PEACEWORKS

Afghan Women's Views on Violent Extremism and Aspirations to a Peacemaking Role

By Haseeb Humayoon and Mustafa Basij-Rasikh

PEACEWORKS

VIOLENT EXTREMISM

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report, the result of a study commissioned by USIP's Asia Center, examines the nature and extent of women's involvement in violent extremism and peacemaking in contemporary Afghanistan. In-depth interviews were conducted with 350 respondents in seven provinces from June to October 2018. Researchers and analysts at QARA Group Afghanistan undertook the research design, fieldwork, and data analysis under the direction of the authors.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Haseeb Humayoon is the founding partner of QARA Group, an Afghanistan-based research, public affairs, and management advisory firm. He has worked with multiple domestic and international organizations in Afghanistan on advancing human rights and civil liberties and on social and institutional reform. Mustafa Basij-Rasikh is the managing partner of QARA Group. Prior to joining QARA in 2015, he worked on a major donor effort that sought to enhance the role of Afghan businesses in stabilizing the country.

Cover photo: Women attend a meeting of the Consultative Peace Loya Jirga in Kabul on May 2, 2019. (Photo by Rahmat Gul/AP)

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Summary

Participation in violence and, conversely, efforts at peacebuilding in Afghanistan remain dominated by men. Understanding the role of Afghan women in violent extremism and peacemaking today requires reckoning with the polarization between the increasing number of liberal initiatives and the long-standing conservativism in Afghan society, which has traditionally restricted women's activities to the domestic sphere.

Between these two poles, however, lies a more nuanced, and growing, space where women actively contribute to Afghan society beyond the immediate confines of the home or small community. To better understand the changing roles of Afghan women today and their contributions to peacebuilding or violent extremism, interviews were conducted with 350 respondents (more than 90 percent women), comprising a mix of urban and rural residents in seven provinces. Respondents were queried about activism in their communities, in particular in relation to peacemaking and countering violent extremism; their understanding of and involvement in extremism or violent extremism; their most frequent means of accessing information; and awareness of and participation in organized groups active in their areas.

The study found that what constitutes "extremism" varied by province, most likely tied to the security and political situation of the area and the profile of the respondents. In Kandahar, for example, several respondents linked extremism to violence and even terror. However, all respondents referred to limited acceptance of women's roles in the public sphere—some citing traditional cultural barriers, others family restrictions—as the primary obstacle to greater activism of women in pursuit of peacemaking. The need for solidarity among women, especially in relation to advocacy for rights and roles, was mentioned as important for women's empowerment in all provinces.

Noting that Afghan women who are not publicly active often have limited access to information sources beyond their family and immediate circle, the report's recommendations focus on improving access to information, including through online and offline access to women's groups concerned with peacebuilding; depolarizing the information flow; and increasing exposure to women leaders.

Orchestra conductor Negin Khpolwak rehearses with Afghanistan's first all-female symphony in Kabul in February 2017. Khpolwak attended the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, one of the few schools in which boys and girls share classrooms. (Photo by Rahmat Gul/AP)

Background and Study Methodology

Among multiple efforts at peacemaking during the country's four-decades-long war, the current discourse by and around women on their potential contributions to ending the war and building peace marks a clear break from the tradition of omission.

Contemporary Afghanistan exhibits a complex reality on the situation and influence of women in society. From the Taliban-imposed restrictions to private space, the country has moved to a stage where women in Kabul and the provinces are harnessing, to varying degrees, newly available opportunities in the domestic and even international political arena. This rise began when several women were appointed to high offices in the post-Taliban government—the Interim Administration of 2001–2, which featured a female vice chairperson, Sima Samar, and a female minister of public health, Sohaila Sediq. There were 160 female delegates at the Emergency Loya Jirga that approved the Transitional Authority in 2002. The leadership of the Transitional Authority was up for election in the Loya Jirga, and Hamid Karzai was challenged by Masooda Jalal, who had served as an aid worker before 2001 (and would serve as minister of women's affairs in Karzai's presidential cabinet from 2004 to 2006). She received 171 of the 1,555 participant votes. Women commissioners also played a notable role in the drafting of the country's current constitution, adopted in 2004, which guaranteed women a minimum of 25

Female delegates attend the opening ceremony of the Consultative Peace Loya Jirga in Kabul on April 29, 2019. (Photo by Jim Huylebroek/ New York Times)

percent of seats in parliament. The foundations laid in these years created space for an increased role for women in the country's present and future, as is widely acknowledged.

