



AFGHANISTAN
ANALYSTS
NETWORK

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Between Hope and Fear: Rural Afghan women talk about peace and war

Afghanistan Analysts Network, Special Report, July 2021



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the United States proceeds with the rapid and unconditional withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan, an unrelenting Taliban offensive is pushing the Afghan government out of scores of districts across the country. Many Afghans are seeing their fears about the fallout from an ill-considered ‘peace process’ come true. From the start, Afghan women activists had voiced their concerns and raised the alarm that the rights and freedoms they have struggled for over the last two decades could be lost. They called for substantive

They desire peace because they know first-hand what war looks like and how seemingly distant political developments play out in their daily lives, affecting their freedom of movement, levels of anxiety and hopes or fears for the future.

female representation at the negotiations table. They continue to struggle not ‘just’ for women’s rights, but rather a sustainable peace that will not lead to an unravelling of the political system, will ensure violence is reduced, if not ended, and will not curtail the rights and freedoms of large parts of the population.

Although calls for greater representation of women in the peace talks were generally viewed as valid, they failed to gain much traction. Diplomats and politicians argued, sometimes explicitly, that women’s rights and basic freedoms, though important, may need to be the price paid for achieving peace and ending the hardships of war. Moreover, women’s rights activists often found

themselves dismissed as representing only a small and privileged subset of the Afghan population – although curiously, no male Afghan activist or politician is ever challenged as to whether he is representative of Afghan men. Still, the reasoning goes, they do not represent the majority of Afghan women, especially those living in rural areas, who, it is said, may have very different priorities.

These reasons – the downplaying of Afghan women and their rights in the negotiations, the accusation that activists do not speak for the many, and the readiness of some to sacrifice women’s rights for the sake of peace – inspired us to conduct the current study. We felt that, if Afghan women in general are more talked about than heard from, then this is particularly the case for women living in rural areas, who are probably the segment of the population least likely to get the chance, space or time to speak for themselves. We were,

in particular, interested in finding out about their experiences and views on peace, security and the peace process.

In this qualitative study, through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, we asked a wide range of rural women about their daily lives and how they were affected by the security situation in their areas, their knowledge and views of the ongoing peace process and what they imagined peace would look like if it did come. The report quotes the women in considerable detail in an attempt to do justice to their voices and the acuity of their views.

The interviewees were, on the whole, well-informed, indeed better than many might expect of rural women. They had a solid grasp of the political and security dynamics in their areas, as well as at the national level.

For several women, the February 2020 US-Taleban agreement had resulted in less violence in their areas, at least in terms of airstrikes and night raids, which in turn had resulted in greater freedom of movement and reduced anxiety. For others, the security situation had become more stable because their area was no longer contested, either because the Taliban had completely taken over or because Afghan government forces had managed to consolidate their positions – in at least one place so much so that people from other areas had started coming for picnics again. Unfortunately, in several cases, this turned out to be short-lived (as discussed in the update on security in Chapter 5). In several other cases, the women reported that violent conflict – mainly intra-Afghan fighting on the ground, with its crossfire, mortar attacks and use of landmines – had continued, or even worsened. Even in areas where direct fighting had abated, the presence of the Taliban, with attendant threats, often limited the interviewees' freedom of movement and kept people on edge.

The combination of security threats, local customs and, in some cases, Taliban directives mean that many women reported that they only left their homes when it was strictly necessary and if there was no fighting. Strictly necessary, for most meant, at the very least: weddings, funeral wakes, family calls and hospital visits. The amount of travelling and visiting – at least within their village, district or province – that many women expect to do to maintain family relations and responsibilities was remarkable, and the extent to which the conflict disrupted their ability to do so, harming their wider networks, was keenly felt by the women.

The interviewees who lived in more stable areas, worked outside the home or were the family's main breadwinners, often also left the house to shop, go to work, sell handicrafts, or visit their children's schools, when possible. The two women living in the Hazarajat mentioned that they worked on the land with the men in their families. They feared that a possible Taliban takeover would threaten this activity. Several women said they needed to be accompanied by a *mahram* – male family member – when leaving the house (and expressed anxiety when they needed to go out without one), particularly in areas under Taliban control or influence. Others feared that greater Taliban control would make it more difficult for them to work outside the home or go to places.

Every interviewee had lost family members or relatives and many have had to leave their homes, either temporarily because of the threat of night raids or airstrikes, or because it was no longer safe to remain in their home areas. Of the three women who now live as IDPs

AAN interviewed women living in rural areas across Afghanistan

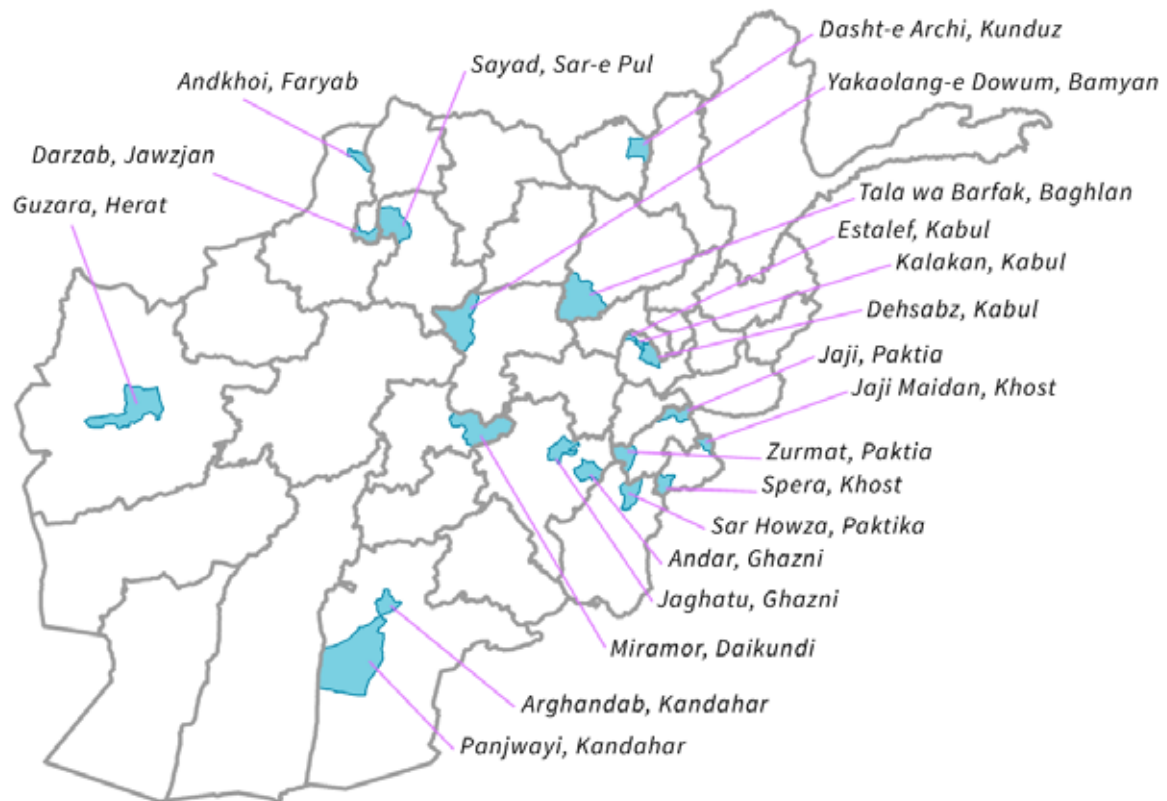


Image: Roger Helms

(internally displaced persons), two had to leave their area after the Taliban overran their villages and their husbands were killed. One woman became an IDP after her husband and two of her children were killed in a US airstrike. Several women discussed the heavily strained relations in their households due to the stress brought on by both the war and economic hardship. In several instances, domestic violence was implied.

When asked how they felt about the US-Taliban agreement, which was a fairly recent development at the time of most of the interviews, a considerable number of women said they were happy about it. They said it had made them hopeful – because peace was better than war and because they hoped the deal would lead to further negotiations and a ceasefire. When it came to the possible impact of the deal on their own lives, some said they hoped to finally pursue their education or see women's rights finally recognised, strongly suggesting that they were talking about peace in general, rather than the ongoing peace process.

Others were much more sceptical, expressing deep misgivings about the intentions of all parties to the talks, the Taliban, the government and the Americans. A few women said they thought the deal showed the Americans had been defeated. For one woman, this was a reason to feel bitter because it meant the Taliban would now think they had won,

while another woman expressed happiness that there would be no more fighting because the deal meant the ‘infidels’ would leave. A little later in the interview, however, the same woman worried that possible Taleban rule might make it even harder for her to leave her home and make a living. Many of the interviews contained such vacillating and seemingly contradicting views, illustrating how complex and multi-layered the topic is and how, as a result, Afghans have to juggle a wide range of feelings, views and possible scenarios.

When asked what peace, if it came, might look like, many of the women said they hoped it would allow them to move around more freely, pursue work or education, travel and see the country, even go sightseeing. They hoped for greater peace of mind, more income and better investment opportunities, better health facilities and a greater feeling of safety. There was, however, considerable variety in how public the women imagined their lives would be, if peace was achieved.

The women who saw their primary role as caring for their immediate family interpreted this question accordingly. They expressed a desire that peace would enable them to be better mothers and manage their households better. Others thought peace would allow them to be better caregivers to their neighbours and communities. Several women who expressed a desire to further their studies, linked this to what they would be able to do for others – and here there was an element of playing a more public role in their communities – for instance, by teaching or establishing a school or actively advocating for women’s rights. Several mentioned that they hoped peace would give women and girls more access to their rights, including the right to education, employment and to choose whom they marry.

The women who were entrepreneurs hoped peace would provide them with new investment opportunities. Others hoped their husbands and sons would have less difficulty finding work. Several women hoped that more money coming into the household would lead to more harmony in the family. Many imagined that peace and the absence of news about the conflict and noise of warfare, would finally allow them to be calm and happy. The women who had been forced out of their villages by the conflict expressed a yearning to go home. Those who could not see their families because of insecurity longed to have the whole family in one place again.

However, not all interviewees were hopeful about an eventual peace. Several women, including some of those who earlier in the conversation had expressed a sense of optimism, in the end said they thought things would probably stay the same or get worse. They worried that peace would result in greater Taleban control and speculated what that might mean for their freedom to work, study or leave the house and for the future of their children. This was particularly the case for the women who had experienced increased restrictions due to a recent transfer of power to the Taleban in their area, as well as those who had experienced Taleban violence in the past. Several women struggled with the possibility that there would be no accountability for those who had inflicted suffering on so many families. Finally, some women recognised that many of their problems were not directly related to the war, or even if they were, that an end to the conflict was unlikely to solve them.

On balance, when setting aside the almost dreamlike descriptions of what peace might look like, very few of the women were genuinely optimistic about the chances that the current peace process would bring the desired combination of an end to the conflict, security and freedom of movement. On the other hand, almost all of them, even those who were most pessimistic, found their negativity and hesitations tempered by a stubborn hope that there was a chance, if not for outright peace, then at least for a lessening of the violence.



Women walk on a road in Arghandab district, Kandahar province. The Taliban are increasingly cutting off rural women from aid and imposing restrictions on the activities of NGOs, spurring fears women will again bear the brunt of the Taliban's growing influence. Photo: Javed Tanveer/AFP, 22 February 2021.

So far, much of the discourse around protecting Afghan women's rights has focused on safeguarding, what are often referred to as, the gains of the last two decades: women's participation in public life, girls education, freedom of movement, greater equality between the sexes and improved legal protections (if not always in practice, then at least on paper). The interviews, first of all, show that such gains have been very unevenly

distributed; in some areas, they have already been largely lost, while in other places, they never really took root, or only very precariously.

At the same time, these conversations clearly challenge the idea that women in rural areas are satisfied by what is often portrayed as 'normal' by the Taliban or other Afghan conservatives. Almost every woman we spoke to, regardless of her political stance and level of conservatism, expressed a longing for greater freedom of movement, education for her children (and sometimes themselves) and a greater role in their families and wider social circles.

The conversations are a reminder of how deeply the years of war have affected Afghans' lives. Every woman in this study has suffered bereavement and material loss – some catastrophic – as well as near misses where they or their close relatives were almost killed or their homes just escaped destruction. They desire peace because they know first-hand what war looks like and how seemingly distant political developments play out in their daily lives, affecting their freedom of movement, levels of anxiety and hopes or fears for the future. These interviews, finally, also make clear that dreams of greater agency for Afghan women are not the exclusive domain of those who can speak up publicly, that the priorities of rural women are not that different from those put forward by the more well-connected women activists and that the concerns activists raise are deeply-felt and urgent.

In its nuances and details, this study thus provides an important backdrop to discussions about the concerns, hopes and anxieties of rural Afghan women. The relatively free-flowing nature of the conversations allowed the interviewees to provide a rare and intimate snapshot of the pressures they have to navigate, the heartbreaking losses they have suffered and, for most, the daily grind of living through a war while still, stubbornly, holding onto hopes for a peaceful future.

AIMS AND STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

CONTEXT

The United States' decision to withdraw its troops rapidly and unconditionally after almost two decades in the country has left Afghanistan facing great uncertainty. Although there is still officially a 'peace process', its milestones – including the US-Taleban agreement and the start of intra-Afghan talks – were shaped by US timelines and interests, without substantive Afghan input.¹ As the various rounds of talks proceeded, the consistent demand of Afghan women for more meaningful participation in the process has been an enduring theme. Together with many other Afghans, women's organisations were wary of the process, concerned about a rollback of women's rights and worried that the talks would result in hasty political deals or power-sharing agreements that could make things worse without putting an end to the war.

In response to these concerns, the Islamic Republic 'side', ie the Afghan government plus political opposition, increased the number of women on its negotiating team, which at four out of 21 is more or less on a par with the proportion of women in Afghanistan's elected bodies and government institutions.² There are no women on the Taliban negotiating team and the group has shown no sign of consulting women. Afghanistan's international supporters have also done poorly when it comes to including female officials in talks.

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- 1 For more details on the US-Taleban agreement and the Afghan peace talks, see Thomas Ruttig, 'A Deal in the Mist: How much of the US-Taleban Doha agreement has been implemented?', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 25 February 2021, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/a-deal-in-the-mist-how-much-of-the-us-taleban-doha-agreement-has-been-implemented/>, and Thomas Ruttig, 'From Doha to Peace? Obstacles rising in the way of intra-Afghan talks', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 3 March 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/from-doha-to-peace-obstacles-rising-in-the-way-of-intra-afghan-talks/>.
 - 2 Women currently make up around half of elected Community Development Council representatives and almost 30 per cent of MPs, according to the Afghan government's Citizens' Charter website (<https://www.ccnpp.org/Default.aspx?#Women>). They make up around 21 per cent of the Afghan civil service, including 16 per cent in senior management levels (source: National Statistical and Information Authority, *Men and Women in Afghanistan 2018*, November 2019, https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Women-and-men-in-Afghanistan-2018_full.pdf) and 19 per cent (nine out of 46 appointed members) of the High Council for National Reconciliation's Leadership Committee.



US Special Representative for Afghanistan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad speaks with a member of the Afghanistan High Peace Council, Asila Wardak, women's rights activist Aziza Watanwall and Mary Akrami, Executive Director of Afghan Women's Network (AWN), on the sidelines of the intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha. Photo: Karim Jaafar/AFP, 8 July 2019.

At a conference held in Moscow in March 2020, for example, which was attended by Taliban emissaries and on the Republican side, members of the government, of the Afghanistan High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) and factional and other influential leaders, and representative of the US, China and Pakistan, government negotiator Habiba Sarabi discovered that she was, yet again, the only woman in the room. As women's rights activist MP Fawzia Koofi pointedly noted, the "countries that are our friends and our supporters of peace" had not included any women in their delegations. It was, she said, apparently "an international phenomenon to undermine, ignore and deny women participation" in processes of peace and security.³ (This was, incidentally, a repeat of what had happened during a similar conference in 2019, when Sarabi had also been the only woman at the table).⁴ If it is already a struggle for the Kabul-based, articulate, English-speaking and relatively well-organised Afghan women's networks with connections to the media, to be represented in the talks, it is not surprising that it is even more difficult for those with no links to activist networks to be heard.

The women's networks that are lobbying for greater participation stress that they speak for a wide range of women. Indeed, most have worked hard over the years to become more inclusive and consult much more widely. Still, politicians, observers and negotiators tend to dismiss their demands as inopportune and downplay their importance. Often, they claim that women activists speak for only a small segment of the female population,

3 Sayed Salahuddin, 'Lone female negotiator 'surprised' at lack of women at Moscow Afghan talks', Arab News, 21 March 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1829446/world>.

4 See Thomas Ruttig, 'Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed: First steps in Afghan peace negotiations', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 4 February 2019, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/nothing-is-agreed-until-everything-is-agreed-first-steps-in-afghan-peace-negotiations/>.

although, curiously, no male Afghan activist or politician is ever challenged as to whether he is representative of Afghan men. The arguments of women's rights activists have also been dismissed by those arguing, sometimes explicitly, that although women's rights and basic freedoms are important, they may need to be the price paid for achieving peace with the Taliban and ending the hardships of war.⁵

For all these reasons – the downplaying of Afghan women and their rights in talks, the accusation that activists do not speak for the many and the readiness of some to sacrifice women's rights for the sake of peace – we wanted to carry out the current study, which sought out the views and experiences of women living in rural areas. If Afghan women in general are more talked about than heard from, then this is particularly the case for rural women, who are probably the segment of the population least likely to get the chance, space or time to speak for themselves.

In this qualitative study AAN actively heard from a wide range of rural Afghan women to hear their views on peace, security and the peace process through a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women from across the country. The conversations focused on their views of the February 2020 United States-Taliban agreement, their everyday experiences of security, whether there had been any changes since the agreement was signed and how they thought an eventual peace might change their daily lives and roles in the community.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The main body of the report, Chapters 2 to 4, explores the three main themes of the interviews: the everyday experience of security, the women's opinions on the peace talks and their views on what an actual peace might look like. The full report is organised as follows:

CHAPTER 1. METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a discussion of the research methodology, including how the interviewees were selected and approached.

