



WASA  
Women Activities  
and Social Services  
Association

مجلس خدمات اجتماعی زنان (واسا)

# Building Peace for All: WOMEN'S ADVOCACY FOR A FUTURE AFGHANISTAN

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# Building Peace for All:

## WOMEN'S ADVOCACY FOR A FUTURE AFGHANISTAN

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# Executive Summary



After over 40 years of war, Afghanistan finds itself at a crossroads. On February 29, 2020, the United States signed a security agreement with the Taliban, leading to the partial withdrawal of American military forces, and opening the door for peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Any successful deal will likely include a power sharing agreement, which will bring the Taliban into a new Afghan government. This expected power sharing arrangement has prioritized issues of women's rights in local and international peace efforts. After the brutal suppression of women during its five-year rule from 1996-2001, the Taliban now asserts it supports women's rights "granted by Islam."<sup>1</sup>

The Women Activities and Social Services Association (WASSA) has been at the forefront of promoting and advocating for women's rights in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Going forward progress is likely to demand dialogue with new players, such as Taliban representatives, ex-combatants, and rural religious scholars. These

stakeholders may not initially be open to WASSA's advocacy. Over time, we believe there is both significant need for and substantial advantage offered by this type of engagement. In our judgment, WASSA is uniquely positioned to leverage its prior experience to lead during this next era in Afghanistan.

Since 2001, Afghan women have made significant strides in securing greater rights, economic participation, civic engagement, and political representation. Unfortunately, women have made far more progress in Afghanistan's cities than in the countryside. The rural context remains religiously and culturally conservative, with extraordinary levels of female (and male) illiteracy, and traditional norms, such as the Pashtun code of honor (*pashtunwali*) still prevail.

WASSA has unique assets to take on these challenges. Its three centers (the Center for Civil Society Empowerment, the Center for Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding, and the Center for Legal and Social Protection) support civil society organizations, build local

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<sup>1</sup> Sirajuddin Haqqani, "What We, the Taliban, Want," *The New York Times*, 20 February 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html>.

capacity to promote sustainable peace, and offer legal and psychological counseling to women. WASSA's radio station, Radio Sahar, has over 60,000 listeners across five districts, and advances women's rights through public service announcements and social programming. WASSA's women-only internet cafe in Herat city provides a safe space to learn new technologies and skills.

Since 2006, WASSA has implemented 126 projects. The organization is currently working on seven projects, such as: CODE4FUN (a coding project for women and youth), a trauma healing initiative, the Afghan Woman Leadership Initiative, and several social reintegration projects for internally displaced persons and returnees. WASSA's projects cross a wide breadth of regions and involve women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

WASSA's capabilities and projects can be organized across three broad categories: engagement (with the government, religious scholars, and men); education; and economic empowerment. Our five proposals leverage WASSA's past experience and capabilities within these three frameworks while also highlighting new opportunities.

Our proposals are as follows:

- New interview series and radio dramas for Radio Sahar which engage religious scholars and promote women's rights within Islam;
- Entrepreneurship and skills training to facilitate economic empowerment;
- Peacebuilding training for women serving on Provincial Peace Committees and Community Development Councils;
- Reintegration for ex-combatants and host communities which leverages WASSA's current reintegration project for internally displaced persons;
- And male allyship development to enhance community support.

These five projects will increase awareness of women's rights, promote financial security, empower women to promote peace, and build support for new gender norms among men.

Women's rights in Afghanistan are inextricable from cultural norms, years of war, political instability, and widespread poverty. This complex environment requires multifaceted solutions that target not just women's rights, but these other cultural, historical and economic phenomena as well. We believe that our proposed projects complement WASSA's capabilities and prior successes.

Afghanistan is at a pivotal moment. Peace and security, though far from a foregone conclusion, have never been more attainable. Yet Afghan women have much to fear and many find themselves in the most precarious and vulnerable situation since 2001. WASSA and its indomitable employees will be needed now, more than ever, to ensure a progressive future for women's rights in Afghanistan.





# Introduction

In January 2020, a group of Georgetown graduate students met with WASSA regarding a consulting project on the organization's current assets and capabilities and opportunities to continue promoting and advocating for women's rights and peacebuilding going forward. Dr. Nilofar Sakhi, the founder of WASSA, asked for the following three deliverables:

- 1) A historical mapping of women's roles in Afghanistan since 2001;
- 2) An assessment of WASSA's current assets and capabilities;
- 3) New project proposals for the organization.

Our work takes place against a backdrop of many dynamic shifts in Afghanistan this year. The February 2020 security agreement between the United States and the Taliban in Doha has opened up the opportunity for intra-Afghan peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban insurgency.

Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, women and civil society in Afghanistan have made tremendous strides in improving women's rights. However, Afghan society remains traditionally conservative and highly religious, with a strong urban-rural divide. As Intra-Afghan peace talks with the Taliban proceed, serious concerns have emerged over whether women will retain the advances which they fought so hard to achieve over the past 19 years.

Women want not only to protect progress to date, but also to advance their rights going forward. The normative context surrounding women's rights in Afghanistan,

however, remains highly complex, with divergent views and attitudes depending on socioeconomic status, ethnicity, region, education, and religion, among many other factors.

It is impossible to predict the results of intra-Afghan dialogues in the medium to long-term. We have endeavored, therefore, to put forth proposals for WASSA that take into account the uncertain political atmosphere which may prevail for several years, and that WASSA can execute independently of the political outcome.

This report is divided into three sections. The first is a historical mapping of women's progress in Afghanistan since 2001, which describes the private and public lives of Afghan women in the post-Taliban era. We analyze women's roles in Islam, *pashtunwali* (which is important for understanding Taliban attitudes), and the impact of widely held concepts of Afghan masculinity. In the public sphere, we examine women's roles in politics since 2001, participation in local governance structures (especially *shuras* and *jirgas*), women in the Afghan economy, and female education.

The second section is an overview of WASSA as an organization, including its historic mission statement, current assets and capabilities, and ongoing projects. We then provide a situational analysis of WASSA's strengths and weaknesses, and the associated opportunities and threats going forward.

The third section is comprised of our proposals. We offer five project ideas based on WASSA's current capabilities and its unique opportunity to advance women's rights. We organize these proposals based on metrics such as cost, feasibility, and impact, which we hope will provide a roadmap for implementation and prioritization.

Throughout the course of the project, we have been continuously inspired by WASSA's commitment to advancing women's rights in Afghanistan and its proven history of impact. We consider it an honor to contribute, albeit in a small way, to its ongoing success. We would like to give special thanks to Dr. Nilofar Sakhi for the opportunity and Mr Said Wase Sayedi for his continued support as well as the incredible employees at WASSA, whom we met several times via video conference. We also would like to thank over 30 practitioners who donated their time and expertise. We give special thanks to WFI for organizing this project, and of course, Ambassador McEldowney for her constant advice and leadership.

# Women's Roles in Afghan Society

## A HISTORICAL MAPPING SINCE 2001



### WOMEN IN THE PRIVATE SPHERE: CULTURE AND RELIGION

#### The Role of Islam

In Afghan society, the roles of both men and women are anchored in Afghan religiosity, the traditional honor codes, and cultural narratives

which punish men who take on or help with tasks supposedly done by women.<sup>2</sup> Certain verses in the Qur'an appear to support gender-based

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<sup>2</sup> A. Gibbs, R. Jewkes, F. Karim, F. Marofi & J. Corboz, *Understanding how Afghan women utilise a gender transformative and economic*

*empowerment intervention: A qualitative study*, *Global Public Health*, 13:11, 2018.



discriminatory practices and are used as justification for such practices within Afghan culture. The An-nisa chapter of the Qur'an states that "Men are in charge of women" and "those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them" (4:34).<sup>3</sup> However, alternative interpretations of the Qur'an exist: ones which are gender neutral and in support of gender equality.

The Qur'an expresses the moral and spiritual equality of men and women by balancing virtues and rewards for both genders in identical terms. The following verse from the Qur'an is often used to highlight theological support for gender equality: "Their Lord responded: 'I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female, you are equal to one another'" (3: 195).<sup>4</sup>

### **Women's Rights within Pashtunwali**

Herat and the surrounding provinces are historically Persian speaking (i.e. Tajiki or Dari), not Pashto. Yet many areas, especially those infiltrated by the Taliban, are culturally Pashto, meaning *pashtunwali*, or the Pashtun "code of honor," is present.<sup>6</sup> In Herat and beyond, the Taliban's primary

But while there is a long tradition of interpreting Islamic texts through the prism of women's rights, conflict between Islamic beliefs and cultural traditions persists in many parts of the world.

Indeed, many of the harsh rules imposed during the Taliban era have roots in Pashtun custom, rather than classical Islamic tradition. For example, Islam allows women to pursue education, but for many Pashtun men, brought up within the norms of the tribal law of *pashtunwali*, female schooling beyond the eighth grade is forbidden.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is important for WASSA to adapt to each community based on their unique structure of religious and cultural beliefs.

political goal is the creation of an Islamic Emirate, but the movement is "mostly Pashtun and rural [and is], in part, influenced by the code of honor in Pashtun law."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Taliban views on women's rights are more often "traditional" than "Islamic."

<sup>3</sup>The Qur'an, 4:34, (Translated by quran.com).

<sup>4</sup> The Qur'an 3:195 (Translated by quran.com).

<sup>5</sup> A. Gibbs, R. Jewkes, F. Karim, F. Marofi & J. Corboz, *Understanding how Afghan women utilise a gender transformative and economic empowerment intervention: A qualitative study*, Global Public Health, 13:11, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Based on an interview with Fatema Jafari, a female member of the *Herat Provincial Council*.

<sup>7</sup> Rosemarie Skaine. *The Women of Afghanistan Under the Taliban* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2002), at 22.

*Pashtunwali* does not exist in a written, codified canon. Rather, each village has its own similarly understood set of norms, passed down through generations orally (given widespread illiteracy). Tom Ginsburg, of the University of Chicago, has distilled this proto-legal<sup>8</sup> system down to seven tenets:

1. Honor is paramount, and the honor of women (*tor*) is to be protected
2. Gender boundaries must be rigidly maintained (*pardah*)
3. One has the right to compensation (*por*) when one is wronged
4. Revenge (*badal*) is tolerated and even encouraged
5. Apologies accompanied by *por* are to be accepted
6. Guests are to be sheltered (*melmastia* for hospitality, *nanawati* for asylum)
7. The *jirga* is to be obeyed<sup>9</sup>

*Pashtunwali* is not monolithic. Indeed, the intensity of gender boundaries (*pardah*) reflect the socio-economic status of various Pashtun tribes. Concepts of *pardah*, in fact, fall along a spectrum. As USIP expert Palwasha Kakar notes, "on the one end are the Kuchinomads, where women do not veil in public [...] on the extreme opposite end are the *qalang* [landowning class], where only elderly

women and female children are allowed to leave the household compound without being completely veiled."<sup>10</sup> The severity of *pardah* appears to be contingent on available resources, in this case land. But while nomadic Pashtun women may enjoy more freedoms, gender inequality still prevails.

*Pashtunwali*, at its core, is a form of government. In the absence of a centralized authority, "law [...] must be enforced by the communities and individuals themselves."<sup>11</sup> In the case of murder, blood vendetta provides a serious negative incentive for killing. To a lesser extent, the compensation that must be paid to a victim's family also prevents bloodshed. Compensation often takes the form of cash or women (*baad*).

