



A just peace?
The legacy of war
for the women of
Afghanistan

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Executive summary

October 7 2011 marks 10 years since British and American forces intervened in Afghanistan, responding to the threat to global security following the attacks of September 11 2001. At the time, alongside claims that this intervention would destroy Al-Qaeda's operational capability and bring democratic governance, peace and the rule of law, the status of women in Afghanistan was cited as one of the justifications for military intervention.

Ten years on, international troops have started to leave Afghanistan, with a full withdrawal expected by 2014-15. At the same time the US and other governments, as well as the Afghan government, are seeking peace talks with the Taliban, with the aim of bringing them into a political process that secures a lasting national settlement.

It is a critical time for Afghanistan, but particularly for Afghan women who fear they could lose the fragile gains in women's rights made since the fall of the Taliban.

It is in this context that this report examines what has changed for Afghan women in the last decade, and what prospects there are for retaining any of the positive achievements during this rocky time of transition and reconciliation.

ActionAid has also carried out a rare survey of 1,000 women in Afghanistan – one of the very few times that Afghan women have been asked their opinion on the last 10 years of war and a possible Taliban return to power. It reveals that 72% of Afghan women believe their lives are better now than they were 10 years ago, while 37% think Afghanistan will become a worse place if international troops leave. A massive 86% are worried about a return to Taliban-style government, with one in five citing their daughter's education as the main concern.

And with good reason – they remember all too well what life was like under the Taliban. Going out to work or school was forbidden and access to healthcare was difficult. Women could not leave the house without a male relative and, even with this escort, had to wear a burkha outside the home.

After the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan put in place a new constitution that enshrined equal rights for men and women. Women are free to be educated and to work. They serve as government ministers and MPs, and work as doctors, teachers, professors, entrepreneurs and lawyers.

These are significant achievements. However, huge challenges remain, with many women still denied basic rights.

ActionAid believes that including women in the peace, reconciliation and transition processes is the best means of safeguarding and furthering women's hard-won civil freedoms and human rights.

However women's rights groups in Afghanistan say they are being kept in the dark regarding the talks with the Taliban, as well as being frozen out of an important international conference on the country's future and transition of power, which will take place in Bonn, Germany in December 2011.

Women who have stood up for women's rights in the past 10 years are also worried about their own personal safety if the Taliban returns to power, with some activists making plans to leave the country.

ActionAid believes that women's human rights are a non-negotiable part of any political settlement and is calling on all parties involved to make public statements of their commitment to equal rights for men and women – including women's right to education, to work, and to participate in public life.

In addition the UK government and the international community must develop a systematic approach towards supporting women who have defended human rights.

ActionAid has already started lobbying the UK and Afghan governments to make sure that women make up at least 30% of participants in all peace and reconciliation processes.

A goal of intervention: women's rights

“The international community used women as an entry point into the country – they said they were here to protect women's rights.”

Asila Wardek, Director of Human Rights and Women's International Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The status of women in Afghanistan now and their prospects for the future is a good litmus test of the level and quality of democracy and peace that has been achieved, and the extent to which the UK's mission has been a success within the terms that it set out 10 years ago.

In 2001 the defence of women's rights was promoted as a goal of intervention in Afghanistan by the UK government and the international community. Assurances were given to the women of Afghanistan that men and women are of equal value and hold equal rights.

“When the Taliban came to power they announced that girls' schools must close. They announced that the only place for a woman was in the house or the grave.”

Belquis, 56, a teacher from Mazar-e-Sharif

For example, in November 2001, just a few weeks after the invasion of Afghanistan, President Bush's weekly radio address to the nation was given by First Lady Laura Bush, who said the fight against terrorism was “also a fight for the rights and dignity of women”.

