



Peace in Family is Peace in Society:

In today's Afghanistan, despite the rhetoric of progress in women's access to their fundamental rights, women continue to face daily threats and trauma; these include the repercussions of conflict related violence and death, endemic gender based violence, and more recently the effects of COVID 19 falls disproportionately on their shoulders. Now, more than any time in recent Afghan history, the Afghan government must commit to real action in order to realize the essential goal of transforming the lives of Afghan women to guarantee their equal but meaningful participation in political peace building. The government's commitment in this area was first articulated in July, 2015, with the adoption of the National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 and reaffirmed in June 2019 with the adoption of the Second National Action Plan. However, despite apparent activity at the national level, evidence collected through the work of non-governmental organizations, including Medica Afghanistan – Women Support Organization (MA-WSO), demonstrates that at the community level – in most districts across Afghanistan; Afghan women are not able to focus on issues related to political peace while struggling for their own survival and wellbeing and that of their children and families.

This article will therefore present an overview of the linkages between violence and war torn countries and will discuss the views and perspectives of various Afghan women regarding the meaning of 'peace'. The women emanate from five provinces (Baghlan, Herat, Kabul Mazar and Samangan) and have been clients of Medica Afghanistan, receiving legal assistance and other support from this dynamic organization¹. Through a random sampling, 1176 clients were interviewed in person, taking into consideration their age group, gender, educational and economic backgrounds.

President John F. Kennedy said, "*Mankind must put an end to war — or war will put an end to mankind.*" Afghanistan is a country that has faced thirty years of protracted war and conflict - one of the worst examples of on-going conflict in the present day world. It has adversely impacted every sector of society from structures to systems to human generations, effectively undermining harmony and prosperity. Under-Secretary-General Michelle Bachelet, the Head of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), said, "*Wherever there is conflict, women must*

¹Medica Afghanistan – Women Support Organization (MA-WSO) is a women led organization for women in Afghanistan, extending legal aid and psycho-social services for women in five provinces since 2002. For further information refer to website: www.medicaafghanistan.org .

be part of the solution.” The role of Afghan women in understanding, negotiating achieving peace and reconciliation is critical.

Hudson et al argue in their book based on ten years of empirical evidence that the higher the level of violence against women, the more likely a nation-state is to be non-compliant with international norms and the less peacefully the nation-state will behave in the international system.² In a journal article focusing on gender equality and state militarism, Caprioli (2000) draws on other sources to note that ‘societies with high levels of family violence are more likely to rely on violent conflict resolution and are more likely to be involved in wars compared to societies with lower levels of family violence’ (citing research by Brumfield, 1994; Erchak & Rosenfeld, 1994; Levinson, 1989).³ In another study Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif- Spanvill, McDermott and Emmett quantitatively analyze the ‘physical security of women’ across countries. Preliminary results find a strong and statistically significant relationship between the physical security of women and the relative peacefulness of states. The authors also found that countries with high levels of violence against women and girls (including, for example, household violence, female infanticide and sex-selective abortion) are more likely to experience armed conflict than those which do not. This is based on a Physical Security of Women Index (PSOW) used by the authors that examines the prevalence of domestic violence, rape, marital rape, and murder of women in the nation, in addition to another variant index that includes the degree to which “son preference” is present within society. This study argues that the physical security of women is one of the most important factors for predicting the peacefulness of societies. However, it also recognizes this nexus is complex, not fully understood, and likely to be a correlation as a causal relationship cannot be proven.⁴

On another note, one of the worst impacts of prolonged war in a country is the creation of violent males, desensitized to the dire results of violence and upheaval. Violence – both domestic and public – is cyclical in nature and evidence suggests that early exposure to violence and gender-based violence, (including witnessing and experiencing violence) is a strong factor in whether an adult male will use violence broadly or gender-based violence later in life. “As previously noted, studies affirm that boys who grow up exposed to violence in the childhood home are at far greater risk of perpetrating intimate partner violence later in life than those who did not.”⁵

Alternatively, in response to violence and insecurity, women may be agents of change rather than perpetrators of conflict and discord. Evidence from non-government

² Hudson, V.M., et al. (2012a). *Sex and World Peace*. Columbia University Press. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1478-9302.12087_75