Women's status as currency and the practice of *baad* may be more economic than cultural. Ginsburg states: "in a society that is relatively poor [...] other forms of compensation are used instead of scarce cash. Indeed, the use of women as a form of compensation may be explained this way [...] they intertwine the families of the disputants across generations."<sup>12</sup> Since "honor is fungible"<sup>13</sup> through both violence and compensation (cash or women), theoretically, an improved economic situation could lead to more cash resolutions, and

<sup>8</sup> Tom Ginsburg, "An Economic Interpretation of the Pashtunwali," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 2011 (2011): at 89–423, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., at 102.

<sup>10</sup> Palwasha Kakar, "Tribal Law of Pashtunwali and Women's Legislative Authority."

([https://beta.images.theglobeandmail.com/archive/00231/Tribal\\_Law\\_of\\_Pasht\\_231142a.pdf](https://beta.images.theglobeandmail.com/archive/00231/Tribal_Law_of_Pasht_231142a.pdf))

<sup>11</sup> Tom Ginsburg, "An Economic Interpretation of the Pashtunwali," at 93.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., at 106.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., at 106.

fewer women subject to commoditization.

Within *pashtunwali*, women hold some legislative authority.<sup>14</sup> They can negotiate peace, both within a household, and between different families. Importantly, in the case of asylum, or *nanawati*, a woman “is the family representative who asks for the conflict to be resolved.”<sup>15</sup> Again, these “traditions” change with socio-economic status, displacement as refugees, or urbanization.

### Conceptions of Masculinity

Prevailing concepts of Afghan masculinity are the framework for justifying women’s lack of bodily integrity, physical security; inequity in family law; and unequal participation in decision-making councils. Afghan men’s attitudes, influenced by socially constructed ideas of masculinity, create their own pressures on men with regard to gendered social expectations. In turn, these factors affect the interaction between men and women in Afghan communities. Given that men retain virtually all structural power and authoritative voice, involving men in gender-equity initiatives is vital to improving the status of women in the country.<sup>16</sup> Any intervention on behalf of women in local communities must involve men in discussions of family rights in

The norms that bind *pashtunwali* adapt to the economic and political circumstances of its adherents. Its interpretation differs not only across socio-economic cultures, i.e. nomad vs. pastoral, but also political status, i.e. displaced vs. settled. This mutability shows that over time, at a grassroots level, the norms of *pashtunwali* can change with improved economics and political stability.

Islam, intimate partner violence (IPV), or reframing *pashtunwali* honor, amongst other topics.

Men are critical stakeholders in political and religious institutions, regardless of their socioeconomic class or background. Male buy-in prevents community backlash for new initiatives. Any deconstruction of the norms surrounding gender inequality and violence against women requires an understanding of Afghan masculinity. The present threats to Afghan women are shaped by detrimental traditional practices, passed down through generations, that cross religious and ethnic lines.

Researchers have outlined the most enduring gender-based normative principles for Afghan males.<sup>17</sup> Men

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<sup>14</sup> Palwasha Kakar, “Tribal Law of Pashtunwali and Women’s Legislative Authority.”, at 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., at 9.

<sup>16</sup> Valerie Hudson, *Sex and World Peace*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, at 180.

<sup>17</sup> Chona Echavez, Sayed Mahdi Mosawi, Leah Wilfreda, RE Pilongo, *The Other Side of Gender Inequality: Men and Masculinities in Afghanistan*, Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2016.

must be the principal breadwinners for the family. In addition, they must provide *nafaqah*, defined as all needs of a household such as finances, home, education, health, and physical security. In return men command respect, exert authority on all domestic matters, and are exempt from household chores<sup>18</sup>.

These high expectations placed on Afghan men result in intense pressure to match community ideals of masculinity. Men who do not

conform to these values are subject to dishonor, or *be-ghairat-i*, and

shame<sup>19</sup>. These pressures can result in untimely death, sickness, alcoholism, risk-taking, and depression.<sup>20</sup> The norms surrounding Afghan masculinity are persistent, and in fact, defined in relation to women's roles and position within society.

Redefining Afghan masculinity in an Islamic and traditional context, therefore, is crucial to changing attitudes on women's rights.



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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Gerald Corey and Marianne S Corey, *I Never Knew I Had a Choice: Explorations in Personal*

*Growth*, 10th ed. Belmont: Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Chona Echavez, et al. *The Other Side of Gender Inequality*.





## WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: POLITICS AND THE ECONOMY

### Afghan Women in Politics since 2001

After the fall of the Taliban regime, international organizations (IOs) began to support women's efforts to incorporate female voices into Afghan politics. Significant milestones followed. In 2003, after the Bonn Agreement instituted a Constitutional Drafting Commission, Dr. Sima Samar was selected as vice-chair of the Loya Jirga. In addition, she was selected to amend and approve a new draft of the constitution, with particular focus on women's participation in government, education, and health

services. Ultimately, a reserved quota system for female candidates was introduced. By 2005, Afghan civil society organizations were helping women register to vote for the first time since Taliban rule, marking an important turning point for women in Afghan politics and democracy.<sup>21</sup> According to data published by the World Bank in 2017, 28 percent of seats in Afghanistan's parliament were held by women, compared to 4 percent in 1990.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Adriana Piatti-Crocker and Daniel Kempton, "Gender Quotas in Afghanistan: Solution or Problem?," *Institute of the Study of Diplomacy*, no. 317 (2008), at 13.

<sup>22</sup>"Proportion of Seats Held by Women in National Parliaments (%) - Afghanistan | Data," The World Bank, accessed March 11, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PA.RL.ZS?locations=AF>.

In 2018, 417 women ran for parliament—a historic number for the country. This level of participation was in part due to the reserved seat system in the Afghan parliament, which requires that 68 of 250 seats be reserved for women.<sup>23</sup> Critics of this system argue that women are elected undemocratically through appointment by the executive, whose members may choose candidates that align with their interests.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, others applaud the quota system for its ability to get women through difficult barriers of entry and have a seat at the table.

Some political parties in Afghanistan, which were male-dominated and critical of women seeking office, are now being led by women themselves.<sup>25</sup> In 2019, Fawzia Koofi was the first female politician to lead her own political party—Movement of Change for Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> The

impetus for heading her own party was that women's interests were largely ignored in politics. While male-dominated parties have female politicians that support them, “women needed far fewer votes to win a seat than their male counterparts and so were approached by some parties with offers of financial and logistical assistance...to gain valuable seats”.<sup>27</sup>

Women are now using parties as a way to ensure more than a token presence in politics. Today, women aligned with larger political parties expect “self-development and progression.”<sup>28</sup> Although they are making strides in government, key positions are limited to women's affairs and education. This makes it extremely difficult for female politicians to have influence more broadly across all spheres of governance.

### **Local *Jirgas*, *Shuras*, and Community Development Councils**

Local governance in Afghanistan is complex, but the importance of Traditional Dispute Resolution (TDR) cannot be ignored. One United Institute of Peace (USIP) report states

that “80 percent of all disputes in Afghanistan continue to be resolved through TDR mechanisms, principally in the form of community councils called *shuras* or *jirgas*.”<sup>29</sup> Typically,

<sup>23</sup>Jelena Bjelica and Rohullah Sorush, “Afghanistan Elections Conundrum,” Afghanistan Analysts Network - English, October 19, 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/afghanistan-elections-conundrum-19-women-candidates-going-against-the-grain/>.

<sup>24</sup>Piatti-Crocker and Kempton, “Gender Quotas in Afghanistan: Solution or Problem?” at 4.

<sup>25</sup>Nazif Shahrani, *Modern Afghanistan: The Impact of 40 Years of War* (Indiana University Press, 2018), at 299.

<sup>26</sup>“Afghan Woman Politician Sees Taliban Talks as Only Hope,” October 31, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/afghan-woman-politician-sees-taliban-talks-hope-191031090231604.html>.

<sup>27</sup>Shahrani, *Modern Afghanistan: The Impact of 40 Years of War*, at 298.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., at 307.

<sup>29</sup> Sinha, Sylvana Q. *Traditional Dispute Resolution and Afghanistan's Women*. Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace, 2011.

*jirga* is the designated Pashtun word for a TDR body and an important tenet within the overall code of *pashtunwali*. *Shura* is the term used in other Afghan languages. *Jirgas* and *shuras* typically consist of tribal leaders, elders, *mullahs* (clerical elites), and militia commanders. Another source of informal authority, the *malik*, is usually a literate community member of note, who often acts as the interlocutor between government and village.

While sharing many similarities, there are certain differences in structure. *Jirgas* offer open forums for council members to make decisions and address disputes in the community.<sup>30</sup> *Shuras*, on the other hand, typically operate as advisory councils for a local leader. Given that there is little trust in the formal justice system in Afghanistan<sup>31</sup> *jirgas* and *shuras* play an important part in governing.<sup>32</sup>

*Jirgas* and *shuras* gain much of their legitimacy from the role of religious leaders in the decision-making process.<sup>33</sup> Religious leaders interpret Islamic teachings and impact the realization of women's rights through

Islamic references.<sup>34</sup> These bodies are typically occupied by men. However, several all-women *shuras* have been created or convened both at the local and national level over the past decade, for instance in Kabul and Paktika provinces, to discuss issues specific to women and advocate for greater participation of women in peacebuilding.<sup>35</sup> Women *shuras* seek to give voice to women's concerns including harassment and participation in school. However, community members may not be aware of all-women *shuras* nor the role they can play in voicing women's concerns. Furthermore, female members of *shuras* may lack adequate training to effectively address women's needs in the community.<sup>36</sup> Despite the move to create some female *shuras*, *jirgas* and *shuras* remain dominated by men.<sup>37</sup>

The most egregious abuse of women often occurs when they are used as currency in TDR decisions, especially surrounding compensation for grievances. For example, in the case of a transgression, the perpetrator's family can "pay" the victim's family in the form of cash or women to avoid future conflict. Unlike official courts,

<sup>30</sup> Michael Shurkin, Subnational Government in Afghanistan, RAND Corporation, 2011, available at

[https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional\\_papers/2011/RAND\\_OP318.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2011/RAND_OP318.pdf), at 12.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., at 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., at 12.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., at 13.

<sup>34</sup> Orzala Ashraf Nemat and Karin Werner, The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Good Governance in Afghanistan, AREU, 2016, available at <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/57d93f264.pdf>, at 35.

<sup>35</sup> "Women in Surobi District Set Up Shura to Support Peacebuilding," UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, January 13, 2018,

<https://unama.unmissions.org/women-surobi-district-set-shura-support-peacebuilding>.

<sup>36</sup> "Afghan women: leading the country into the future," *World Vision Afghanistan*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.wvi.org/article/afghan-women-leading-country-future>.

<sup>37</sup> "Women and Conflict in Afghanistan," *The International Crisis Group*, October 14, 2013, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/women-and-conflict-afghanistan>.

jirga decisions are “not written down, but good decisions are seen as having precedential value.”<sup>38</sup> Precedents are seen as “common knowledge”<sup>39</sup> within the community, which means there are opportunities for changing the normative landscape through bottom-up approaches. On a community by community basis, *jirga* decisions that benefit women can be used as a precedent for the future, especially if said decisions also comply with Islamic law.