Immediately after her speech, the State Department released an 11-page report on the Taliban's ‘war against women’, detailing the systematic repression of women in Afghanistan: girls could not go to school or university; women were very rarely allowed to work; they were denied access to healthcare; they had to wear a burkha outside the home, but could not leave their homes without a male relative.¹

In the same month, then Senator Hillary Clinton wrote: “A post-Taliban Afghanistan where women's rights are respected is much less likely to harbor terrorists in the future. Why? Because a society that values all its members, including women, is also likely to put a higher premium on life, opportunity and freedom – values that run directly counter to the evil designs of the Osama bin Ladens of the world.”²

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said international aid to a new Afghan government would only be given on condition that Afghan girls and women had their rights restored.³ And shortly after the invasion, the prime minister's wife, Cherie Blair described the “repression and cruelty of the joyless Taliban regime” which denied the basic rights of education and employment to women.⁴

Even years later, UK politicians still said publicly that women's rights were a justification for war. Mark Malloch Brown, former UK foreign office minister for Africa, Asia and the UN said in 2009: “The rights of women was one of the reasons the UK and many in the west threw ourselves into the struggle in Afghanistan. It matters greatly to us and our public opinion.”⁵

Ten years of change

“All women’s achievements are very fragile. With a change in government it all could collapse.”

Dr Soraya Sobhrang, Commissioner, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission

How much has changed for Afghan women since 2001? Most of the women interviewed during the research for this report said there were huge differences in the lives of women since the fall of the Taliban.

There is a new constitution which enshrines equal rights for men and women, and new laws, for example to end violence against women. Afghan girls and women attend schools, colleges and universities. Women serve as government ministers, have been elected to the lower house of parliament and appointed to the upper house, while one is a provincial governor. They are visible as doctors, teachers, professors and lawyers. They work in shops and own businesses. Of the women surveyed for ActionAid, 66% said they felt safer now than they did 10 years ago and 72% believe their lives are better. And some women activists believe that as well as changes in laws, entrenched discriminatory attitudes are also starting to shift, albeit slowly.

- 39% of children who attend school are girls
- 27% of MPs are women (higher than the world average)
- 5% of positions in the army and police force are filled by women
- 25% of government jobs are filled by women⁶

These achievements are real and should not be underestimated. Yet huge challenges remain and too many women are still denied rights that should be taken for granted. Even now, a woman who runs away from home to escape domestic abuse is seen as dishonouring her family and often loses the right to see her children.

Forced and child marriage are common and only 13% of women are literate (the figure for men is 43%). Eighty-seven per cent of all women in Afghanistan suffer domestic abuse, according to a UN survey⁷ and life expectancy for both men and women is around 45 – more than 20 years lower than the world average. The Save the Children index this May described Afghanistan as the worst place in the world to be a mother – one in 11 women perishes in pregnancy (one every 30 minutes) while one child in every five dies before reaching its fifth birthday.⁸ This means that every mother in Afghanistan is likely to face the loss of a child. And many women remain isolated. The ActionAid poll found that four in 10 women never leave their village or neighbourhood.

In 2008 the Afghan government launched the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) – a 10-year plan to implement commitments to women. At the time it was hailed as a success for women by donors, but critics say it has since lain dormant without support from the international community, including the UK.

And other successes also need careful examination, as, just 30 years ago, Kabul society, admittedly unlike much of the rest of the country, was relatively progressive compared to its neighbours. In 1964 a new constitution gave women the right to vote and enter politics.⁹

Even now, for example, many of the women in parliament are excluded from decision-making or are unable to participate effectively due to lack of money or political networks.

Seema, 17, a student from Mazar-e-Sharif, was lucky that she was taught by her father at home during the Taliban years.

“For three years under the Taliban I didn’t go to school, I had to stay at home,” she said. “So when the Taliban left I was very happy to be able to come back to school and study. Things are better now than in the past. The Taliban don’t see women as human – they don’t let them work or study or be in the government. I want to be minister of health and help women and children.”



Shogofa, 18, from a village in the western province of Herat, suffered 65% burns after setting herself on fire.

“I had suffered so much abuse from my husband and my in-laws that I could not take it anymore,” she explained. Shogofa’s husband is now refusing to let her see their daughter, but she is fighting him in the courts with the help of ActionAid partner, Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA).

PHOTO: JENNY MATTHEWS/ACTIONAID

It is also important to note that it is not only the Taliban who repress women. Many features of Taliban rule were present before they came to power and are still common in many areas of Afghanistan, particularly outside the cities.

