



BETWEEN WAR & PEACE

THE AFGHANISTAN ESSAYS

The Woman Question:

Gains at Risk

Ammara Durrani

The Afghanistan Essays

This 2018 short-essay series by the Jinnah Institute (JI) reflects a range of Pakistani thought leadership on Afghanistan and its complex history with Islamabad. With the region in the current crosshairs of a seemingly intractable conflict, these essays attempt to spur old and new thinking on the history of Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and existing challenges. The essays cover a range of subject matter on Afghanistan-Pakistan including efforts for peace and reconciliation, threats to security, the broader geopolitical dynamic, and the role of civil society and economy.

This essay titled 'The Woman Question: Gains at Risk' explores the critical importance of women in any viable settlement in Afghanistan, and highlights the role of gender in the country's current socio-political, economic and security discourse. It traces the gains made in recent years and the inherent dangers associated with reversals therein.

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THE WOMAN QUESTION:
GAINS AT RISK
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Shifting Goal Posts: Winning a War or Building a Nation?

In the hours following US President Donald Trump's August 21, 2017 policy speech on a 'new' strategy for the 16-years old war in Afghanistan, renewed concern over the status of women in the endgame emerged after media reports suggested that President Trump's National Security Adviser, Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, used a 1972 photo of Afghan women in miniskirts to show the President that Afghanistan had enjoyed Western values well before western clothing was banned under the Taliban regime.

"One of the ways McMaster tried to persuade Trump to recommit to the effort was by convincing him that Afghanistan was not a hopeless place. He presented Trump with a black-and-white snapshot from 1972 of Afghan women in miniskirts walking through Kabul, to show him that Western norms had existed there before and could return."¹

In an environment clouded with policy confusion, opacity and indecision on Afghanistan, this news was received with satirical comment and also contextualized with the President's own personal history with women coupled with perceived lack of foreign policy knowledge. "This is creepy, considering Trump's history with women," observed one American political commentator:² "Afghanistan wasn't worth the fight unless they could be culturally colonized?"

For two reasons, this anecdote is relevant to how the war in Afghanistan has unfolded and where it may be headed. First, it points to how the status of Afghanistan's women has gradually emerged as an international issue. The Taliban regime (1996-2001) became an international outcast because it curtailed fundamental freedoms, particularly targeting women. The Taliban's version of Afghanistan was seen by the West as an ugly aberration in a post-Cold War international order that was heralding a new international relations ethos based on the globalization consensus and the 1995 Beijing Platform gender agenda.

1 "It's a hard problem": Inside Trump's decision to send more troops to Afghanistan", The Washington Post, August 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/its-a-hard-problem-inside-trumps-decision-to-send-more-troops-to-afghanistan/2017/08/21/14dcb126-868b-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_trumpdecision-838pm-winner-new%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.dff9b16dbd01.

2 <https://twitter.com/JamilSmith/status/899969778231660545/photo/1>. Also see a very good critique by Alex Shams, "The Weaponization of Nostalgia: How Afghan Miniskirts Became the Latest Salvo in the War on Terror", September 6, 2017, <https://ajammc.com/2017/09/06/weaponization-nostalgia-afghan-miniskirts/>

International attention on Afghanistan, lukewarm since the Geneva Accords of 1988, re-focused on not just the rise of the Islamist Taliban but also on its treatment of women. Western media's portrayal of the plight of Afghan women under the Taliban propelled Afghanistan's 'woman question' onto the global imagination. Women in Afghanistan's pre-Taliban era had largely been seen in the frame of refugee-turned-icon Sharbat Gula, pictured as 'Afghan Girl' on the cover of the June 1985 edition of the *National Geographic* magazine. The world had been used to seeing women as conflict refugees, in Afghanistan and elsewhere. But the Taliban's anti-women agenda compounded and transformed it into an international rights alarm.

Second, McMaster's miniskirts photo illustrates how America's rationale for its presence in Afghanistan has evolved since 9/11.

There is general consensus that American policy change on Afghanistan and the Taliban regime immediately after 9/11 was a geo-strategic security calculation. It was not driven by an altruist agenda in service of human or women's rights, societal reforms or nation-building. The Taliban's ten-year rule came to an abrupt end because of their tactical mistake of hosting Osama Bin Laden and refusing to surrender him on the pretext of ancient Pakhtunwali traditions.

Would the Fate of Afghan Women Have Changed, Had 9/11 Not Happened?

The global War on Terror's (WoT) theoretical framework was still in infancy and the world was struggling to comprehend its rationale and objectives, not without criticism and resistance. Hence, the fall of the oppressive Taliban regime provided an opportunity to add a compelling and universally acceptable ideological dimension to the military invasion of Afghanistan – liberating the oppressed and violated Afghans from the Taliban and putting them on a path of nation-building along Western democratic ideals.