A second local governance mechanism, which is both informal and semi-official, is the Community Development Councils (CDC). These

are village-level councils run by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and were first introduced as part of the National Solidarity Program (NSP), a nation-wide development project established in 2003.<sup>40</sup> CDCs create and carry out development projects and are present in many provinces. Members of the community are elected to serve on the councils and help identify the needs of villages and create connections between local people and the state.<sup>41</sup> Certain CDCs have participated in conflict resolution efforts and both Western analysts and some Afghan government officials encourage CDCs to take on larger governance roles.<sup>42</sup>

## Women’s Economic Participation

Prior to 2001, women’s economic participation in Afghanistan was heavily restricted by the Taliban regime. With the exception of a 1999 edict allowing for widows with no other means of support to take limited paid positions, women were effectively banned from the workforce.<sup>43</sup> Following the overthrow of the Taliban, the Afghan Interim Administration took a number of steps to facilitate female labor force

participation, including the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as well as the inclusion of Article 22 in the Afghan Constitution, guaranteeing all citizens equal rights before the law.<sup>44</sup>

In urban centers, the liberalization of labor laws allowed for greater female participation across a wide variety of

<sup>38</sup> Tom Ginsburg, “An Economic Interpretation of the Pashtunwali.” at 98.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., at 98.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Shurkin, Subnational Government in Afghanistan, 2011, at 10-11.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> “Afghanistan: Humanity Denied - Background.” Accessed April 8, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/afghan3/afgwrdr1001-03.htm>.

<sup>44</sup> Vincent Icheku, “Post-Taliban Measures to Eliminate Gender Discrimination in Employment,” *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 30, no. 7 (2011): 563-571. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/02610151111167025>. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/893892338?accountid=11091>.



sectors. Particularly in Kabul, a larger proportion of women have found work in education, handicraft work, clerking, and hospitality.<sup>45</sup> An additional group of trailblazing women have made headlines in more non-traditional fields as well, such as music, art, and activism. Despite these advances, female labor force participation remains relatively low across much of the country, with less than half of all Afghan women currently participating in the labor force.<sup>46</sup> In rural provinces, this statistic is estimated to be far lower.

Though notable strides have been achieved in urban centers, economic opportunities for women in the provinces remain largely constrained by local customs. As a result, female labor force participation is almost exclusively relegated to two critical fields: agriculture and animal husbandry.<sup>47</sup> In both these two sectors, women comprise an estimated 65 percent of the total workforce.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, both agriculture and animal husbandry are

considered an unpaid household duty of women, and therefore only a small share receive compensation for their work.<sup>49</sup>

In agriculture, women serve essential roles in every step of the production process, spanning from crop cultivation to post-harvest processing.<sup>50</sup> On the occasion that women do receive compensation for their agricultural contributions, the payment is often dwarfed by that of

<sup>45</sup>“Socio-Democratic and Economic Survey: Economically Active Population,” Central Statistics Organization of Afghanistan, (2015) Accessed April 7, 2020. <https://afghanistan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA%20DES%20Mono%20Labour%2028%20May%20for%20web.pdf>

<sup>46</sup>“Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate) - Afghanistan | Data,” World Bank, (2019) Accessed April 8, 2020. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TL.F.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AF>.

<sup>47</sup> Izabela Leao and Anunja Kar and Ahmed Mansur, “For Rural Afghan Women, Agriculture Holds the Potential for Better Jobs,” (2017) Accessed April 8, 2020. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinso>

[uthasia/rural-afghan-women-agriculture-holds-potential-better-jobs](https://afghanistan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA%20DES%20Mono%20Labour%2028%20May%20for%20web.pdf).

<sup>48</sup>Clair Sophia Wilcox et al., “From the Field: Empowering Women to Improve Family Food Security in Afghanistan,” *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* 30 no. 1 (02) (2015): at 15-21. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1742170514000209>. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1648976528?accountid=11091>.

<sup>49</sup>Rosemarie Skaine, *Women of Afghanistan in the Post-Taliban Era: How Lives Have Changed and Where They Stand Today* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland and Company, 2008).

<sup>50</sup>MadinaJunussova et al., “The Role of Women in the Economic Development of Afghanistan,” The University of Central Asia, Working Paper #53, (2019) Accessed April 7, 2020. <https://www.ucentralasia.org/Content/downloads/IPPA-WP53-Eng.pdf>

their male counterparts.<sup>51</sup> In animal husbandry, women comprise an estimated 93 percent of all backyard poultry owners in Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup> Though women frequently forfeit a significant share of agricultural earnings, they have traditionally been able to retain a larger share of the earnings from animal husbandry.<sup>53</sup>

## Women's Literacy and Education

Access to education is extremely limited in Afghanistan, particularly for women. The average years of schooling is 13 years for males and 8 years for females. Only ~30 percent of Afghan women over the age of 15 can read and write<sup>54</sup>, meaning that 70% of adult Afghan women are illiterate.

Public opinion polls demonstrate that women and male allies have identified increased education parity as a priority for women's empowerment. In a 2019 survey of cultural attitudes and moods in Afghanistan by the Asia Foundation, 43 percent of male and female respondents said that the biggest problem facing women and girls was education, surpassing lack of rights (34 percent), employment

Due to widespread female participation in agriculture and animal husbandry, both sectors are particularly well-situated to facilitate greater economic empowerment for rural Afghan women. Numerous challenges remain, but these sectors appear to offer unique opportunities for large-scale economic growth.

opportunities (24 percent), violence (18 percent), lack of services (14 percent), and economic concerns (9 percent).<sup>55</sup> Secondary and tertiary concerns differ across regions.<sup>56</sup> But the overwhelming response regarding lack of education shows that the phenomenon is a nationwide obstacle to women's rights. Shifts in public attitudes will be critical to increasing education for women and girls.

The underlying challenges to women's education are both structural and cultural. When the Taliban rose to power in 1996, they banned education for women and girls and encouraged strict gender norms according to their interpretation of *Sharia* law. Today, girls in school may face sexual

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<sup>51</sup>Leao and Kar and Mansur, "For Rural Afghan Women."

<sup>52</sup>MadinaJunussova et al., "The Role of Women."

<sup>53</sup> "FAO - Animal Production and Health." n.d. Accessed March 11, 2020.[http://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/home/en/news\\_archive/AGA\\_in\\_action/Milk\\_making\\_the\\_difference.html](http://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/home/en/news_archive/AGA_in_action/Milk_making_the_difference.html)

<sup>54</sup> "CIA World Factbook: Afghanistan.", <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>.

<sup>55</sup>Akseer, Tabasum, Khadija Hayat, Emily Catherine Keats, Sayed RohullahKazimi, Charlotte Maxwell-Jones, Mohammed SharihShiwan, David Swift, Mustafa Yادgari, and Fahim Ahmad Yousufzai. *Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People*. (The Asia Society Foundation, 2019).

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

harassment, tarnishing their reputation in a society that places a high value on women's honor and virtue. Additionally, the Taliban and other groups often target female students and teachers or bomb girls' schools.<sup>57</sup>

The combination of strict gender norms and lack of security is a significant concern for parents hoping to educate their daughters. Girls who are able to attend often travel long distances or through insecure areas to reach the closest school. In 2019, ~19 percent of respondents said that it takes between 31 and 60 minutes for a child to reach the closest educational institution.<sup>58</sup> While cultural norms towards menstruation may affect girls' education (with many families pulling girls out of school when they first reach puberty), limited access to a toilet at the time of puberty in their school may also curb participation.<sup>59</sup> Still, there remains some cause for optimism: the approval for women's education in a public opinion poll of both men and women rose from 84 percent in 2018 to ~87 percent in 2019, signaling a positive shift in cultural attitudes towards women's literacy.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> "I Won't be a Doctor, and One Day You'll be Sick": Girls' Access to Education in Afghanistan." 2017. Accessed April 11, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/10/17/i-wont-be-doctor-and-one-day-youll-be-sick/girls-access-education-afghanistan>

<sup>58</sup>Akseer, Tabasum et al.

<sup>59</sup>Bohn, Lauren. 2018. *'We're All Handcuffed in This Country.' Why Afghanistan Is Still the Worst Place in the World to Be a Woman.*

Male allyship is critical in securing women's educational opportunities, as men are often the decision makers when allocating resources. Given widespread poverty, male education is often prioritized over female education.<sup>61</sup> However, attitudes are shifting. While women are more likely than men to strongly agree that "women should have the same educational opportunities as men," 44 percent of men polled in 2019 somewhat agreed to this statement.<sup>62</sup> Only ~4 percent of men strongly disagreed. These figures demonstrate progress: one year earlier, 38 percent of men somewhat agreed and ~7 percent strongly disagreed that women should have the same educational opportunities.<sup>63</sup>

Low female literacy levels limit the pedagogical tools available to nonprofits advocating for women's rights and economic empowerment. In the absence of basic numeracy and literacy, skills training and professional development programs for women require more resources. But the investment is worth it. Programs that build women's civic participation, increase economic independence, and shifting cultural attitudes on education will play a

<sup>60</sup>Akseer, Tabasum et al.

<sup>61</sup>"I Won't be a Doctor, and One Day You'll be Sick": Girls' Access to Education in Afghanistan." 2017. Accessed April 11, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/10/17/i-wont-be-doctor-and-one-day-youll-be-sick/girls-access-education-afghanistan>

<sup>62</sup>Akseer, Tabasum et al.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

critical role in securing a durable peace in Afghanistan.





# WASSA Capabilities



## MISSION AND HISTORY

***Facilitate  
social  
improvement  
for all  
people in  
Afghanistan***

WASSA's mission is to facilitate "social improvement for all people in Afghanistan through strengthening civil society, gender mainstreaming and promoting conflict resolution."<sup>64</sup> WASSA was established in 2002 by Dr. Nilofar Sakhi. Like others, Dr. Sakhi was motivated to advocate for human rights following a decline in educational standards due to civil war from 1992-1996, and the Taliban's prohibition on female education, among other social issues.<sup>65</sup> WASSA has established three specialized centers which offer social, legal, and development assistance to the Afghan community.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> WASSA, *Annual Report 2017* (n.d.), at 2.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, at 1-2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, at 1, 3-5.

In 2003, WASSA established the Center for Civil Society Empowerment (CCSE) to strengthen the role of civil society organizations in Afghanistan's southwest zone. The CCSE provides technical support to develop internal and external policies and procedures for civil society groups, as well as funding through small grants to practice field implementation. The CCSE is supported by USAID and its partner, Counterpart International, through an eight-year program entitled Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS).<sup>67</sup>

From 2009 to 2011, the CCSE conducted a project, Support to The Electoral Process (STEP), which provided civic education programs for elections in five western provinces. After the completion of I-PACS, the CCSE started another five-year project, the Afghan Civic Engagement Program, to continue its technical support for grassroots civil society in western Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup>

In 2005, WASSA established the Center for Legal and Social Protection (CLSP) to deliver capacity building services for women and men through community mobilization, awareness campaigns, volunteerism, legal and psychosocial counseling, and

livelihood projects. In 2008, WASSA also established its Legal Aid Consultation and Services Clinic (LACSC) to provide legal (specifically family law in Herat) and psychosocial counseling free of cost.<sup>69</sup>

Apart from civic engagement, WASSA started the Center for Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding (CCRP) in 2004, with official inauguration in 2008. The center builds local capacity for long-term peace and stability through research, training, and exchange programs.<sup>70</sup>

In 2009, WASSA was awarded by the Director of the Afghan Department of Refugee and Repatriation for supporting and delivering protection services for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>71</sup>

Since its establishment, WASSA has received donations from many IOs and governmental organizations, such as UNHCR, UNIFEM, UNWFP, UNICEF, USAID, Counterpart International, CAID, Mennonite Central Committee, Internews, Action Aid Afghanistan, Terre des Hommes Germany, NED, OSA, Women Global Fund, NCA, WAR CHILD, Asian Development Bank, IOM, ACBAR, Rights and Democracy, Linda Foundation, USIP, Trocaire, the British

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<sup>67</sup> WASSA, "Civil Society Empowerment," Accessed March 30, 2020, <http://wassa.org.af/services/civil-society-empowerment/>.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> WASSA, "Legal And Social Protection," Accessed March 30, 2020, <http://wassa.org.af/services/legal-and-social-protection/>.