For example, recent government attempts to change the laws regarding shelters for abused women and children have been criticised as an attempt to control women and give more power to husbands and families of women trying to escape abuse.

In addition the changes that have happened are far more pronounced in cities than in rural areas, where most people live. Women in rural areas, and particularly in the more conservative southern provinces, still face threats, restrictions and violence related to working outside the home.¹⁰

As Asila Wardek, Director of Human Rights and Women’s International Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, says: “In Kabul you can see things are progressing, but in other areas of the country there is not a major change in the lives of Afghan women.”

It is clear that women in Afghanistan are becoming more afraid of their uncertain future. They are afraid because of the security situation, which has deteriorated in recent years, afraid that the achievements in women’s rights over the past 10 years are fragile and could be easily overturned, and afraid that their rights could be traded away by the international community and the Afghan government for a peace that will not include them. Our survey found that almost 90% of Afghan women were worried about a return to Taliban-style government in Afghanistan, with one in five citing their daughter’s education as the main concern.

An insecure future?

“Women are the most vulnerable if the Taliban return. Women will be back in their homes like prisoners.”
Homa, a teacher from Mazar-e-Sharif

Almost every woman ActionAid interviewed for this report cited security as the main concern in their lives – above worries over income, employment, health or education. As Fawzia Koofi, an MP who says she will stand for president in the 2014 election, said: “The biggest problem for everybody is security because if you don’t have security you cannot plan for the economy, you cannot plan for education, you cannot plan for health. If you are a secure state then you can cope with other problems of corruption, good governance, all of these issues can be dealt with, but if you are afraid that you might get assassinated in your bedroom how can you be hopeful to plan for tomorrow?”

Activists say women’s rights were slowly but steadily improving after the fall of the Taliban, but this stalled in 2005-2006 when the security situation worsened as the Taliban insurgency gained ground.

Dr Nelab, a 30-year-old doctor from Mazar-e-Sharif, said:

“Things are incomparable now to the time of the Taliban. Then no one could go out, now women have rights. But the change from then to now is not actually as much as I was expecting. That is because of security and I am afraid the situation will get worse and worse. Security is the big issue for us.”

“After the fall of the Taliban things got better. But then gradually, after 2006, the situation got worse,” says Selay Ghaffar, executive director of ActionAid partner HAWCA. “All these efforts were undermined because of security and the presence of people who committed crimes and abuses in the past who are still in power. Girls’ schools shut down, acid was thrown in girls’ faces, schools were burnt down.”

Now, despite 10 years of war, there is a real possibility that the Taliban and other insurgent groups could return to power as part of a power-sharing government. International troops will be withdrawn by 2014-15 and the Americans have admitted they are

talking to the Taliban to cut a deal to prevent a civil war when they leave.¹¹

Some women’s rights activists fear this means the international community will do a peace deal with the Taliban in order to speed up the withdrawal of troops and call that a victory – but without safeguarding women’s involvement and interests during the peace negotiations.

And despite the early statements from international leaders, women’s rights seem to have been deprioritised as the military operation against the Taliban and other insurgents has been stepped up. In a speech last year, British Prime Minister David Cameron said Britain was in Afghanistan purely for national and security interests. “We are not there to build a perfect democracy, still less a model society. We are there to help Afghans take control of their security and ensure that al-Qaeda can never again pose a threat to us from Afghan soil. A hard-headed, time-limited approach, based squarely on the national interest,” he told the Conservative Party Conference.¹²

The transition process, whereby international troops leave Afghanistan in a phased withdrawal ending in 2014-15 and Afghan forces take over security, and the reconciliation process, which concerns peace talks with the Taliban and others, have different, although associated sets of problems. In both these processes, the involvement of women falls short of what is necessary to ensure that progress on the rights of women continues and that the gains in women’s welfare and justice from the past 10 years are not overturned.

In September last year the Afghan government set up a High Peace Council – a 79-member body which is tasked with talking to the Taliban. There are just nine women on the council and many women’s rights activists say they hold merely symbolic positions and are not part of the real negotiations.