Since then – and in parallel to fighting the Taliban – the US has invested billions of dollars

WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

Born with Challenges:

Total Afghan Population (inside Afghanistan): 29.2m (2015)
Men: 14.2m (51.3%); Women: 13.5m (48.7%) (2015)
Life Expectancy: 63 (2016)
Poverty: 35.8% (2011)
Human Development Index Rank: 169th Low (2016)
Gender Inequality Index Rank: 154th Low (2015)
Fertility: 4.8 per woman (2016)
Maternal Mortality (per 100,000): 396 (2015)
Females 25yrs+ with secondary education: 8.8% (2015)
Female University Graduates: 20.8% (2015)
Female Labor Force Participation: 19.1% (2015)
Female Unemployment: 36.8% (2014)
Gender-based Violence Cases: 1,863 (2015)

Indicators of Progress:

Seats in Parliament: 27.4% (2016)
Ministerial Level Positions: 16.7% (2016)
Civil Service: 21.9% (2015)
Judiciary: 12.3% (2015)
Provincial & District Governorship: 2.2% (2015)
Afghan National Police: 1.7% (2015)

Instruments of Change:

Anti-Harassment Regulation & Family Law (2016)
National Action Plan for Women Peace & Security, Under UNSC 1325 (2015)
Afghanistan's Transformation Decade Plan (2015-2025) aligned with UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030), led by Ministry of Economy
Elimination of Violence Against Women Law (2009)
Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (2002)
Ministry of Women's Affairs (2001)

Sources: World Bank; UNDP; UN Women; UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan; Afghanistan Central Statistics

on the reconstruction of Afghanistan,³ in which women's rights-based protection, development and progress has rightly figured prominently and cross-cuttingly. It also paved a 'moral' way for development and military assistance extended by allies from Europe, Asia, the Middle East and global multilateral institutions to support a larger international project of nation-building for transforming Afghanistan into a modern, democratic and civic polity that eschews women's rights and development as one of its foundational pillars. Many of these development actors had already been working on the ground in Afghanistan since the Jihad years. In the post-9/11 Afghan nation-building project spear-headed by the US, its allies' scope of work also found new theoretical and operational impetus.

This WoT-inspired model of US development assistance (implemented through civil and military programs in Iraq and Afghanistan) was ardently followed by the administrations of Presidents George W. Bush Junior and Barack Obama from 2001-2016, though not without criticism of its questionable impact and accountability failures, creating "systemic corruption" in Afghanistan.⁴

The Theory of Change behind this model has been the assumption that Afghanistan's gendered development as a modern nation-state will mitigate the influence and presence of jihadist/radicalized elements, prevent another takeover by an Islamist regime, and restore (Western) order and civilization to the world's last remaining frontier.

Conversely, President Trump's sharp electoral rhetoric opposing America's policy of fighting distant wars and building other nations threatened to put a stop to the Afghan nation-building enterprise. At stake was not only an entrenched 16-year US geo-military footprint in the Asian heartland, but also a heavily-funded and institutionalized public-private sector project that faced premature abortion because of Trump's isolationism. The nation-building model could not yield 'results' unless implemented over decades of multi-generational interventions.

Thus, the Trump White House was fundamentally divided on which lens to apply on Afghanistan for a new policy: a purely military lens or a nation-building lens?

Thereafter, McMaster's deft playing of the miniskirts image has sought to apply gendered nation-building as a means to positing America's militarized victory as an end. It creates a useful and projectized before-and-after binary for Washington to craft a vision and (still-unaccomplished) mission statement that can justify continuation of a costly expedition for which there are now few takers at home and abroad. It also gives us a clue to the potentially acceptable form of peace America wants in Afghanistan before exit – a peace symbolized by free, educated and confident women (not necessarily attired in miniskirts) walking in Afghanistan's streets.

McMaster's analogy has worked. US military engagement in the region has been reinforced, although there have been some narrative changes vis-à-vis conditionalities on Afghanistan to ensure bang for buck, increased pressure on Pakistan, and opening the field for India to play a larger role in Afghanistan.

3 Sahadi, Jeanne, "The financial cost of 16 years in Afghanistan", CNN Money, August 22, 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2017/08/21/news/economy/war-costs-afghanistan/index.html>.

4 "US aid fuelled corruption in Afghanistan, watchdog says", Financial Times, September 14, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/84fa-ca7a-7a8d-11e6-b837-eb4b4333ee43>.

Washington has emanated mixed-signals about how far it is prepared to continue its nation-building efforts in terms of funding levels and mechanisms.⁵ But the overall framework of military sticks with development carrots remains intact -- much to the relief and glee of Afghanistan, other development partners, and the small but critical mass of an aspiring and ambitious Afghan politico-civic society now well established in Kabul, including a sustainable measure of dynamic women's representation.