CHAPTER 2. SECURITY IN THE DISTRICTS: FREEDOM FROM CONFLICT AND FEAR, FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT, ACCESS TO HEALTH AND EDUCATION

This chapter focuses on how the interviewees experienced and described the security situation in their home areas, whether the situation had changed as a result of the peace process and how having to navigate difficulties affected their daily lives.

CHAPTER 3. VIEWS ON THE US-TALEBAN AGREEMENT AND HOW MIGHT IT AFFECT THEIR LIFE

This focuses on the interviewees' opinions on the peace process, particularly the US-Taliban agreement and to a lesser extent, the intra-Afghan talks. They were asked what

5 For an eloquent and forceful discussion of these issues, see the recent roundtable discussion on Women's Rights and the Peace Process, chaired by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission on 9 June 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNKsGKvmPUk>.

they knew about the agreement, their feelings and expectations about a possible peace deal and its possible impact on their lives.

CHAPTER 4. IMAGINING WHAT PEACE COULD LOOK LIKE

In this chapter, we hear what interviewees thought real peace would look like, what it would allow them to do and how it might change their roles in society and in their daily lives.

CHAPTER 5. LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING AHEAD: WHAT HAS BEEN GAINED, WHAT HAS BEEN LOST AND WHAT CAN ONLY BE HOPED FOR?

This chapter offers an analytical discussion of the interviews, an update of what happened to some of the women since we last spoke to them, and thoughts on what these findings mean for the discussions around peace, participation and women's rights.

CHAPTER 1

METHODOLOGY



Girls walk to school along the river in the Panjshir valley.
Photo: Martine van Bijlert, 2011.

THE DATA

for this report was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 23 women from Afghanistan's rural districts. The interviews were conducted either in person or by phone, depending on the circumstances, and followed a three-part questionnaire that focused on 1) the interviewees' views on the US-Taliban agreement that was concluded on 29 February 2020; 2) the human security situation in their area; and 3) their views on the potential impact of peace on their personal life (see Annex 1 for the questionnaire).

I decided to travel to the province and do the interviews in person. I asked a journalist friend for help before my trip. Through a trusted female activist, he was able to find two women who were willing to talk to me.

The interviews were done by seven AAN researchers in Dari or Pashto. They took place between June and August 2020, except for three interviews in Kabul province conducted in early November 2020. By that time, the public focus had shifted somewhat from the US-Taliban deal to also include the Intra-Afghan talks, which had begun, also in Doha, in September 2020.

In their choice of interviewees, the researchers sought to reflect a variety of experiences, such as the extent of war and loss the women had suffered, their levels of education and whether they could be considered active members of their society

and connected, or more isolated and withdrawn. The researchers also sought to ensure sufficient ethnic, geographic and socio-economic diversity.

The researchers described most of the 23 women as 'housewives', meaning not working outside the home, but the term 'homemaker' is probably more appropriate and will be used throughout the report. Five of the interviewees were current or former schoolteachers (one of them was also a member of a local development council), three were entrepreneurs (one had a rug-weaving business, the other two sold handicrafts) and one woman worked as a cleaner in a school.

The interviewees included a mix of married women of different ages, including one older woman, whose age gave her a relative degree of freedom of movement, a few young unmarried women and three relatively young widows. All three widowed women were living as IDPs outside their home districts and had lost their husbands to the violent

conflict. The women comprised eleven Pashtuns, five Hazaras, one Shia Sayed, two Tajiks, three Uzbeks and one Turkman. Exact ages are included where it was available.

The women lived in a variety of domains: Taleban-controlled, government-controlled and contested. In terms of geographic spread, the sample included:

- Eight women in the central provinces of Afghanistan: one from Daikundi, one from Bamyan, three from Ghazni and three from Kabul province's rural districts;
- Six women in the north: respectively from Jawzjan, Sar-e Pul and Faryab provinces
- Three in the northwest, including one from Baghlan and two from Kunduz;
- Five in the southeast, including one from Paktika, two from Khost and two from Paktia provinces;
- Two in the south, both from Kandahar province;
- Two in the west, both from Herat province.

The logistics of interviewee selection and conversations were somewhat complicated by the demographic – women largely living in remote and sometimes contested areas – and the fact that most of AAN's researchers are men. This meant that almost all interviewees had to be found through trusted introductions to ensure that they would agree to a lengthy interview and to allow the researcher to create an atmosphere of trust.

In two cases, the interviewees were distant relatives of the interviewers. In all other cases, the researchers were introduced by trusted friends and contacts, for instance, former classmates, local women's rights activists or a village *malik*. In four cases, an introduction had been made previously for an interview on a different subject.

Both approaching interviewees and conducting the interviews took considerable skill, inventiveness and finesse, as illustrated by some of the researchers' comments:

It isn't easy to talk to a woman who doesn't know you in the Pashtun areas. I asked some friends – a journalist and a member of the local youth council – to help me. They were able to make introductions. First, I talked to the woman's brother and then I interviewed the woman on her brother's phone.

I didn't know the women I interviewed. I was introduced to them, two by their brothers and one by a local journalist. I chose them because they were from areas that had experienced war between the Taleban and the Afghan security forces.

I interviewed a woman from my village. I already knew her and knew she would talk to me. It isn't easy to interview women you don't know; they might not have the courage to speak to you.

I decided to travel to the province and do the interviews in person. I asked a journalist friend for help before my trip. Through a trusted female activist, he was able to find two women who were willing to talk to me.

One of the women I interviewed is my relative. I was able to speak to her without a man present because my wife was in the room during the interview.

It is possible that, despite the best efforts of the researchers, the sample still excludes representatives of the most isolated (both geographically and socially) and conservative parts of the population – for instance, women who do not speak to strangers at all. However, the methodology and the content of the interviews makes us confident that this sample includes women who are rarely heard and that the research provides a fair representation of the diversity within large parts of Afghanistan's rural female population.



Girls attend class in Khas Uruzgan district, Uruzgan province.
Photo: Martine van Bijlert, 2007.

The researchers took notes during the interviews, which were later transcribed and translated into English. The AAN team took great care to convey the conversations as they took place and, to the extent possible, preserve the meaning of what was said. The quotes in the report have sometimes been lightly edited for clarity or condensed to minimise repetition.

While presenting the findings, we have sought to strike a balance between quoting women at length – to do justice to the fact that individual quotes could often only be adequately understood in the context of the whole interview – and readability. In many cases, questions that were asked at the beginning of the interview, for instance, on the US-Taliban deal, were often only fully unpacked by the end of the conversation, with new detail, nuance,

or counterpoint added at almost every question. It is evident that this is a complicated subject – the desire for peace is strong, while the shape it might take is precarious – that does not lend itself well to be distilled or reduced into single quotes or opinions.⁶

⁶ Many of the interviewees oscillated between a range of sometimes seemingly contradictory emotions, views and opinions, zigzagging between scepticism and hope, concern and determination, pessimism and wishful thinking. It is thus useful to note how a shorter interview, a more limited quoting of the answers, or a more predetermined questionnaire could have resulted in widely varying outcomes. Many surveys, opinions polls and even focus groups are specifically designed to boil down an opinion to a single ranking on a scale, for instance ranging from positive to negative (very positive/negative, somewhat positive/negative, neutral/don't know). In this case, many of the women we interviewed could have ended up anywhere on that scale, depending on the framing of the question, the flow of the conversation and the moment the question was asked.

CHAPTER 2

SECURITY IN THE DISTRICTS: FREEDOM FROM CONFLICT AND FEAR, FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT, ACCESS TO HEALTH AND EDUCATION



Women gather in the corridor of their home in Bagram district, Parwan province.
UN Photo/Eric Kanalstein/ UN Photo, 12 September 2009

TO BETTER understand the context within which the interviewees gave their opinions and expressed their hopes for peace, they were asked at some length about the security in their districts: what security was like, how they could tell if it got better or worse and how that affected their lives.⁷

There is no family in our district that has been left untouched.

Later in the interview, when the women were asked what effect a possible peace would have on their lives, many expressed the hope that it would allow them to move around freely, travel the country, pursue work or education and even go sightseeing, while others feared that greater Taliban control would diminish their

freedom of movement. Here in this section of the interview, when discussing their current security situations, it became clear how severely for most their freedom of movement was curtailed and how precarious their sense of safety was. This was partly for fear of reprisals when leaving the home (by the Taliban or because of strict cultural rules), but mainly because they feared the fall-out of war – whether through hitting a roadside bomb, being caught in crossfire, being present during a night raid or, to a lesser extent, becoming a victim of violent crime.

2.1 SECURITY IN THE DISTRICTS: DO YOU CONSIDER YOUR DISTRICT TO BE SAFE?

The women were asked whether there had been any violent conflict in their area in the past year; whether the situation had changed since the religious holiday of Eid ul-Fitr on 23 May 2020 (there had been a three-day ceasefire and because it was a few weeks before most of the interviews had taken place, it was an easy reference point for the interviewees); and how they judged whether security in their area had improved or worsened since then.

Almost all interviewees were well aware of the security situation in their areas and districts and made it clear that it directly affected their lives, including their freedom of movement,

⁷ During the interviews, the women were first asked their opinions about the US-Taliban agreement, which will be discussed in the next chapter, then their views on the security situation and in the third part, their thoughts about what an eventual peace would look like. For the purpose of the report, however, it makes sense to first discuss the context the women live in, so that it can serve as a backdrop to their opinions.

future outlook and daily levels of anxiety, but there were considerable differences both between and within districts concerning the level and nature of the conflict.

Of the three women interviewed in Ghazni, for instance, two (in Andar and Jaghatu) suffered from violence in their areas due to ongoing skirmishes between the government and the Taliban, while the third woman, who also lived in Andar, said the situation had recently become much calmer since the government no longer ventured into their area. Other women lived in relative safety, including the two women in the Hazarajat who had not seen conflict directly, although they had also suffered losses in the last few years. The two women in Herat province mainly worried about the prevalence of violent crime.

Two women from Zurmat also described different experiences: one said her area was now under complete Taliban control, which had led to a reduction in violence because government forces had retreated, while the other lived in a still contested area. She said that while drone attacks and night raids had stopped, the fighting (ground engagements) had only become more intense. In both places in Zurmat, the Taliban had banned girl's education. The two women interviewed in southern Afghanistan said security had improved, although they worried because the Taliban were still present in their areas.

AREAS UNDER TALEBAN CONTROL

Of the twenty-three women who were interviewed, four women said they now lived under complete Taliban control; they were from Andar (Ghazni), Tala wa Barfak (Baghlan), Zurmat (Paktia) and Spera (Khost). For three of them, the security situation had improved at the time of the interview due to a decrease in night raids, airstrikes and drone attacks and/or because government forces had retreated to more distant bases.

25-year-old unmarried woman, from Spera district, Khost province (Pashtun):

We haven't had any incidents since Eid ul-Fitr. Before this, the conflict was bloody and we witnessed the war in its full horror.... Since the Taliban-US agreement, there have been fewer night raids and less fighting.

30-year-old homemaker and mother of three, from Zurmat district, Paktia province (Pashtun):

Our area is now under full Taliban control, which has resulted in a reduction of violence. There was a government forces' camp near our district before, but now they have left and there's less fighting.... But it's still unpredictable. We live like nomads. If someone says there'll be an attack tomorrow night, we go to another village and stay there until the threat is over.

31-year-old homemaker and mother of three from Andar district, Ghazni province (Pashtun):

In our district, there's no fighting, except near government checkpoints. The Taliban attack those posts from time to time, [but] in the village where I live, the security situation is good.... The area is now completely under Taliban control, that is why. People are happy because there's less violence and fighting. Taliban fighters move around in my village and the area, but they're not creating problems for the people.

The women from Spera and Andar, whose situation had improved since the Taleban took over, expressed enthusiasm over the US-Taleban deal. One of the women from Zurmat said that, while initially, it had made her happy, she now thinks nothing will change. Moreover, she and her family are concerned that the Taleban might want to seek revenge against those who had supported the government.

The fourth woman living in a Taleban-controlled area, a **42-year-old mother of six from Tala wa Barfak district in Baghlan province (Pashtun)**, who was the breadwinner in her family, said that there was still ongoing, occasional fighting in her district. Her main problem was that her freedom of movement had been curtailed after the Taleban took over (more on that below).

AREAS THAT WERE ACTIVELY CONTESTED

Most women, by far, described their areas as actively contested. Some characterised their village or area as being on the frontline, including the two women from Dasht-e Archi and one of the women from Zurmat (even though she later also described her village as being practically under Taleban control).

Dasht-e Archi and its centre, Kunduz province



Image: Samir Hamidi

23-year-old teacher, unmarried, Dasht-e Archi district, Kunduz province

(Pashtun): *There's fighting between the Taleban and government forces every day. It's been going on for years. There was only peace for the three days of Eid ul-Fitr. Schools are often caught in the middle of the fighting and closed for weeks. Both the Taleban*

and the government keep recruiting people to go to the battlefield and fight. I don't think there's willingness, either from the Taleban or the government, to bring peace and stability. Some of my relatives have been killed or wounded... There's no family in our district that has been left untouched.

35-year-old teacher, mother of four and local development council member, Dasht-e Archi district, Kunduz province (Uzbek): *We live right on the frontline between the Taleban and government forces. We've had to flee our village several times this year because of the fighting. Recently, a rocket hit my home. Part of it was destroyed. We were lucky there were no casualties... The major change since the US-Taleban agreement has been the reduction of night raids, targeted killings and airstrikes by US forces. But we had only a three-day ceasefire during Eid ul-Fitr. [After that] the fighting resumed.*

48-year-old former schoolteacher and mother of five from Zurmat district, Paktia province (Pashtun): *Our area has always been on the frontline of the war. In our experience, things haven't changed for the better despite the US-Taleban deal. In fact, the fighting has become more intense and more deadly. The only change is that the night raids from the security forces side have decreased or even stopped.*

Others said their village or area was in the line of small arms or missile crossfire or subject to regular clashes because of its proximity to a government checkpoint:

30-year-old homemaker, mother of two, from Andar district, Ghazni province (Pashtun): *The security in my area is good right now, while I'm talking to you, but it can turn bad within minutes. There's an Afghan security forces checkpoint on a nearby hill and when the Taleban attack it, the soldiers fire rockets towards our village.*

AREAS WHERE THE SECURITY SITUATION HAD IMPROVED

Some women living in contested areas said the situation had improved since the signing of the deal. In some cases, this was so much so that people had started to come to their areas for picnics again. Still, they worried that security could deteriorate:

Older woman, mother of three (two married and with children), from Panjwayi district, Kandahar province (Pashtun): *Before Eid ul-Fitr [23 May 2020], there was a lot of fighting between the Taleban and the government. It increased after the end of the 'reduction in violence' period [22-29 February 2020], but now there's no fighting in our area... Our district has lovely gardens and when the security situation is good, people from Kandahar city come to have a good time. They're coming for picnics to places where the Taleban used to be. Now they can go without being afraid of fighting... But some people from our village say the Taleban presence in the district is increasing again. We worry that fighting might re-start.*

55-year-old homemaker, mother of six, from Jaji Maidan district, Khost province (Pashtun): *There's occasional fighting between the Taleban and the government forces, but the overall security situation has improved. There are still corrupt officials*

who want to play with the security situation for their own personal gain... but I can tell that the situation is better now because this year we haven't heard the sound of fighting and bombing.

20-year-old unmarried woman, living at home, from Sar Howza district, Paktika province (Pashtun): *The security situation in my area isn't very good, but it isn't as bad as it was in the past. There used to be security threats against schools in the area, but now they aren't threatening schools. Now the village people are supporting the government and there are fewer security threats.*

Mother of five, who travels to Kandahar city once a week to sell garlands of flowers, from Arghandab, Kandahar (Pashtun): *I consider my area secure. We do not hear the sounds of bullets and explosions anymore and we haven't heard of fighting in the news for the last eight months. I think if peace comes, security in our area would be even better than now, but thank God there's already much less fighting in our district. Before Ramadan, we heard from family members that there had been fighting between the Taleban and the government. Five policemen were killed and we don't know how many Taleban. But since Eid [23 May 2020; at the end of Ramadan], we haven't heard of fighting or explosions.*

AREAS WHERE THE TALEBAN WERE ENCROACHING

Other women lived in areas where the Taleban appeared to be steadily encroaching. This was particularly the case in the rural districts of Kabul province, where open fighting was limited. Still, people feared for their lives because of targeted killings aimed at people linked to the Afghan government.

25-year-old, unmarried Pashtun woman from Kalakan district, Kabul province (Pashtun): *A few years ago, security in our area was very good; no one was disturbing anyone. People used to walk around in the village and gardens and go to weddings and travel freely, whether they were working for the government or not. Now, no one is safe. Those who work for the government have mostly moved their families to Kabul city. The Taleban roam freely and the government can't come into the village, especially at night. In the past, if anything happened, the government would intervene quickly and often, but now even after several hours of fighting, no matter how many times we call, they don't come. The Taleban roam freely; they distribute leaflets in the mosque and warn people to leave their government jobs.*

This woman, and others, also described a sense of fear due to a rise in violent crime:

The number of thieves and vagrants has also increased. People don't want to travel to their gardens or another village now, especially after dinner. The shops in the village close very early nowadays.

40-year-old homemaker and mother of four, from Estalef district, Kabul province (Pashtun): *The Taleban now openly come and go in the area and the roads aren't safe anymore. Many people have moved to Kabul city because they fear the Taleban may*

take over the district. Thefts and robberies have also increased. We can no longer leave our homes at night. People used to come here for the weekend and have picnics, but we haven't seen much of that in recent years, especially not this year.

35-year-old homemaker from a contested village in Dehsabz district, Kabul province (Pashtun): *Security in this district used to be very good, but this year, especially after Ramadan, it deteriorated and there's now a kind of fear among the people. About a month ago, the Taleban and government forces clashed nearby for more than an hour. They used light and heavy weapons and several of the security forces were killed. There were attacks on the district centre. One night, the fighting lasted from night to morning. Every night, we can hear gunfire... A while ago, [the government] overran a Taleban checkpoint and destroyed it, but the Taleban still patrolled in the area a few days ago. They said they'd clear the area of spies, and that those who work with the government would be assassinated. People are terrified. They don't leave their houses at night or even go to the congregational prayers in the mosque. They're afraid of the Taleban and also of thieves and muggers.*



Women, wearing the traditional all-enveloping veil known as the burqa, walking in the Estalef valley, about 30 kilometres north of Kabul. Photo: Farzana Wahidy/AFP, 2005.