“As a woman I am very worried at the process that has started,” Selay Ghaffar said. “The process is not transparent. It is not clear what is going on behind the scenes. Women have to be involved in this process.

“There are negotiations going on with the Taliban, but no one knows in reality what is going on. It is an underground process. Women are the victims and everyone is playing with their future.”

Dr Soraya Sobhrang, Commissioner, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission

We hear the Taliban has made it a condition to change the constitution. So we think there will be compromise and our rights will not be guaranteed at the table. We do not want to accept any deal with Taliban and other groups who are responsible for international crimes in this country.”

Asila Wardek at the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs agrees that the transition and reconciliation processes are a major concern for Afghan women. “We don’t want to lose all the achievements from the past 10 years. We don’t want to pay the price of women’s rights for peace. The international community seems to have forgotten Afghan women.”

Women’s rights in Afghanistan

Population: 28.9 million

GDP per person: US\$1,000

Life expectancy: 45

Adult literacy: 43% men, 13% women

ActionAid has been working in Afghanistan since 2002. We currently work in four provinces – Kabul, Balkh, Jawzjan and Bamiyan – with activities around six main themes: women’s rights, democratic governance, human security, child protection, HIV/AIDS and the right to food.

ActionAid works alongside local organisations to help women stand up for their rights and take charge of their lives. We provide education and training – everything from reading, writing and numeracy, to specialist skills that will help women earn a better income.

In just the first six months of 2011 ActionAid helped to investigate 480 cases of violence against women. ActionAid-trained paralegals handled 240 of these cases, with 127 cases resolved in the women’s favour. Ninety paralegals were trained, 100 girls received higher education support and 760 women earned income from vocations with ActionAid support.

We also work to help women understand and demand their rights using adult literacy and community empowerment projects, as well as strengthening the formal and informal justice delivery system by raising awareness with religious leaders, community elders and government officers. Paralegals are the crucial link that connects this demand for justice and the delivery of justice.

Security for ActionAid Afghanistan is a high-priority issue, particularly as four female staff members or community volunteers have been killed since 2006. The safety of all our workers is paramount, with ActionAid recognising the particular security concerns of women, especially those who publicly defend the rights of women.

However not all in Afghanistan agree that women's rights are at risk. The Ministry of Women's Affairs in Kabul is at pains to say that the negotiation process will never overturn the constitution, particularly regarding the protection of women's rights. "The negotiations involve women and there are nine women on the High Peace Council, and we are sure they will defend our rights," a representative said.

Meanwhile, in December 2011 delegations from around 90 countries and international organisations will meet in Bonn, Germany, for a conference on Afghanistan's future. It will take place exactly 10 years after the 2001 Bonn conference that chose Hamid Karzai as the leader of an Afghan Interim Authority and set the agenda for the following years.

The meeting will discuss the withdrawal of NATO troops and the transition to Afghan-run security, as well as the long-term engagement of the international community in Afghanistan after 2014-15. Rumours swirl in Kabul that the Taliban could attend the conference. Decisions on the outcome appear to be being made ahead of the meeting but the process by which this is happening is opaque. Women's rights groups say they are being kept in the dark over the agenda and fear there will be few, if any, women in the Afghan delegation. Their fears are justified. At the international conference on Afghanistan in London in 2010, hosted by then Prime Minister Gordon Brown, no Afghan woman was invited to attend the official proceedings.

"Without the participation of women, the Bonn conference is useless," Asila Wardek said. "We had good representation of women at the Bonn conference in 2001, but now after 10 years where we talked about democracy and good governance and women's rights, men will sit together and will decide our future. It is not acceptable."

The lack of inclusion of women's organisations and women politicians in the process is truly worrying. In a depressing repeat of the 2010 London conference, as a last resort women's activists and groups are being forced to organise themselves outside of the formal structures, for example by organising pre-Bonn meetings for civil society in Afghanistan.

The Afghan Women's Network, which has organised some of these meetings, is demanding that 30% of the official Afghan delegation to the Bonn Conference is made up of civil society representatives, of which half should be women. However the process for even choosing the delegation has not yet been made clear by the government.

No one knows for certain if the Taliban could return to power or what this could mean for women's rights, but some women are already making plans to leave Afghanistan if they can.