After the relapse of the country into conflict and the intensification of violence in the past decade and a half, sustainable peace has once again become the goal of most actors involved in the country. Peace offers made to the Taliban have given rise to the fear that women's rights may be sacrificed in a bid to end the war. Afghan women and their supporters have campaigned not only to safeguard women's rights to education and work (among other rights) but also to ensure women's participation in peace negotiations. In 2019, Afghan women politicians and activists faced off against the Taliban on the airwaves and around conference tables.

Efforts at reaching a settlement to the war in the country feature an increasingly vibrant and visible display of women's activism. At the official level, Afghanistan's government and its international partners have sought active roles for women in peace processes and initiatives. More recently, concurrent with the official pursuit of a political settlement to the war, the pace and volume of women's activism have increased. The research reported here, based on in-depth interviews with 350 respondents in seven provinces between June and October 2018, coincided with senior-level Afghan and international policy discussions and initiatives on the role of women in peace processes. Most respondents, however, did not refer to women's public activism and government initiatives as a way to increase women's participation, choosing instead to discuss the role of women in peace within traditional parameters. The overarching response to the discussion on women's

role in peace processes was one of acknowledgment and enthusiasm, but constrained conceptually by societal limits and unfamiliarity with relevant best practices outside Afghanistan.

Among multiple efforts at peacemaking during the country's four-decades-long war, the current discourse by and around women on their potential contributions to ending the war and building peace marks a clear break from the tradition of omission. Until recently, research in the Pashto and Dari languages on Afghan women's roles in violent extremism and peacemaking was scarce. The absence of women from official accounts warrants addressing in light of major societal changes in Afghanistan.

Additionally, research on women's participation in Afghanistan's wars, and particularly in mobilizing the populace for war, has remained limited to date. The few women who have led unofficial groups of armed men in recent years, including commanders Bibi-Aisha (known as Qumandan Kaftar, of Baghlan Province), Feroza (known as Haji Ani, of Helmand Province), and even the leadership of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan, are anomalies, overshadowed by the abundance of male war figures dominating public discourse.

While Afghan women did feature prominently in the military parades and propaganda campaigns of the Soviet-backed government (1978–92), the mujahideen parties implemented a strict social code for the participation of women in public life and rarely allowed them to interact with the outside world apart from attending a small number of educational institutions.[1] Moreover, women were rarely identified as a distinct group in need of support in pre-2001 Afghanistan. Once they became an important target group for aid programs, international actors in the field realized how little they knew about the roles and perceptions of Afghan women and the need for special considerations for female beneficiaries of aid programs. As a result, gender-sensitive program design and delivery became a routine condition for aid programs.[2] Some programs were designed to specifically address the needs of women in such areas as reproductive health, education, skills development, and small-scale income-generating projects.[3]

Even though Afghan women historically experienced severe societal restrictions, it was the policies of the Taliban toward women in the years from 1994 to 2001 that drew international attention. The media in particular were at the forefront of an international campaign condemning Taliban practices with respect to Afghan women. This increased media attention drove increasing research into the lives of Afghan women.

RECENT RESEARCH ON AFGHAN WOMEN

While there was hardly any public presence of women—in violence or in peacemaking—during the Taliban reign (1996–2001), the plight of Afghan women generated interest and acquired strategic significance. This period also revealed the extreme challenge in accessing women in Afghanistan. Aid organizations had to look for creative ways to design and implement female-focused programs. Gender advisers and experts, whose primary task was to ensure women benefited from international aid without provoking the Taliban, began to enter the scene. These experts and a few academics produced the first contemporary research on Afghan women.[4] This research was exclusively in English, and for the most part was not in the public domain.

