conversations engaged approximately 160 women, including high school and university students, teachers, health care workers, civil society activists, government workers and home-makers. The findings from the Focus Group Discussions were supplemented by key informant interviews at both national and provincial levels.

KEY FINDINGS

The gap between the reality of women's lives and government commitments can be attributed to insecurity, corruption and the use of international aid as an instrument of foreign policy—all of which are consequences of conflict.

"Since the Taliban do not like Americans, anything that is renovated or built by them — bridge, clinic or school — they will burn or destroy it to show power. So we women are mainly the victims of power struggle between different groups in Afghanistan." —A student from Nangarhar province

ON SECURITY

- Far from women's rights making progress, insecurity was a likely cause of their decline. How safe women felt depended on where they were; women in Kandahar felt least safe and women in Bamyan felt the safest. Generally, urban life was seen as safer.

- While the home might be an Afghan woman's last refuge, women also spoke about violence within the home, forced marriage, honour killings, dispute settlement through exchange of girls and forced confinement to the home. Patriarchy and tradition are responsible for discrimination and insecurity, as much as the conflict conditions that prevail.

- In the public sphere, "Afghan Local Police" and other armed groups empowered by the government, as well as non-state militias are the most common perpetrators of violence against women. Women were divided on whether national or foreign forces inspired more confidence.

- Deteriorating security has long-term consequences for the life-chances of Afghan girls and women, decreasing their mobility, access to health and education while increasing the range and extremity of the violence they experience. Moreover, it strengthens the arguments of conservatives who would limit women's freedom. Absence of the rule of law and endemic corruption reinforces a culture of impunity.

- Participants see the potential of religious leaders to be agents of change, given their influence over every aspect of life.

"How can one feel secure when every day we hear from the news that someone has been kidnapped or killed? Whenever a family member leaves the house we are worried for their security and whether they will return or not. How can a person feel secure and live normally in situation like this. A few days back (there was) a suicide attack on Nangarhar airport so how can home, office and school be a safe place [if they can attack a building that is so heavily guarded]." —Housewife, Nangarhar province

ON CORRUPTION

- Corruption is seen as all-pervasive, and women make a clear link between insecurity and corruption. Furthermore, corruption both arises from and reinforces weak governance. People lose faith in government and lose hope of change.

- Anecdote after anecdote reinforced the idea that corruption was unavoidable and that in addition to monetary bribes, women were often forced into sexual favours as bribes.

- All conflict parties use corruption to increase their advantages in a given position. Poverty and conflict make this possible.

- A substantial portion of international aid has flown back out of Afghanistan through imports, contractors and consultancies. Aid delivered by foreign military forces is involving the military in humanitarian and development activities with detrimental consequences.

- "Lead from the front" echoed through the discussions; the fight against corruption depends on the removal of corrupt and tainted leaders.

"My brothers took all my father's properties and did not give anything to me and my sisters. I complained but my brother's bribed the court to take all the properties for themselves."—Health care worker, Kunduz Province

ON MILITARISATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF AID

- Most participants felt strongly that for development initiatives to be successful and sustainable, they need to be driven by Afghans themselves. However, irrespective of who runs projects, stringent accountability mechanisms need to be embedded in their design.

- Participants were most concerned about militarisation through illegal militias. Insurgent groups use military means to create insecurity which then gives them leverage with the government.

- Many thought the military delivered aid more quickly and efficiently. However, some strong reservations were also expressed. First, such aid rendered beneficiaries more vulnerable, as militias target such installations and their end-users. Second, those contracted by the military to do the work pocket the money to the detriment of the project.

- The effectiveness of aid as a military 'hearts and minds' project appears to be inconsistent. The real aim is then to leverage goodwill towards support for military purposes.

- Aid disbursed by the military was also regarded as not reflecting ground realities and not sustained.

- What would make such aid effective was Afghan civilian ownership, through involvement in conception, planning and execution.

Women in Afghanistan are living with extremely high levels of violence in both private and public spheres and with acute gender inequality. Insecurity, corruption and militarisation seem to impede any change in this situation. There is cynicism about the prospects of peace. Nevertheless, they believe in the importance of asserting and expanding their agency—as an active part of civil society and also, by expanding women's participation in the peace process.