The two women in Herat province also mentioned an increase in violent crime (possibly indicating that this could generally be worse in the vicinity of large urban centres). Their area, they said, was otherwise relatively safe in terms of attacks, skirmishes or Taleban threats.

Guzara district, Herat province



Image: Roger Helms

35-year-old homemaker, mother of six, from Guzara district, Herat province

(Sayed): *Thank God, it's safe here [in the village] but not by the river, especially late in the evening. Many things can happen there. A few years ago, a girl and her fiancé went there in the afternoon. Two men followed them and threatened them with a gun. These people don't care about anything. You have to do what they say. The couple gave them all their gold and their phones and money... Women are afraid of going to the river around noon and later in the evening when there are fewer people... I'm very worried about my children. My eyes are pinned on the door until they come home. I worry about them being abducted.*

AREAS WITHOUT FIGHTING

The two women from Hazarajat, unsurprisingly, said they had not experienced any direct fighting or violence in their area. They had, however, been affected by insecurity and had lost relatives to the violence:

43-year-old homemaker, mother of five, from Yakaolang district, Bamyan province (Hazara): *Yakaolang has been secure for as far as I can remember. But I know that security on the highway from Kabul to Bamyan has worsened over the past two years. Even during the last Eid's ceasefire, a traveller was taken from the road and killed by the Taleban. Now people prefer the longer road through Ghorband, but even that's not safe because the Taleban stop people and demand a tax... We have lost one life in our family. My nephew was in the national army and was killed in Uruzgan two years ago in a fight with the Taleban.*

23-year-old homemaker and mother of two, Miramor district, Daikundi province (Hazara): *I haven't seen any Talib in my whole life. I haven't seen the war either [but] my brother-in-law was killed in Kabul. And a distant relative was working with the foreigners as a translator in Helmand. After four years, he was so mentally affected by it that he lost his mind.*

THE WOMEN WHO NO LONGER LIVED IN THEIR AREAS OF ORIGIN

Finally, three of the twenty-three women no longer live in their areas of origin. They were originally from Darzab in Jawzjan (now living in the provincial capital); Sayad in Sar-e Pul (now living in Mazar-e Sharif); and Kejran in Daikundi (now living in Injil district in Herat). All three were widows and had the following to say about security in their places of origin:

25-year-old widow, no children, IDP originally from Sayad district, Sar-e Pul province (Hazara): *No one lives there [in the village] anymore, except the Taleban. It's deserted. We were around 900 Hazara households in the area and we were all forced to leave. Do you call that secure? We hadn't experienced war and attacks before, but when the Taleban surrounded the area, the fighting began. We knew we wouldn't be safe anymore. They killed many of us and burned all the houses. They destroyed almost everything. My husband was killed – my brother-in-law, my cousins and nephews too. Our house was burned to ashes. In one day [in 2017], 60 people were killed. It was brutal.*

40-year-old widow, mother of three, IDP (originally from Kejran district, Daikundi province) living in Injil district, Herat province (Hazara): *Thank God, it's good here. We're more or less comfortable. We don't worry as we did back in Kejran.... Our neighbours are good. It's safe here. Kejran isn't safe. We can't go back, so it's better for us to stay here.*

Widow and mother of four, former schoolteacher, IDP originally from Darzab district, Jawzjan province (Uzbek): *My area is insecure.... I think the security is getting worse because people are still fleeing from their villages to the provincial centre. Over the last three years, I haven't seen any people return to their villages, so clearly, security isn't getting better.*

2.2 FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT: HOW OFTEN DO YOU GO OUTSIDE YOUR HOME?

To get a better sense of the impact of the security situation on their daily lives, the interviewees were asked how often and on what occasions they left their homes; how the security situation affected their freedom to go out; whether their children went to school and how that was affected by the security situation; whether they had access to clinics in their district, or where else they went for medical treatment.

ONLY LEAVING THE HOME WHEN NECESSARY

By far, most women said they only left their homes when it was strictly necessary, although their definition of ‘necessity’ varied. For those who lived in insecure or conservative areas, their answers tended to be near-identical: they would go out for family visits, weddings and ceremonies, and, to a lesser extent, medical reasons. Others also went out for work, shopping or to school, although this usually depended on the security situation.

25-year-old, unmarried Pashtun woman from Kalakan, Kabul (Pashtun): *I leave the house when I need to because our area is a village. But no one goes anywhere when it isn't necessary. Usually, people leave their homes when they're invited to a wedding or ceremony. Women go to mourning gatherings and sometimes to a shrine. And I used to go to school in the morning but, after the twelfth grade, I couldn't continue because of family problems and because the educational centres were far away.*

48-year-old former schoolteacher and mother of five from Zurmat, Paktia (Pashtun) who had described her village as both “on the frontline” and “under Taleban control”: *Based on Islamic law and Afghan customs, women don't leave the house if it's not necessary. But we can go out for family visits and funerals and weddings of close relatives and visit the doctor. Security also plays an important role. Every human being needs a secure environment. So, besides customs, our ability to move around town depends on whether it's safe enough to go out. For instance, I've never travelled to any other province. Think about it, if men can't travel safely, how would they allow us to travel? They would never do such a thing.*

30-year old mother of two in Andar, Ghazni (Pashtun) who lived in a contested area, close to a government checkpoint: *I can't say exactly how often I go out, but I do it whenever there's a need. For example, if my relatives are getting married or if there's any other ceremony. Sometimes, I visit my parents, or go to the hospital when I'm not feeling well. But when there's fighting or shelling by the Afghan army, I couldn't go out even if my son were dying.*

Travel, itself, was also difficult and perilous:

When I go to the hospital, I'm constantly concerned about roadside bombs. A few days ago, I went there with my father-in-law. On the way, some boys stopped us and told us not to go any further because there were roadside bombs; we were lucky they told us. And if I want to go to my parents' house, I have to travel the long way through Ghazni

city, because the Taleban have blocked the Paktika-Ghazni highway. And there are also roadside bombs on the other roads. When we go outside, we're always concerned about fighting and airstrikes, which can kill us and others.

The **31-year-old woman from Andar, whose area had become more secure since it came under Taleban control**, described how, at the time of the interview, her freedom of movement had improved to such an extent that she could again visit her parents:

Security, of course, affects my going outside. Sometimes, the government forces suddenly show up in our area and block all the roads and then we can't go anywhere... When the security situation is good, as it is now, I can spend the night in my relatives' house. But when there's no security, I can't even [briefly] visit their house and I avoid leaving the house altogether. Last year, I couldn't stay with my parents because there was always the possibility of a night raid or an airstrike, both in my parents' house and on the way. Now that security's better, I can go without fear.

She also described how nearby fighting had prevented a relative from receiving the medical treatment she needed:

Last year, my niece was suffering from appendicitis and we couldn't take her to hospital because helicopters were hovering in the sky during the night. We were afraid they'd bomb our car. We had to wait to take her to the hospital until the next day and she suffered a lot because of that.

VENTURING FURTHER OUT

However, even in contested, unsafe or Taleban-controlled areas, some of the women went out more often than the strictly limited occasions of weddings, funerals and medical emergencies, for instance, for work or to go shopping. Some of them said they had no choice, even if they preferred not to go out or considered it too dangerous – usually because they needed to make a living or because there was nobody else in their household who could take on tasks outside the home. Several described fears of both the insecurity and Taleban scrutiny.

The 36-year-old schoolteacher and mother of four from a contested area in Dasht-e Archi, Kunduz (Uzbek): *I'm a schoolteacher. When I go out, I have to wear a burqa and my husband has to accompany me. It means I can't go out alone... There's a parallel government system in my district; two governments, each with different rules and regulations. It means we have to adjust to both of them... Both my boys and my girl go to the madrasa. There's no issue with that. But when my girl gets older, when she's 13, she'll [have to] stop going.*

25-year-old teacher from Jaghatu, Ghazni, unmarried, living with her parents (Hazara): *Last week, I went to school, but I couldn't go via the main road because there were mines. If the Taleban are in the area, I never go out of the house. When they aren't in the area, I go out once or twice a day – to collect water from the spring or wash the dishes. Sometimes I go to the school, but nowadays I don't always go, because of the quarantine... In my area, both girls and boys can study up to grade 12. Some girls*

graduated from our school, studied teacher training in Ghazni city and returned to be teachers here. Other girls have bachelor degrees and now teach in our school.

Many women referred to the need for a *mahram* – a male relative to accompany them when they leave the house – due either to Taleban restrictions or local custom. Often this complicated their freedom of movement, particularly for those whose husbands had died or had difficulty travelling.

Tala wa Barfak district, Baghlan province



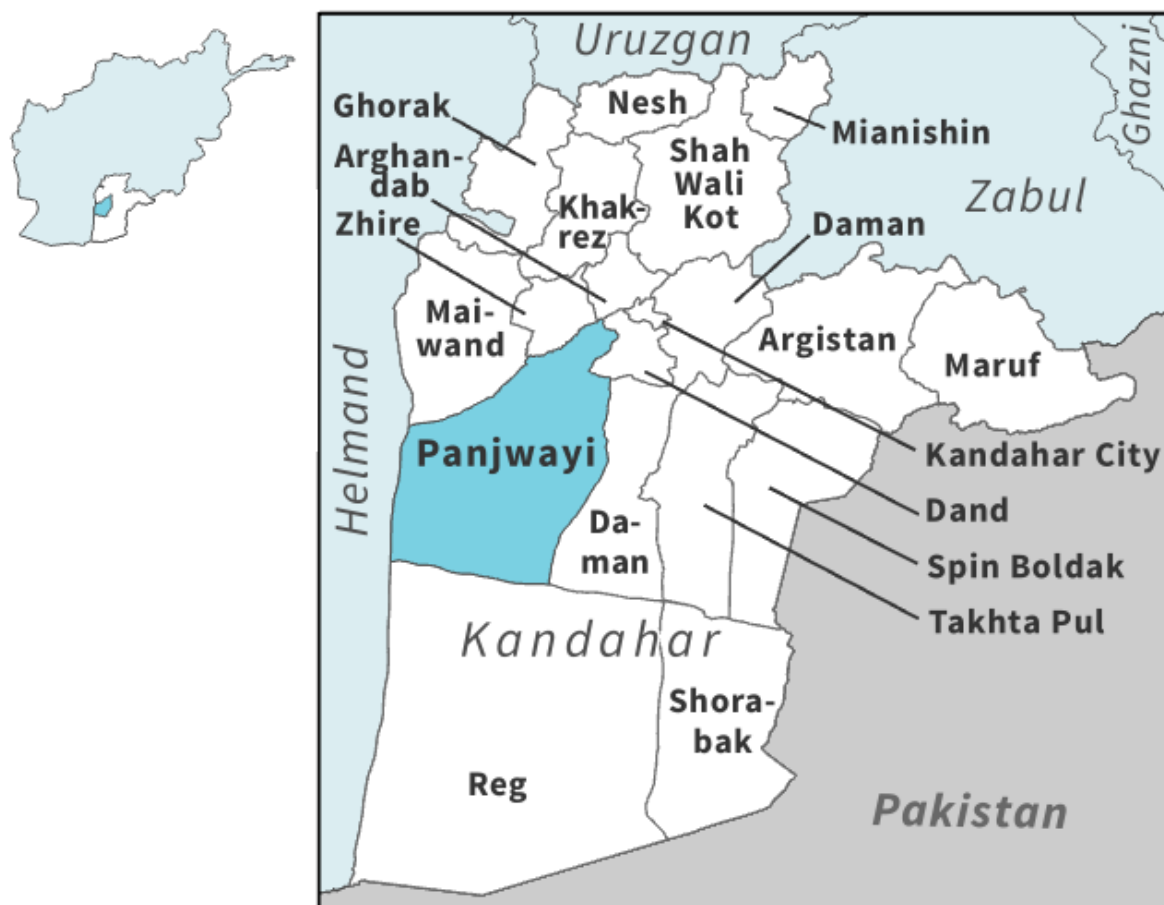
Image: Samir Hamidi

42-year-old mother of six from Tala wa Barfak, Baghlan (Pashtun), whose area recently came under Taleban control: *Since the Taleban came, I hate going out, to be honest. But the whole family relies on me. My elder sons are helping now – they started working, which is a huge relief. Otherwise, how can a woman provide for her family in a Taleban-controlled situation? We can't go out on our own. We have to take a mahram wherever we go. My husband's blind, so it's difficult for me to find a mahram every time I go out. We're very restricted. Women can't work outside and shouldn't be seen in the bazaar. Girls can't go to school... I never thought that if the Taleban came, I would lose my job. I was a cleaner, not some officer who did something [important]. But I lost my job when they gained more power in this area. [Now] I need a mahram to go anywhere. Sometimes, I pretend that our neighbour's my brother, so I can go to the doctor or run essential errands. But if they find out, we'll be in serious trouble. They have no mercy when it comes to punishing women.*

The 40-year-old Hazara widow from Kejran, who had moved to Injil in Herat, has to regularly travel considerable distances. Not only does she need to take her son, who lost his leg, for treatment to the Red Cross hospital, but she also has to travel from Herat through several provinces to Daikundi to collect stipends from the local Directorate of Martyrs and Disabled in their place of origin, Kejran.

We've just got back from a trip. There was fighting between the government and the Taleban on both ways. When we were going from Herat to Daikundi, there was fighting in Adraskan district. We were stopped by the soldiers and had to wait for it to end. On the way back, we heard there was a wedding and the Taleban had attacked it. But we didn't see the fighting and the road was open... It takes two days to travel to Kandahar, then we have to spend a night there. From there, we have to take the old, dilapidated vans to Kejran. That also takes two days on a bumpy, unpaved road. Along the way, we're afraid of the Taleban and of thieves and the van falling off a cliff. Then, on the road from Kejran to Nili [the centre of Daikundi province], we aren't too afraid of the Taleban, but we're afraid of road mines. In a way, we're afraid of everyone. For the Americans, we look like Pashtun Talebs and for the Pashtun Talebs, we look like Hazaras. So we're targeted by both sides. We're in the middle of the attacks and we don't know what to do or where to go to be safe.

Panjwayi district, Kandahar province



The **older woman from Panjwayi in Kandahar (Pashtun)** had greater freedom to leave her home and travel without a mahram than other women because of her age. She said she regularly travelled to Kandahar city to visit her children, unless the security situation disrupted her plans.

I leave my home every day to visit my relatives in the village and my relatives' homes in other villages. I also go to condolence ceremonies. I don't go shopping in the bazaar, but when family members, like my grandsons or my daughter-in-law get sick, I take them to hospital for treatment. Until a year ago, I used to go to Kandahar city once every two or three months to see my daughter, who's married and lives there. Now I go to Kandahar city every two weeks to visit my son who works in the police. I use local transport – every day, many taxis carry passengers from the district centre and the villages to Kandahar city. I usually go on Fridays, but when security's not good, I delay my trip.

Of her three grown children, two are married, with children of their own. There are no young girls in her family, but in general, she says: “Girls don't go to school in the villages.” She has also stopped sending her grandsons to school for fear of the Taleban:

My policeman son has four children. I can't send them to school because I'm afraid the Taleban will abduct or kill them. I was sending them to the mosque, but one day, the boys said they were told their father would be killed in the fighting. They were very afraid. So, I decided also to stop sending them to the mosque for their religious studies.

It comes as no surprise that the two women from the generally less conservative Hazarajat, where there was also no Taleban control and no direct fighting, described a greater degree of freedom. They also expressed unease at the thought that this may change, as discussed in more detail in the next section.

23-year-old homemaker and mother of two, Miramor, Daikundi (Hazara):

Although work is burdensome in the village, I like that I'm working outside. We go for ashar [volunteer work on other people's land]. Like this summer, I helped my uncle with the wheat harvest... I work outside in the fields. I visit my relatives. We go to [a nearby bazaar] when we need to see a doctor or for shopping. But if the Taleban took control of this area, I think people would be too afraid to leave their houses.

43-year-old homemaker from Yakaolang, Bamyan (Hazara): *I go to the bazaar to buy clothes for the family and necessary things for the house, to other districts for family gatherings, marriage ceremonies and funerals and to my father's family who live in [another area]. Other than that, we work on our land. I do household chores and help with outside work. Sometimes, I go to the school for meetings or payments, if my husband is too busy with work... I have three daughters – in grade 12, 10 and 7 – and two sons in grade 1 and 3. We have a high school for girls and one for boys, it's around a 30-minute walk from where we live. This year, schools are closed because of corona, but my children were able to go before that. There's also a clinic in the bazaar with women nurses and midwives. A few times we had to go to Bamyan city because of the lack of facilities here.*

ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND HEALTH

The **48-year-old former schoolteacher and mother of five from Zurmat, Paktia (Pashtun)**, who was quoted above as saying that Islamic law and Afghan customs meant women do not leave the home unless necessary, said she had sent her eldest daughter to school in the past. However, this was no longer possible since the girls' schools had closed – possibly due to cuts in donor funding, changed attitudes about girl's education or pressure from the Taleban.⁸

My eldest daughter's 26 years old. She was able to study until grade six before getting married because some NGOs had set up community schools in the homes. We don't have these community schools anymore. Education for women is now considered as bringing shame on the family. My sons study in the mosque. They can go to the mosque and madrassa, but that opportunity's not available in our village for girls. A while ago, there were mobile schools up to grade nine that could serve up to five families. People trusted these schools – the teachers were elderly men – but the Taleban banned those schools too.

Health services, she said, had also declined:

Before the Taleban took over the district and province, we had women doctors and nurses. Most of them were locals who'd been trained for the job. But now they're not allowed to work... The people in our village, and other villages that are under Taleban control, have to take sick people elsewhere, sometimes even to Kabul. A lot of the time, the person dies.

Several women described a situation where girls could not go to school at all and boys only irregularly. They expressed their unease over the risks involved:

The **31-year-old woman in Andar, Ghazni (Pashtun), whose area had become more secure**, said:

My daughters are old enough to go to school, but my son not yet. There are no girls' schools nearby; my daughters go to the mosque for religious studies. Of course, security affects the education of children in my village. When the Afghan forces used to come at night and block the roads, the children weren't allowed to go to school. At other times, the Taleban closed the schools in our district for security reasons or because they were fighting the Afghan government forces. Also, when the Taleban planted mines along the roads to the schools, the children couldn't go.

