
Policy briefing

Bonn and Beyond: Negotiating the future of women's rights in Afghanistan

Ten years on from the military intervention, the international community will gather on 5 December 2011 in Bonn, Germany for a high-level conference on the future of Afghanistan. The stakes for Afghan women could not be higher.

"All the promises made at Bonn 2001 have yet to be fulfilled. Bonn 2011 offers a new door for Afghanistan. It should not be just another paper conference. We want honest commitments from the Afghan government and the international community that democracy, human rights and women's rights will be delivered. And that peace will come with justice."

Selay Ghaffar, Executive Director of Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan, an ActionAid partner, and official civil society delegate to the Bonn 2011 Conference

Women's rights in Afghanistan

The ten years since the international community's intervention into Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban has witnessed remarkable changes in the lives of Afghan women. There is a new constitution which enshrines equal rights for women and men. Many women are now free to attend schools and universities and to work outside their homes. Some of these women are even serving in government as officials, MPs and ministers, while others are working as doctors, teachers, professors, entrepreneurs and lawyers.

These gains, highly significant, are unfortunately not universally shared. Women in rural areas, particularly in the more conservative southern provinces, are still facing restrictions and violence to their working outside the home. Meanwhile many women across the country still lack basic rights like access to justice and economic independence from men.¹

Afghan women's concerns

ActionAid recently carried out a rare survey of 1,000 women across Afghanistan. This revealed that two thirds of women feel that their lives have improved since the fall of the Taliban but that 9 out of 10 are worried about a return to Taliban-style government – with one in five of them citing their daughters' education as the main concern.² More than one third are specifically worried about what will happen when international troops leave.

The road to Bonn

In establishing a new framework for Afghanistan, the first Bonn Conference in 2001 can be credited for many of the advances in women's rights that have been achieved in the last decade.³ However this momentum has not been consistently maintained: no Afghan women were invited to attend the international conference on Afghanistan hosted by the British Government in London in 2010.

The 2011 International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn cannot afford to make the same mistake. Moreover, pursuing an opaque and seemingly quick peace deal that doesn't involve women risks a return to instability and conflict in Afghanistan. This would undermine the last ten years of investment by the international community.

The UK Government

The way that women were treated under the Taliban was given as a justification for the military intervention. The Foreign Secretary's recent speech on the future of Afghanistan discussed some of the gains made for women, but did not make a clear statement about the British government's position on women's rights in a future Afghan settlement.⁴ Both he and the Prime Minister must make it clear that the UK will only accept a political settlement which guarantees the protection of women's rights.

“It is difficult to imagine what the future will be like for women’s rights groups and activists. Now they [the Taliban] know the key women. These women will be the key targets for them. These women will have no choice but to leave.”

Afghan women’s rights activist

Recommendations for the international community

Bonn processes

1. Include women when setting the agenda:

For the transition to peace to take effect in Afghanistan, it will not only need to be women-centric, but also led and decided by women themselves. Governments should ensure that Afghan women – from government and civil society – play an active role in preparations for conferences like Bonn, including shaping the agenda and participating in any decision-making fora taking place prior to conferences.

2. Promote women’s representation:

Ensure that women make up at least 30% of participants in all peace and reconciliation processes, including policy fora on national and local security. Specifically, ensure that all key decisions on the future of Afghanistan, including security and peace building, are made in consultation with women and women’s representatives.

3. Set gender-just objectives:

Ensure 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.

4. Recognise women’s expertise:

Learn from Afghan women’s experiences of realities on the ground when defining the security agenda. Specifically, ensure women leaders and women-focused organisations input into the design, monitoring and evaluation of the security indicators that guide decisions on any political settlement. Governments should help facilitate women’s involvement in key deliberations by funding participation in national and international fora.

5. Start at home:

As a signatory of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and through its National Action Plan on 1325, the UK government has committed to ensuring peace processes promote women’s equal participation and address women’s rights. The UK should ensure its own delegations to international conferences like Bonn reflect these commitments.

Beyond Bonn

1. Deliver promises:

Convert policy to practice. Make all parties accountable to the commitments made and ensure that women’s rights are promoted and protected at all levels. Ensure perpetrators of violence against women are brought to justice. Deliver on previous commitments to Afghan women’s rights, including those in the Constitution.

2. Protect women human rights defenders:

Women who have stood up for the rights of women in the past ten years are the most at risk of attack when international troops withdraw, especially if there is a reconciliation with the Taliban and other conservative factions. International donor countries should develop a systematic approach to supporting women human rights defenders, including prioritising women’s access to justice.

3. Link women’s rights and development interventions

Make women’s empowerment a non-negotiable part of any development interventions. Focus in particular on supporting the realisation of the National Action Plan for Women in Afghanistan (NAPWA). Ensure there are appropriate and efficient mechanisms to address women’s rights including by conducting a gender audit of all key development plans and interventions.

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