<sup>70</sup> —, "Conflict Resolution & Peace Building," Accessed March 30, 2020,

<http://wassa.org.af/services/conflict-resolution-peace-building/>.

<sup>71</sup> —, "Psychosocial support for refugee and IDP women in western zone provinces," January 22, 2020, <http://wassa.org.af/wassa-has-been-awarded-by-director-of-department-of-refugee-and-repatriation-for-supporting-and-delivering-protection-services-for-refugees-and-idps-in-2019/>.

Consulate (Tawanmandi), and the US Consulate.<sup>72</sup>

WASSA is also a member of the following networks: Afghan Civil Society Forum (ACSF), Women Living

under Moslem Law (WLUML), Women in Persian Speaking Country (WPSC), We Can Campaign, and Afghan Women Network (AWN).<sup>73</sup>

## WASSA'S ASSETS

The multifaceted needs of women in Afghanistan demand that women's organizations develop varied capabilities so that they might best serve the community. Partnering with UNHCR, USAID, UNICEF, and many others, WASSA has developed unique assets to fulfill the needs of women in their communities. They include:

### **WASSA's Centers**

WASSA runs three centers, each with specific missions aimed to fulfill the goal of supporting and empowering women:

#### ***Center for Civil Society Empowerment (CCSE)***

The CCSE focuses on developing civil society organizations (CSO). They provide technical and logistical support to CSOs in the region with the aim of building civic consciousness and participation in political and economic processes. WASSA has built up 55 CSOs across 5 provinces with the help of USAID over the course of 8 years.<sup>74</sup> WASSA

connects CSOs across Afghanistan's western region with international funding, and builds local organizations' capacity.

#### ***Center for Conflict Resolution and Peace Building***

Focuses on creating the local capacity to promote sustainable peace in Afghanistan through research, training programs and cultural exchange. WASSA also runs a trauma and healing program for women who were victims of domestic violence or war.

#### ***Center for Legal and Social Protection (CLSP)***

Offers legal services to women, who often lack adequate social protections when seeking justice. The center largely focuses on community mobilization, awareness campaigns, and legal and psychological counseling for victims. LACSC offers free legal and psychological counseling through this clinic, in partnership with the U.N.'s Right and Democracy Organization Fund.

<sup>72</sup> WASSA, *Annual Report 2017* (n.d.), at 2.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, at 2.

<sup>74</sup> SakhiNilofar, Sayedi Said, Nasibi Hamid, "Women Activities & Social Services

Association Annual Report 2017". (WASSA 2017) at 1.





## Radio Sahar

One of the organization's most notable assets, Radio Sahar has a listenership of over 60,000 across five districts.<sup>75</sup> Radio Sahar advances the cause of women's rights through public service announcements and social programming. Programs reach illiterate listeners, women confined to their homes, and many others unable to access WASSA's services in person.

In addition to regular broadcasting, the station can support programs that include audience participation.

By 2017, Radio Sahar was already soliciting listener responses regarding violence against women.<sup>76</sup> But despite being an asset, Radio Sahar still carries risks. Workers are subject to threats, and their activities make them targets of conservative or radical actors.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> As of 2017. See Ibid., at 14.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., at 15

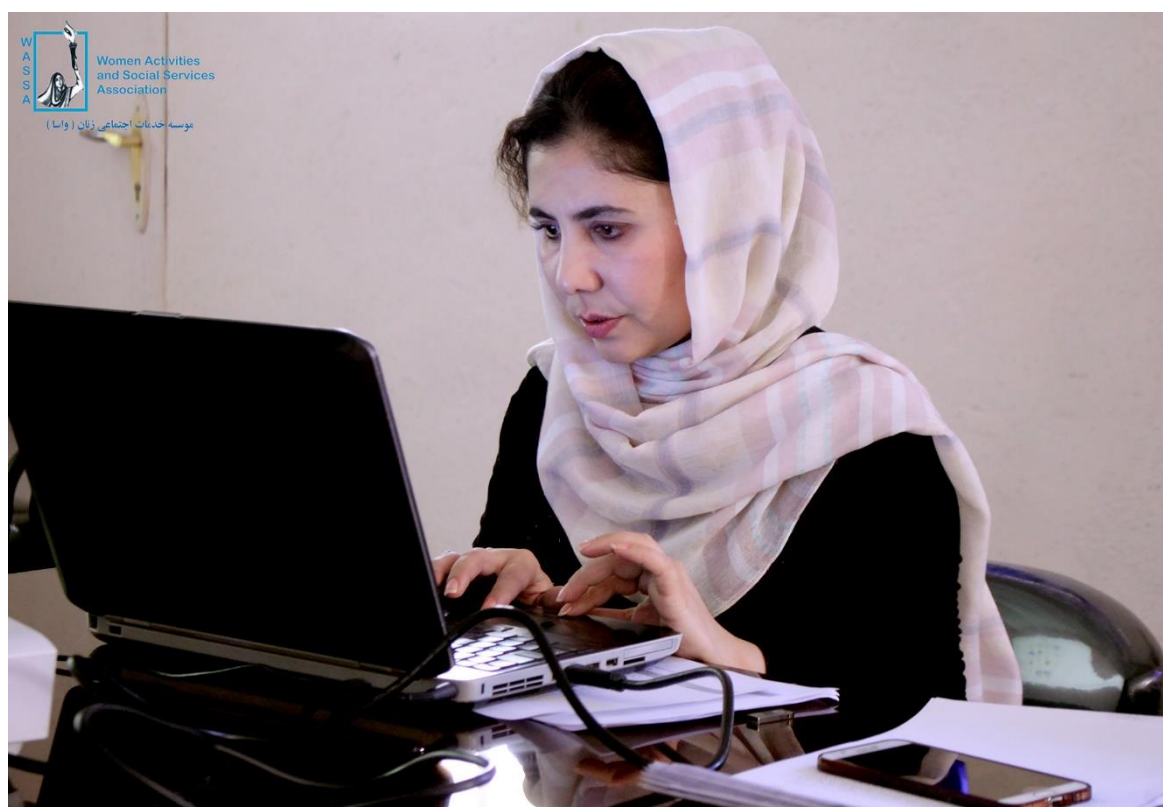
<sup>77</sup>Ferris-Rotman Amie, *Women-Run Afghan Media Offer Untold Side of Story* (Reuters, 2011) n.p.



## The Women-Only Internet Café

WASSA runs an internet café in Herat city, Herat. The women-only café, with laptops and internet access, provides a safe space to use technology. Each computer has the full Microsoft Office Suite and basic graphic programs installed. The café also functions as a small library. By 2017, the café had close to 8,000 visitors, a number which has likely increased in recent years.<sup>78</sup>

WASSA has run courses out of the café that cover hardware and internet literacy, Microsoft Windows, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and graphics software.<sup>79</sup> WASSA has, on several occasions, leveraged their expansive network of organizations to connect café users with other resources and opportunities. In one instance, users were connected with the Nano Net Educational Institute to take special Pre-TOFEL & TOFEL English classes.<sup>80</sup>



<sup>78</sup>SakhiNilofar, Sayedi Said, Nasibi Hamid *Women Activities & Social Services Association* (WASSA 2017) at 28.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., at 28.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., at 30.

## CURRENT PROJECTS

WASSA has implemented 126 projects since 2006. Each project is funded on a project-by-project basis, ranging in duration from a few months to a maximum of five years. As of April 2020, WASSA is working on the following seven projects:<sup>81</sup>

Project Title	Donor	Term	Budget	Outline
Women/Youth Empowerment Project & CODE4FUN	UNHCR	Jan. 2020 – Dec. 2020	AFN 9,502,960 (USD 125,072 as of Jan. 2 2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operation of the women-only internet café in Herat</li> <li>• Computer repairs and orientation, such as ICDL package training</li> </ul>
Social reintegration for returnees and IDPs - economic prospects for host communities in western Afghanistan	TDH (Terre des hommes) /BMZ (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany)	Jan. 2019 – Sep. 2024	AFN 59,646,763 (USD 784,024 as of Jan. 4 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social and economic empowerment of previously displaced individuals and vulnerable segments of communities to assist in reintegration</li> <li>• Provision of agricultural and vocational training and peacebuilding and conflict resolution skills</li> </ul>
Trauma Healing	MCC (Millennium Challenge Corporation)	Apr. 2019 – Dec. 2021	USD 34,517	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce post-traumatic stress disorder among women through counseling sessions and employment opportunities</li> <li>• Centers for tailoring and embroidery, and involvement of women in social activities</li> </ul>

<sup>81</sup>WASSA, “Our Projects,” Accessed March 31, 2020, <http://wassa.org.af/our-projects/>.

Afghan Woman Leadership Initiative (AWLI)	Action Aid	Sep. 2018 – Jan. 2021	AFN 101,052,834 (USD 1,414,740 as of Sep. 7 2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvement of awareness and understanding about women's rights from the perspective of both international Afghan law</li> <li>• Operation of the Safe Space Center where women who have psychological disorders can receive consultation</li> </ul>
Provision of Vocational Training and support to Women's entrepreneurship in the province of Herat (PVT)	Italian Cooperation	Jan. 2019 – Apr. 2020	AFN 9,310,000 (USD 122,375 as of Jan. 4 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of vocational training and support to women's entrepreneurship, in order to reduce poverty among widows, disabled, and displaced women</li> </ul>
Child Protection	TDH	Jan. 2019 – Apr. 2020	AFN 1,350,000 (USD 17,745 as of Jan. 4 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishment of two child-friendly centers in IDP camps</li> <li>• Training sessions on children's rights, and entertainment for children<sup>82</sup></li> </ul>

Figure 1: Grid of all current and ongoing WASSA projects.

<sup>82</sup>. Terre des Hommes International Federation, "Global Action Month," Accessed April 3, 2020. <https://www.gam-tdh.org>.

## SWOT ANALYSIS (STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, THREATS)

Beyond the assets and capabilities listed in the previous section, our team has identified the following overall strengths of WASSA as an institution, as well as previous organizational gaps. Going forward, we have identified both opportunities, as well as threats, to WASSA's future mission.



Figure 2: Situational analysis of WASSA's resources and capabilities within current political climate.