The women most at risk from a peace deal that compromises women's rights are those in public life who put their own lives and those of their families at risk by fighting for girls' education, women's mobility,

Paralegals

ActionAid developed the Paralegal Project in 2008 to train women paralegals so they can help women survivors of violence to gain fair and just access to legal compensation.

ActionAid provides paralegal training in women's rights in the context of Afghan laws and Islamic Sharia, criminal and civil court procedures, psychological support training and mapping violence cases in the community. Once trained, paralegals establish community groups and educate other women about their rights.

Longer term, ActionAid is developing the network of women paralegal volunteers across districts and provinces so that they can continue to assist each other and provide help and support for survivors of violence in their communities.

and an end to violence against women. Many are deeply afraid that the departure of international troops, and reconciliation with the Taliban and other conservative factions, will leave them vulnerable to violence targeted at women politicians, women activists and women working outside the home. This violence is intended to intimidate and silence those who stand up for women. The ActionAid survey found that 41% of women thought Afghanistan would be less safe when international troops leave.

“It is difficult to imagine what the future will be like for women’s rights groups and activists. Now the Taliban know the key women. These women will be the key targets for them. These women will have no choice but to leave,” one leading women’s rights activist said, understandably preferring to remain anonymous.

Of course most will not be able to leave. Another activist said that she cannot go back to being confined at home. If the Taliban return she will “pick up a gun and go into the mountains”.

A woman in the street in Herat. During the Taliban regime women could not go out in public without a male relative.

PHOTO: JENNY MATTHEWS/ACTIONAID



Dr Nelab, 30, a doctor from Mazar-e-Sharif

“There are better health facilities now, particularly in the cities, but there is little change in rural areas.”

Angiza (not her real name), 18, from Kabul, lives in a shelter run by ActionAid partner HAWCA after escaping from her violent uncle who tried to force her into marriage **“I am here because my life is in danger. After my father died, my mother got married for a second time. Now my uncle is in charge of me and he beats me. He got me engaged to someone who I don’t know and I don’t want to marry him. My mother said she could not keep me safe and said my life was in danger or I could have acid thrown in my face if I did not marry.”**



Sakina, 29, in jail in Herat
“Life in prison is better for women in Afghanistan than life outside.”



Mina, 55, from Herat Province
“I’m not sure that my daughters’ lives will be better than mine. I would rather have been born a man. Women are beaten by their brothers and husbands and they can’t earn much money or live on their own.”

Naheed Farid, 27, from Herat Province, Afghanistan’s youngest MP
“My constituents really feel that I can represent them, that is why they vote for me. I receive votes from women and men as well. They feel that women can do something – that we can represent our culture, our situation, our background, our religion. That’s why I think men are also optimistic about women – women can do anything if they believe in themselves.”

Dr Tahera Alemi, 45, ActionAid's Women's Rights Officer

“Women have the right to vote but in some places unfortunately it is still men that vote on behalf of women, and they don't allow their wives and sisters or mothers to vote.”

Mariam (not her real name), 22, a sex worker from Wardak Province

“I don't want to do this work because I am afraid my family will find out and I am afraid of the police and the community. I want to leave this work. I feel really sad that I am a prostitute. I am not comfortable with this work. I am very unhappy with my life.”



Homa, 50, a teacher from Mazar-e-Sharif

“Women are the most vulnerable if the Taliban come back. Women will be back in their homes like prisoners.”



Fawzia Koofi, 35, MP and prospective candidate for the 2014 presidential election

“My hope for Afghanistan in 10 years’ time is that no woman in Afghanistan dies in childbirth, no pregnant woman has to walk for three days to reach a hospital, no girl has to walk for four hours to reach a school. That is my ambition and hope for this country.”

Zarguna, 30, from Helmand, whose four children died in an air strike

“Four of my children were killed in a bombing last year. After that we had to leave our home – it was destroyed and there was nothing left for us. We came to Kabul and have been living in this camp. But things are very hard here for us. We don’t have a house or land or a future. We don’t have any money or any jobs. What can we do? One day when there is peace we want to return to our home and start again.”



