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Afghanistan women: 'Give us a seat at the peace table'

Given the Taliban's history, women say it's critical that they're at the table to make sure concessions aren't made at their expense.

By Tom A. Peter

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During the past year, the [US](#) and its [NATO](#) allies have placed increasing emphasis on bringing an end to the war in [Afghanistan](#) through negotiations. With the [Taliban](#) on the verge of getting a [political office in Qatar](#), substantive talks now appear closer than ever before.

Women have taken on an increasingly active role in Afghan society in recent years – holding elected offices, working outside the house, and sometimes running their own organizations. But many Afghan women see a potential peace deal with the Taliban as representing anything but a ray of hope. Current negotiation efforts have mostly excluded women, and without a voice at the table many women worry how well the Afghan government can protect women's rights if the Taliban is reincorporated into the political system.

As the US and NATO continue to work toward talks, a number of activists argue that if the West was serious about promoting women's rights here, they'd help ensure women a seat at the peace negotiation table.

“The sad part is that the international community's actions do not reflect what they say. It talks about women's rights, but then they don't include them [in peace talks]. Women's involvement should be one of the conditions,” says [Sima Samar](#), chairperson for the [Afghanistan Independent](#)

[Human Rights Commission](#). “The problem here is that it’s not only the Afghans, it’s the international community that also sees that women are not capable or useful in the negotiations.”

[What is a loya jirga? Afghanistan's most pivotal meetings since 2002.](#)

Of the nearly 70-member Afghan High Peace Council created to liaise with the Taliban and other insurgent groups, only nine are women. Given the Taliban's history with women's rights, women here say their inclusion in the peace process is critical to ensure history does not repeat itself or concessions are not made at their expense.

Aside from women's involvement, just who negotiates with the Taliban has consistently been an issue. When the High Peace Council was formed, many people criticized it for consisting almost exclusively of Taliban adversaries who hold little clout with the group. So far it has been largely sidelined, especially after its chairman, [Burhanuddin Rabbani](#) was [assassinated in September](#).

The most serious negotiations have taken place behind closed doors between NATO and Taliban representatives. [Afghan President Hamid Karzai](#) complained that he and other Afghan government officials had been left out of the process. While NATO has taken steps to address Mr. Karzai’s concerns, Afghan women’s activists say that the council has done little to ensure the inclusion of women in the peace process.

Without meaningful representation in talks, many women say they worry negotiations with the Taliban could compromise their rights. A number of women's activists here have also pointed to a [UN](#) security council resolution that requires women's participation in peace negotiations, saying their exclusion violates international law.

Women argue it wouldn't be impossible to make an agreement with the Taliban. During a Loya Jirga, or Grand Assembly, meeting to discuss strategic relations with the US and negotiations with the Taliban last year, women delegates were among those who endorsed on-going efforts to broker a deal with the Taliban.

And Taliban officials and supporters, meanwhile, now say that they’re more open to women’s rights than they were in the past. For example, with regard to women’s education, Taliban supporters say that during their reign in the late 1990s, they would have [supported girls’ schools](#), but there were not enough female teachers at the time. Now that this has changed, Taliban officials say they’re open to the idea.

Still, many Afghans say they doubt the Taliban’s political and social mindset is capable of evolving to match many of the changes that have taken place in big cities like [Kabul](#) since their ouster in 2001.

Massouda Jalal, a former Afghan presidential candidate, doubts that any negotiations with the Taliban would be successful. She says she's sure that the group will not support women’s rights and will likely work to remove many of the freedoms they’ve gained over the past decade such as opportunities to work outside the home, better access to education, and the option to participate in the political process all of which opened up after the fall of the Taliban.

Ms. Jalal points to the past: Why, she asks, if they were good, were the Taliban removed 10 years ago? "If they are bad, why are you bringing them back?" No one seems to have an answer to this question, she says. "Once the Taliban gets power and they are assured that they will stay in power then they will introduce their own values and there won't be any space for women."