### **Strengths**

#### **International and Local Credibility:**

WASSA continues to be one of Afghanistan's foremost leaders in innovative women's advocacy. Programs like the women-only internet café, Radio Sahar, and conflict resolution training are based in local contexts, utilizing respected impact analysis methods. WASSA's 20 years of experience in advancing

women's rights in Afghanistan builds credibility at the local and international level. As a result, distinguished IOs continue to fund projects, including UNHCR, TDH, BMZ, USAID, MCC, Italian Cooperation, Christian Aid, and Action Aid, among others.

**Radio Infrastructure:** WASSA increased its advocacy efforts

through the establishment of Radio Sahar. Notably, Radio Sahar is one of the most influential radio programs in Herat and surrounding provinces. Through this platform, WASSA broadcasts important news and holds roundtable discussions with religious leaders, CSO activists, and government representatives. Comedy shows, live musical performances, and short fictional drama programs are a popular way for listeners to decompress.

**Inclusion, Diversity, Male Allyship:**

WASSA employees come from many backgrounds, including both rural and urban areas. The men working for WASSA lead by example when promoting male allyship in other organizations.

**Collaboration with Local**

**Governance:** WASSA works closely with community leaders, elders, and TDR councils to build capacity and facilitate education programs. Collaboration with community decision-makers, and engagement in seminars, discussion groups, dialogues, and celebratory gatherings, enable WASSA to adapt programs to the local context.

***Weaknesses***

**Gender Parity:** There are significant barriers to promoting gender parity in the Afghan workforce; these challenges face WASSA as well. While WASSA's male employees are a strength with regards to male allyship, of 95 staff members (in Herat, Farah, and Badghis), 64

percent are men. Given WASSA's important role as a women's advocacy network, it should continue to work toward gender parity in its workforce.

**Previous Lack of Engagement with Religious Scholars:**

Islamic scholarship within rural communities is often limited, despite the significant authority of *mullahs*. WASSA has historically not engaged with these local religious leaders, whose opinion regarding a project can determine its success or failure.

***Opportunities***

**Engaging Religious Authorities:**

WASSA has historically siloed its work from conservative religious authorities. But recent outreach suggests that despite a consistent, conservative ideology, there may be an opportunity to engage local *mullahs* in advocacy projects. This engagement would increase WASSA's credibility within the community and widen the appeal of its programs, while still promoting an Islamic framework for the discussion of women's rights.

**Strategic Radio Programming:**

WASSA's existing radio station offers opportunities to build long-term entertainment programs and medium-term mediation programs. This will allow WASSA to further influence cultural attitudes, encourage community integration, and promote women's education, engagement, and empowerment.



### **Enhanced Male Allyship**

**Opportunities:** Building upon WASSA's current practice of engaging men in almost all of their programs, we suggest WASSA consider creating specific programs designed to educate and engage men on women's rights and the benefits that men derive from equity and equality.

**Skills-Training:** By modifying and extending pre-existing initiatives focused on skills-training can increase women's economic independence while minimizing current program costs. By increasing women's ease of access to limited market-based opportunities, WASSA can help promote the socio-economic standing of women, families, and communities.

### ***Threats***

**Financial Dependence:** WASSA, like most NGOs in Afghanistan, has no independent source of funding. Since Afghan government funds are often stolen by corrupt officials, WASSA must depend on foreign governments, IOs, and other nonprofits. Given the fluctuations in international priorities, specific long-term programs may be difficult to sustain. WASSA's main costs are human resources (staffing), radio maintenance, rent, office maintenance, and transportation.

### **Weak Rule of Law and Insecurity:**

Constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and gender equality exist but are rarely enforced. Advocates, such as WASSA, can face violence from non-state actors, leading to self-censorship due to fear of reprisal.<sup>83</sup> Physical insecurity may limit WASSA's ability to successfully implement advocacy programs, particularly if the balance of power between the Afghan government and the Taliban shifts considerably following intra-Afghan peace talks.

### **Breakdown of Intra-Afghan**

**Dialogue:** While WASSA has effective contact with the Afghan government at a local and national level, it does not have contact with the Taliban. A power-sharing arrangement between the Taliban and the Afghan government could limit WASSA's programs going forward, if the Taliban chooses to take an uncompromising stance on its advocacy. If the intra-Afghan talks breakdown, potentially resulting in further violence, WASSA's projects and employees could face increased security risks.

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<sup>83</sup> Mariam Amini. "Afghanistan's Media Self-Censors to Survive." (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/11/afghanistan-media-self-censors-survive>.

# Recommendations



## UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES OF RECOMMENDATIONS

WASSA's capabilities and projects can be organized across three categories: engagement, education and economic empowerment. While we have illustratively distilled WASSA's activities into three buckets, in reality, each of the three are interconnected and cannot be treated separately. Women's progress in Afghanistan demands multi-faceted solutions that tackle not only cultural norms but widespread poverty, domestic violence, and political instability. Any improvement in women's status must include top-down engagement with authority figures. Equally important is the achievement of women's self-sufficiency through financial security. Given the overall lack of economic and educational opportunities in Afghanistan for both men and women, addressing female financial empowerment remains particularly challenging. Our five proposals leverage WASSA's past experience and capabilities, while focusing on new opportunities.

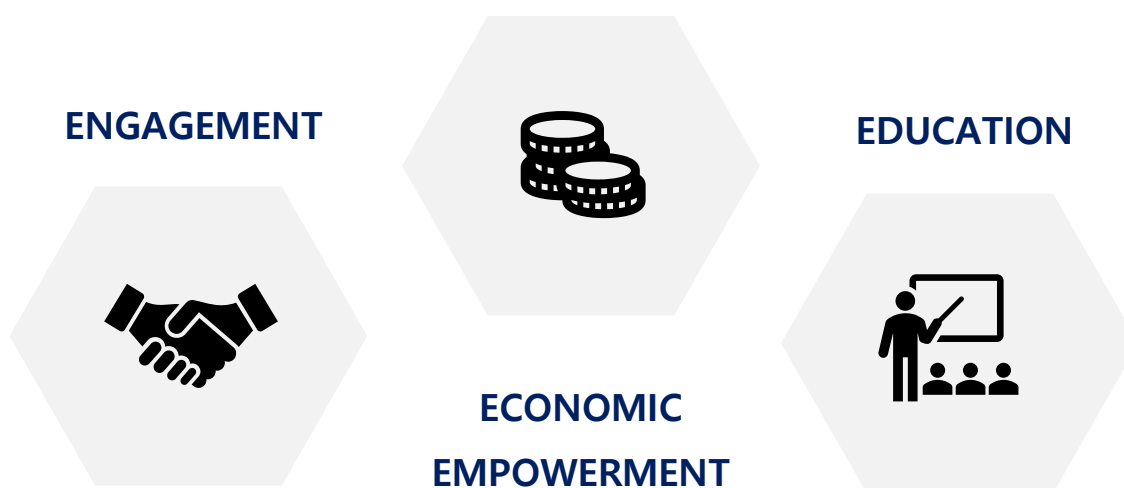


Figure 3: Principles underpinning current WASSA activities and report recommendations.

## ENGAGEMENT

Given the current composition of power structures within Afghanistan, certain groups have influence over the viability and reception of our policy proposals. Engagement with these groups is, therefore, vital to ensuring the success and sustainability of proposed projects. We identify government officials, religious scholars, ex-combatants and men as the most important groups to engage.

Government ministries have considerable oversight over the activities of CSOs, requiring engagement with relevant ministries before commencing a new project. Strong relationships with local government and an understanding of government priorities will be essential moving forward.

Religious scholars and preachers have powerful voices when it comes to women's rights in Afghanistan. Establishing a formal and sustained plan of engagement with these figures is key to all recommendations outlined in this report. Understanding where advocates already exist and how they can best be leveraged at a local and/or national level is necessary for implementing projects in conservative communities.

At a more granular level, creating allies out of local men in the community is necessary to ensure the sustainability of progress after WASSA's projects have concluded. Continued engagement with men, who are focused on challenging existing norms, should be made a compulsory component alongside any intervention for women's rights.

## ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Key among WASSA's strategic objectives is the promotion of women's rights at the grassroots level, seeking "their equal participation in the socio-economic sector of the country."<sup>84</sup> Despite progress since the overthrow of the Taliban regime, less than 50 percent of Afghan women participate in the "formal" workforce.<sup>85</sup> Despite the incredible amount of "informal" labor that women contribute to the Afghan economy, men continue to exclude them from economic decision-making, and devalue their perspective.<sup>86</sup>

Given the widespread economic challenges facing women in Afghanistan, we have adopted economic empowerment as a third guiding principle for our proposals. This principle acknowledges the multilevel challenges facing women in the workforce, including job

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<sup>84</sup> "Objectives – Wassa." n.d. Accessed April 8, 2020. <http://wassa.org.af/about-us/objectives/>.

<sup>85</sup> World Bank. "Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate) - Afghanistan | Data." 2019. Accessed April 8,

2020. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TL.F.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AF>.

<sup>86</sup> UN Women. 2018. "Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment." n.d. UN Women. Accessed April 8, 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>.

availability, skills training, market accessibility, and personal security.

## EDUCATION

Despite the challenges posed by low literacy and numeracy rates, non-profit and advocacy organizations can successfully implement capacity-building programs and skills training. By relying on best practices, organizations can equip women with vocational skills, mediation tactics, and an understanding of their own rights under the Afghan constitution and Islamic law.

Education for male allies is also critical to advancing women's rights. Working with men and boys increases understanding of how strict gender norms negatively affect all members of a family. For example, education programs can promote vocational opportunities for women and girls by helping men understand that women's financial independence increases security for children and families.

WASSA is a leader in innovative pedagogies to overcome these challenges. WASSA curricula leverages the ongoing work of CSOs to educate women about their rights, as well as to mobilize communities to

prevent, mitigate, and resolve conflict. Certain technical training requires literacy, such as TOEFL courses, and computer coding. But WASSA's 2017 Women and Youth Empowerment Program incorporated confidence and community building programs that did not require formal education. Volleyball, basketball, and Taekwondo tournaments taught 160 women and girls to raise their voice and participate in civil society activities.<sup>87</sup>

Other non-profits, including Women for Afghan Women (WAW), rely on provincial offices to develop community-specific training materials. With simple language and graphic representations, WAW informs women of their rights under Islam. They also raise awareness on issues such as forced marriage, child marriage, and the legal rights of women and children under Afghan law.<sup>88</sup>

Based on WASSA's resources and capabilities, the organization is uniquely positioned to further raise awareness of women's rights through strategic education and training initiatives.

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<sup>87</sup>SakhiNilofar, Sayedi Said, Nasibi Hamid "Women Activities & Social Services Association Annual Report 2017". (WASSA, 2017)

<sup>88</sup> Women for Afghan Women (WAW). "Women's Rights Trainings." (WAW, nd).