30-year-old homemaker and mother of three from Zurmat, Paktia (Pashtun):
My sons have to go to the madrasa in the morning and school in the afternoon. The Taleban control the madrasa. They teach the children a fighting mindset. If I could,

8 In 2019, AAN reported that all 13 girls schools in Zurmat had closed and discussed the reasons for this. See Christian Bleuer, Sayed Asadullah Sadat, Obaid Ali, 'One Land, Two Rules (8): Delivering public services in insurgency-affected insurgent-controlled Zurmat district', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 4 September 2019, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/one-land-two-rules-8-delivering-public-services-in-insurgency-affected-insurgent-controlled-zurmat-district/>.

I wouldn't send them there since it's more Taleban teachings than religious studies. The Taleban also keep their artillery and weapons in the mosques and madrasas, which I think is extremely dangerous. And whenever there's an attack, the schools are closed. Once, the kids were locked in school for an entire day. This has affected their willingness to go to school. My sons don't want to study; they'd rather stay at home or work in the fields.

Zurmat district, Paktia province

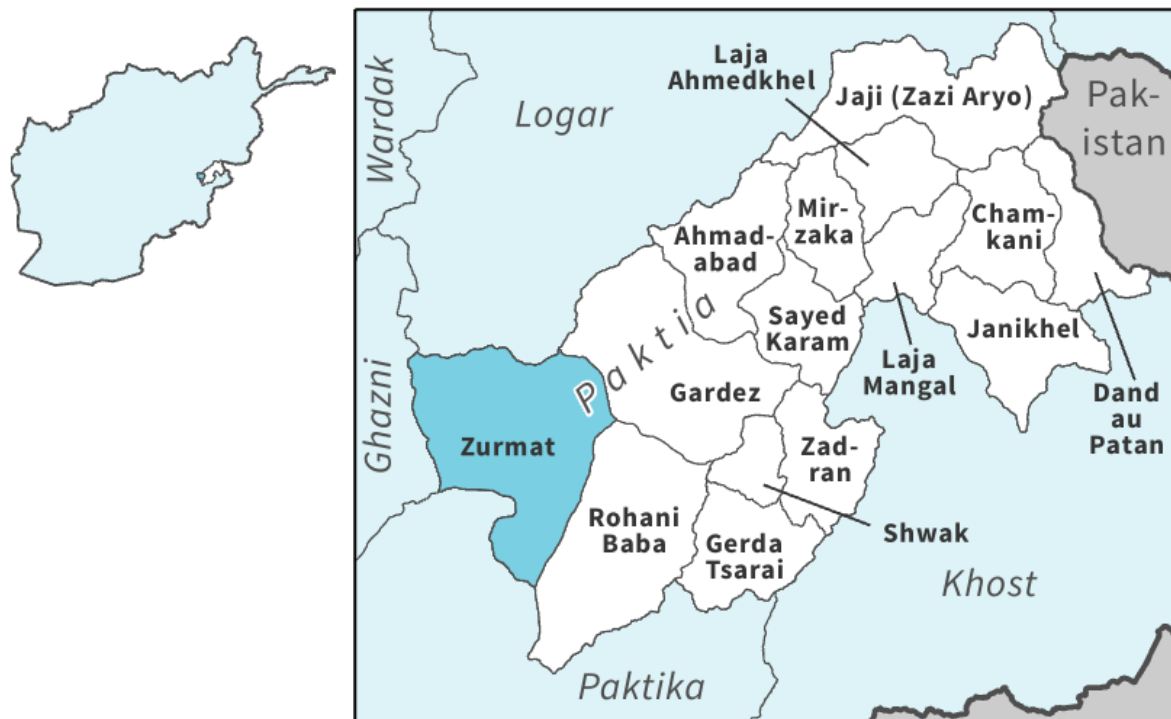


Image: Roger Helms

Mother of five, who sold handicrafts in Kandahar city, from Arghandab, Kandahar (Pashtun): *On many occasions, we had to tell our children not to go to school. When we hear the sound of bullets, we stop the boys from going to school... My sons go to school, but not my two daughters. When the school was built in our village, one of my daughters, who was 10 or 11 at the time, wanted to go, but my husband's brother said she was too old – even though he enrolled his own son, who was the same age at the time, in that same school.*

23-year-old unmarried teacher from Dasht-e Archi Kunduz (Pashtun): *In my area, boys can go to schools or madrasa at any age. But it's a different story for the girls. In the government-controlled area, most girls study until grade 12. [But] when it comes to madrasas, girls only study until age 11 or 12. There are two girls' high schools in our district, one in the Taleban-controlled area and the other in the government area. The one in the Taleban area is mostly shut and when it's open, girls over 13 are not allowed in.*

For the **25-year-old unmarried Pashtun woman from a village in Spera, Khost where the Taliban had gained “full control”**, it made no difference who was in charge:

I go out about once a month or less. But because of the lack of security on the road and in the streets, I don't even feel secure enough to go out that often. It has to be an absolute necessity – like going to a relative's wedding, visiting a doctor, or a family gathering... We have a school in our area that teaches up to grade 12. My [younger] brothers go to the school and the madrasa for religious studies, but often because of the war, children can't go. And girls have never been allowed to go to school in our area. Women and girls can't go out without a mahram either.... [When we were] in Pakistan, I studied until grade 9. But when we came back to Afghanistan, I couldn't continue. The culture here is not in favour of women at all. It doesn't matter who controls the area; the situation has always been the same. I wanted to go to the girls' school in the provincial centre, but my family didn't allow me because of the travel and insecurity. I wanted to become a doctor, but that wish was never fulfilled.

Other interviewees described how, in some areas, the girls and their families tried to safeguard their education through self-study at home:

20-year-old unmarried woman from Sar Howza, Paktika (Pashtun): *In the past, when there was fighting, my younger sister couldn't go to school, but for the last two years, there's been no fighting and the school's been open. Before, girls were allowed to go to school [only] until grade eight. Now, girls [still] go to school until grade eight and after that, they study at home with books so that they can sit the exams.*

2.3 IMPACT OF THE WAR: HAVE YOU SUFFERED ANY LOSSES DUE TO THE WAR?

Finally, to get a better sense of the effect of insecurity on interviewees' daily lives, we asked whether any family members or close relatives had been killed or wounded in the previous five years. This small sample is a reminder of how deeply the many years of war have affected people's lives. The violence had come from all sides: from the Taliban, Afghan government forces and the US military.⁹

30-year-old homemaker and mother of three, from Zurmat district, Paktia province (Pashtun): *A family member was killed because he worked for the government. The Taliban said he was a spy. We lost two other family members when mortars were fired at my aunt's house. My aunt lost her arm in that same incident; she was hospitalised in the Emergency Hospital in Kabul for five months. And last year, in a night raid by the Americans and the [Khost Protection Force], four members of our extended family were killed. One was a schoolteacher; two others were university students. In total, eleven people were killed. I think this is the most bitter memory of my life, the memory of that night raid. Those images are still in my head.*

⁹ Since the end of NATO's ISAF mission in Afghanistan in December 2014, only the US military has had a combat role.

Widow and mother of four, schoolteacher, IDP originally from Darzab district,

Jawzjan province (Uzbek): *In 2018, when the Taleban attacked our village, my husband and three of my relatives were killed in the crossfire between government forces and Taleban fighters. My husband was a government employee, but the Taleban accused him of being in the [Afghan] local police [ALP]. After they captured the village, the Taleban came to our door looking for my husband's brothers. They said they'd burn down our home if we didn't hand [the brothers] over within two days. So, we fled the village for the provincial centre, leaving everything behind.*

48-year-old former schoolteacher and mother of five, from Zurmat district,

Paktia province (Pashtun): *My brother-in-law ... was killed in the crossfire between the Taleban and the government on his way to the district centre from home. His wife and kids now live with us. Our financial situation barely keeps us afloat. This isn't unique to our family. Thousands of families in Afghanistan have experienced this and maybe even worse.*

25-year-old unmarried woman, from Spera district, Khost province (Pashtun):

Around two years ago, a close family member was shot and severely wounded in a Taleban attack on government facilities. When we took him to hospital, they didn't accept him because they didn't have the right equipment. We tried to take him to the provincial capital, but the roads were destroyed and closed to traffic. He died and we could not help him. This image is still vivid in my memory. It still hurts and disturbs me and I feel hopeless when I think about it.

Older woman and mother of three adult children, from Panjwayi district,

Kandahar province (Pashtun): *Eighteen months ago, my husband's nephew, who was working for the local police [ALP], was wounded. He was travelling with his friends from Panjwayi bazaar to his security post when the Taleban attacked them. He was badly hurt and taken to Kandahar city for treatment. Thank God, he recovered. He left the local police and took a job as a mechanic in Kandahar city. Then his brothers went to the Taleban and told them their brother wasn't working for the local police anymore. The Taleban gave them a letter saying their brother would not be harmed and he could travel freely – but if he re-joined the police, they would kill him.*

44-year-old homemaker, mother of five, from Arghandab district, Kandahar

province (Pashtun): *Around two years ago, my cousin's son was killed in an explosion. He left behind a wife and two small sons. Another time, my brother-in-law was in a friend's car; they were travelling along a road where the Taleban had planted a landmine when it exploded. My brother-in-law was killed on the spot. His friend lost his foot.*

55-year-old homemaker, mother of six, from Jaji Maidan district, Khost province

(Pashtun): *I lost my cousin to a road mine in recent years. He was travelling in his car when it happened. The Taleban were responsible. When they brought back his corpse, half of his body was missing.*

The widow from Kejran spoke at length about her plight, caused by an American bombing:

40-year-old widow, mother of three, IDP from Kejran in Daikundi, now living in Injil district, Herat province (Hazara): *It happened about ten years ago. My youngest daughter was only six months old. There was a lot of war and misery and poverty and drought in Kejran. We had five children. My children's father was sick and we weren't able to make a living. So, we decided to go and live in Herat, to have a better life. Others were travelling with us too, in three cars. Some were taking their sick to Kandahar and others were going to Herat. Some of the unmarried boys were going to Iran. On the way, we were bombed in a desert area by the Americans by mistake. We had to pass through a Taleban area and there was fighting. A report had gone out that the Talebs were moving. The Americans mistook us for Talebs and bombed us.*

Arghandab district and its centre the village of Baba Wali, Kandahar province

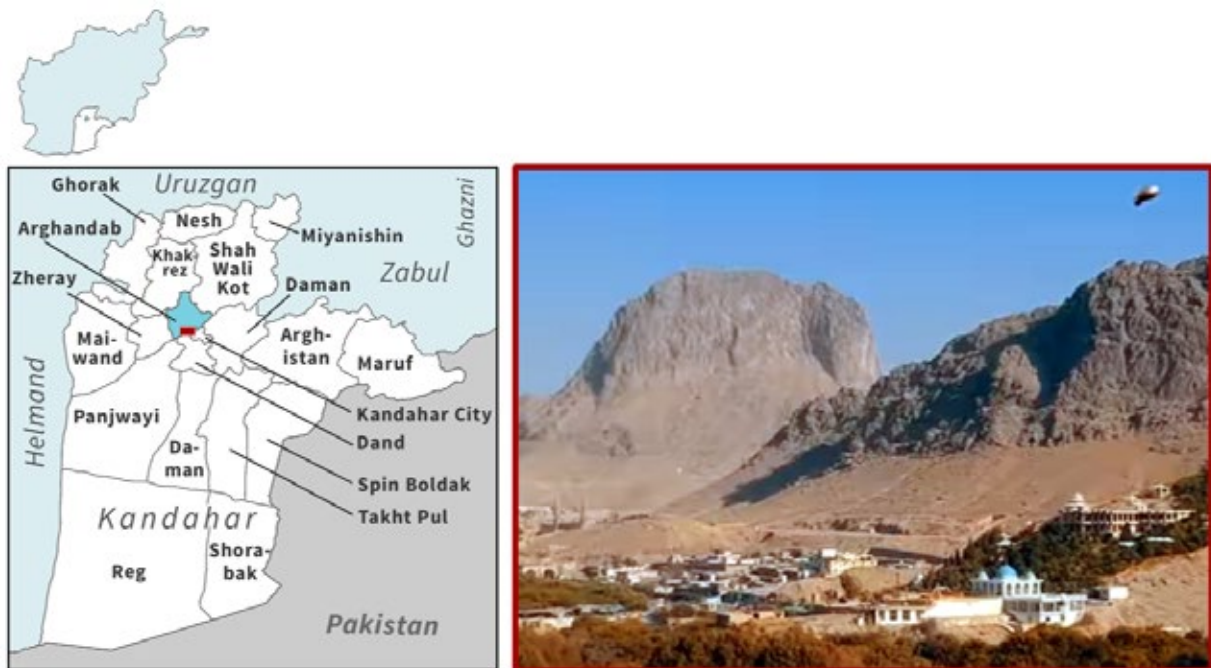


Image: Roger Helms

27 people were killed and 12 injured. From our family, my husband, who was a farmer, was martyred, one of my sons was martyred, one of my daughters was martyred and this son here, who was five, lost a leg. I was also hit by shrapnel. Of my seven-year-old daughter, I could only bury one of her hands – it was the only part of her that remained. [Crying] Of my four-year-old son, I could only bury part of his shoulder, the same for their father. Not one of them still had a head on their bodies. No one had a head so that I could look at them for a final time. Nothing.

The Americans also killed one of my father-in-law's relatives on the way to Kandahar. It wasn't a bombardment; they were fired at. Many people were killed or wounded in that incident. He was martyred along with this wife and their infant. Another man lost his leg.

Look at this picture. [She tells her son to show pictures on the phone.] This man was killed in the shooting too. So many from Kejran have lost their lives... Look at these photos; they were three brothers, relatives of my husband, all killed. One was a police officer – he was killed by an explosive on his motorcycle. The other was a labourer – he died on the way to Iran. The Taleban slaughtered the third one on the road to Ghor; he was taken from the car and beheaded. He had a grocery shop; his family's still in Kejran. His mother's gone mad. She lost three sons in three years, one after another. Look at these other photos. They are all martyrs. Many of them were my relatives. These are the martyrs of Kejran.

CHAPTER 3

VIEWS ON THE US-TALEBAN AGREEMENT AND HOW IT MIGHT AFFECT THEIR LIFE



Women attend literacy class in Bamyan.
Photo: Sebastian Rich/ UN Photo, 29 April 2009.

WHEN ASKED about a complex issue like a peace process, people often have to grapple with several different questions and layers at the same time while trying to formulate a precise answer. Although the questionnaire was designed to separate the interviewees' opinions about the actual process from their more idealised visions of what peace would look like, in practice, most interviewees discussed the subjects interchangeably. For instance, when asked about the US-Taleban deal, several interviewees said they felt good about it because peace would make everything better. Conversely, when asked later what difference peace would make to their lives, several interviewees speculated about how Taleban restrictions would make their lives more difficult.

To give people hope and then show them this wasn't a real attempt [for peace] would be the cruellest betrayal of all.

This illustrates that when asked about the Afghan peace process, in general, respondents are often trying to answer several different questions simultaneously, including (1) what they think about the actual process as it appears to be unfolding, (2) what they think the process might bring if it were successful and (3) what they think or hope to gain from peace processes, or even peace, in general.

On balance, when setting aside the almost dreamlike descriptions of what peace would look like once it came, very few of the women were, in reality, optimistic about the chances that the current process would bring what they typically desired – peace, security and freedom of movement. At the same time, almost all, even the most pessimistic, found their negativity and hesitation tempered by a stubborn hope that there was still a chance, if not for outright peace, then at least for a lessening of the violence.

3.1 THE US-TALEBAN AGREEMENT: HAVE YOU HEARD OF IT? WHAT ARE YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT IT?

When asked whether they had heard about the US-Taleban agreement, almost all interviewees knew about the agreement and what it entailed. Most of them had a fairly sophisticated sense of the deal's details and implications, including who was party to it and who was not. They were aware of what the parties had agreed to, including the US troop withdrawal, prisoner exchanges, attempts to get the Taleban to talk to the Afghan



Women fleeing with their children after US forces hit a civilian vehicle in Haska Mina district, Nangrahar province.
Photo: Noorullah Shirzada/AFP, 12 August 2017.

government and attempts to negotiate a general ceasefire. Several women said they were happy with the agreement, since peace was better than war. Several said they hoped the agreement would lead to negotiations and possibly even a ceasefire between the Taliban and the Afghan government. A few women offered a different interpretation of the agreement, saying it meant that the Americans had been defeated and/or that the Taliban now felt they had won.

Most women had heard about the agreement through a combination of radio or television, family members and other relatives. One woman, the **25-year old Hazara widow from Sayad district, Sar-e Pul province**, who had lost her husband in a Taliban attack and now lived with her mother as an IDP, said she had not heard about the deal:

All I know is that they say peace should come. And that people are tired of the war... I think it's good; we would be able to go back to our place.

The **35-year-old Sayed mother of six from Guzara, Herat**, when asked about the deal, said:

I don't know much about what the Americans and Talebs have been discussing. I see them on TV, but I can't understand what the issue is between them. I don't know the language they're speaking or what the TV says they're saying.

The **23-year-old mother of two from Miramor, Daikundi (Hazara)**, also said she had not heard about the deal (or rather: about peace), but she still turned out to have a rudimentary understanding of what was going on:

I haven't heard anything about peace. [All I know is that] the government has decided to agree with the Taliban and share power with them. This is supported by the US and other countries too. All sides are eager to bring peace to Afghanistan. I think peace is good if they really mean to bring peace, so no one gets killed, displaced or orphaned.

Although her initial response to the possibility of an agreement was positive, when asked how this might affect her own life, her thinking took a different turn:

I haven't seen a Taleb my whole life and I haven't seen war either, so I don't know how it would change my life. I do know that Pashtun women live very differently from me. I know they can't go to school, for example and do not work outside their homes. I'm not sure how much of this is true, but once I heard that they're locked in their houses and

their husbands hold the keys. Although the work's burdensome in the village, I like that I'm working outside. I'm not sure whether this would still be possible [if the Taleban came]. Also, I don't know if the Taleban would agree with our religious sect. I heard that in Kabul, they bomb mosques for holding the Muharram ceremonies and that in the past people used to do their religious rituals in secret.