Survey results: The voice of Afghan women

Ten years on from the invasion of Afghanistan, ActionAid polled 1,000 Afghan women to get a unique insight into their opinion on living through the last 10 years of war, and the possibility of the Taliban returning to power.¹³

The women, aged 23 and over, were surveyed across five provinces – the capital Kabul, the northern province of Balkh, the western province of Herat, the central province of Bamiyan and the southern province of Kandahar.

86% of Afghan women said they were worried about a return to Taliban-style government in Afghanistan, with one in five citing their daughters' education as the main concern. The figure rose to 92% in urban areas but was consistent across the different age groups surveyed.

66% of Afghan women said they felt safer now than they did 10 years ago, and 72% believed their lives were better now than they were 10 years ago.

37% thought Afghanistan would become a worse place if international troops leave, while 28% thought it would become a better place. Women under the age of 30 were keener to see the troops stay than those over 30.

41% thought Afghanistan would be less safe when international troops leave, while 33% thought it would be safer.

The biggest fear of women under 30 was sexual assault (40% of respondents) and women of all ages were more fearful of sexual assault (30% of respondents) than abduction, kidnapping or being caught in an explosion combined (24%).

Four out of 10 of the women surveyed never leave their village or neighbourhood.

Nearly 60% of Afghan women said they voted in the last parliamentary elections but one in 10 of those surveyed cast their vote as directed by their husband or father, while for one in 100 their father or husband actually physically cast their vote for them. Of the 40% who didn't vote, one in eight admitted this was due to not being granted permission by their family to do so.

Survey methodology

The survey was commissioned by ActionAid and carried out by STATT Consulting and Awaz Women and Children's Welfare Organisation.

1,000 women were surveyed in the five provinces of Kabul, Balkh, Kandahar, Herat and Bamiyan between 26 June and 15 August 2011; 491 women were from rural areas and 509 from urban areas.

Only women above the age of 23 were eligible to participate in the survey due to the time-bound nature of some questions.

Women were surveyed in female-only environments – in beauty parlours, mosques, vocational training centres, educational institutes, universities and home schools. Males were not present during surveys in order to gain a truly female Afghan voice.

To give context to the challenging nature of the survey, while it was being carried out, a daughter of one of the surveyors was shot in the street in Kandahar.

What do Afghan women want?

“The people of Afghanistan, along with their international supporters, managed to deliver a baby called democracy and we have spent a lot of blood and treasure to pamper and take care of this democracy, this baby. It is almost 10 years old, it is very fragile, but if the world forgets about Afghanistan without finishing this war properly, this baby can die at any moment.”

Fawzia Koofi, MP and prospective candidate in the 2014 presidential election

Afghan women want to see an end to war, which has torn their country apart over decades, and are ready to engage with the reconciliation and transition processes and to participate in shaping the future of their country. However they are unanimous that they do not want to return to any form of government that does not respect the human rights of women.

The survey showed that most Afghan women are worried about a return to Taliban-style government in Afghanistan. Despite this, women are realistic. Women's rights activists are open to the idea that the Taliban or other conservative factions could be brought into the peace process – if it is certain that they will respect women's rights.

“If the reconciliation and talks with the Taliban are like a process, a process which means everybody is included, the parliament of Afghanistan is on the board, the women of Afghanistan are part of this process and the constitution cannot be compromised and women's rights cannot be compromised... then it will be acceptable to the people of Afghanistan,” said MP Fawzia Koofi.

There have been reports recently that the Taliban may have changed their attitude towards banning girls from school, although these have not been officially confirmed and are so far only rumours.

“Irrespective of who runs the government, who holds the power or who controls the affairs of the country, the primacy of human rights – and in particular women's rights – should be respected at all levels of the society and government,” said ActionAid country director PV Krishnan.

Crucially, including women in the peace, reconciliation and transition processes is the best means of safeguarding and furthering women's hard-won civil freedoms and human rights.

