WOMEN'S RIGHTS ON THE LINE

Fighting for women’s rights when it matters most - peace processes

October 31, 2020 will mark the twentieth anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The resolution has generated significant global and regional commitments. This period has also witnessed a recognition that the nature of war has changed, requiring a new architecture for peace negotiations and greater inclusivity in peace processes. There has been a growing body of research supporting this view, demonstrating that women in particular are key to a durable peace. There has also been compelling research showing a positive correlation between gender inequality and increased risks of terrorism, national instability and civil wars. While the research on Combating Violent Extremism (CVE) is limited, there is compelling evidence suggesting that women, especially mothers are playing important roles in countering violent extremism. Despite these positive trends, peace processes continue to be confined to narrow processes, composed largely of men, and largely limiting women's participation.

In this discussion, we will focus on these issues in the contexts of Yemen and Afghanistan, where women are fighting to be included in efforts to bring these devastating conflicts to an end.

Background

The war in Yemen has entered its 6th year, resulting in the largest humanitarian crisis in the world. Since the 2011 uprising, multiple efforts have been initiated to end the fighting between government loyalists and Houthi rebels through a negotiated settlement. Women, who were at the forefront of the protests were initially included in these processes, securing a 30% quota in the 2-13-2014 National Dialogue Conference. They have however largely been excluded or allotted minimal space in subsequent peace efforts. Women have no official role in the current UN-brokered talks. They have attempted to influence the process through the UN Supported Yemen Women Pact for Peace and Security and managed to send seven observers to the UN-brokered talks in May 2016. In the 2018 peace talks women were allotted a 4% quota as negotiators and even this commitment was not upheld as only one woman was included in the discussions.

Intra-Afghan talks have been underway since September, raising hopes that the four decade conflict can finally be brought to an end. The stakes for women and other vulnerable groups could not be higher. They are invested in not only addressing past violations but preventing future injustices. The Taliban, which imposed the most extreme interpretation of Islam in the Muslim world when they held power, have been unconvincing in their reassurances. While they have indicated they will accept women's rights according to shariah, they have failed to clarify how their interpretation of shariah has changed since they were last in power. In areas under Taliban control, women report increased acts of intimidation, repression and restrictions of their rights, including limiting their mobility and participation in public life.
In the current talks, four women serve on the government’s 21-member delegation, and none on the Taliban team. While Afghan women had hoped for a larger quota of seats, the fact that the four women representatives are strong and credible leaders with a good track record on women's rights is promising. The issue of women’s rights will undoubtedly be a critical and contentious matter among a host of complex issues including ceasefires, the form and structure of the government, power-sharing mechanisms, the reintegration of Taliban fighters into national security structures, among other issues. Despite the Afghan government's public statements of support for women's rights, there are widespread concerns that women’s rights may ultimately be sacrificed as the two sides attempt to reach agreement on these difficult issues.

Speakers

Zarqa Yaftali is the Executive Director of the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation (WCLRF) and board member of the Women Regional Network (WRN), Gender Advisory Board and the Afghan Constitutional Network. She joined the WCLRF after graduating from Kabul University, and excelled as a researcher on girls' and women's rights in Afghanistan. With her work, she has influenced national legislation in Afghanistan. In 2019, she was awarded the N-Peace award, as part of a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) initiative to celebrate a decade of UNSCR1325.

Firyal Majdi is the project coordinator for peacebuilding projects at the Youth Without Borders Organization for Development (YWBOD), based in Yemen. She is a gender trainer and founder of several initiatives that promote coexistence and community peace. She has been an activist for peacebuilding since 2015 and has managed advocacy campaigns related to UNSCR1325. YWBOD, initially founded in 2011 as a non-official youth initiative, now cooperates successfully with a variety of partner organisations and networks for the promotion of peace and the role of Yemeni youth in this process.

Melanne Verveer is the Executive Director of the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, co-founder of Seneca Women, and co-author of the book Fast Forward: How Women Can Achieve Power and Purpose. She served as the first US Ambassador for Global Women's Issues, a position that she was nominated for by President Obama in 2009. She was the Chair and Co-CEO of Vital Voices Global Partnership, an international NGO that she co-founded to invest in emerging women leaders. She is a member of the Council of Foreign Relations and the World Bank Advisory Council on Gender and Development.

Seema Samar is the Special Envoy of the Afghanistan President and State Minister for Human Rights and International Affairs. In 2019, she was appointed as a member of the United Nations Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement and she also serves as a member of the UN Secretary General's High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation. Previously, she served as Chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), as Minister of Women's Affairs of Afghanistan, Vice-Chair of the Emergency Loya Jirga and UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Sudan.

Co-Organizers

Cordaid is an international organization for relief and development with its Global Office based in The Hague. Cordaid has been fighting poverty and exclusion in the world's most fragile societies and conflict-stricken areas for a century. Cordaid supports people in vulnerable regions and areas of conflict to build flourishing communities by creating opportunities and delivering innovative solutions to complex problems. Cordaid positions to include women and youth not just as beneficiaries, but as partners and leaders in the process of building peace, development and enhancing security within their community.

The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) is a member-led international network composed of civil society actors, practitioners, experts and academics from the Global South and Global North who work together on conflict and crisis prevention, peacebuilding and statebuilding in over 27 fragile and conflict-affected countries (FCAS). Hosted and coordinated by Cordaid, CSPPS has been acting since 2011 as the central platform where civil society ideas are generated, where progress with regard to the Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals (PSCG) and the Agenda 2030 is discussed, and where consensus is sought on the course of action to be taken with respect to the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS).

Georgetown University's Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS) seeks to promote a more stable, peaceful, and just world by focusing on the important role women play in preventing conflict and building peace, growing economies, and addressing global threats like climate change and violent extremism. The institute does so by engaging in rigorous research, hosting global convenings, advancing strategic partnerships, and nurturing the next generation of leaders. Housed within the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown, the Institute is headed by the former U.S. Ambassador for Global Women's Issues, Melanne Verveer.