State of the Empowerment Play

In this reconstruction and nation-building context, how well have women fared in the post-Taliban Afghanistan?

Compared to Hamid Karzai's government, President Ashraf Ghani's National Unity Government (NUG) in Kabul has arguably done more to mainstream women in its governance agenda and policies. The NUG's agenda has also been systematically integrated with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, levying a cross-cutting premium on gender-based development. According to the UN, the combined efforts of the government, the international community and local organizations have resulted in "substantial progress" for women and girls⁶ in Afghanistan:

"[More] women are now holding positions of power than at any other time in history: 27.7 per cent of the seats in parliament are held by women, four ministries and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission are led by women and three women have been appointed as ambassadors. Afghanistan is one of only two South Asia countries [not Pakistan] with a National Action Plan in place for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325, evidence of a commitment to promote women as participants in leadership and peace building."

To the geographical extent that security has allowed, key fundamentals have been put in place for systematic socio-cultural, political and economic development of women. This includes improved female literacy and education, better healthcare, and enhanced economic growth and labor force participation (see Box: Women in Afghanistan).

On the other hand, women continue to face pervasive structural and societal challenges of violence, oppression and discrimination, most intensely in the nearly 40% of the areas under the Taliban control or influence. The government's legislative and institutional efforts for their protection, representation and empowerment continue to face resistance at political and public levels. For instance, implementation of the Elimination of Violence Against Women law and the UN SCR 1325 National Action Plan faces serious bottlenecks. Nevertheless, the quantum of women's empowerment is growing. More visible is the restoration and return of women in Afghanistan's public life in the form of female politicians, parliamentarians and administrators; justice and security officials; journalists; civil society leaders/activists; businesswomen; medics, educationists; academics; creative artists, sportswomen, and other professionals.

⁵ "Tillerson Defends Trump's 'End to Nation-Building' Stance On Afghanistan", NBC News, August 22, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/video/on-afghanistan-tillerson-defends-trump-s-end-to-nation-building-stance-1029975107900>. Also see critique by Crowley, P.J., "Nation-building is the only way out of Afghanistan", The Washington Post, August 25, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/nation-building-is-the-only-way-out-of-afghanistan/2017/08/25/2f99a410-890b-11e7-961d-2f373b3977ee_story.html?utm_term=.0c3cde7b780d.

⁶ UN Women Afghanistan, <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/countries/afghanistan>

These successes point to an indigenous female desire, spirit and cultivated narrative speaking for its resilience, talent, aspiration and struggle against the odds of war and regressive societal norms – a narrative that finds resonance and support from the international community.⁷ In turn, this narrative gives reason to continue the nation-building project until acceptable levels of social progress and cohesion are achieved. To measure that progress, therefore, women will need to be configured as key stakeholders in Afghanistan’s endgame.

A Seat at the Negotiations Table

Interestingly, the lines between Afghanistan’s domestic and security-foreign policy are blurred: its domestic problems also form substance for its external policies. Women have been engaged on domestic fronts, but they have not been given sufficient space to speak on security and foreign policy. This has direct implications not only for women’s agenda but also for Afghanistan’s peace and stability.

The Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (2010-2012) opened a space for women in the High Peace Council, a body established by Karzai to initiate a formal peace process with the Taliban.⁸ Consequently, women were engaged not only in the High Peace Council, but also in ministries and provincial peace councils. A historical milestone was reached when a group of women attended an informal face-to-face meeting with the Taliban in Norway in 2015.⁹ But in the Afghanistan-Pakistan-US-China Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), Afghan women have had no visible representation.

A seat at the table is important for another reason: the Taliban have closely watched the state of play of women’s progress, factoring in the role of women in a future political calculus. Recent reports inform about a set of women-specific pre-conditions by the Taliban for agreeing to a negotiated settlement.¹⁰ They are willing to accept the Afghan Constitution and future elections, but have asked for guarantees on amendments to the constitution envisioning an Islamic system of governance on the following women-specific lines (among other points):

- Acceptance of education for boys and girls at all levels, but segregated by gender;
- Employment of women in all fields, including defense and judiciary, except the Supreme Court;
- Constitutional guarantee that a woman could not be President.

It is plausible that the Taliban understand the impact of gendered nation-building in countering their influence on the Afghan people. While they have demonstrated a willingness to accept developmental reforms that legitimize, support and enhance their power-hold, they have resisted fundamental shifts in the gender equation that could alter the balance of state and institutional power away from them (men) towards women. It also explains why the Taliban have called upon Afghans to plant more trees in line with a global climate change agenda,¹¹ but will not allow a woman to become the President of Afghanistan.