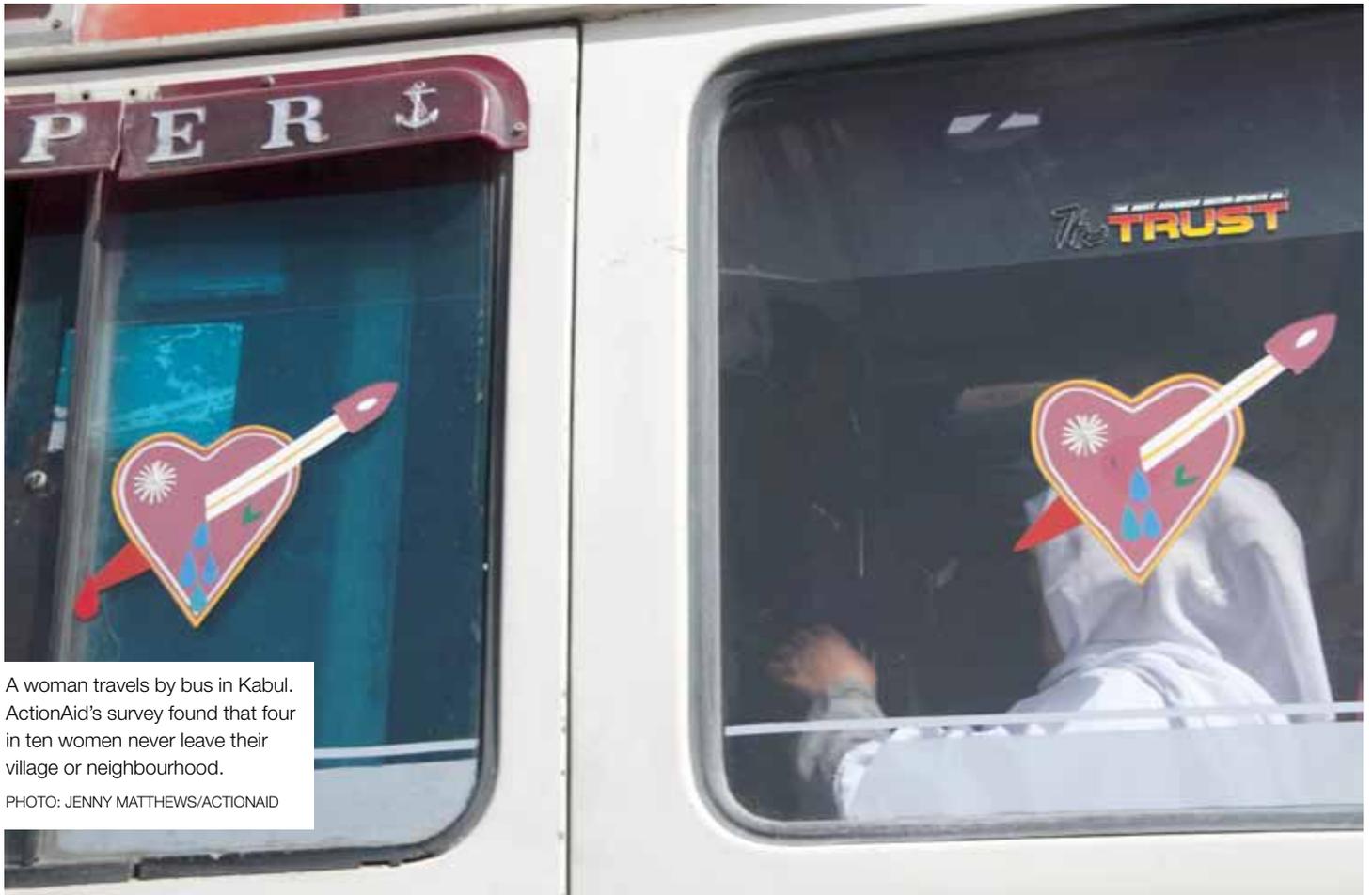
And it is ActionAid's view that women's involvement in building peace is also crucial to security objectives – a view shared in 2001 by then Senator Hillary Clinton who said: “A post-Taliban Afghanistan where women's rights are respected is much less likely to harbour terrorists in the future.” In 2011 UK Foreign Secretary William Hague MP, agreed when he said: “No lasting peace can be achieved after conflict unless the needs of women are met – not only justice for the victims of crimes of war, but their active involvement in creating a society in which their rights are respected and their voices are heard.”