When asked what the US-Taleban agreement might mean in general, or for them personally, some women expressed optimism or even enthusiasm. Like the **25-year-old Pashtun unmarried woman from Spera, Khost province**, whose area had become more secure since the Taleban took over:

Since the Taleban gained control of our town, life has become tough. It makes me angry they now think they've won the war and will control everything.

I have a good feeling about this agreement. Afghans will be able to sit together and talk about their future because we can't keep fighting. This is the beginning and I think the negotiations will help both sides find a solution. The nation's now hopeful and this hope is precious at a time when most families have lost at least one family member to the war... One thing that will change is the fear. We've been fearing the Taleban; they've been called the enemy. This will change and this change will have its effects on us.

Throughout the interview, she expressed very few misgivings about the process. Later in the interview, she was hopeful that peace would finally allow her to pursue an education. She was optimistic that “with peace, women's rights will be recognised” (even though earlier she had said “the situation isn't in favour of women at all, it doesn't matter who controls the area”).

The **30-year old Pashtun mother of two, who came from a contested village in Andar, Ghazni**, was relatively hopeful that the agreement would ultimately bring peace after the US forces had left:

As far as I know, from other women who come to my home and from relatives, there's an agreement between the US government and the Taleban that the American soldiers should leave Afghanistan and after that, we will work for peace. I don't think there'll be peace before the Americans are gone from Afghanistan. I think the Taleban also said they wouldn't make peace before that.

I think the agreement contains that there'll be a ceasefire once the US forces leave and there's no reason left to fight. In the meantime, the US and the Taleban have agreed not to make problems for each other and to release some Taleban prisoners.

I think it was a good idea that the agreement was signed between the two parties. I think it can bring peace and stability. People will be able to take a breath in peace. It

Andar district and its centre in the village of Miri, Ghazni province



Image: Roger Helms

will bring happiness and end atrocities and take away the sadness and grief in almost every house and every family. People are expecting a lot from the coming peace.

When asked how a peace deal with the Taleban would affect her personally, she talked about peace in general, rather than the reality of what a political arrangement with the Taleban might entail for her:

It would affect me a lot. For example, I'm always worried about fighting in my village or shelling at the nearby Afghan security forces checkpoint. If there was peace, we could live a calm and peaceful life. We could take better care of our children. We would happily do our work without being afraid to hear bad news. Right now, we have no enthusiasm for work and no patience.

Later in the interview, she said she hoped peace would bring girls' schools to her area, as in Kabul.

The **44-year-old Pashtun homemaker from Arghandab, Kandahar, in whose village the security situation had greatly improved**, also expressed enthusiasm over the deal:

I heard about the agreement on the radio. As far as I know, it was between the Americans and the Taleban. The Afghan government was not involved in the agreement or the process of talks. I heard that Taleban prisoners would be released and that the foreigners would leave our country and that after the prisoner release, talks between the government and the Taleban would start and peace will come. I was very excited to

hear this; it was excellent news because there'll be no more fighting and the infidels will leave.

In her case, the agreement had already delivered one real positive result:

One of my neighbour's sons, who was in prison in Kabul, was released. His mother had been crying for him every day. Now she's very happy. I'm also happy for her and all the mothers and fathers who get to see their children alive and well. I hope the deal with the Taleban will bring peace so that we can have a secure life and my husband can work in his fields and orchards without fear and my children can play in the village and I can go to the bazaar without fear of explosions and fighting.

Although she expressed happiness over the deal (and described the Americans as 'infidels'), later in the conversation, when asked what difference peace might make to her life, she expressed concern that Taleban rule might make it even harder for her to leave her home and make a living (as discussed in the next section).

The **older Pashtun woman from Panjwayi, Kandahar, from a village where the situation had also improved recently**, said she first learned about the agreement from her son. She was apprehensive about the Taleban's intentions, unconvinced the deal would lead to peace and worried about her son:

My son saw it on Facebook and then I heard it on the radio, that the Taleban and the US had signed an agreement... Whether it's good or bad depends on the intentions of the Taleban. If the Taleban are honest and stop fighting and killing people, I'll be happy. But if they deceive the government and the people and if they mean to keep fighting our government, I won't be happy. They'll kill my son, who's a policeman. I couldn't welcome the murderers of my son and the sons of other women... But if there's a successful and sincere deal between the Taleban and the government, my son will be safe. He'll be able to come home every Friday again.

Other women were unreservedly sceptical. The **42-year-old Pashtun breadwinner and mother of six, from Tala wa Barfak, Baghlan**, for instance, was bitter that the Americans had decided to hand Afghanistan to the Taleban:

Yes, I've heard about the deal. I've heard that America is defeated and is leaving Afghanistan. I feel bad about it. Since the Taleban gained control of our town, life has become tough. It makes me angry they now think they've won the war and will control everything. But it is what it is. If America wants to hand Afghanistan to them, no one will be able to do anything about it.

For the **48-year-old Pashtun former schoolteacher from Zurmat, Paktia, whose area was still on the frontline of the war**, making peace with the US was an unpalatable but, perhaps, necessary choice, simply because everyone is so exhausted by the fighting:

As a woman, I'm really tired of this situation. Other women are also anxious and frustrated by the ongoing war and violence. Every family's had losses, sons and daughters killed, disabled, gone missing. So this wanting to make peace with the US isn't because we agree with what the US preach, but because we're tired of violence and war and we're thirsty for peace... I think the US-Taleban deal is a useful step

towards peace if both sides stick to their words and promises. So far, for us, the deal's only benefit has been that the drone and air attacks and night raids have stopped and there are fewer operations and attacks in the cities. But the domestic war, the war between the Taleban and the Afghan government, is still ongoing... Even so, people are more hopeful now that they might see the day when there's no fighting in Afghanistan.

Several women expressed scepticism about the intentions of the various parties.

The **55-year-old Pashtun homemaker from Jaji Maidan, Khost whose area had become more secure in the previous year**, did not believe the different sides would stick to their word:

[The US-Taleban deal] is a topic that is discussed very often at home. They say that the most important point is the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, but I can't really believe the US will leave this easily and the Taleban will make peace with the government. I welcome any move that brings security and peace to Afghanistan, but it's too optimistic to think that all three sides will stick to their word and that we'll have peace. If that were true, why didn't we have peace in the last 20 years?... I just hope we're talking about a real peace. There's a saying: "You shouldn't colour your black chickens yellow. They might be yellow for a few days, but then they'll show their true colour." To give people hope and then show them that this was not a real attempt would be the cruellest betrayal of all. People deserve peace. Now that the hope is born, it's up to our politicians to make it right.

After an initial flash of hope, the **30-year-old Pashtun homemaker from Zurmat, Paktia, whose area had come under Taleban control**, expressed a worry that all sides were just following their own agenda and did not care what happened to the people:

When I first heard rumours about a possible peace with the Taleban, I was really happy. I thought it would change our lives. We're the people who live in remote areas and have no voice in the politics of this country. While we've seen nothing but war and death all our lives, those politicians living in Kabul can decide about peace deals or war deals. But I don't think it will change anything. Just like the deal between the Taleban and the US hasn't changed anything. It's all about their gains and losses, not about the people of Afghanistan. They have their own goals; we have seen this repeatedly.

As a woman who lived in what appears to have formerly been a pro-government area, she was also worried about the effects of a peace deal on her life:

The agreement has only made me more fearful of the future. If the US withdraws its troops from Afghanistan, the Taleban might seek revenge against those who joined the government or agreed to government rule in their areas. I'm not sure what will happen to us. Until now, at least they feared the Americans, but women will have no place in this country after this. Men will also lose their freedom under Taleban rule.

The **35-year-old Sayed mother of six from Guzara, Herat**, who earlier had said she did not know what the Americans and the Taleban were talking about, compared the distrust between the US and Taleban with the distrust between the different sides within the Afghan government:

There's a lot about [the deal] on the TV, that the Americans and Taleban are talking to each other. There's also a lot about Abdullah and Ghani, who keep squabbling with each other. Like between the Taleban and the Americans, there's no trust between Abdullah and Ghani. They have each taken part of the state by force. Is this greatness? It is not. I've never been to school, but this is what I think, see and feel... I'm happy for there to be peace because it'll be good for our lives. But it depends on whether the peace is a true peace. And I don't know if the Americans and the Talebs are honest about what they're talking about and agreeing on. If they're like Abdullah and Ghani, trying to cheat each other and the people, then what good is it? We don't trust Abdullah and Ghani; how can we trust the Americans and the Taleban? And what if the Americans and the Taleban make peace, but Abdullah and Ghani still can't get along, what will happen then? We're afraid that the war might come even closer to our home.

The **31-year-old Pashtun mother of three from Andar, Ghazni**, whose area had become more secure since the Taleban took over, was also sceptical about the role the Afghan government had played:

As far as I know about the Qatar agreement, the US and the Taleban sat together and sidelined the Afghan government. The reason, I think, was that the Afghan government didn't want peace to come to Afghanistan. And it still doesn't want it. The Taleban said President Ashraf Ghani had promised he'd make peace with them or establish a joint government if he became president. But when he became president, he didn't fulfil his promises and didn't care about the Taleban. Then the Taleban started fighting from one side and the government from the other. Still, the president didn't want to sit with the Taleban or recognise them. Later the Taleban decided to sit with the US government and make peace with them. They said they didn't want to sit with the Afghan government but wanted to share their concerns with the US first. Once the US accepts their concerns, then the Taleban said they'd sit with the Afghan government.

Still, she expressed optimism about the agreement, although like with many of the other interviewees, it mainly seemed to be based on how good life might be once peace was achieved, rather than on the realities of the process at hand:

I feel good and excited about this agreement because if peace comes to Afghanistan, there'll be no war. The bloodshed and brutalities will be reduced or may even end. People will be able to move from one area to another with confidence – now, the Taleban stop people who are working for the government and government officials harass and question people who look like Taleban. The roads connecting different cities or villages will be without bomb blasts. People will be able to do their work peacefully, without worry. This is why I'm happy about the peace agreement. But there might be some people who are unhappy about it.

The **40-year-old Hazara widow and IDP from Kejran, Daikundi, who had been the victim of US bombing** also oscillated – here and during the whole interview – between what seemed justified scepticism and hesitant, ungrounded hope:

I heard about the deal. They're just sitting down and talking and trying to cheat each other. Neither side has a clean heart about peace. They're sitting and looking at each

other furtively and holding grudges against each other. And they don't care about us, neither the Talebs nor the Americans. I don't know what they care about. No one can kill them; the Americans are in their planes and we can't reach them. And as for the Talebs, no one dares to kill them. Getting killed is only for us poor people. Misery is also only for us poor people. What do I think about the deal? It's good, but it depends on whether they really want to act in good faith. I think they just want to cheat each other. But it's good if peace comes.

Some of the women did not engage with the potential pitfalls and uncertainties surrounding the deal, or at least not yet, and simply described what they imagined peace would be like:

32-year-old Turkman rug weaver and homemaker from a contested village in Andkhoy, Faryab: *I heard that the Taleban and US forces won't fight anymore, that they've started negotiations to create a new government and that the Taleban would get high-ranking positions. I think it's very good. I hope the government and the Taleban also reach such an agreement and end the current conflict... I have a small rug-weaving factory; it's a family business and the only income we have. If there was peace, we could weave more rugs and sell them across the country. People would visit our market. I could create jobs for hundreds of women in my village.*

20-year-old unmarried Pashtun woman from Sar Howza, Paktika, from a village where the security situation had somewhat improved: *[This agreement] is a step towards peace and that makes me happy. I think it will at least reduce the violence in the country. It could resolve problems and make the government talk to the Taleban. Peace is especially important for women. If someone's killed in the fighting, that person's mother, sister or wife will suffer, so women are happy when they hear about peace talks. It would also have a positive effect on my personal life. If my sister or I want to go to school now, we cannot. My family won't let me, so long as there's no peace because of concerns about Taleban attacks and bomb blasts. But if there's peace, everyone will be able to work and go to school with confidence.*

The three women in the rural districts of Kabul province, who were interviewed in November 2020, several months after the other interviewees, expressed a marked disappointment over how little tangible progress towards peace the US-Taleban agreement had brought.

40-year-old Pashtun homemaker from Estalef district, Kabul province: *I was very optimistic about the US-Taleban agreement in the beginning; I could foresee peace within a few months, but this hope is killed every day with every person the Taleban kills. The intra-Afghan talks didn't change anything either. I don't have any hope for the peace talks anymore. Everyone I know is disappointed and discouraged. There's no news and no progress [on the talks]. And there's no hope that even if they came to an agreement in Doha, they'd stand by it when they came to Kabul. Overall, for the ordinary people of Afghanistan there's just hopelessness.*

25-year-old, unmarried Pashtun woman from Kalakan, Kabul (Pashtun): *At first, we felt good. I thought there would be no more war in the country, but instead, the war*

escalated. The Taleban, who call themselves mujahedin and declared a jihad against the US, now have a ceasefire with the US but are waging a war against Muslims. We're worried. At least, there shouldn't be a deal that re-establishes the Taleban or that starts a civil war or that's hidden from us behind those closed doors.

Estalef, Kalakan and Dehsabz districts, Kabul province

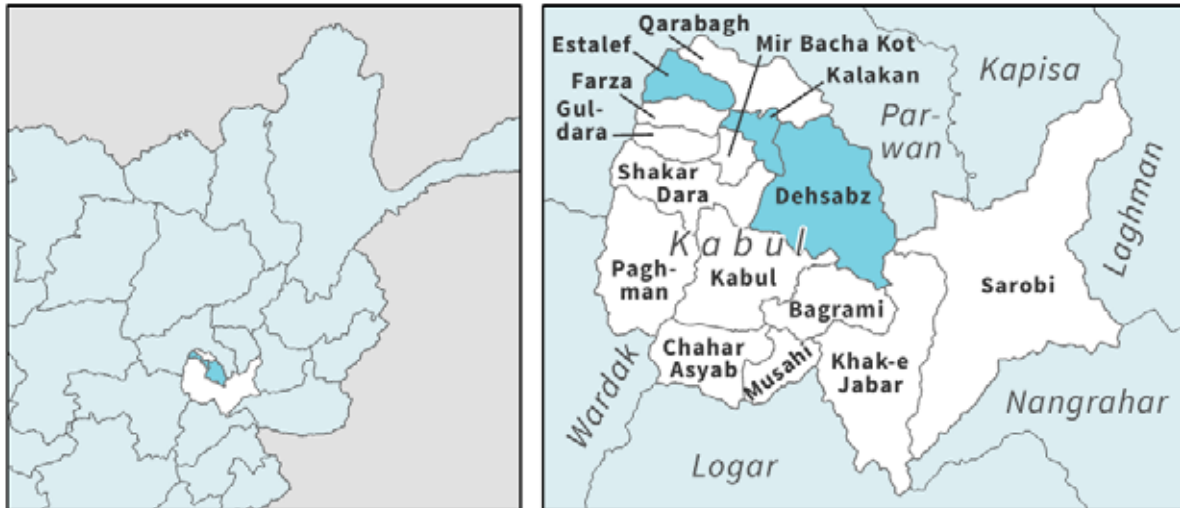


Image: Roger Helms

When asked how an agreement with the Taleban might affect her personally, she switched to an imagined best-case scenario:

If an agreement with the Taleban is done in such a way that the country's achievements aren't lost and women's rights aren't violated and civil war doesn't start, then it will have a positive effect on all people, especially me. Women will be able to get their rights and work and study alongside men.

The 35-year-old Pashtun homemaker from a contested village in Dehsabz, Kabul province, also felt pessimistic:

At first, we felt very good. Not just me, but all Afghans were optimistic that another war would end and lasting peace would come. Unfortunately, it didn't happen the way we expected. The talks lasted a long time and an agreement wasn't reached. Instead of working for peace, the Taleban intensified their attacks... I don't think these Afghan talks will succeed. I think our country will go back to civil war because there's no forgiveness on either side. Both sides are power-hungry and in the middle of that, ordinary people continue to suffer and security worsens with each passing day.

3.2 POSSIBLE IMPACT OF A PEACE DEAL WITH THE TALEBAN: HOW WOULD IT AFFECT YOU PERSONALLY? HOW WOULD IT AFFECT WHAT YOU COULD DO?

A central recurring theme – at this point in the interview and when the women were asked later about the difference peace would make to their lives – was that peace would reduce the mental stress they, their families and their relationships were suffering. For one woman from Andar, this was where her thoughts went when she was asked about how a peace deal would affect her life:

31-year-old Pashtun mother of three from a village under Taleban control in

Andar, Ghazni: *I will finally sleep peacefully and wake without hearing about war and bloodshed. I will not worry about roadside bomb blasts or night raids and airstrikes. I will not be concerned that government forces may show up at my door, looking for Taleban fighters. There'll be no government helicopters hovering over our house at midnight. If there's peace, I'll be able to travel from one village or area to another without fear. I'll do my daily work peacefully without psychological pressure hanging over my head. Right now, I'm under pressure whenever my son or daughter leave the house because I'm afraid something might happen. When I go to another village, I'm worried I may hit a roadside bomb or that government forces may question my husband on the way.*

Other women were more wary. When asked what effect a peace deal with the Taleban might have, their imagination immediately went to what Taleban rule might mean for them personally.