## SUMMARY OF PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

Coupled with the two other principles, *engagement* and *education*, we suggest that WASSA consider the following projects:























Program Evaluation				
Key		Expansion of Existing Programs	Immediate Impact	Upfront Costs
	High upfront cost or low short-term impact		Low upfront cost or high short-term impact	
	Moderate upfront cost or moderate short-term impact		Expands existing WASSA infrastructure and/or initiatives	
	New Radio Programming			
	Entrepreneurship & Skills Training			
	PPC & CDC Peacebuilding Training			
	Reintegration Program for Ex-Combatants & Communities			
	Male Allyship Engagement			

Figure 4: Evaluation of strategic program recommendations based on success variables. *Please note all initiatives are designed to have a positive long-term impact on women's rights. Immediate impact refers to the timeline for achieving program objectives. Costs over the long-term will vary according to local conditions and WASSA resource distribution.*



## DETAILS OF SUGGESTED PROGRAMS



### NEW RADIO PROGRAMMING

**INTRODUCTION:** Given the high rate of credibility and penetration of radio as a medium for information sharing and advocacy (see annex), we recommend WASSA consider employing its radio infrastructure in two new and distinct ways: mediated interviews and long-term radio dramas. These initiatives will serve to inform the public, build peace between discordant parties, and shift gender norms for the next generation of Afghans.

<sup>89</sup> Betz, Michelle and Katy Williams. How Media can be an Instrument of Peace in Conflict-Prone Settings.

### PROJECT PROPOSALS:

- *Interview Series:* Peace advocates have proven the effectiveness of bringing opposing views together through radio in order to promote sustainable peace. Peace Café programs in South Africa ultimately facilitated direct negotiations between parties who had previously been unwilling to meet.<sup>89</sup> WASSA may consider working with radio broadcasters to moderate idea-exchange

[https://www.undp.org/content/dam/norway/undp-org/documents/UNDPOGC\\_Media\\_conflict%20roundtable%20background%20paper.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/norway/undp-org/documents/UNDPOGC_Media_conflict%20roundtable%20background%20paper.pdf)

between members of society with distinct worldviews. Speakers should represent all members of the target audience, including women, youth, and Islamic scholars. Over a series of weeks, interviews will cover topics surrounding women's rights in Afghan society. These interviews will then be played back to the opposing party, followed by a recorded conversation with a mediator. After a series of sessions, these two people will sit down for an in-person, recorded interview with a mediator. With participants' permission, these sessions will eventually be broadcast to the wider public alongside additional context from the mediator. While participants may continue to disagree on key issues, this initiative will build common ground between citizens with disparate perspectives and foster a culture of civil engagement among people of diverse backgrounds. Moreover, discussion of sensitive topics related to women and Islam will increase public awareness of legitimate debate over perceived orthodoxies.

- *Radio dramas.* Building upon the successful "One Village, A Thousand Voices" model, implemented in Afghanistan with the USIP, we suggest WASSA consider working with artist-

activists, screenwriters, and Islamic scholars to create a radio drama focused on gender roles in Afghan society.<sup>90</sup> Radio dramas can explore obstacles facing women's participation, the benefits of women's economic empowerment, and education parity. Islamic scholars, women, and activists can follow the show with a call-in discussion, engaging members of the target audience on issues addressed in each episode. In the long-term, these narratives will help shape listeners' views, improving societal conditions for women.

Program content should promote male allyship, and community integration, focusing on issues that affect both men and women. Topics could include (but are not limited to): domestic violence, economic independence of men and women, women's economic status in a male dominant culture, and women's rights under Islamic law.

These radio initiatives will target three subsets of Afghan society. We suggest further research by WASSA should prioritize program scheduling and speakers that will increase listener penetration and engagement within following target audiences:

*Women between the ages of 14 and 24:* Radio is a unique

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<sup>90</sup> US Institute of Peace. 2013. "USIP-Supported Radio Drama Aims to Strengthen Justice, Young People in Afghanistan."

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2013/06/usip-supported-radio-drama-aims-strengthen-justice-young-people-afghanistan>

medium that can engage women of all education levels in rural areas and within the safety of their homes. Given the precariousness of women's rights in Afghanistan, this audience subset has the most to gain from a successful peace process. As such, women must be prioritized as both creators and consumers in all radio advocacy programming.

*Young people, regardless of gender:* Given that ~41 percent of the population is between the ages of 0 and 14 years old, advocacy initiatives must engage young people who have never known a peaceful Afghanistan.<sup>91</sup> The ability to shape the perspectives of Afghan youth is an opportunity that, if properly leveraged, could alter women's roles in their families, communities, and government.

*Religious scholars and other conservatives:* 99.7 percent of Afghans identify as Muslim, with approximately 85 percent identifying as Sunni and 15 percent identifying as Shia.<sup>92</sup> Fundamentalist Islamic thinkers, including members of the Taliban, are often proponents of restrictive gender roles. Religious

scholars wield significant influence in their communities. By engaging Islamic legal scholars in radio advocacy and entertainment initiatives, community activists can shape social views about women amongst religiously-oriented communities throughout the country.

*Language:* Radio programming should be offered in both Dari and Pashto, and other local languages, in order to equally engage as many Afghans as possible.

*Beyond radio:* In areas where radio is less prevalent, and where resources are available, WASSA may consider repackaging programs on cassettes, podcasts, or compact disks, depending on the needs and preferences of local communities.

**RISKS:** While these policy proposals encourage community-level activists to engage publics through Afghanistan's existing media infrastructure, nationwide implementation of policies guaranteeing freedom of speech will be critical to the sustained success of radio advocacy programs. In the absence of strong rule of law, those who implement and engage in these programs may be subject to government pressure. Moreover, threats from community leaders or armed groups could occur.

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<sup>91</sup> "CIA World Factbook: Afghanistan." (CIA, n.d.)

<sup>92</sup>Ibid.





## ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SKILLS TRAINING

**INTRODUCTION:** We suggest WASSA consider creating an entrepreneurship and skills-training program to improve educational and economic opportunities and increase the standing of women in Afghan society. Through the extension of pre-existing initiatives such as the Provision of Vocational Training (PVT), WASSA can minimize costs while expanding the scope of its skills-training programs.<sup>93</sup> We recommend the following alterations to improve the scope and

effectiveness of WASSA's skills-training initiatives:

- (1) The creation of "Self-Help Groups" to encourage communal economic cooperation
- (2) The provision of a monthly stipend to cover start-up costs
- (3) The inclusion of export-focused products, such as saffron

<sup>93</sup>SakhiNilofar, Sayedi Said, Nasibi Hamid  
"Women Activities & Social Services

Association Annual Report 2017." (WASSA, 2017)

## PROJECT PROPOSALS:

- *Self-Help Groups (SHGs):* Voluntary, financial-savings associations within a local community.<sup>94</sup> These small, homogenous groups manage a communal fund from which money is loaned to support local investments. The concept not only provides a local tool for economic empowerment, but also promotes communal solidarity surrounding the provision and management of financial resources.

WASSA may consider facilitating the creation of women-led SHGs in a small number of provinces in conjunction with training seminars on basic financial management skills. In the first year of SHG implementation, we suggest WASSA track the effect on participants through regular qualitative evaluations, in order to ensure the project's effectiveness. The associated financial and social impacts will assist the expansion of other vocational training initiatives, providing a local source of funding for future economic development initiatives.

- *Provision of a regular stipend:* When engaging in skills-training

workshops, we suggest WASSA consider providing a weekly or monthly stipend to participants to cover the costs of participation. Although skills-training workshops provide future opportunities for economic independence, women remain dependent on the finances of their male counterparts when attending intervention and skills-training seminars.<sup>95</sup> The provision of a small, regular stipend will grant women an independent source of income while encouraging men to support the initiative.

- *Export Products:* One persistent problem facing agriculture in western Afghanistan is the prevalence of poppy as a dependable, albeit illicit, form of agricultural revenue. The crop's durability and high profit margin makes it a highly desirable alternative to more demanding, legal alternatives.<sup>96</sup> Though WASSA has successfully introduced reliable profit streams through its PVT program and other similar initiatives, it must focus on high-profit, export-focused products if it wishes to create sustainable opportunities for economic growth.

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<sup>94</sup>ReliefWeb. "The Self-Help Group Approach in Afghanistan - Afghanistan." Accessed April 9, 2020.<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/self-help-group-approach-afghanistan>.

<sup>95</sup>Gibbs A, Jewkes R, Fazal Karim, Marofi F & Corboz J. Understanding how Afghan women utilise a gender transformative and economic empowerment intervention: A

qualitative study. *Global Public Health*, 13:11, 2018.

<sup>96</sup>Parenti, Christian. "Flower of War: An Environmental History of Opium Poppy in Afghanistan." *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 35, no. 1 (May 27, 2015): 183–200.<https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2015.0000>.



Saffron is increasingly viewed as a low-cost, high-profit alternative to poppy in the western provinces. The low demand for water and high profit margin has positioned the plant as a legal and lucrative alternative to opium production. Most importantly, the laborious process of extracting the saffron spice from the flower requires a large labor force, resulting in the creation of thousands of jobs—80 percent of which are filled by women.<sup>97</sup> Unlike pre-existing WASSA programs, the creation of a labor-intensive, export-focused initiative will likely require larger start-up costs. Nevertheless, the high-growth potential of export-led development could facilitate the expansion of the program in subsequent years. Additionally, the program would provide opportunities for management training and larger commercial negotiations, allowing women to expand their expertise outside of traditional agricultural frameworks.

Despite high start-up costs, an export-focused, skills-training program would likely attract numerous international donors. International organizations ranging from Italian governmental bodies, Dutch CSOs, and American veteran associations have all demonstrated interest in the saffron market. Given the organization's current infrastructure and eager investors,

WASSA has the potential to create a long-term path for female economic empowerment.

**RISKS:** Export-oriented products such as saffron require more reliable infrastructure than produce for local markets. WASSA must monitor not only the production facilities, but also the larger marketplace accessibility. With regard to regular stipends, it is important that WASSA fosters a cooperative relationship with local men to mitigate conflict between stipend recipients and their male counterparts.

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<sup>97</sup> World Bank. "Saffron: A Major Source of Income and an Alternative to Poppy." Text/HTML. Accessed March 11,

2020.<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/01/20/saffron-major-source-income-alternative-poppy>.



## PPC AND CDC PEACEBUILDING TRAINING INITIATIVE

**INTRODUCTION:** We suggest WASSA consider leveraging its Center for Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding to create a team that conducts training sessions for women serving on Provincial Peace Committees (PPCs), CDCs, and other local councils. This team would expand WASSA's capacity-building reach and enhance the skills and knowledge of women on local councils. Whether conducted in person (by traveling to local

provinces) or virtually, these trainings will prepare women to facilitate community dialogue and make decisions more confidently regarding issues related to the ongoing intra-Afghan talks, community development, and the larger national peace process. Moreover, investing in women's ability to train others will create a network effect with councils and communities currently beyond WASSA's reach. By addressing gaps in training, WASSA can increase

women's ability to participate in public life and to do so with greater confidence.

A peacebuilding team would increase the meaningful participation of women in the peace process at the local level. According to UN Women, "meaningful" participation of women "should ideally lead to their concerns being heard and implemented, opportunities for women to share their expertise and experiences, and for a gender perspective to inform the peace process."<sup>98</sup> Meaningful participation includes at least four elements: agency, self-efficacy, influence, and presence.<sup>99</sup> Here, the project would seek to strengthen women's "self-efficacy" or their "knowledge and confidence to effectively represent women's interests."

## PROJECT PROPOSALS:

- *Training for women on CDCs, PPCs, and other local councils:* Create one or several teams to deliver in-person training to women on PPCs and CDCs in nearby provinces, developing technical skills related to peacebuilding, mediation, and negotiations. (Alternatively, based on capacity and safety

concerns, trainings may be offered virtually). The WASSA Team will offer two to three trainings for each group, calibrated based on the need of women on the councils, to create local leaders who can carry on the training with minimal assistance from WASSA. In many cases, women already possess extensive training and knowledge. In these cases, WASSA members should play a strong facilitation role to encourage women with these skills to assist teams in building the capacity for female council members.