³ Caprioli, M. (2000). *Gendered conflict*. *Journal of Peace Research*, 37(1), 51-68. <http://jpr.sagepub.com/content/37/1/51.full.pdf>

⁴ Hudson, V. M., Caprioli, M., Ballif-Spanvill, B., McDermott, R., & Emmett, C. F. (2009). *The heart of the matter: The security of women and the security of states*. *International Security*, 33(3), 7-45. <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/isec.2009.33.3.7>

⁵ Peacock, Dean, and Gary Barker. “Working with Men and Boys to Prevent Gender-Based Violence: Principles, Lessons Learned, and Ways Forward.” *Men and Masculinities* 17, no. 5 (December 2014): 578–99. <https://promundoglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Working-with-Men-and-Boys-to-Prevent-Gender-Based-Violence.pdf>.

organizations and women's rights organizations shows that women are active agents of peace, resolving conflicts at all levels of society with little or no recognition.”⁶ This article highlights the significance of violence against women as a barrier to peace-building, and brings forward other requirements from average lay woman’s viewpoints related to the requirements for political peace to personal daily lives. Until these requirements are addressed in their lives, women's exclusion and marginalization from peace processes tends to increase the lack of resonance of the formal peace process to all women.

With the commencement of U.S.A. and Taliban peace talks, the hopes and concerns of Afghans, particularly women, have been more publicized and discussed. Medica Afghanistan has played a role in documenting these issues. Afghan women are concerned that political deals may erode the last 18 years of women’s achievements and gains. Medica Afghanistan has been engaged in the peace process on behalf of women in civil society, providing a collective voice and visibility for a large majority of those women without voices or connections to relevant politicians and policy makers. To support the role and understanding of MA in this regard, a survey was conducted of 1,176 women in five provinces to document what ‘peace’ means at the community level, to average Afghans as reflected in their daily lives. They found that Afghans, particularly women, are focused on their future and the future of their children. Another common theme is that women believe that without their meaningful participation in peace building and reconciliation, the sustainability of peace is questionable.

Overall, in this survey it was found that 35% of the interviewees believe and understand that peace means absence of war and conflict. A further 40% believe that peace means “peaceful coexistence” while 15% share that access to economic opportunities and health care is peace for them. Furthermore, 10% of the interviewees share that the “basic means of life” means peace. Results of the MA survey demonstrate that women’s perception is not only focused on the Taliban as barriers and spoilers, but there is also concern about general communal discord. The highest percentage of responses (40%) demonstrate that “co-existence” is “peace” for interviewees. This in turn represents the level of diversity and tribal identity in Afghanistan, which has widened the distance between people. Corruption, lack of economic resources and employment, drug addiction by male member of the families, and discrimination in equal distribution of resources and opportunities based on ethnic, lingual and political values pose serious threats to community level harmony and reconciliation.

The survey demonstrates that respondents are not only concerned due to general insecurity, but also because of a lack of social protection of life and dignity of all citizens. It also reveals that 48% of the respondents are concerned for their safety and protection and for them peace represents an increase in safety in daily life and protection of their dignity. In Herat, 24% of the respondents mentioned that peace means equal access to

⁶ Zohra Moosa, Maryam Rahmani & Lee Webster (2013) *From the private to the public sphere: new research on women's participation in peace-building*, *Gender & Development*, 21:3, 453-472, DOI: [10.1080/13552074.2013.846585](https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.846585)

economic and political resources and 14% of the respondents highlight the importance of women's participation at all levels of the peace process.

In summation, insecurity, corruption and unequal access to opportunities and resources are underpinning barriers and obstacles identified by Afghans which need to be factored into 'peace indicators' by politicians and policy makers involved in the peace process we will inevitably engage. In all of this, the role and voices of women cannot be ignored or minimized.

This author's perspective is consistent with the findings of the MA survey: that the Taliban are not the only problem and not the only solution for this country, especially for women. Many other issues are to be considered such as equality in distribution of economic resources and opportunities, improvement of employment opportunities, and access to legal system without corruption and discrimination which are needed to move a society towards peace. At the end, whatever the configuration of 'peace' and a transitional government, Afghan women must enjoy fundamental basic human rights and the promise of a life within a peaceful society without conflict and violence must become a reality.

.