⁷ For examples, see: “Afghan girls team shines at US robotics competition”, Al Jazeera, July 19, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/afghan-girls-team-shines-robotics-event-170719051830661.html>; “Afghan [Woman] Refugee Completes Historic Flight Around the World”, National Geographic, October 4, 2017, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/10/shaesta-waiz-youngest-woman-fly-solo-around-world-afghan-refugee-spd/>; and “All-Female Orchestra From Afghanistan Is A Force for Change”, National Public Radio (NPR), January 31, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/01/31/512592727/all-female-orchestra-from-afghanistan-is-a-force-for-change>.

⁸ Samadi, Wadia, “A Seat at the Table: The Evolving Role of Afghan Women Peacebuilders”, August 17, 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/womenandgirls/articles/2017/08/17/a-seat-at-the-table-the-evolving-role-of-afghan-women-peace-builders>.

⁹ Ibid.

Securing the Gains

Improved gender indicators and regular appearance of inspiring success stories in the media are proof that both individual and collective agency for women has increased, at least in urban Afghanistan. Doubtless, this has been made possible by the sustained political and policy commitment of Kabul, the US and the international community. But women's agency will increase further only if its active role and participation is ensured in political developments including upcoming elections, peace negotiations, national and sub-national governance, and economic activities of Afghanistan. Equally worrisome is the mainstreaming effort that is exclusive to Kabul's "centralist impulse" and limited in its regional outreach. This risks failure and alienation of local governments that are already showing signs of turning back to *shuras* and *jirgas*.¹²

The current conflict situation in Afghanistan is in flux. The stakes for an endgame have increased manifold, from being exclusively political in the past to now including important economic and socio-cultural factors that differ for each stakeholder involved in this conflict. In this scenario, small but significant gains made by Afghanistan's nascent gender mainstreaming effort remain fragile and vulnerable to reverses. It is evident that women's sustained political and economic participation hinges on a negotiated settlement between the US and the Taliban. But as current events point to the US taking a hardline stance vis-à-vis the Taliban, prospects for a negotiated settlement will become more problematic. Therefore, it is all the more important that negotiations and dialogue are given a chance to ensure people-centric sustainable peace and development in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's deliberately segregated counter-approach to negotiations does not augur well for women's fledgling empowerment agenda. Their terms for a negotiated settlement are openly biased against women. They deliberately seek to set a thick glass ceiling on urban women's growing aspirations and agency for change. On the other hand, and beyond McMaster's miniskirts photo, Washington has not explicitly made the woman question a non-negotiable condition for dialogue with the Taliban. On the contrary, the shocking news in November of the US Department of Defence advising American soldiers to ignore child sex abuse in Afghanistan "as a culturally acceptable phenomenon"¹³ points to Washington's increasing nervousness and desperation in the battlefield. As Washington injects a new urgency into efforts on the ground, such reports indicate its preference for a settlement agenda that is heavy on securing short-term geo-political interests at the cost of long-term societal gains in which it has invested billions over 16 years.

The gains for Afghanistan's women can only be secured for sustainability, if the National Unity Government in Kabul, Washington's allies (especially U.K. and Europe), the U.N., and the global rights watchdog and civil society communities put unequivocal pressure on the US as well as all regional actors involved in any peace process to commit to ensure that any agreement with the Taliban is not made explicitly at the cost of women, children and other vulnerable segments of the local population.

10 "Afghan spy chief Stanikzai speaks with Taliban nearly every day: report", August 30, 2017, <http://1tvnews.af/en/news/afghanistan/31026-afghan-spy-chief-stanikzai-speaks-with-taliban-nearly-every-day--report>.

11 "Taliban leader urges Afghans to plant more trees", BBC, February 26, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39094578>.

12 "Women and Sustainable Peace: Reflections from Afghanistan", December 2, 2010, <https://www.odi.org/events/2497-women-and-sustainable-peace-reflections-afghanistan>.

13 "U.S. troops told to ignore child abuse in Afghanistan", Dawn, November 18, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1371275>.

Furthermore, the Organization for Islamic Cooperation and Muslim states like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, Central Asian Republics, U.A.E. and other GCC members -- who have overt and covert ties with the Taliban and who are also signatories to the U.N. rights and U.N. SDGs frameworks -- must exert their full influence and role to promote and secure women's agenda in any peace deal with the Taliban.

The justification to invade and liberate Afghanistan 16 years ago must be put to its ultimate test by transferring complete power to the Afghan people and with complete and nonpartisan protection of and constitutional commitment to women's rights and empowerment. The best way to ensure this will be to immediately give a decision-making place and voice to women on the negotiations table.