- *Trainings regarding substantive issues with specific focus on gender analysis:* In addition to skills-building, we suggest that WASSA offer trainings on substantive issues, such as the ongoing intra-Afghan talks, and how a gendered perspective can create a more sustainable peace. These trainings would target both male and female members of CDCs and PPCs with the intent to increase dialogue between genders and facilitate greater understanding of women's unique experiences.

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<sup>98</sup>UN Women, *Women's Meaningful Participation in Negotiating Peace and the Implementation of Peace Agreements: Report of the Expert Group Meeting*, May 2018, available at:

[https://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/egm-womens-meaningful-participation-in-negotiating-peace-en\\_0.pdf](https://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/egm-womens-meaningful-participation-in-negotiating-peace-en_0.pdf), at 12.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid.

Training for women on CDCs, PPCs, and local councils would include a certificate program, recognizing expertise in various skill sets or knowledge of substantive issues. Both programs should take the following into account:

*Explicit conversations about confidence:* Structured trainings should enable women to build confidence through public speaking and other interactive activities.

*Encouragement of male allies:* While WASSA's primary focus will be on female council members, male members should be given access to trainings on substantive gender issues and be encouraged to support and validate their female colleagues.

Women on CDCs and PPCs are in positions to engage in peacebuilding, but their presence does not guarantee that women's voices are heard, nor their rights upheld. As stated by UN Women: "Women representatives have the potential to be great advocates for women's

rights and supporters of civil society voices but need support and knowledge to be effective once they reach leadership positions."<sup>100</sup> UN Women suggests investing in individual and long-term training for women who have a seat at the table. Such investment will improve women's participation in the peace process, while enhancing their own credibility and leadership within communities. Specifically, for the peace process to be inclusive, women should receive technical support and mediation and negotiation training, while remaining informed on all substantive issues.<sup>101</sup>

**RISKS:** Women's safety may be endangered by increasing their public presence and using their voice more confidently. Local leaders or religious elites may be opposed to elevating women's authority within community decision-making processes. If WASSA team members travel to nearby provinces for the training, there may be threats to their own security. Finally, increased stature of women within the community can elicit jealousy from men and potential reprisals.

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<sup>100</sup>International Civil Society Action Network, *The Better Peace Tool*, Second Edition, 2018,

available at: [https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/BPT\\_2018.pdf](https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/BPT_2018.pdf), at 46.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, at 50.

## REINTEGRATION PROGRAM FOR EX-COMBATANTS AND HOST COMMUNITIES

**INTRODUCTION:** Leveraging its current project on the reintegration of IDPs, we suggest that WASSA consider expanding these efforts with a new project to include ex-combatants. The program would use existing resources and infrastructure to socially integrate ex-combatants and improve the economic conditions for local communities. The project's mission is to prevent ex-combatants from returning to violence, and stem further radicalization of members in host communities.

Reintegration of ex-combatants will be crucial for peace going forward. In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban reached a historic deal in which the two sides agreed to take significant steps to end the war, including the release of up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners in exchange for one thousand Afghan government fighters.<sup>102</sup> Despite resistance from Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the executive signed the decree on March 10, 2020, to release 1,500 Taliban prisoners.<sup>103</sup> Intra-Afghan talks remain delayed, in part due to the discussions over prisoner swaps,

but it is likely that any final peace accord will include the release of fighters on each side.<sup>104</sup> We suggest WASSA consider playing a part in preparing local communities for the reintegration of fighters.<sup>105</sup> This will undoubtedly present a challenge to upholding women's rights at the grassroots level and will require significant efforts to address. WASSA has the opportunity to use a pre-existing project to extend its efforts to integrate ex-combatants.

WASSA's current reintegration project is focused on returnees and IDPs in western Afghanistan including the provinces of Herat, Farah, Ghor, and Badghis. The five-year project was implemented in 2019 and aims to socially and economically empower previously displaced individuals, assisting them in integrating into communities. The project targets both adult men and women as well as youth and children. Target groups receive agricultural and vocational training and are taught conflict resolution skills. WASSA administers the project

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<sup>102</sup>Council on Foreign Relations, *U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal: What to Know*, March, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-taliban-peace-deal-agreement-afghanistan-war>.

<sup>103</sup>"Afghanistan: Ghani signs decree to release 1,500 Taliban fighters," *Al Jazeera*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/afghani>

[stan-ghani-signs-decree-release-1500-taliban-fighters-200310195110306.html](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/afghani).

<sup>104</sup>[5] James Dobbins, Jason H. Campbell, Laurel E. Miller, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, *DDR in Afghanistan*, RAND Corporation, February 2020, available at

[https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE343/RAND\\_PE343.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE343/RAND_PE343.pdf), at 1.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*



through three partner organizations.<sup>106</sup>

### PROJECT PROPOSALS:

- *Expand ongoing IDP reintegration efforts to include ex-combatants.* Offer skills-training and economic empowerment services to help ex-combatants transition into local communities. This project should offer similar agricultural and vocational training for ex-combatants as it does to returnees. Local communities, not just ex-combatants, should receive similar training. The ex-combatant project should retain the same timeline as reintegration of IDPs. Additionally, the provision of psychosocial services should be extended to ex-combatants, with a particular focus on identity, the transition to life as a non-combatant, and navigating meaningful relationships within their communities.
- *Ensure that communities receive full assistance.* WASSA's current project on the integration of IDPs highlights the need to treat the community as a whole. Benefits for returning ex-combatants must be available to non-combatants as well. This helps to prevent resentment from developing between local communities and ex-combatants.
- *Provide gendered perspective regarding peacebuilding and conflict resolution.* In addition to the provision of peacebuilding skills, the expanded project should include a particular focus on offering female perspectives on conflict resolution. Through this process, ex-combatants may be exposed to new viewpoints and attitudes, which may help them integrate more successfully into society.
- *Empower communities to participate in reintegration process.* WASSA can encourage all community members to be active participants in the reintegration of ex-combatants. Community members should engage with reintegrated fighters through facilitated dialogues and socialization. WASSA can provide a space for non-combatants to express views and share values which they feel are important going forward.

According to the UN, ex-combatants may have difficulty reintegrating into society given that their skill sets may not match the jobs that are offered in a particular area, or they may have limited skills due to their years of fighting. Without the ability to integrate into local economies, fighters may turn again to violence.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>Said WaseSayedi, WASSA Executive Director, questionnaire conducted by Georgetown University, March 2020.

<sup>107</sup>United Nations, "4,30: Reintegration," *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards*,

For some fighters, the same social connections or circumstances that led to their radicalization may still be in place, and their identity may have been deeply shaped by their engagement in a militant group. The process of reintegration must therefore reshape social relationships and alter personal circumstances for ex-combatants.<sup>108</sup> Reintegration programs should address “economic hardship, social exclusion, psychological and physical trauma, and political disenfranchisement.”<sup>109</sup> Of particular importance to WASSA is the UN’s call for reintegration programs to work with local peacebuilders, implementing programs in a gender-sensitive way.<sup>110</sup>

**RISKS:** Providing skills-training to ex-combatants can be a controversial part of a reintegration program if local non-combatants are struggling to find work. It may also build resentment between groups affected by the fighting who may feel that former fighters are being rewarded for their past actions or are gaining an unfair advantage over the community.<sup>111</sup>

To mitigate these risks, the UN recommends that reintegration

efforts be part of a wider recovery program for war-affected communities.<sup>112</sup> Community-based reintegration programs that involve both local engagement and assistance have proven to be more effective over time.<sup>113</sup> Given these factors, WASSA must connect the skills-building and economic support for ex-combatants with similar support for the community. Thus, tying these efforts to the existing project may be beneficial. However, great care must be taken to ensure that all members of the community feel respected, heard, and empowered.

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2014, [https://www.unddr.org/uploads/documents/IDDRS\\_4.30%20Reintegration%20WEB.pdf](https://www.unddr.org/uploads/documents/IDDRS_4.30%20Reintegration%20WEB.pdf), at 1.

<sup>108</sup>Georgia Holmer and Adrian Shtuni, *Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative*, USIP, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-03/sr402-returning-foreign-fighters-and-the-reintegration-imperative.pdf>, at 5.

<sup>109</sup>United Nations, “4,30: Reintegration,” *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and*

*Reintegration Standards*,

2014, [https://www.unddr.org/uploads/documents/IDDRS\\_4.30%20Reintegration%20WEB.pdf](https://www.unddr.org/uploads/documents/IDDRS_4.30%20Reintegration%20WEB.pdf), at 2.

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*, at 1.

<sup>111</sup>Georgia Holmer and Adrian Shtuni, *Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative*, USIP, 2017, at 7.

<sup>112</sup>United Nations, “4,30: Reintegration,” *Integrated DDR Standards*, 2014, at 1.

<sup>113</sup>*Ibid.*, at 9.



## MALE ALLYSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

**INTRODUCTION:** All economic empowerment initiatives, including those previously proposed, should simultaneously promote male allyship. Engaging Afghan males is a key to addressing persistent social norms, lack of employment opportunities, and access to markets for women. While engagement programs can stand alone, they may be best suited to work in tandem with other WASSA projects regarding

economic empowerment and civil society engagement.

### PROJECT PROPOSALS:

*Building Male Allyship and Engagement Programs.* Participants (should ideally include a range of stakeholders, including male relatives, village *malik*, *wakil-e guzar* (head of the neighbourhood), elders, local imams and tribal leaders, teachers to community and youth councils that

are considered decision-makers and/or role models. The male engagement program should include the following:

*Regular discussion groups:* Facilitated by WASSA's trained local mediators with an initial focus on the importance of women's economic inclusion for household well-being and prosperity. Topics should expand to education and the impact of gender roles on financial security, Islamic notions of women's rights, IPV, and women's rights within *pashtunwali*.

*Training male allies as advocates.* Bring in high-profile participants from provincial communities and tribal groups, particularly those seen in decision-making positions, or those seen as role models, to represent the new norms regarding gender roles, and how they benefit both men and women.

- *Public engagements:* Male advocates should participate in public events for other WASSA programs and take opportunities to speak on Radio Sahar.
- *Peer-to-Peer training:* Male advocates should be trained and given the tools to conduct peer training for additional men in the community, conducting eight sessions over the course of a month covering similar issues to the WASSA discussion group.

**RISKS:** While male allyship engagement programs are necessary for changing norms and attitudes at the local level, these initiatives are a long-term commitment which produce results gradually through sustained and determined contact with local communities. As such, time horizons for attaining key performance objectives need to be set more holistically and be more accommodating of exogenous factors interrupting or disrupting program performance, particularly insecurity and the wax and wane of conservative influence in Afghanistan.