The consequence of processes that are not representative of women's rights and interests is a return to instability and conflict, and a failure to harness the immense political, social and economic potential of women for the development of the country. It will undermine the 10 years of military invention which have inflicted such a huge cost on the whole country, as well as on the international troops serving there, and their countries.

The forthcoming international conference in Bonn is a marker of the level of women's engagement in key decision-making fora. It should not repeat the mistakes of the 2010 London conference, where the only way Afghan women could get their voices heard was by speaking to media outside the conference.

PV Krishnan urged the UK government to take a lead in making the reconciliation process transparent. “Being a key member of NATO, the UK has both the responsibility and authority to show the path to other nations,” he said.

And as the international community withdraws it must commit to protecting the women who stand up for the rights of Afghan women in a hostile environment, and develop support mechanisms that women politicians and activists can access.



A woman travels by bus in Kabul. ActionAid's survey found that four in ten women never leave their village or neighbourhood.

PHOTO: JENNY MATTHEWS/ACTIONAID

“It is essential that women’s rights and women’s opportunities are not sacrificed or trampled on in the reconciliation process.”

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton¹⁴

The international community can also support Afghan women through deeper engagement with women’s civil society and community-based organisations. Direct funding to women’s organisations to build their capacity as advocates and leaders will enable funds to aid transformation to a more democratic society, not just facilitate transition without the promise of sustainable change.

However, providing this support will require a fresh look at funding priorities, and methods to ensure aid reaches women and can address the root causes of women’s inequality. Women’s organisations working to reduce poverty and empower women and girls say they receive little or no funding, forcing them to

operate hand to mouth and limit activities to practical services rather than also being able to lobby for long-term changes for women.¹⁵

In addition the international community should broaden diplomatic efforts to include consultations and information sharing with women’s organisations. Amplifying the concerns of women’s organisations and ensuring women’s voices are heard is a valuable role the international community can play.

Recommendations

The UK government and the international community can directly support Afghan women in a number of ways:

- Diplomats from the international community – embassy staff and UN officials – should include civil society, and specifically women’s organisations in discussions regarding peace and reconciliation, and underscore the importance of broad inclusive consultation to the Afghan government.
- Directly fund Afghan women’s organisations, and allocate core funding, allowing these organisations to develop their capacity to hold their government to account and realise their leadership potential.
- Fund and facilitate women’s civil society representatives to attend international and regional conferences (such as Bonn).
- Provide long-term support for programmes to encourage women to enter and remain in public life, including capacity-building and local networking initiatives.

The UK government and the international community should also apply diplomatic pressure on the Afghan government to:

- Develop a systematic approach towards supporting women in public life who face intimidation and violence while working to defend women’s human rights – including provision of security, ending impunity by investigating and recording all attacks, prosecuting perpetrators, and identifying preventative measures.
- Ensure that women’s human rights are a non-negotiable part of any political settlement and that all parties agreeing to peace and reconciliation processes make public statements of their commitment to equal rights for men and women – including women’s rights to education, to work, and to participate in public life.
- Ensure that women make up at least 30% of participants in all peace and reconciliation processes, and national and local security policy-making fora.
- Make the peace and reconciliation processes more transparent, specifically ensuring civil society participation. To this end the international community should make funding for peace and reconciliation conditional on consultation with civil society.
- Ensure that Afghan women – from government and civil society – play an active role in preparations for conferences, including shaping the agenda and participating in any decision-making fora taking place prior to conferences.
- Ensure that civil society makes up at least 30% of the official Afghan delegation to the Bonn Conference, of which 50% are women who have been elected by women’s civil society to represent them.¹⁶

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Photography: Jenny Matthews/ActionAid

Women outside a hospital in Mazar-e-Sharif. Under the Taliban, women were often denied access to healthcare.

PHOTO: JENNY MATTHEWS/ACTIONAID



**“A post-Taliban Afghanistan
where women’s rights are
respected is much less likely to
harbor terrorists in the future.”**
Then US Senator Hillary Clinton

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