23-year-old Hazara homemaker from Miramor, Daikundi, who had not directly

experienced war: *I haven't heard anything about peace. [All I know is that] the government has decided to come to an agreement with the Taleban and share power with them. This is supported by the US and other countries too. All sides are eager to bring peace to Afghanistan. I think peace is good if they really mean to bring peace, so that no one gets killed or displaced or orphaned.... I don't know if the Taleban would agree with our religious beliefs. We have ten days of Muharram ceremony every year. I'd heard that in Kabul, they bomb mosques for doing that and that in the past, people used to hold their religious rituals in secret.*

25-year-old Hazara teacher from Jaghatu, Ghazni, where the fighting had

worsened: *How might the agreement affect me personally? When I hear about the Taleban or hear the word 'Taleban,' I get very frightened. Last year, they came to our school and the teachers and students were very afraid. If the Taleban really make peace and let us work and study freely, that is good. I'll go to school to teach without fear and I won't be worried when I go out to work or visit relatives.*

The woman from Yakaolang still bore the mental scars of the Taleban massacre in her district twenty years ago:

43-year-old homemaker from Yakaolang, Bamyan, who had not directly experienced war: *A few months ago, when the TV showed Khalilzad signing the agreement with the Taleban representative, my father-in-law gathered all of us to watch the news. The Talebs were so proud of their achievement and they all shook hands. For my husband, it was the worst day of his life. He lost two brothers when the Taleban attacked Yakaolang [in a massacre of civilians in January 2001]... If this Taleban is the same old Taleban... I think I'll have to stay home or take my husband with me wherever I go. I don't know what will happen to my children. If my daughters are banned from going to school and my sons are forced to go to a madrasa to be brainwashed and turned into Talebs, then that is bad news.*

Yakaolang-e Dowum district, Bamyan province

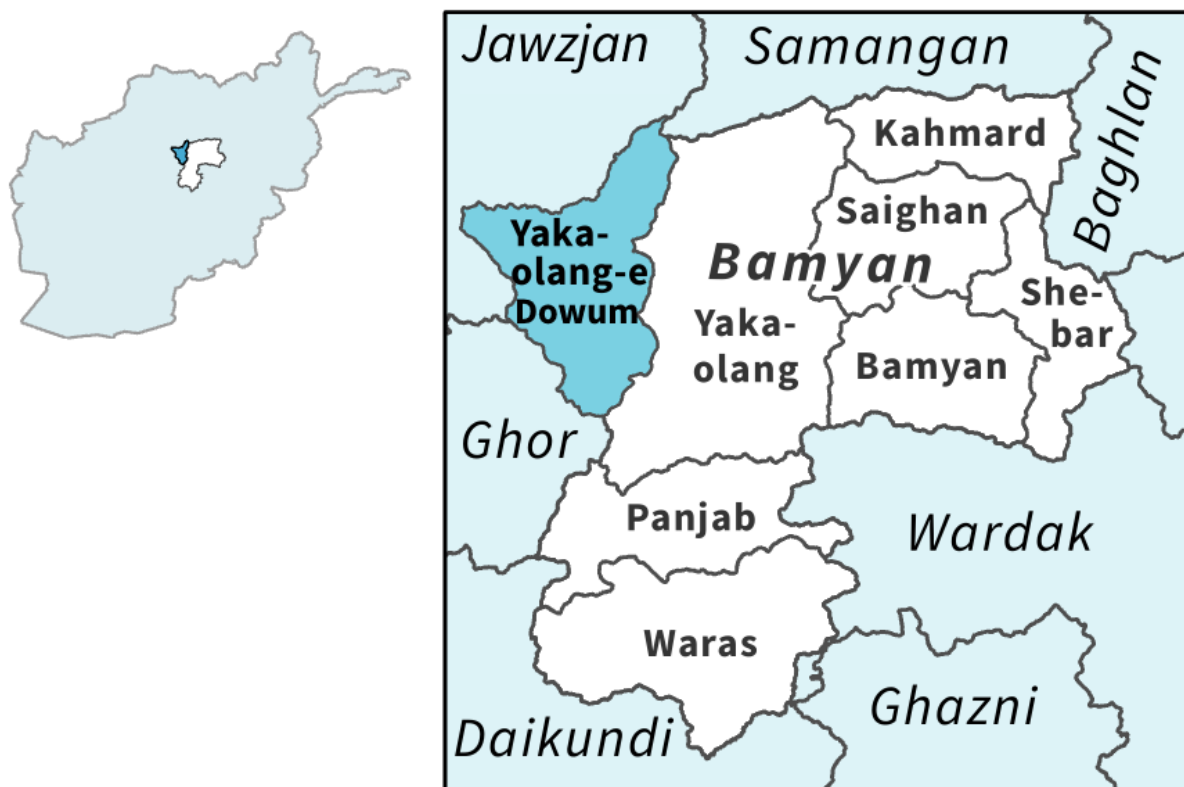


Image: Roger Helms

The **25-year old Hazara widow and IDP from Sayad, Sar-e Pul Province**, who said she had not heard much about the deal, did, however, hope that it would make her life better and allow her to return to her village that had been overrun and emptied in a Taleban attack:

It's been three years since the Taleban took over [my area] and killed almost everyone. I think if they make peace with the government, we'll at least be able to go back to our land and our home. Now I live with my mother in Mazar and I don't have anyone else... I feel like I don't deserve this much sorrow and hardship at this age. I think about the

past and my life in [my village] all the time, about my family and my husband who were all slaughtered. I hope this war ends so we can go back to where we belong.

Sayad district, Sar-e Pul province

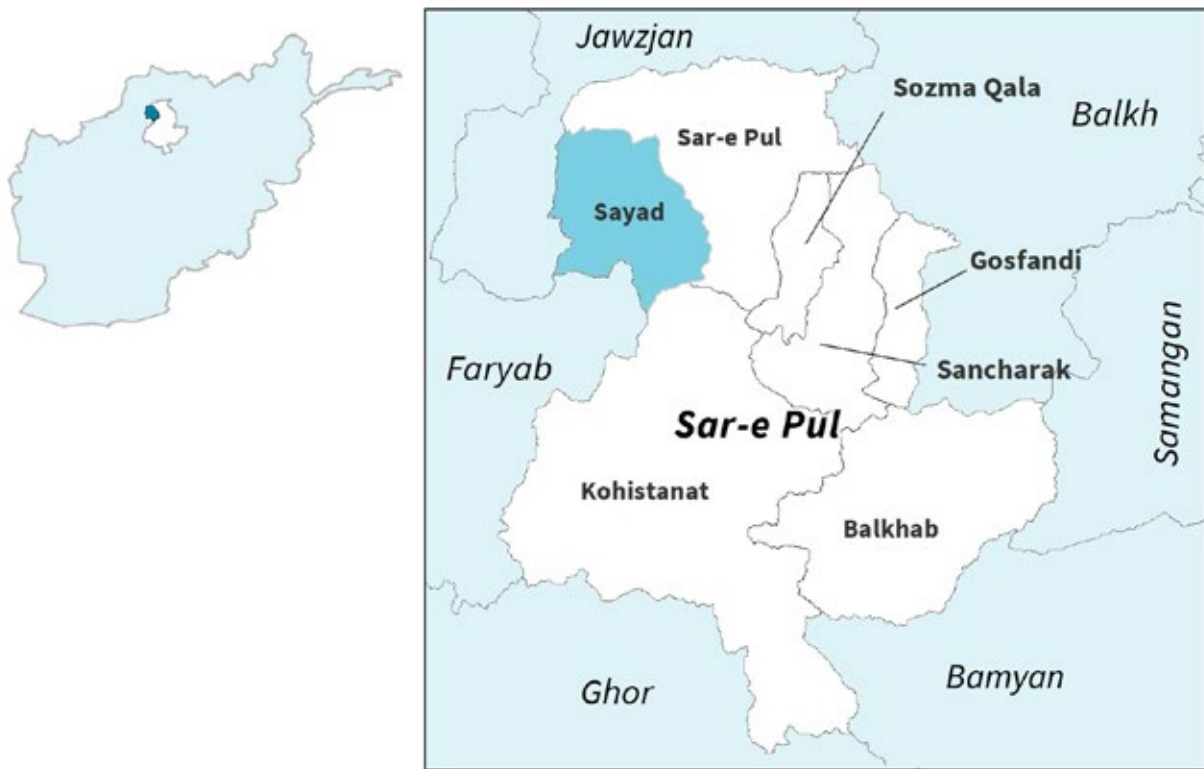


Image: Samir Hamidi

The other IDPs interviewed also hoped a peace deal would allow them to return home.

Widowed Uzbek schoolteacher and IDP from Darzab, Jawzjan province:

It's difficult to say whether the Taleban will fulfil their commitments... We fled to Sheberghan because of the fighting.... The Taleban took our property and killed my husband... If there was a peace agreement between the Taleban and the government, I could go back to my village and resume my work as a schoolteacher. Now I live in a rented house and it's so difficult to make a living. My children are working in a supermarket to make money. We have so little income we can barely survive. If there was peace, I'd go back to Darzab and take back our farmland and property.

CHAPTER 4

IMAGINING WHAT PEACE COULD LOOK LIKE



Women washing dishes in a stream,
Lal wa Sarjangal district, Ghor province.
Photo: Martine van Bijlert, 2006.

WHEN ASKED about their aspirations if peace was achieved, many of the interviewees expressed the hope, or wish, that it would allow them to move around more freely, pursue work or education, travel and see the country, even go sightseeing. Several women believed peace implied access to more and better schools, including for girls. Some hoped to go (back) to school or university, while others dreamed of building a school for the girls in their villages.

*If there was peace,
I would be a different
person.*

Several expressed hope that peace would mean the economy would improve so that the men in their families could find jobs or that their businesses would flourish. Several women said they would be able to take better care of their children and their homes and help their neighbours more. Others said they would be better

able to serve their communities – often as teachers, doctors, social workers or activists. Almost all said they would feel calm, be happy or have more joy in their days.

Many of the interviewees looked forward to an end to the anguish and stress they now live with. They hoped that both they and their mahrams – their husbands or brothers – would be less anxious and slower to anger and there would be fewer arguments in the house. It was striking how often domestic violence was mentioned or at least implied in these interviews, even though it was not asked about. The women who had been forced to leave their villages because of the war expressed a longing to go home.

Others, however, said they thought things would probably stay the same or even worsen if there was peace. Several mentioned the fear that an agreement could result in greater Taliban control and diminish their freedom to work, study or leave the house. This was particularly the case for the women who had experienced a recent transfer of power to the Taliban in their area, and seen the restrictions on their lives increase, as well as those with personal or family memories of the Taliban's previous rule.

Several women indicated they had problems that peace would probably not solve. For some this was because their struggles were not directly related to the war. For others, their hardships and losses felt simply too great to be solved by an end to the conflict.

SWEET DREAMS OF PEACE

While the main themes in most of the answers were similar – peace would bring better access to healthcare and education, peace of mind, greater freedom of movement,

a feeling of safety, better income and more investment opportunities – there was a great variety in how public the women imagined their lives would be, if peace was achieved.

Some of the women, who saw their primary role as caring for their immediate family, expressed a hope that they would become better mothers and manage their households better. Others thought peace would allow them to better look after their neighbours and their wider communities.

Several women expressed a desire to further their studies.

31-year-old Pashtun woman from Andar, Ghazni, in whose area the security

situation had improved: *I think we may have girls' schools in our district [if there is peace]. I may also be able to try to go to school and get an education... I think the main role I play in the community is that of a mother; if there's peace, I think I can give my children more love and take better care of them. I'll be more enthusiastic about cleaning the house and thinking about how to improve my standard of living.*

30-year-old Pashtun homemaker from Andar, Ghazni, whose area was still

affected by fighting: *If there's peace, I'll be able to go to my relatives' houses without fear and visit my parents and stay the night. I'll be able to take my children to school and to the doctor. Right now, we don't have a nearby school, but if there's peace, there'll be schools and we'll be able to send our children to them. We may even have girls' schools, like the people in Kabul... Right now, my role is to contribute to the work of my neighbours. For example, when they have a wedding ceremony, I help them cook and serve the guests. And if one of my neighbours is sick, I help the women cook and do the housework. But when there's fighting, nobody can leave home, so most of the time, we can't help each other due to the shelling. If there's peace, we'll be able to help each other.*

20-year-old Pashtun unmarried woman from an area in Sar Howza, Paktika,

where the security situation had somewhat improved: *If there's peace, I'll be able to study until grade 12; right now, girls in our area only go to school until grade eight. If a woman lives in the city, she has access to education and other facilities. For a rural woman, this is difficult, but if there's peace, rural women will also have access to these facilities. Now women in our area can't work in health centres because they have no education. If there's peace, women in our area will be able to become nurses and doctors.*

Some linked the dream of an education to an aspiration to play a more public role in their communities, for instance, by teaching or establishing a school or actively advocating for women's rights:

35-year-old Pashtun homemaker from a village in Dehsabz district, Kabul

province, where security had deteriorated: *I would complete my education and serve women.... Although I teach girls and children of different ages at home, I'm really interested in being a university professor. Maybe I could build a school for village women. I studied until 11th grade and then I got married and couldn't finish school. Fortunately, my husband's an educated person... He lets me teach and help the neighbouring girls... God willing, I'd establish a free school for women... I could teach them about social rights, family rights and the role of women.*

23-year-old Pashtun unmarried teacher from Dasht-e Archi, Kunduz: *I could complete my higher education and work for the women in my community as a women's rights activist. I could open a private school for uneducated women and teach them... I could go out and discover my town. I've heard there's a river in my district and Tajikistan is on the other side of the river. My dad told me, but I've never seen it. I'd also have better access to health facilities and education and work opportunities... I could serve in better positions, not just in my community but also in my society [Afghanistan]. I would 't spend my days at home, but go out freely, to university or teach in a school.*

The **36-year old Uzbek schoolteacher and development council member from Dasht-e Archi, Kunduz province, whose village was "right on the frontline"** envisaged a life with far fewer restrictions:

I could go out independently, without a man accompanying me and without wearing a burqa. Peace would bring major changes to my life. I'd be able to travel alone. I could work with other women in my community.... I would raise my voice and represent my community. I could nominate myself for the provincial council election.

The **30-year-old Pashtun homemaker and mother of three from Zurmat, Paktia, whose area is now under Taleban control**, hoped that peace would give her more opportunities and help her be the kind of person who could make use of them. She echoed a wish expressed by several others:

I think if there was peace in Afghanistan, I would be a different person. I know some people have done a lot for this world and I believe I would be one of them. I would help my people and my society. My dream was to go to school, finish my studies and become a doctor to serve my people. But I couldn't do this.

Women are ignored in our society. In numbers, we're many, maybe even more than men, but in decision-making, we can't say anything or [have] any rights. If there's peace and this peace grants us our basic rights, a lot will change. We will have the freedom to raise our children on our own terms. I think women would love to play an equal part in building their homes and society – if they get the chance.

For some, peace would allow their families to live in one place and provide opportunities to invest in a business and increase their income:

48-year-old Pashtun former schoolteacher from Zurmat, Paktia, whose area is still on the frontline of the war: *Peace will bring stability and stability will boost people's finances. For instance, my husband's long-standing dream is to start a business and a factory in the provincial centre. Peace would give him the security and the means to fulfil his dream.*

25-year-old Pashtun unmarried woman from Spera, Khost, whose area had become more secure since the Taleban took over: *We'll be able to live peacefully with our family. So many families live apart because of this war.*

32-year-old Turkman rug weaver and homemaker from a contested village in Andkhoy, Faryab: *I could make a big investment in my factory, provide jobs for other women and have a good income. If there was peace, there'd be markets for our products.*

Andkhoy district, Faryab province



Image: Roger Helms

The **40-year-old Pashtun homemaker from Estalef, Kabul province, where the situation had deteriorated**, mentioned a similar hope that peace would lead to development and tourism and a better income. Still, she ended on a more sceptical note:

One thing for sure, [if there was peace] the villages and districts would grow in terms of infrastructure, facilities, economy and culture. There would be more visitors, which would change our economy. I used to sell bolani to people who came to Estalef, but now that security isn't good, very few people visit. I was thinking of growing my small business, but now I'm not sure if that's possible.

Several mentioned that they hoped peace would give women and girls more access to their rights, including the right to education, employment and to choose who they marry:

25-year-old Pashtun unmarried woman from Kalakan, Kabul province, where security had deteriorated: *It would have a very positive effect on the personal lives of the people, especially women, who are a very weak class in society and deprived of all their rights, mostly due to insecurity. The civil wars have left them illiterate. If there was peace, there'd be opportunities for girls. Like men, they could work alongside their family members and serve their community. Unfortunately, most girls in the village are deprived of education and can't even get married according to their own choice.*

31-year-old Pashtun woman from Andar, Ghazni, in whose area the security situation had improved: *I think I'll be able to use my property rights. Right now, if my brothers decide to sell my father's property, I may not be given my portion, but if there's peace, I can ask my brothers to give me my right.*

48-year-old Pashtun former schoolteacher from Zurmat, Paktia, whose area is still on the frontline of the war: *I believe that once we have peace, we'll be able to argue for our rights and get them – the right to live in peace and not in war, the right to educate our children, the right to public services and judicial services, and access to the law.*

25-year-old Pashtun unmarried woman from Spera, Khost, whose area had become more secure since the Taliban took over: *I'm optimistic that with peace, women's rights will be recognised. People will no longer be ashamed of their women and daughters appearing in public, holding office jobs, or going to school or university. Peace can change how women are treated in our society. We'll be able to learn about our rights and find our role in society.*

Many women expressed a hope that more money would come into the household and more harmony in the family. The threat, or reality, of domestic violence, although not directly mentioned, hovered over several of the interviews.

31-year-old Pashtun woman from Andar, Ghazni, in whose area the security situation had improved: *My mahrams may change their attitudes towards me. Now my elder brother and my husband get angry very quickly, but I don't think they'll behave like that if there's peace. In the absence of peace, my husband and male relatives are jobless. But if there's peace, they'll find jobs and we'll have a good life. If I spend a little money on something, [my husband] gets angry, but he won't get mad over small expenses if he has work.*

FEARS WITH REGARD TO PEACE

The question of what effect peace would have on their lives brought a surprising mix of responses. Some women spoke about an ideal peace, but for others the response was not so straightforward, given their concerns about this particular peace process. The two themes – with their accompanying feelings of hope, disappointment and scepticism – turned out to be difficult to disentangle.

For **23-year-old Hazara homemaker from Miramor, Daikundi**, who had not directly experienced war, the question of peace was immediately translated into the possibility of Taliban rule and what that might mean for the future of her children:

I'm happy with how I live now, as long as there's a future for my children. I want them to study and become educated. My father sent me to school, but I was so naïve. I thought getting married was better and that then I would know what to do with my life. Now I see other girls my age who have studied. They became teachers or doctors, or they moved to Kabul for further studies. I regret that I didn't use that opportunity and hope the possibility will exist for my children. Our people have never experienced Taliban rule. I can't imagine how it would be. We work equally with our men. We respect them, but we also enjoy the freedom of leading the household and taking part in work and decision-making... The Taliban are like cancer. They will affect everything for the worse when they come. I hope we will still be able to live like human beings under Taliban rule.