# Annex



## I. ACRONYMS

**ACBAR** - Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development

**ACSF** - Afghan Civil Society Forum

**APRP** - Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program

**AWN** - Afghan Women Network

**BMZ** - Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (German)

**CAID** - Christian Aid in Afghanistan

**CCRP** - Center for Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

**CCSE** - Center for Civil Society Empowerment

**CDC** - Community Development Councils

**CEDAW** - Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

**CLSP** - Center for Legal and Social Protection

**CSO** - Civil Society Organizations

**IDP** - Internally Displaced Persons

**IO** - International Organization

**IOM** - International Organization for Migration

**I-PACS** - Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society

**IPV** - Intimate partner violence

**LACSC** - Legal Aid Consultation and Services Clinic

**MCC** - Millennium Challenge Corporation

**NCA** - Norwegian Church Aid

**NED** - National Endowment for Democracy

**NSP** - National Solidarity Program

**OSA** - Open Society Afghanistan

**PPS** - Provincial Peace Committee

**PVT** - Provision of Vocational Training

**SHG** - Self Help Group

**STEP** - Support to The Electoral Process (A CCSE Project)

**SWOT** - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, And Threats



**TDH** - Terre De Hommes  
**TDR** - Traditional Dispute Resolution  
**TOFEL** - Test of English as a Foreign Language  
**UN** - United Nations  
**UNHCR** - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
**UNICEF** - United Nations Children's Fund  
**UNIFEM** -United Nations Development Fund for Women  
**UNWFP** - United Nations World Food Programme  
**USAID** - United States Agency for International Development  
**USIP**- U.S. Institute of Peace  
**WASSA** - Women Activities and Social Services Association  
**WAW** - Women for Afghan Women  
**WFI** - Women Forward International  
**WLUML** - Women Living under Moslem Law  
**WPSC** -Women in Persian Speaking Country

## II. WOMEN IN PEACE

The inclusion of women in peace processes serves many essential roles in protecting the longevity and efficacy of peace agreements. In the short term, female inclusion in peace negotiations makes an agreement 20 percent more likely to last at least two years.<sup>114</sup> Over a 15-year period, female participation increases the likelihood of success by 35 percent.<sup>115</sup> Further, the inclusion of women in the negotiation process is correlated to a higher number of political reforms and a higher implementation rate of negotiated provisions.<sup>116</sup> As a result, female participation allows for more robust and consequential peace agreements. In Afghanistan, an agreement that is both sustainable and substantial will be required to ensure lasting peace.

The absence of references to female experience and gender-based violence shows the lack of women's involvement in peace negotiations. Despite the data that supports women in peace agreements, the percentage of women's roles in major negotiations is incredibly low—only about 3 percent of women have served as

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<sup>114</sup>Marie O'Reilly, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Thania Paffenholz, "Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes," 2015, 42.

<sup>115</sup>*Ibid.*, at 42.

<sup>116</sup>Jana Krause, Werner Krause, and Piia Bränfors. "Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace." *International Interactions* 44, no. 6 (November 2, 2018): 985–1016. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386>.

mediators between 1992-2018.<sup>117</sup> Women's interests cannot be adequately addressed if they are not at the negotiation table.<sup>118</sup> In most societies around the world, men's voices are strongest within the community. Therefore, engaging with male allies is critical.<sup>119</sup>

While women are often excluded from formal negotiations, they are far more likely to be involved in informal peace processes.<sup>120</sup> Female empowerment on the local level has also been shown to positively impact peace agreements. Women CSOs provide critical linkages across society that can aid the implementation and monitoring of peace agreements.<sup>121</sup> The broad political scope of women's organizations can facilitate widespread mobilization in support of a peace process, particularly when organizational leaders are directly involved in negotiations. Even in the absence of a seat at the negotiating table, however, these organizations are uniquely poised to assist with the monitoring and implementation of a peace agreement. Consequently, WASSA and other women's organizations must utilize their critical resources to improve women's rights and help achieve an inclusive and durable peace.

### III. METHODOLOGY

Eight students in the Georgetown Master of Science in Foreign Service program (subsequently referred to as "the Team") were tasked by the client, WASSA, to produce this report. In January 2020, the Team met with Dr. Nilofar Sakhi, the founder of WASSA, regarding a consulting project on the organization's current assets and capabilities and opportunities to continue promoting and advocating for women's rights and peacebuilding going forward. Dr. Nilofar Sakhi asked for the following three deliverables:

- 1) A historical mapping of women's roles in Afghanistan since 2001;
- 2) An assessment of WASSA's current assets and capabilities; and
- 3) New project proposals for the organization.

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<sup>117</sup>"Women's Participation in Peace Processes | Council on Foreign Relations Interactives," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/>.

<sup>118</sup>"Reframing Women's Roles in Peace Processes," *Georgetown Institute of Women Peace and Security* (blog), accessed April 17, 2020, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/resource/reframing-womens-roles-in-peace-processes/>.

<sup>119</sup>Valerie Hudson, *Sex and World Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014): 177.

<sup>120</sup>"Reframing Women's Roles in Peace Processes."

<sup>121</sup>*Ibid.*, at 1004.

The Team conducted research and interviews from January to April 2020. Throughout the project, WASSA has served as a critical source of information and assisted the Team through several video conference calls and continued communication.

Originally, the Team had also planned to conduct field research in Qatar in mid-March, funded by WFI. However, the Team made the decision to cancel due to the spread of COVID-19. Instead, with the support of WFI and others, the Team conducted multiple interviews with WASSA Afghan staff and other women living in Afghanistan via video conference and heard live testimonials.

The Team interviewed over 30 experts on the region including scholars and practitioners specializing in mediation, development, Islamic law, religion, and women's activism in Afghanistan.

During the research and organization of the report, two expert practitioners, Ms. Palwasha Kakar and Professor Carla Koppell, served as Senior Advisors and provided valuable advice.

#### **IV. AFGHANISTAN MEDIA PENETRATION**

While progress has been made to extend the coverage of land and mobile telephone services to the entire country, less than 1 out of 100 people in Afghanistan have access to a landline. According to the CIA World Factbook, 63 percent of all citizens were reported to have access to a mobile phone and 90 percent of the population live in areas with cellular service. Only around 11 percent of the country enjoys internet access, according to July 2016 estimates. In areas where internet and telephone are accessible, women's access continues to be limited due to social restraints on women's movements.<sup>122</sup>

In contrast, radio coverage is widespread and consistent in Afghanistan: According to 2019 government telecom statistics, the country had 813 FM radio transmitters and 310 FM radio operators, nearly triple the number when compared to TV operators and TV transmitters in the country. Given that radios do not require women to leave the home, radio is more accessible to all subsets of WASSA's designated target audience.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> "CIA World Factbook: Afghanistan.", <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>.

<sup>123</sup> Afghanistan Telecom Regulatory Authority. *Afghanistan: Telecom Statistics*. <http://atra.gov.af/en/page/telecom-statistics-2014>

Radio is seen as a highly credible source of information by Afghan publics, signaling widespread penetration and strong influence in shaping individual and community attitudes. While ~87 percent of respondents to an Asia Foundation Afghan Survey said they get their news and information from family and friends, ~57 percent say they get their news from radio.<sup>124</sup> While this represents a significant decrease from ~63 percent of respondents in 2018, radio continues to be a critical source of information. Radio programming can be easily repackaged for internet use as Afghanistan continues to move towards a digitized information space.<sup>125</sup>

Significantly, Afghans who get their information from radio and *shuras* are more likely to feel sympathy for the Taliban (16.5 percent) and hold less favorable views of equal education opportunities for women and of women working out of the home.<sup>126</sup> This suggests a dearth of radio programming with favorable views of women may exist in Afghanistan. As such, WASSA's radio programming can play a critical role in fostering more diverse, tolerant, and inclusive views of women amongst youth, male allies, and more conservative community members.

## **EFFICACY OF RADIO PROGRAMMING IN AFGHANISTAN**

According to the 2017 United Nations Development Programme paper entitled "How Media Can Be an Instrument of Peace in Conflict-Prone Settings," television broadcasts, radio programmes, newspapers can support peace-building, prevent insecurity, and decrease the likelihood of violent conflict. Radio programs bring together different groups to discuss issues and increase knowledge on peacebuilding. Programming on corruption, marginalization, economic opportunity, and political injustice increases transparency, civic participation, and trust in peace policy negotiators and implementers.<sup>127</sup>

Radio programs have been used as an effective advocacy tool in the Afghan context. Capitalizing on the market penetration of radio, the USIP developed the "One Village, A Thousand Voices" program for Radio Azadi.<sup>128</sup> The program consists of a weekly radio drama that details the story of a young couple who would like to marry but face considerable family resistance due to property rights

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<sup>124</sup>Akseer, Tabasum, et al. 2019.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid.

<sup>127</sup>Betz, Michelle and Katy Williams. *How Media can be an Instrument of Peace in Conflict-Prone Settings*. [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/norway/undp-ogg/documents/UNDPOGC\\_Media\\_conflict%20roundtable%20background%20paper.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/norway/undp-ogg/documents/UNDPOGC_Media_conflict%20roundtable%20background%20paper.pdf)

<sup>128</sup>US Institute of Peace. 2013. "USIP-Supported Radio Drama Aims to Strengthen Justice, Young People in Afghanistan." <https://www.usip.org/publications/2013/06/usip-supported-radio-drama-aims-strengthen-justice-young-people-afghanistan>.

and their difficulties navigating Afghanistan's complex justice system. A discussion and call-in session with rule-of-law specialists follows each week's episode, leveraging the show's popularity to increase awareness and promote legal education.

## **V. WOMEN ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COUNCILS AND PROVINCIAL PEACE COMMITTEES**

Efforts to include women on CDCs and PPCs have given rise to greater female participation at the local governance level. Across Afghanistan, approximately 35 percent of CDC members are women. Additionally, impact evaluations from the Afghan National Solidarity Program reveal that the increased level of women on councils led to a higher provision of governance services to women.<sup>129</sup> Through CDCs, women have gained knowledge of issues enabling them to participate more fully in community life.<sup>130</sup> However, according to the World Bank, women on CDCs often need more time and training to improve their technical peacebuilding skills given the limited roles women hold in society.<sup>131</sup>

Similarly, PPCs represent unique opportunities for women to take part in reconciliation and reintegration efforts. Created under the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) in 2011, PPCs coordinated reintegration initiatives and offered conflict resolution at the local level. APRP included gender-specific projects such as capacity building for female members of PPCs in mediation, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. By focusing on skills-building, these efforts increased the confidence of women on councils and improved their ability to promote peace through conferences and open discussions with various communities across the country.<sup>132</sup>

When the APRP came to an end in 2016, female members of PPCs from 34 provinces developed recommendations to improve peace and reconciliation measures.<sup>133</sup> Among these recommendations was the suggestion that PPCs work alongside women-led civil society organizations to expand the impact of community support efforts.<sup>134</sup> With the gender-specific projects of the APRP no longer in place, it is necessary that civil society take on the role of training women

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<sup>129</sup>Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Citizen's Charter National Priority Programme*, December 2016, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5b28f2ed4.pdf>, at 13.

<sup>130</sup>"Women Take their Place in Rural Community Development," *World Bank*, January 26, 2016, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/01/26/women-take-their-place-in-rural-community-development>.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup>"Women Take their Place in Rural Community Development," *World Bank*, January 2016.

<sup>133</sup>*National Dialogue for Peace & Reconciliation*, The Institute for Women, Peace and Security, March 2015, <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/PPCs-Proposal-to-President-on-Peace-Process-English.pdf>, at 1.

<sup>134</sup>*Ibid.*



in the technical skills of peacebuilding. Thus, there is an opportunity for WASSA to strengthen the peacebuilding skills of women on these councils.