"Increased corruption and insecurity have direct linkages. The military issues contracts for companies. These companies take all the money and provide services that are not up to standard." —A student from Nangarhar province

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- **Commit** to and advocate women's rights as a non-negotiable part of any international dialogues on peace;

- **Continue** to assist the government of Afghanistan in implementing its commitments to gender equality policies and laws, and in particular, the organs of the Elimination of Violence Against Women Bill (EVAW);

- **Continue** to provide capacity building and technical assistance and to hold accountable the justice and security sectors, for the protection and prevention of violence and abuse of women and girls;

- **Ensure** Afghan women are driving the agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment, taking the lead role in defining their legal, policy and social concerns and priorities, during the transition process and beyond.

TO THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT

- **Ensure** women's rights are a non-negotiable part of the peace process and agenda;

- **Commit** to women's meaningful and full participation at the negotiation table and in decision-making with regard to the peace, reintegration and reconciliation processes at every administrative level and in line with Constitutional guarantees;

- **Refrain** from supporting proposed laws and policies detrimental to women's rights; these violate the Afghanistan Constitution and their international obligations and commitments with regard to women's rights.

TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

- **Facilitate and promote** coordination and cooperation on women's rights work among individuals and organisations across locations and backgrounds;

- **Project** women leaders as role models for both women's rights and professional life;

- **Build** the professional capacity and confidence of women to work beyond gender sensitisation, in male-dominated sectors like the economy, security and judiciary.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Across the region, the security agenda of states has undermined the rule of law and accountability. Escalating defence expenditures, declining social funding and predatory development models that exploit national resources and marginalise and displace communities have deepened structural inequalities. The growing democratic deficit and rampant corruption are reinforcing extremist, militant and fundamentalist ideologies. As such, the region has become a playground for private and state actors with global geo-strategic interests, and people, especially women, pay the price.

THE WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK

Founded in 2011, the Women's Regional Network (WRN) is a network of individual women civil society leaders from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan working together to strengthen women's rights, to ensure peace and security in the region. WRN is animated by a vision of women working collaboratively within and across borders, to listen to and learn from each other to construct a common agenda towards equitable and sustainable development with full participation of women in building a just peace. At its launch, members of the Network identified interlinked areas of concern—militarisation, extremisms, corruption and lack of security—as a priority for all three countries. WRN networks in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan are autonomous but work in close coordination with each other. Network members in each country have invited others to join and establish working relationships with individuals and organisations working for women's rights in their respective countries.

THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

How do you take discussions about security, conflict, militarisation and governance outside elite security policy circles? How do you bring more women's voices into this discussion? How do we integrate their experiences and concerns into the security discourse? Brainstorming these questions generated the idea of Community Conversations.

The "Community Conversations" process initiated in 2011 was one of the first activities undertaken by the Women's Regional Network. It evolved organically in each of the three WRN countries, adapting to different ground realities. The resulting documents reflect this diversity clearly—the methods are different, the questions are different, the perspectives vary.

At the core, however, a few things remained the same in every country. We sought out women who live and work in remote and insecure areas to understand their experiences, fears and insecurities. Our objective was to document the impact of militarisation, extremisms and corruption on their ability to access rights and justice. The CCs emphasise women as survivors and make visible their agency in everyday life and in resistance movements. The Conversations acknowledge women's contribution to the post-conflict processes of justice, peace and social reintegration.

This process has generated rich and detailed accounts from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan of the gendered social impact of politicised violence, militarisation and corruption in conflict-affected areas. It anchors WRN's work firmly in the real world of women's experiences. While the findings of each Community Conversation process remain context-specific, by identifying the common threads and themes, WRN will create cross-border strategies and seek common solutions.

The Women's Regional Network
c/o The Colorado Non-Profit
Development Center
789 Sherman Street, Suite 250
Denver Colorado, U.S.A. 80203

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
Email infowrn@gmail.com
www.womensregionalnetwork.org

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