Miramor district, Daikundi province



Image: Roger Helms

The other woman from the Hazarajat, the **43-year-old Hazara homemaker from Yakaolang, Bamyan**, who had not directly experienced war, started on an optimistic note when she imagined what peace would be like, but her daydreams were quickly overtaken by worry:

I haven't seen Kabul. Maybe I could travel to Kabul and then go to Mazar to visit the [religious sites]. If there was real peace... I would love to see other provinces in Afghanistan. But I'm a bit confused. I don't know what kind of peace we're talking about... What if they start beating women in the streets? My daughter has so many

dreams. We're saving to send her to university in Kabul if she can pass the entrance exam. I don't know what the peace would do to her. The other day we were talking at home about if the Talebs come, how that would affect life in our village. We have a hydropower dam, the people in the village built it and we charge the whole district for the electricity it provides. With the financial crisis, the extreme cold and the poor harvest in the area, it's almost our only means of making a living. I don't know, with the Taleban taxing people even for just existing, how would that go for our village? ... I think if the Taleban come to power with a peace deal, women's rights will be most affected, girls' education, the right to work and travel and the right to be in government positions. We've heard disturbing stories about their attitude towards women, both in the past and now. I don't think anyone would want them back in power.

Others tried to speculate how Taleban rule might affect their lives. For instance, the **older Pashtun woman from a village in Panjwayi, Kandahar, where the situation had improved**, said that peace would allow her son – a policeman – to travel and work without fear. She also wondered about the restrictions the Taleban would impose on women:

First of all, my son, who's a policeman, could go to work and everywhere else without fear. I wouldn't have to worry about his safety. I could be happy that he was serving our people. My grandsons would be able to go to school and the mosque. I'd be able to go to Kandahar city and many villages in our district without fear... Regarding the attitudes towards a mahram, I'm not sure the Taleban would impose as many restrictions on women as they did in the past. On the news, it's said that they've changed. I hope they have. But if they still impose bans on women, it won't affect me because I'm an old woman... Of course, the women who are young and who want to leave the house without a mahram, they'll have problems.

The 44-year-old Pashtun mother of five from a village in Arghandab, Kandahar, that had seen no fighting for several months said she travelled to Kandahar city once a week to sell garlands of flowers. She gave a similar answer – initially optimistic, but then wondering out loud about the consequences of living under Taleban rule:

I'd be able to send my children to school and leave my home without fear. My husband and brothers would be able to work in any province of the country.... We'd have a good life, financially and security-wise. I'd be able to go to the bazaar ... without fear. I've heard that the Taleban have changed. I think they'll allow women to work and girls to go to school. But sometimes, I think they won't let women go out, not without mahrams. If that's the case, the Taleban might stop me from going out or going to Kandahar city without my husband. That would cost me a lot because I'd have to pay the travel fare for two people when I go to sell my garlands.

The 42-year-old Pashtun breadwinner (she sells handicrafts) and mother of six from Tala wa Barfak, Baghlan, whose village has come under Taleban control, is already experiencing what it means to live under Taleban rule:

It will depend on who has power and who rules.... They enforce their rules very insistently. I never thought that if they came, I would lose my job. But I lost my job when they took over our area. How would it affect my life? Maybe there'll be more restrictions.

Already, we can't go anywhere without a mahram. Most probably, this would only get worse if they came to power.

PROBLEMS THAT PEACE MAY NOT SOLVE

The three interviewees who were forced to leave their villages due to war, unsurprisingly, expressed a longing to return home. The **25-year old widowed Hazara IDP from Sayad, Sar-e Pul**, now living in Mazar-e Sharif, struggled with what that might mean if there was a peace that also involved Taleban rule and, she feared, no accountability:

I would be able to return home. All the houses and trees were burned, but I still want to go back. As a survivor of an attack, I think peace is better than any sort of war. It might cost us and we might not be able to be as free as we were before or as we are here in Mazar, but it would still be better than living as displaced people. So many people like me want to go back to their land, their homes and the place they're from.

How would it affect my rights or role in the community? What rights? What role in the community? Although I do think it would affect my rights because the Taleban are said to be against women. Still, I believe since we're all Muslim, we can negotiate and find the middle ground. But what bothers me most isn't how they would treat other women or me, but that they will not be made to pay for this war that they inflicted. They have caused immeasurable suffering and pain and now you're telling me they might come to power and rule this country? That is painful.

When asked how she would spend a day if there was peace, she replied differently:

I'm sure we have the capacity to forgive what has happened – we can make sacrifices for the sake of peace and a better life for the next generation. I would go back home. I was raised there. I think that is the place where I belong.

Other women who were not very optimistic spoke about their current problems, the kind that peace would probably not solve. For instance, the **35-year-old Sayed mother of six from Guzara, Herat province**, who had been mainly worried about crime in her village, said:

We've been in debt for a long time. My husband often borrows money to buy livestock, but the sheep keep dying. We've never made a profit in all these years. A husband and wife should consult each other, they should plan together, but he isn't like that. He does whatever he likes... Two of my sons dropped out of school. May God give us health. I hope there'll be more work for our men [if there's peace]. I don't want my sons to go to Iran; they might not get there safely and I don't want them to be away for a long time. I'm also afraid they may end up using drugs... And what happens to my daughter just depends on her fate. If she's lucky, she'll end up with a good man. If not, she'll get stuck with a man like her father, as I did.

The **40-year old Hazara widow and IDP from Kejran, now living in Injil, Herat province**, also did not foresee much chance for a good life, even if peace came:

It will always be difficult for people who have seen a tragedy like being widowed and losing one's family. I just pray to God that whatever happened to us doesn't happen

to anyone else, whether Muslim or infidel [she recounts the story of the bombing again].... All these things happened to us and nothing can return what we lost.

Still, when asked how she would spend a day if there were peace in Afghanistan, she replied: "We would celebrate with smiles and laughter in the room. We would be happy that there was a new day and that our Afghanistan had changed."

Others expressed similar dreams for a single day in peace:

30-year old Pashtun homemaker from Andar, Ghazni, whose area was still affected by fighting: *I'll send my children to school in the morning and then go to my neighbours' house to ask after their health.... Now, I wake with the sound of rockets and start my day with bombs. But in a peaceful Afghanistan, I will begin my day in peace.*

The older Pashtun woman from Panjwayi, Kandahar, where security had improved: *My sons would be at home with me every day and I wouldn't worry about them being safe. My grandsons would go to school and I'd enjoy life with my daughters-in-law and sons and grandsons in my home. I'd enjoy my days like the women of our country did 40 or 50 years ago.*

Widowed Uzbek schoolteacher from Darzab, who had moved to the capital of Jawzjan: *I would spend a joyful day without the fear of being killed.*

Others struggled even to dream:

The 42-year old Pashtun breadwinner (sells handicrafts) and mother of six from Tala wa Barfak, Baghlan: *There'll be no difference, like I told you. We're already living in the peace that can be expected from the Taleban. We know what it's like to live under Taleban rule.*

CHAPTER 5

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING AHEAD: WHAT HAS BEEN GAINED, WHAT HAS BEEN LOST AND WHAT CAN ONLY BE HOPED FOR?



A woman walks through a wheat field in Bamyan province.
Photo: Eric Kanalstein/UN Photo, 2009.

5.1 BRIEF UPDATE, SINCE WE LAST SPOKE TO THE INTERVIEWEES

Because considerable time had passed since we last spoke to the women, AAN's researchers reached out to the ones they could still contact in April 2021 to see what had happened in their lives and how their views of peace and war might have shifted. Since we first interviewed them, the intra-Afghan talks started and faltered, the US began

I don't think peace will come to Afghanistan. Every day the situation is getting worse. The Taliban don't accept anything the government says. They think they can take power by force and keep it all for themselves.

withdrawing its troops with alacrity and the Taliban had gradually ratcheted up their attacks; initially, the ANSF took a defensive stance, but from late summer onwards began also to attack the Taliban. While some areas saw a reduction in violence in 2020, others experienced only more fighting. Overall, the conflict had intensified.¹⁰

In April 2021, the security situation had already worsened for some interviewees, including the **two women in Kandahar province**. Earlier, they had told us with considerable relief that their areas had become much more secure since the US-Taliban deal and they no longer heard the sound of fighting. A few months later, in October 2020, both their districts, Arghandab

and Panjwayi, became the target of significant and sustained attacks by the Taliban, who overran the area, leaving only the district centres in government hands. In Arghandab, it took "a series of punishing airstrikes" to allow the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to retake the area.¹¹ By early April 2021, much of the lost territory had been retaken by the

10 For a discussion of recent trends, see Kate Clark, 'As US troops withdraw, what next for war and peace in Afghanistan?', Afghanistan Analysts Network 1 May 2021, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/as-us-troops-withdraw-what-next-for-war-and-peace-in-afghanistan/>.

11 Susanne George, 'The Taliban is on the offensive. Keeping the militants at bay: U.S. air strikes, even as bases close and troops leave', The Washington Post, 21 November 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghanistan-taliban-offensives-kandahar-helmand/2020/11/20/522e3e54-285f-11eb-9c21-3cc501d0981f_story.html.

government, but clashes continued throughout April and May and IDPs were warned not to return until their areas had been cleared from mines.

Jaghatu district, Ghazni province

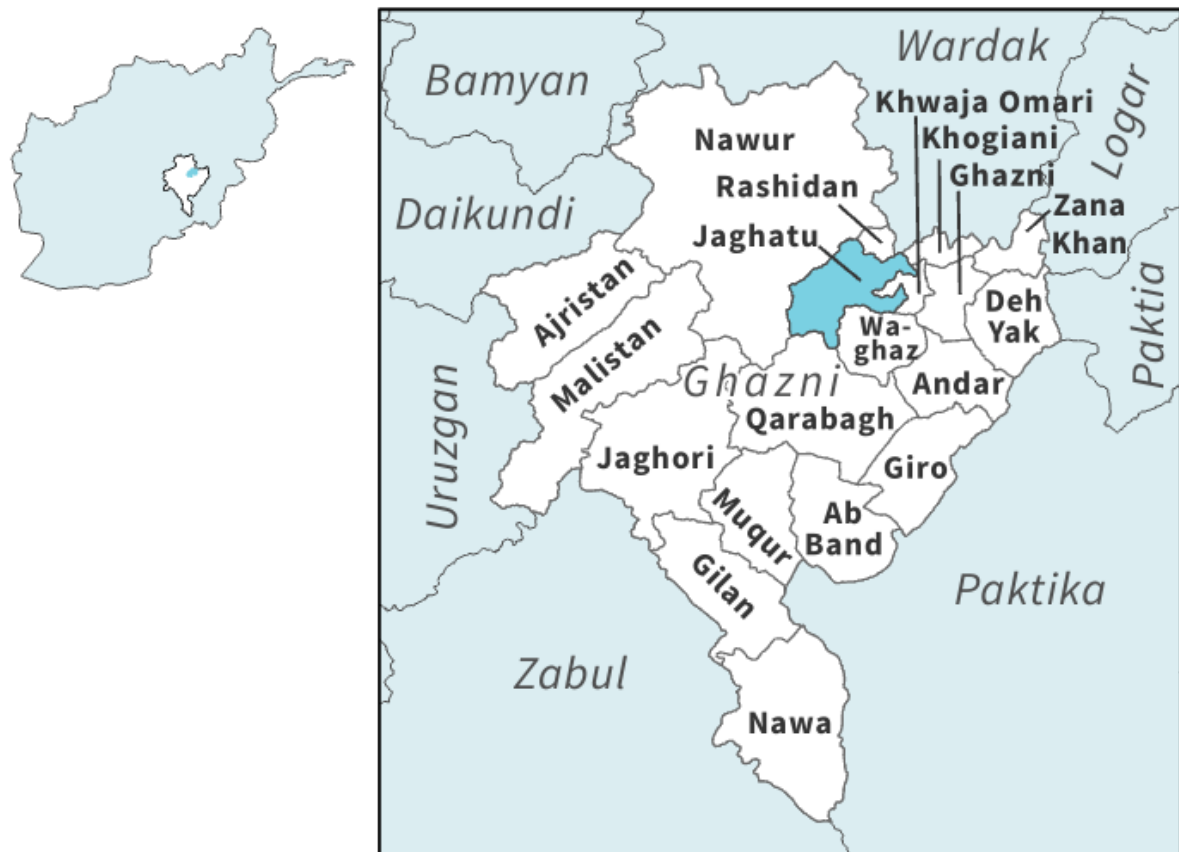


Image: Roger Helms

The **young unmarried Hazara teacher from Jaghatu, Ghazni**, told AAN in late April 2021 that the situation in her area had also worsened:

During the winter, it was a little calm, but now the Taliban often come to our area. Sometimes they're in the mosques and sometimes they take position in the hills and then fire at the government security posts. Fortunately, there have been no casualties so far. Yesterday, the Taliban came to the school where I teach and went onto the roof of the building to guard the area. We had to send the students home.

When we spoke to her before, she had mixed feelings about the peace process. Now she said:

I don't think peace will come to Afghanistan. Every day the situation is getting worse. The Taliban don't accept anything the government says. They think they can take power by force and keep it all for themselves.

The unmarried young woman from Spera, Khost (Pashtun), who had earlier said she had a good feeling about the US-Taleban agreement and was happy because the fighting and night raids had lessened, was now dejected:

All our hopes and aspirations have been dashed. There's always fighting between the government forces and the Taleban in our area now. The Taleban are trying to take control of the security posts. And when the government conducts an operation, it's the civilians who suffer. This agreement makes no sense. It's of no use to Afghans.

The 55-year old Pashtun homemaker from Jaji Maidan, Khost, on the other hand, told AAN that, although there had been a few assassinations lately, her district was still one of the safest in the province. However, she also sounded disappointed about the peace process:

The agreement between the US and the Taleban didn't change anything; it just intensified the war several times over. Now that the agreement has reached a deadlock, there's a kind of mistrust between the Americans and the Taleban. Initially, when it was signed, people were hopeful, but now there's no hope and fighting is increasing every day. The Taleban are trying to claim they're the winners of the war and have defeated the Americans. People are very disappointed. The hope of peace was broken by all sides. The commitments made in the agreement were lost.

The 48-year old former schoolteacher and mother of five from Zurmat, Paktia (Pashtun), echoed these thoughts:

Zurmat has always been a battlefield. Nothing has changed. On the contrary, the war has only worsened. The agreement between the Taleban and the United States didn't do anything to reduce violence. It was never put into practice and now the Americans are leaving. People are very worried.

The **young Hazara mother of two in Miramor district, Daikundi province**, has in the meantime moved to Kabul city, not because of insecurity, but because her family was facing "extreme poverty." They never recovered from the death of her brother-in-law, who was killed in a suicide attack in Kabul in 2016. However, she said her husband had been unable to find work in Kabul and had returned to Daikundi to sell the house so they could move to Iran. Then, travel restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic were delaying their visas.

When asked about the peace process, she seemed better informed than she had been while still living in Daikundi, probably due to greater exposure to the news. She was not hopeful:

I think they'll all keep playing this game until another country, who is willing to pay for their war, comes onto the scene.

The **43-year-old Hazara homemaker from Yakaolang district, Daikundi province**, described a growing anxiety around her, amid reports of the NATO troop withdrawal. She said there was an increased interest among the villagers to leave Afghanistan, although she did not know anyone who was actively planning their departure.

The Pashtun homemaker from Andar, Ghazni, said her security situation had not changed, except that there were again more helicopters and aircraft in the skies now. The

cessation or decrease of airstrikes and night raids had been one of the best outcomes of the US-Taleban deal for her, as with several of the women. Now, the helicopters were back. “I think the peace talks are dead,” she concluded. “I haven’t heard anything positive about peace.”

5.2 WHAT THESE FINDINGS TELL US

As we were finalising this report, the Taleban launched a massive onslaught on many district centres across the country, in the wake of US President Joe Biden announcing that US forces would be leaving Afghanistan for good. The Taleban have captured more than a hundred districts in recent weeks, including several of the 19 districts where women featuring in this report live. At the time of publication, the government no longer controlled any part of Sayad (captured by the Taleban on 13 June), Dasht-e Archi, Jaghatu, Tala wa Barfak or Andar (all captured 20-22 June). The ANSF also lost and then re-captured Andkhoy, where our 32-year old rug-weaver lives. It is one of a handful of districts to be re-taken, while more districts fall every day.



A family walks in a field in Kapisa province.
Photo: Freshta Dunia/UNAMA, 10 September 2016.

The anxieties of the women we interviewed for this report have thus turned out to be all too well-placed. Many were explicitly worried that things would probably stay the same or get worse. They worried that the situation would unravel or that ‘peace’ would result in greater Taleban control, more restrictions or a higher level of violence. Several women

struggled with the possibility that there would be no accountability for those who had inflicted suffering on so many families.

They hoped that peace, real peace, would allow them to move around more freely, so they could safely visit relatives and attend family gatherings, pursue work or education, travel and see the country, even go sightseeing. They hoped for greater peace of mind, more income and better investment opportunities, better health facilities and a greater feeling of safety. Several mentioned that they hoped peace would give women and girls more access to their rights, including the right to education, employment and to choose whom they marry. Others hoped they would be in a better position to help their neighbours and communities and that peace would afford them the possibility to plan and look ahead, have more energy and patience to take care of their homes and children and improve their relationships with the men in their households. Almost all imagined that the absence of the noise of war and news about conflict, would finally allow them to be less anxious, maybe even happy.

The nuances might be different, but it is difficult to argue that this significantly diverges from the main discourse around protecting Afghan women's rights, which has largely focused on safeguarding, what are often referred to as, the gains of the last two decades: women's participation in public life, girls education, freedom of movement, greater equality between the sexes and improved legal protections (if not always in practice, then at least on paper).

It is true that the interviews show how unevenly these gains have been distributed. In some areas, they have already been largely lost, while in other places, they never really took root, or only very precariously so. At the same time, these conversations clearly challenge the idea that women in rural areas are satisfied by what is often portrayed as 'normal' by the Taliban or other Afghan conservatives. Almost every woman we spoke to, regardless of the political stance and level of conservatism that could be gleaned from the answers, expressed a longing for greater freedom of movement, education for their children (and sometimes themselves) and a greater role in their families and wider social circles.

TRYING TO GET THE WORLD'S ATTENTION

This convergence of priorities is illustrated by the advocacy of one of the large women's networks inside Afghanistan. In August 2020, around the time the interviews were conducted, a coalition of 400 Afghan women and activists under the name "Our Voice Our Future" posted two open letters, addressed respectively to "Women World Leaders" and the Afghan Taliban. Both letters are worth reading in their entirety and have been included in Annexes 2 and 3.¹²

The first letter, to female world leaders, called on them to support the ongoing fight to secure the rights of Afghan women and their children in the face of a peace process that not

12 Afghan Women's Network, 'Open Letter to Women World Leaders: Stand With Us to Protect Women's Rights in Afghanistan', 5 August 2020, https://drive.google.com/file/d/19rLnAjVEgBsflujRsRz_-RepARGeA9T/view. Coalition of Afghan Women, 'Open Letter by Afghan Women to the Taliban', 20 August 2020, <https://tolonews.com/opinion/open-letter-afghan-women-taliban-0>.

only includes “a group that took all rights from women and have still not evolved in their views,” but also largely excludes women in the talks themselves. This exclusion, they say, is ill-advised and violates UN Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security and several treaties Afghanistan is a signatory to (including for instance CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and ICCPR, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights).

The letter pointed out how a process that disregards and disrespects the rights and freedoms of Afghan women threatens to seed future hardships and injustices that will affect women and their families in all spheres of life:

Unlike other peace processes where the issue is about past injustice, this peace process also threatens to enact policies bringing about future injustices against women. [...] We are concerned that the way this process has been led shows an established disrespect for the rights and freedoms of Afghan women.

There are many simple things that women take for granted in your countries. These range from more serious matters such as having the right to earn a livelihood and provide for their family to every day little acts like leaving their house without fear of reprisal, taking a stroll in the park, and laughing with a friend in public. However, these are some of the basic things we fear we will lose again.

These concerns echo the fears of many of the women we interviewed, with again the caveat that for some, both the “more serious matters” such as having the right to earn a livelihood, and the “every day little acts” like leaving home without fear, taking a stroll, or laughing with a friend in public, were lost long ago. For others, such freedoms are under constant threat, or depend on whoever controls their area on a given day. For some women, such small delights barely seem to be an option, but they still mentioned them, not wanting to lose the possibility of hoping they might enjoy them one day.

In their second open letter, the one to the Taliban leadership, “Our Voice Our Future” chastised the movement’s leadership for not clearly explaining their position on women’s rights. The letter refuted the notion that the Taliban should be the arbiter of what is religiously permissible, pointing out: “Respectfully, your interpretation is one of many.”¹³

They confronted Taliban claims that the demands for women’s rights and freedoms were based on ‘western values’, saying:

As proud and responsible citizens, we do not view putting our skills to work to improve our country’s future towards prosperity as western. In the last two decades, we have played a vital role in rebuilding our destroyed country. We have done so as scientists, doctors, technologists, entrepreneurs, judges, religious scholars, engineers, lawyers,

13 ToloNews recently quoted an unspecified article in which the Taliban was said to have “explained their perception of an Islamic system.” Apparently the group seeks an Islamic system in which “women’s rights, as understood by Islam, are protected,” including the right to their share in inheritance, to not be given away to settle murderous feuds, to marry and choose a husband. Those who slander chaste women are to be lashed, while women can “serve her society in education, business, health and social fields while maintaining the correct Islamic hijab.” See Tamim Habib, ‘Taliban Explain Their Perception of an Islamic System’, ToloNews, 25 April 2021, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-171680>.

teachers, university professors, security officials, journalists, artists, and rights activists across the country.

We will not allow our place and contribution towards rebuilding our country to be erased or reversed. More than ever, we recognize our capacity to contribute to the well-being of our society. We will not allow the potential, talent, the rights and dignity of our daughters and sons to be stripped once again for political gains and posturing.

Their conversations are testimony that dreams of greater agency are not the exclusive domain of those who are able to speak up publicly.

Women's networks in Afghanistan are very clear that they are not solely driven by a desire to place women's rights firmly on the agenda; women's participation in public life is an element of what they ultimately seek – sustainable peace for all Afghans.¹⁴ Like many other Afghans, they are wary of a process that has, so far, largely focused on political deals, power-sharing arrangements and sticking to tight externally-imposed timelines. They are worried that any

agreement reached as part of the talks may not end the war and if it does, will bring a 'peace' that is unsafe, oppressive and unsustainable.

Afghan and international observers, politicians and diplomats far too often still question whether women's rights activists and other outspoken women are sufficiently in touch with the realities of rural and more conservative women, the poor, the less educated and the less privileged. In this study although the women we interviewed have gone through a range of experiences and have diverse opinions, in essence, their aspirations do mirror the demands of the women's rights activists.

Their conversations are testimony that dreams of greater agency are not the exclusive domain of those who are able to speak up publicly. They are also reminders of how deeply the years of war have affected people's lives and reveal a longing among these women for the simple opportunities that are part of everyday life almost everywhere: sending children, including daughters, to school; being able to access medical care; having the ability to move freely, earn a living and contribute to their communities.

These women cannot be dismissed as not knowing what they are talking about, any more than the activists can be dismissed as not speaking for them. The women in this study have all suffered bereavement and material loss – some catastrophic – as well as

14 For instance, in the run-up to the 2019 Moscow talks, the Afghan Women's Network put out a six-point statement, asking the parties to: (1) bring women to the table; (2) not choose 'peace' that does not include human rights; (3) be clear and articulate about women's rights; (4) not change the political order; (5) not compromise law and order in the country; and (6) not cut off the country from the international community. See Thomas Ruttig, 'Women and Afghan Peace Talks: 'Peace consensus' gathering left Afghan women without reassurance', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 15 April 2019, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/women-and-afghan-peace-talks-peace-consensus-gathering-left-afghan-women-unassured/>.

near misses, where they or their close relatives were almost killed or their homes just escaped destruction. They desire peace because they know first-hand what a protracted and intensified war looks like. But they also fear a hazardous peace that might still be oppressive and unsustainable. In that respect the fears, desires and demands of these women are not that different from those put forward by the more well-connected women activists, who have over the last few years worked hard to be more inclusive and aware of the plight of other women. Rural Afghan women, who often live in remote places, deserve to be heard – either directly, or through the advocacy of other women speaking on their behalf.

ANNEXES



Afghan schoolgirls are watched by a teacher during a lesson in the village of Dah Yaya in Dehsabz District, Kabul province.
Photo: Shah Marai/AFP, 8 July 2013.

ANNEX 1. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE RURAL WOMEN AND PEACE STUDY

Part 1: Your understanding of the US-Taleban agreement

1. Have you heard about the agreement between the Taleban and the United States? Can you describe it?
2. What are your feelings about it? Do you feel it's good, or do you feel it's bad? Why?
3. How would a peace deal with the Taleban affect you personally? How would it affect what you could do?

Part 2: The meaning of security in your area

4. Do you consider your area/district to be secure?
 - a) Has there been any violent conflict in your area (including between the government and the Taleban) this year and has the situation changed recently (since Eid ul-Fitr)?
 - b) How do you judge if security is better or worse in your area? What are the signs that help you judge the security situation?
 - c) Have any of your family members and close relatives been wounded or killed in the conflict in the last five years? Can you recall circumstances in which they were killed? Was it a local conflict? Or a result of the conflict between the government and the Taleban?
 - d) How often do you go outside your home? And on what occasions, usually? Does security/insecurity affect that?
 - e) Do you have children? What age are they? Do they go to school? Or to a mosque or madrassa? Up to what grade do children study where you live? Was there ever a time they could not go to school because of insecurity? [See if interviewees mention girls as well as boys. If they don't, ask specifically about their daughters and whether there are differences between girls and boys in terms of education.]
 - f) Are there health clinics in your district? Are there female health workers in the clinic? If there are no clinics, where do you and your family go to seek medical treatment?

Part 3: The impact of peace on your personal life

5. If there was peace in Afghanistan:

- a) What would you be able to do differently?
- b) What difference would it make to your life (including your mahram's attitudes towards what you do)?
- c) Would it affect your rights or the role you play in your community? What rights? What role in the community?
- d) How would you spend a day if there was peace in Afghanistan?

ANNEX 2. OPEN LETTER TO WOMEN WORLD LEADERS BY “OUR VOICES OUR FUTURE”

OPEN LETTER TO WOMEN WORLD LEADERS: STAND WITH US TO PROTECT WOMEN’S RIGHTS IN AFGHANISTAN

August 5, 2020

Dear Leaders,

We are writing this letter to you because we know that as women leaders, you have been working hard to improve the status of women in your respective countries. We are also writing this letter to you because we understand very well the adversity you overcame to get to where you are today. You endured the hardship more only because of being a woman. We are writing you because we believe that as women, you can relate to us and understand the immense concerns we have about our future in Afghanistan.

We are aware that you have been closely watching the developments in Afghanistan. Your countrymen and women served here and supported us in shaping the future of our country. We thank you sincerely for all your support and sacrifices in these years and we thank the people of your country for standing behind you and your predecessors for supporting Afghanistan.

For the past few years, there has been an ongoing effort to negotiate with the Taliban. While we support a peaceful end to the four decades of war, we are disappointed that these efforts have by and large excluded women. It was in violation of the treaties to which Afghanistan is signatory to, including Resolution 1325.

From the outset, we have been the loudest voices in support of peace and a cessation of violence. We want a peace that is inclusive, just, practical and sustainable. We want a peace in which the women of Afghanistan, like in your nations, are considered equal humans and are given equal protection and opportunities. With your support, we have taken great risks and have worked incredibly hard to achieve the rights we have today. In our efforts to make life better for our children, we have made great sacrifices and withstood acts and threats of intimidation and violence.

While we acknowledge the four women who will be participating in the Afghan government-Taliban negotiations for the first time, we demand that their voices be heard, respected, and strengthened. We demand that they be given equal opportunities to weigh in on all matters related in the peace process.

It is correct that the women of Afghanistan did not fight wars and they have not been involved in the killings of their innocent fellow citizens. However, during these years of war, women have paid a tremendous price and have been stripped off their rights with no historic precedence. It is especially important for women to be present in this process because it

involves a group that took all rights from women and still have not evolved in their views of treating women. Unlike other peace processes where the issue is about past injustice, this peace process also threatens to enact policies bringing about future injustices against women.

We are writing to you because we are worried. So far, the talks have been a show of the strongmen in which mostly those who fought and killed our fellow citizens are talking. We are afraid that our rights and freedoms are in danger of being compromised. We are concerned that the way this process has been led shows an established disrespect for the rights and freedoms of Afghan women. We are afraid that our hard-won gains are being jeopardized and eroded only for a short-term solution among these very strongmen. We are afraid of this visible pushback from all those who are part of this process.

There are many simple things that women take for granted in your countries. These range from more serious matters such as having the right to earn a livelihood and provide for their family to every day little acts like leaving their house without fear of reprisal, taking a stroll in the park, and laughing with a friend in public. However, these are some of the basic things we fear we will lose again. We cannot take a chance to lose what we have achieved with your help. We know that it is a long way to achieve full equality for women anywhere and it is even harder to achieve that in Afghanistan but we, the women, cannot allow it to go back. We will continue to fight for and defend our rights and those of our children.

We have been fighting back through all civil platforms. We organized, protested, met with officials, and wrote in all forms, but we need the support of leaders like you who are in a position of influence on the future of Afghanistan to stand with us. We will continue our struggle as it is a matter of life and death to us but with this letter, we want you to hear our voices too that we must matter. We hope that you will speak for us and our desire to be respected as equal humans when your countries make their decisions on Afghanistan. We hope you will speak for our desire for a peace that is just, inclusive, sustainable, and practical. We hope that you will stand with us and for women's rights and a sustainable peace in Afghanistan. As women leaders, we are certain that you will relate to us in wanting a sustainable peace and equal rights for all. You have a great role to play both as leaders of your respective countries that have supported our people and as women who understand the rights of women well. We count on you to not allow short sighted policies jeopardize our rights and to respect us as equal humans.

For peace and equality,

*Our Voices – Our Future Together Stronger
Afghan Women's Network*

1 We are a Coalition of Afghan women, comprised of Afghan women from across the country and outside Afghanistan. The Afghan Women's Network together with a larger coalition of Our Voices - Our Future and Together Stronger work to achieve peace and demand an end to the conflict and an equal representation of women across fields in Afghanistan. We believe in inclusive, just, practical, and sustainable peace in which women are equal citizens of Afghanistan.

ANNEX 3. OPEN LETTER ADDRESSED TO THE TALEBAN BY “OUR VOICES OUR FUTURE”

We, women, have borne the brunt of the four decades of conflict. As wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters we have suffered terribly.

August 13, 2020

For the past two years, Afghan women have been observing the ongoing negotiation process in Afghanistan carefully and, like millions of our fellow citizens, we deeply hope that the process can bring the nearly 40 years of conflict in our beloved Afghanistan to an end. We, women, have borne the brunt of the four decades of conflict. As wives, mothers, daughters sisters we have suffered terribly, we have been subjected to the brutality and violence of war; we have borne witness to the endless suffering of our families and our people. We, perhaps more than anyone, seek an end to this senseless war. Yet, we, like the vast majority of Afghan women and men, worry that the price of peace may be too heavy if we lose the vitality of more than half of our population and the essential gains achieved in the last two decades.

Your willingness to enter peace talks has given us hope but your public statements and behavior on the ground have continued to trouble us. We have heard from some in your leadership that you have changed and recognize that Afghanistan is not the same country that you reigned over in 1996-2001, and recognize women's rights to education and work according to "Shari'a and Afghan traditions". At the same time, you have resisted explaining your interpretations of Shari'a and the Afghan traditions of which you speak. Respectfully, your interpretation is one of many. There are many customary practices that are in clear contradictions to Islamic values. Some of the more egregious are prohibiting and limiting girls' education, women's economic freedom, right to inheritance, the treatment of women and girls as commodities, resolving disputes by giving little girls and women as Baad, preventing and limiting women's employment and their participation in public life, to name just a few.

In Afghanistan, women continue to be the largest illiterate. In addition, 80% of our girls are forced into marriage at a very young age, a tradition more common in areas under your influence. While in other Muslim nations women are thriving as successful leaders, politicians and policy makers, actively improving the lives of their fellow citizens, in Afghanistan we are still fighting to be recognized and respected as equal and capable citizens. Muslim women across the Muslim world - in Tunisia, Morocco, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Jordan, Turkey, Bangladesh, Senegal, Mauritius, even Pakistan and in many others are enjoying freedom of movement, access to education, employment and access to services, but we are still fighting for our survival. Despite the significant challenges and continued threat to our lives, we will pursue our desire to serve our country. Afghanistan belongs to all of us, women and men. We do not view the roles differently when it comes to the protection and development of our beloved Afghanistan. In doing so, you have often addressed our push to serve our country and our fellow citizens as merely western influence.

You have also dismissed those of us who have been on the frontlines of working on women's and human rights, accusing us of bringing in western values. We, as women¹ represent every part of Afghanistan, rural and urban. We represent the full diversity of Afghanistan including geographical, sectarian and ethnic. The rights that we espouse and work towards are fundamental human rights enshrined in the holy religion of Islam and other faiths practiced in Afghanistan. As more than half of the population, we have put our lives and those of our families on the line to defend and protect the most vulnerable and those abused. It is the obligation of every citizen, regardless of their gender or ethnicity, to engage in improving their lives and the lives of their families, friends and fellow citizens. You have often projected our obligation to our country and people as a western influence and propaganda but there is nothing western in Afghan women demanding respect for their dignity and protection of their equal rights. As proud and responsible citizens, we do not view putting our skills to work to improve our country's future towards prosperity as western. In the last two decades, we have played a vital role in rebuilding our destroyed country. We have done so as scientists, doctors, technologists, entrepreneurs, judges, religious scholars, engineers, lawyers, teachers, university professors, security officials, journalists, artists, and rights activists across the country.

We will not allow our place and contribution towards rebuilding our country to be erased or reversed. More than ever we recognize our capacity to contribute to the wellbeing of our society. We will not allow the potential, talent, the rights and dignity of our daughters and sons to be stripped once again for political gains and posturing.

We believe that by sitting together we may overcome the polarized views that you have expressed about Afghan women and the future of our country.

It is the dream of every responsible Afghan, including your children who live outside Afghanistan, to live in a country in which the role of every Afghan will be vital to rebuilding our country and ensuring that we become a sovereign, independent, sustainable and peaceful country in the region and international community.

For peace and justice,

Our Voice, Our Future

A coalition of Afghan women and individual activists, representing thousands of Afghan women

1 This letter is written by a group of women with incredibly diverse backgrounds. We are a group of nearly 400 women from across the country working for and demanding peace. Among us, we have the current generation of Afghanistan, those in their early 20s who do not remember what it was like to live under your regime and older women who remember very well what it was like to live under your rules. The views expressed in this letter voice aspirations and fears shared by millions from across the country. As we have repeatedly offered, we are prepared to sit down with the Taliban and have a genuine discussion about the needs and challenges of our population and our country. We have done so with members of the Afghan government and believe it is equally important to engage with you. We believe this is important because you are a party to the conflict and to the negotiations. For the last two decades, your leadership and command have been living outside of Afghanistan and you have not been exposed to the flourishing progress in our country.

AUTHOR

Martine van Bijlert is a co-founder and former co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network. Her engagement with Afghanistan dates back to the early 1990s in Quetta, where she researched Afghan refugees' decision-making surrounding a possible return to Afghanistan after the mujahedin takeover. Since then she has worked as an aid worker in Kabul under the Taleban; a diplomat at the Dutch Embassy in Tehran following the American-led intervention in Afghanistan; a political adviser to EU Special Representative during the reconstruction years and as an independent adviser to the Dutch Embassy surrounding their involvement in Uruzgan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the peer reviewers for their comments on an earlier version of this report, Jelena Bjelica for methodological input, and Roxanna Shapour and Kate Clark for editorial support. The interviews were conducted by the following AAN researchers: Sayed Asadullah Sadat, Khadija Hossaini, Obaid Ali, Fazl Rahman Muzhary, S Reza Kazemi, Ali Mohammad Sabawoon and Rohullah Soroush. Graphics and maps are by Roger Helms and Samir Hamidi; the aerial photos in the graphics are by Esri. The study was funded by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP).

COVER PHOTO

Women on a roadside in Daikundi.
Photo: Martine van Bijlert, 2006.

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