During the same period, roughly from 1995 to 2001, human rights organizations commissioned research to highlight the plight of Afghan women. Their findings had one common theme: that women were the primary victims of the Taliban's repressive regime and had no role beyond that of victimhood.[5] While the absence of Afghan women from war and peace was at its most extreme during this period, their plight resonated with women in power outside Afghanistan, and took on major strategic significance. As a 2001 article in the *Washington Post* noted, "The pressure from women's groups began to have an impact domestically. It

With the renewal of peace negotiations with the Taliban beginning in 2018, researchers began to pay more attention to the role of women in peacemaking and the potential implications of a settlement with the Taliban for the status of Afghan women.

became increasingly clear that U.S. recognition of the Taliban . . . would be politically implausible."[6] A campaign run by the Feminist Majority Foundation, "Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan," claims credit for the Clinton administration's decision not to extend diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime.[7]

Following the termination of Taliban rule, women sought to harness newly available opportunities in the political arena. As noted, women were appointed to high offices in the Afghan Interim Administration (2001–2), scores of female delegates participated in the Emergency Loya Jirga in June 2002, a female politician challenged Hamid Karzai for leadership of the Transitional Authority, and women played a significant role in drafting the 2004 constitution, which made important strides in ensuring a minimum level of representation in the national parliament. During this time, a large quantity of literature was produced on women's status and experiences in Afghanistan and women's efforts to overcome years of marginalization by increasing their participation in decision-making roles. Almost all the relevant studies are in English (and a few other languages), but not Dari or Pashto. Some Afghan researchers and research institutions that appeared around this time also produced work in non-Afghan languages. Nonetheless, by the late 2000s, a few studies on women's roles in statebuilding began appearing in Dari and Pashto. For example, the 2016 Dari-language position paper of the Afghan Women's Network presented statistics on the number of women in Afghanistan's executive branch, legislature, and judiciary.[8] It also discussed challenges to women's political participation and offered solutions in four areas: good governance, the rule of law, peace, and aid effectiveness.

In "Leaving Them to It? Women's Rights in a Transitioning Afghanistan," a 2014 Chatham House report published in English, Dari, and Pashto, Torunn Wimpelmann suggested that, should external support be withdrawn, women must solidify their participation in Afghan politics if they want to preserve the gains made in women's rights.[9] Fatima Jaffary's 2016 book, *Women's Political Participation in Afghanistan*, originally in Farsi, covered a range of issues, including challenges to, and the importance of, women's political participation in Afghanistan. Jaffary identified increasing democracy, strong governance, and the advocacy of international actors as factors essential to increasing women's participation in civic and political life.[10] In a 2013 paper published in English and Farsi, "Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan, 2002–2012," Lena Ganesh, Massouda Kohistani, Rahim Azami, and Rebecca L. Miller elucidated policy gaps and deep-rooted sociocultural factors that hindered women's economic participation. They argued that if these barriers were addressed, women could be more empowered, both materially and politically.[11] Research for this report confirmed this thesis, as respondents repeatedly made reference to how the economic empowerment of women increases their ability to have an impact on peacemaking.

AFGHAN WOMEN'S RECENT ROLES IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND PEACEMAKING

With the renewal of peace negotiations with the Taliban beginning in 2018, researchers began to pay more attention to the role of women in peacemaking and the potential implications of a settlement with the Taliban for the status of Afghan women. While dozens of op-eds and newspaper columns have appeared on the subject in local languages, there are very few formal, detailed studies in Pashto and Dari on the specific roles that Afghan women might play in the peace process.

However, there are multiple advocacy pieces describing women's marginalization in the peace process.[12] A 2017 paper by the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation on the challenges facing Afghan women's participation in the peace process and a 2011 research paper on inclusivity in the peace process by a consortium of Afghan civil society organizations—consisting in large part of marginalized groups—were noteworthy attempts to assess the role of women.[13]

Violent extremism, on the other hand, is a relatively new concept, and only in the past few years has the role of women in violent extremism received some attention. A gap remains in the literature on the participation of women in either propagating or opposing extremism, particularly in local languages. The paucity of literature on women's roles in supporting violent extremism in Afghanistan in part reflects women's absence from the field. In fact, female politicians and rights activists refer positively to the lack of participation by Afghan women in the cycles of violence that have engulfed the country, arguing that they have had no role in the bloodshed.

In post-2001 Afghanistan, there are at least two anecdotal incidents of women involved in extremist violence, but these incidents appear to be isolated and not part of the larger trends of extremist violence in the country. The first suicide attack carried out by a woman in Afghanistan occurred in June 2010 in the Shegal district of Kunar Province.[14] The bomber was reported to have been a Pakistani national.[15] