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Chapter 43: Testing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: the case of Afghanistan

Claire Duncanson and Vanessa Farr¹

International military intervention into Afghanistan in 2001 moved rapidly ‘from security assistance to full-fledged combat and counter-insurgency’ (Tadjbakhsh 2009, 13), and thus comprised warfighting and peacebuilding elements in constant and irreconcilable tension (Suhrke 2012). Justifying it under the UN Charter as an act of self-defence in response to the 9/11 attacks, first the US and UK governments, then the Security Council, used humanitarian language to frame their military response. When the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) was then established in 2002 to support donor coordination and peacebuilding, efforts to defeat the Taliban were in full force. Some WPS advocates saw the intervention as an opportunity for implementing the new UNSCR 1325, describing it as ‘an important litmus test of U.N. and member states’ resolve to integrate women into peacebuilding efforts’ (Neuwirth 2002, 253). Yet there was no mention of UNSCR 1325 in any of the Resolutions passed by the UNSC on Afghanistan in 2001, even in the creation of UNAMA, and gender-just peace remains elusive in Afghanistan.² This chapter explores the reasons why the WPS agenda had such little traction in its first testing ground. First we examine progress under the four pillars of the WPS agenda; then we suggest three key interconnected reasons for the limited progress. We conclude with suggestions for enhancing women’s security and participation in Afghanistan and the WPS agenda more broadly.

I Assessment of Progress under the Four WPS Pillars

At the time of the military intervention into Afghanistan, UNSCR 1325 merely existed: no mechanisms had been set in place for its implementation. Its adoption created obligations applicable to all United Nations Member States, including the Governments of the USA, the UK and Afghanistan; but these key players were still several years away from developing National Action Plans (NAPs) on how to meet these obligations on the ground.³ Given the patriarchal extremism of the Taliban regime, women’s organisations, local and international, pushed to protect Afghan women from the gendered harms of conflict and encourage their participation in efforts to build peace, but implementing the Resolution was a challenge in the

face of ongoing militarism and the persistence of Taliban-era decrees restricting women's freedoms (Tadjbakhsh 2009). In this section, we briefly assess this history and its impacts.

Protection

Violence and injury, forced displacement and war's long-term consequences are experienced differently by women and men (Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf 2002). Endless war in Afghanistan challenges women's access to the economic, health, education and legal services necessary to survive and recover from war's gendered harms, including sexualised violence, rape, domestic violence, trafficking, abduction and forced marriage (Erturk 2005). Eighty-seven per cent of women in Afghanistan experience physical, sexual or psychological violence during their lifetime, with 62 per cent experiencing multiple forms (UN Women 2017). In her 2005 mission, United Nations Special Rapporteur (UNSR) on Violence Against Women, Yakin Ertürk (2005), concluded that levels of interpersonal violence were 'dramatic and severe' and evidence suggests the situation has worsened as the political and security situation continues to decline. The Afghan Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) reported 2015 as the deadliest year for women, with violent crimes including lashing, stoning, and rape (AIHRC 2013). Perpetrators are most often family members but, from a feminist perspective, separating 'private' from 'public' violence that may be clearly ascribed to 'war' is neither possible nor useful: the rise in interpersonal violence in contexts of conflict is enabled by situations of lawlessness and militarisation (True 2012, 124–33) and it is often the weaponry provided to men to pursue the aims of armed groups that is used to perpetrate domestic violence (Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf 2002; Farr, Myrtilinen, and Schnabel 2009).

On March 5, 2003, Afghanistan acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) without reservation. Other protective legal frameworks have been adopted since then, including to address the problem of gendered violence. In the 2004 constitution, article 22 declares women and men to be equal before the law. The National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), developed under the leadership of the Ministry of Women Affairs (MoWA) and ratified by President Karzai in 2007, is included as a benchmark in the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS), finalised in 2008. Yet these advances arguably happened because of women's on-the-ground activism, with UNAMA's support; they are difficult to ascribe to the WPS agenda. It was not until 2007 that UNAMA made preambular references to UNSCR 1325, with more concrete references to discrimination appearing from 2008 (Tadjbakhsh 2009). Moreover, efforts to put the right to equality enshrined in these frameworks into practice are limited (Ayub, Kouvo, and Sooka

2009). No comprehensive review identified whether laws prior to it conform to the equal rights clause in the 2004 Constitution; as such, these pre-existing laws, which fail to adequately protect women and girls from gender-based crimes, often prevail (Ayub, Kouvo, and Sooka 2009).⁴ The hard-fought Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law, passed by presidential decree in 2009, was accompanied by dedicated prosecution units, training programs for police, prosecutors, judges and lawyers, and legal aid for women (Wimpelmann 2015). Yet, the consensus is that while it criminalises violence, few mechanisms to identify and prosecute perpetrators exist (UNAMA 2013; AREU 2013; Afghan Women's Network 2016; Larson 2016). Meanwhile, women's shelters are under attack and the law is undermined by widespread use of mediation rather than adjudication.

UNSCR 1325 calls for prosecutions and accountability for violence during wartime, yet there has been no 'transitional justice' in Afghanistan: indeed, the 'National Stability and Reconciliation' amnesty law passed by parliament in 2007 disburdened the state from legal persecution of war criminals (Ayub, Kouvo, and Sooka 2009). Key international power-brokers, including the UN, have turned a blind eye to this law for the sake of stability, notwithstanding evidence of widespread war crimes including sexualised violence against women (Grau 2016, 412).

If efforts to develop a justice system that works for women have been slow, those to protect women and their rights in a more direct way, through the deployment of security personnel, have been differently flawed. In 2003, the UNSC voted to expand the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) beyond Kabul with a mandate to protect civilians; but observers argue that NATO intensified the conflict through air strikes, ground battles, night searches and the like, while escalating the militarization of the country through distributing arms and money to militias to battle against Al Qaeda and the Taliban (Kandiyoti 2007b; Suhrke 2012). Ultimately, it is civilians who pay for these calculations about potential military gains, especially when there is an overall lack of expertise on how to take practical steps to dismantle decades-old systems of oppression. For example, while Provincial Reconstruction Teams (operating between 2006 and 2014), were told to promote gender equality, very few of those deployed understood what that meant or knew how to implement anything useful and practical (Jones 2009; Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2014).

While global attention may have been diverted from the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, insecurity continues to worsen, with ever increasing numbers of civilian casualties and massive

internal displacement. The total number of civilian deaths increased by 47 per cent between 2009 and 2015 (UNAMA, 2016, pp. 14–15, 44). In the first nine months of 2016, UNAMA documented 8,397 conflict-related civilian casualties (2,562 deaths and 5,835 injured). 1.2 million people were internally displaced in 2016 alone (Amnesty International 2016). Education, healthcare and other basic rights have been severely compromised by this ongoing insecurity, reducing life expectancy (Samar 2011). Afghanistan remains amongst the lowest ranking countries in the UNDP's Human Development Index and Gender Development Index (169th in both in 2016). The Asia Foundation's 2016 survey found the national mood to be at a record low amid this rising insecurity, civilian deaths and economic challenges (Asia Foundation 2016); and 2017 is turning into another deadly year.

Participation

In its second pillar, UNSCR 1325 emphasises women's participation in all aspects of peacebuilding. In the various international summits and conferences devoted to discussing Afghanistan's future, however, women were often forgotten, or invited as an afterthought or deliberately excluded so as not to anger the Taliban (Cameron and Kamminga 2014). At the first Bonn Conference in 2002, only two out of twenty-three Afghans were women (Grenfell 2004; Heath and Zahedi 2011a). Unsurprisingly, women's security needs were not reflected in the resulting power sharing agreement between the Northern Alliance and the international community (Kandiyoti 2007b, 182). By the second Bonn conference in 2011, which aimed to plan Afghanistan's future following international withdrawal in 2014, UNSCR 1325 was a full decade old, had been followed by more resolutions aimed at strengthening its goals, attracted donor support, and was factored into UN agency emergency and governance responses. Even so, it was only after a united outcry that Afghan women were included as participants (Haynes, Cahn, and Ni Aolain 2012). More recent summits, such as Brussels in October 2016, the Quadrilateral Coordination Group's 2016 meetings to develop a 'roadmap to peace,' and 2017's 'Kabul Process' have hardly challenged this pattern of exclusion.⁵

Turning to women's participation *within* Afghanistan, the situation looks more promising. Although with significant variations from region to region, women move around more freely, and significant advances have been made in enrolling girls in formal education.⁶ Politically, international pressure led to the inclusion of women in the Emergency Loya Jirga of 2002, which in turn recommended quotas for women in parliament (Grenfell 2004; Larson 2011). There are now more women holding positions of power than at any other time in history: twenty-seven per cent of the seats in parliament are held by women, four ministries and the

AIHRC are led by women and three women have been appointed as ambassadors (UN Women 2017). It is still difficult to detect anything of a national women's movement, however: female parliamentarians tend to retain allegiance to political parties or influential individuals, not to promote women's gender interests; there are ongoing tensions between individual women parliamentarians, sometimes exacerbated by the donor community; and – crucially – a real physical danger of upsetting conservative sensibilities in parliament and other public offices, in a context of chronic and highly gendered insecurity (Kandiyoti 2007b; Larson 2011, 2016).

There are quotas for women's inclusion in the High Peace Council (HPC), charged with overseeing the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP), which aims to persuade armed opposition members to disarm and reintegrate into society (UNDP 2011).⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, some women on the HPC speak for their ethnicity or have ties to the Mujahadeen (Henry 2011) while others, who might want to present oppositional views, are ignored and side-lined (Lackenbauer and Harriman 2013; Larson 2015).⁸ President Ghani appointed a new female deputy chair and two female advisors to the APRP in February 2016, but war also intensified that year: the impacts of their presence cannot easily be assessed.⁹ Women are involved in local practices of peacebuilding, but have struggled to impact upon the APRP (Quie 2012; Larson 2015). Nonetheless, NGOs, Afghan and international, continue to support this community-level peacebuilding and develop channels for community peacebuilders to influence members of the HPC and parliament (Chilvers, Khairkhowa, and Morrissey 2016).

Considerable international effort to increase women's participation in the security sector – so that Afghan women are better able to report crimes and access desperately-needed justice, has resulted in tiny advances but communities oppose women working in the security services, seeing policing as a disreputable job for an Afghan woman; commanders can be reluctant to recruit women; and relatively few women are qualified or drawn to working in a dangerous sector in which working conditions are difficult, with discrimination, assault and sexual violence commonly aimed at women recruits (Hancock 2013).¹⁰ The ANSF have developed a recruitment strategy and are conducting training inside and outside the country (Afghan Women's Network 2016), but recruitment of women is likely to remain challenging, especially given community opposition.

Not all suspicion emanates from conservative voices: many feminists question whether an increase of women in the security forces should be seen as a measure of success for the WPS

agenda (see for example Hudson 2012). Cockburn, for one, has consistently asked whether feminists should in fact be “contesting the way the feminist agenda has been recuperated by armies justifying the recruitment of more women to the military in reference to Resolution 1325” (Cockburn 2011). Although Afghanistan represents a compromised space for advancing a liberal feminist agenda of inclusion, it is perhaps easier to agree on the advantages of more women in the justice system. There is potential for optimism here: in 2014, 10 per cent of judges and 22 per cent of lawyers were female (Karlidag 2014: 16).

An overarching constraint, however, remains the deep insecurity that faces Afghans at every turn. Women in public life, whatever their role, are at risk of violence, even murder (Human Rights Watch 2009; Amnesty International 2015). Since NATO’s withdrawal in 2014, human rights organisations have documented a steady conservative backlash against women’s rights and an increase in public threats, intimidation and attacks. In some parts of the country, it remains considerably more difficult for girls to access and remain in school than boys. Again, with great variations across Afghanistan, the social practice of early marriage is a contributing element in the problem that both fertility and maternal mortality rates remain extremely high (UNICEF, 2016). Gains made in increasing female literacy may offer some hope of a future improvement in this cycle of female suffering, and may in time contribute to more women wanting to enter public life – whether at village level or nationally – than at present.

Prevention

Afghanistan’s NAP on UNSCR 1325, which itself demonstrates some progress in recent years in terms of the participation of women in building peace, interprets prevention work narrowly as the deterrence of violence against women. As such, the resolution’s affirmation of ‘the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building’ (UNSC 2000) is overlooked; this problem is exacerbated because there are no efforts to recognise and tackle the root causes of conflict. In Afghanistan, as we discuss below, this would involve recognising the legacies of both Cold War interventions, which include a surplus of armaments and a warlord-shaped narcostate, and contemporary economic policies, which exacerbate rather than alleviate poverty, inequality, and precarity. The Government of Afghanistan may claim to be tackling social grievances to create inclusive and egalitarian communities and prevent violent extremism, yet its approach to poverty reduction and development – the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) – risks exacerbating these problems.¹¹

Relief and Recovery

Although it is heartening that the Afghan government recognises the need for a gender-inclusive programme of sustainable development, the ANDS is based on classic neoliberal assumptions. At the behest of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), Afghanistan aims to ‘ensure sustainable development through a private-sector-led market economy’ (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2008) and focuses on the extraction and exploitation of natural resources, agricultural modernization, infrastructural improvement, with an emphasis on attracting foreign investment. Observers note that development strategy is “premised on the principle that institutions must be put in place to ensure ‘good governance’ in a manner that delivers just enough ‘state’ to allow basic security for the functioning of markets and private-sector-led growth” (Kandiyoti 2007a, 504). This approach has gendered consequences. To take natural resource exploitation as an example, few women anywhere benefit from the extractive industries; they are unlikely to do so in Afghanistan (Lakhani, Durand, and Noorani 2014; Global Witness 2016). Furthermore, a minimalist state in a context of a critical shortage of services exacerbates demands made on women as primary carers (Kandiyoti 2007b, 192) but it is exceedingly difficult for women to make this point in the absence of a national, inclusive and effective women’s movement.¹²

ANDS does have gender as a cross-cutting theme, but while the MoWA is mandated to take the lead role on monitoring and coordinating the outcome of government interventions for gender equality, it is limited by its under-resourced and marginalized position and is powerless to conduct regular and meaningful gender impact assessments of IFI and government plans. This is a critical failure: feminists have argued for decades that women’s organisations and ministries should be able to subject government development plans to scrutiny through gender-impact assessments (Ni Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011) or gender budgeting initiatives (Budlender 2010). NGOs do important work supporting women through small-scale economic empowerment projects,¹³ but there is little space for civil society or international NGOs to challenge the overall economic strategy or object to its skewed impacts on women’s well-being (AREU 2013) (also see chapter 34 in this Handbook).

II Challenges to progress

In this section, we elaborate on what we see as three interconnected and overlapping reasons for the limited progress of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan. The first is the fact that the initial military intervention was not primarily aimed at peacebuilding, but about US security in the reaction to the 9/11 attacks – followed up by a large measure of greed from an international

community that benefits from Afghanistan's war economy. The second is the scale of the challenge of implementing WPS in Afghanistan given the context of legacies of decades of intervention, counter-intervention and conflict. The third is the sense in which the WPS agenda seems ill-suited for the context, because it focuses more on civil and political rights than on the inclusive social and economic transformation that women sorely need.

Self-interested intervention

Unlike other contemporary military adventures which ignore women altogether, the 'need' to save suffering women was a major trope in the build-up to intervention and a loudly-expressed 'interest' in their human rights was used as an emotive justification. Both George Bush and Tony Blair cynically represented Afghan women as somehow being eager to be drawn further into armed violence, making clichéd and hyperbolic claims about how their joint military attack on the Taliban would have the ultimate effect of freeing women. This message was pummeled home in a special radio broadcast as the build-up to the invasion began in earnest, when Laura Bush was put on air to declare that the "fight against terrorism [in Afghanistan] is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (Bush 2001).¹⁴ In reality, then as now, compromises with the Taliban and other conservative armed groups would always receive priority (Ayub and Kouvo 2008; Jones 2009; Kandiyoti 2009, 8; Heath and Zahedi 2011b; Haynes, Cahn, and Ni Aolain 2012; AREU 2013).

Meanwhile, observers have seen an increasing state of 'plunder' in Afghanistan since the 2001 invasion. Afghanistan has been the world's greatest recipient of aid -- \$20bn in the first decade post-intervention -- but very little reaches the local economy or enables sustainable development. The allocation of vast reconstruction funds, totalling billions of dollars, to private (international and national) security and construction companies, which are wasteful, ineffective or fraudulent, has entrenched a system of corruption (Curtis 2011; Gall 2012, 256–57; Rohde 2012).¹⁵

The WPS agenda took around a decade to take hold in Afghanistan because the intervening powers were, beyond rhetoric, unconcerned with its goals, acting primarily to secure their national security and wealth. Donors were not held to account for their promises to Afghan women (AREU 2013). Afghanistan offers woeful evidence of all the ways in which the WPS agenda remains vulnerable "to co-optation by militarist states and military institutions for military purposes" (Cockburn 2011). For many women, an overall decline in their standard of living has been the only lasting outcome of 'Operation Enduring Freedom.'

Legacies of Endless War

Secondly, the country now runs on an entrenched war economy, largely based in opium production and illegal drug trafficking, among other black market activities, from which a few warlords are the sole beneficiaries (Kandiyoti 2007b; Loewenstein 2012). Such war economies are profoundly gendered with most of the beneficiaries being male; women, with increasing levels of hardship the further they are from commercial centres, merely try to survive (Peterson 2008; Jennings, this volume). Bluntly put, Afghanistan shows how challenging it is to make the ideals of the WPS agenda operational in face of an economically, physically and socially devastated landscape.

The gendered effects of Afghanistan's narco-economy are of particular concern. Afghanistan now produces ninety per cent of the world's heroin, twice as much as in 2000. The cultivation of opium benefits the few but causes massive health problems, and the misuse of land and water displaces other cultivation: poppy can be cheaper than food. These factors are both causes of, and exacerbate, violence against women and their children. In a country with virtually no treatment facilities, the number of female addicts continues to rise. Children, fed the drug to stave off hunger and fear, are now the largest group of addicts (Whitton 2016).

Among the other gendered effects of the breakdown of Afghan society is a rise in forced and early marriages: men unable to meet their obligations in the drug trade resort increasingly to *Baad*, the practice of exchanging girls or women in marriage to pay a debt or settle a dispute. Women in such marriages are often underfed, overworked, depressed, and give birth too young, continuing the agonising cycle (Samar 2011). Nonetheless, the international community attributes their plight to culture or religion, ignoring "the possibility that what to Western eyes looks like 'tradition' is, in many instances, the manifestation of new and more brutal forms of subjugation of the weak made possible by a commodified criminal economy, total lack of security and the erosion of bonds of trust and solidarity that were tested to the limit by war, social upheaval and poverty" (Kandiyoti 2009, 2; also see Abu-Lughod 2002; Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002).

Meanwhile, through the ANDS, Afghanistan promotes the policies that further entrench the inequalities produced by the war and narco-economies. Thus it is hardly surprising that gains made in formal rights – which we argue to have been largely the focus of the WPS agenda to date – are 'condemned to remain dead letters' in Afghanistan (Kandiyoti 2007b, 185).

WPS's focus on civil and political rights

The third reason that the WPS agenda has made such little progress in Afghanistan is related to this focus on civil and political rights, such as quotas for the participation of women in parliament, peace talks, and security sector and the development of legal frameworks to uphold women's rights, especially their right to be free from gender-based violence. Afghan women, however, often see themselves as enmeshed in family relationships to the extent that individual rights can be less salient (Fluri 2011; Heath and Zahedi 2011b). The focus on marriage and children, from which women draw material, as well as social and emotional, resources and security (Abirafeh 2009; Grace and Pain 2011), can act to constrain the pursuit of individual advantage and desires upon which the international community's model of peacebuilding, including the WPS agenda, are largely premised. Moreover, the WPS agenda, by appearing to be concerned with women at the expense of men, has not come across as relevant to all Afghan communities (Zahedi 2011).

Moreover, formal rights for women are arguably only ever translated into progress on the ground when there is a strong, coordinated and active women's movement to hold institutions to account, to steer implementation and to continue to advocate for women. Although many scholars testify to the resilience of Afghan women (see in particular the contributors to Heath and Zahedi 2011), few claim that there was in 2001 an Afghan women's movement strong enough to support effective implementation of the WPS agenda (see for example Billaud 2015). This is in part another legacy of the combination of decades of war and patriarchal attitudes which deprived many women of education and the ability to move freely outside the home (Kandiyoti 2009) but it is also perhaps related to the WPS agenda's focus on individual civil and political rights, which can sometimes seem less relevant than the economic and social issues undermining women's security (Ahmed-Ghosh 2006; Kandiyoti 2007b; Kouvo 2008; Burki 2011). Our key point here is that WPS agenda, with its emphasis on civil and political rights, has struggled to make inroads into challenging the entrenched war and narco-economies and their ongoing legacies that are the root cause of women's insecurity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that the impact of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan has been limited, due to three main (overlapping) reasons: the self-interested nature of the intervening powers, the legacies of decades of conflict in Afghanistan, and the agenda's emphasis on civil and political rights. A key question remains: are the small achievements

under the WPS agenda steps upon which more progress for women can be built; or are they too marginal to be meaningful, or worse, counterproductive? Whilst there is much to be optimistic about in terms of the WPS agenda in general – as evidenced throughout this handbook – growing inequality and insecurity in Afghanistan suggests to us that *in this particular context*, efforts to implement UNSCR 1325 have come very close to doing more harm than good (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2007). The attempts to produce new laws to protect women from gender-based violence, and to facilitate their participation in public life, have led to a persistent and extremely violent backlash against women (Wimpelmann 2014). The return to Kabul of the notorious warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in early May 2017, strikes terror in women activists.¹⁶ Meanwhile, efforts to mainstream gender into the prevention and relief and recovery pillars have been inadequate, leaving entrenched war economies intact and exacerbating inequalities.

That said, there are ways in which WPS advocates can move forward which can build on the limited gains we identified in the first section. First, the international community – WPS advocates and the UN more generally – has to rethink how it can best support Afghan women. Researchers suggest donors must be less prescriptive, think beyond technocratic and project-based interventions, and be prepared to play a long-term supportive role as *facilitators of broader mobilization* (AREU 2013; Wimpelmann 2014; Larson 2016). Thinking about how to support women's rights in the context of their family relationships, and how to work to transform masculinities, will also be important ways forward (Zahedi 2011; AREU 2013). Second, the WPS agenda has to pay more attention to economic rights and empowerment.¹⁷ WPS advocates need to advocate for alternative economic models for post-conflict states. As well as community level economic empowerment, NGOs need to put pressure on IFIs and the donor community to direct the Afghan economy towards job creation, distribution of wealth, and sustainable inclusive prosperity. Yet the most urgent task for WPS advocates remains oppositional: especially to commitments, made by the government of Afghanistan with international diplomatic support, to pursue 'national security' with hardline warlords whose words and deeds remain as misogynist and brutal as ever.

¹ We would like to acknowledge those who provided support and advice, pointed us in the direction of research and informants, and, in some cases, were kind enough to read and comment on earlier drafts. Attempting to do justice to the complexity of the situation of WPS in Afghanistan was a challenge, but we think we have come closer due to the solidarity and generosity of feminist colleagues who shared their insights: Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, Wazhma Frogh, Deniz Kandiyoti, Sari Kouvo, Anna Larson, Henry Myrntinen, and Torunn Wimpelmann. Thanks also to the editors of this handbook who provided very useful comments on an earlier draft and were generous with support throughout.

² These are: SCR1363, 30 July 2001; SCR1378, 14 November 2001; SCR1383, 6 December 2001; SCR1386, 20 December 2001. Women receive a single mention in the last of them. UNAMA was established by UNSCR 1401 in 2002.

³ The UK adopted its first NAP in 2006; the USA in 2011; Afghanistan in 2015. Source: <http://www.peacewomen.org/member-states> (accessed 16 January 2017).

⁴ Indeed, Article 3 of the 2004 Constitution states: “No law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam,” providing the opportunity to invalidate article 22 (Grenfell 2004; Kandiyoti 2007a).

⁵ See Human Rights Watch commentary at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/27/afghanistans-mysterious-vanishing-plan-women-and-peace-talks>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/06/afghanistan-donors-splash-cash-bury-rights> and <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/06/women-excluded-again-afghanistans-peace-talks> (accessed 28 June 2017)

⁶ By-and-large, women and girls enjoy greater freedom in Kabul and more freedom in the largest provincial cities than in rural areas. For example, women move around fairly freely and often do not wear the Burka in Kabul, which is a significant change from 2002; and there are more girls in schools, who are likelier to complete more years of schooling, in cities than the rural areas. Ethnographic observation by Vanessa Farr in Kabul, Jalalabad, Herat, Kandahar and Bamian from 2015-2017.

⁷ The HPC is an eighty-member body providing political support to the peace process and overseeing the implementation of the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) signed in May 2010. Nine (13 per cent) of seventy members are women, while thirty-one Provincial Peace Councils (PPCs) have 3-5 women in each (17 per cent).

⁸ This appears to be the fate of the similar project of Community Development Committees (CDCs) part of the National Solidary Programme (NSP) (Kandiyoti 2007b, 189). Perceived and real resistance from the Taliban is often cited as the reason for this exclusion, but that may be a convenient excuse to continue to do ‘men’s business’ as usual.

⁹ 2016 was the most violent year on record and the prospects for peace are declining even further in 2017 as ISIS enlarges its presence.

¹⁰ By 2013, 1 per cent of the Afghanistan National Police (ANP) and 0.4 per cent of the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) were female (Karlidag 2014). The ANA Officer Academy, founded in October 2013, has recruited women since 2014 and graduated several dozen. The 900 women currently serving in the ANA falls short of a goal of 5,000 set by donors, a problem ascribed to the overall difficulty of women serving in the public sector. See online, “Women in Afghan army overcome opposition, threats” <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-women-army-idUSKBN12Z05W> (accessed 18 January 2017).

¹¹ See Ambassador to the UN, H.E. Mahmoud Saikal’s statement to the UNSC debate on conflict prevention at <http://afghanistan-un.org/2017/01/security-council-debate-on-conflict-prevention-and-sustaining-peace/> Jan 2017

¹² A prime example of the on-the-ground impacts of neoliberal national policy can be seen in the basic health services pillar of the Ministry of Public Health, which, at the very humblest level, relies on a cadre of unpaid Community Health Workers (CHWs) of whom around half are women. This sector, then, can be seen as the most important public service space for women – but it is also one of the least remunerated and relies on highly gendered ideologies premised on women’s voluntary and unpaid caring work being made available to their community (see Farr 2017).

¹³ See for example the UN’s internship programme for Afghan women <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2016/08/unlocking-the-potential-of-afghan-women>

¹⁴ Laura Bush was then first lady of the USA, and, as a woman with absolutely no feminist credentials, her intervention was only be read as a cynical effort to manipulate public opinion in favour of an illegitimate military project.

¹⁵ Examples abound: a \$125 million contract to build a new road was initially granted to an American company, which then subcontracted to a firm from a regional country for \$80 million, making a profit of \$45 million much (see Gall 2012, 141).

¹⁶ See Patricia Gossman, May 5, 2017. “Afghanistan Warlord’s Grandiose, and Damaging, Return. Hekmatyar Criticizes Media, Rejects Accountability.” Available online (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/05/afghanistan-warlords-grandiose-and-damaging-return>)

¹⁷ The Asia Foundation’s finding that a record number (seventy-four per cent) of Afghans feel women should be able to work outside the home, whilst due to economic necessity more than commitment to women’s rights, provides optimism (Asia Foundation 2016)

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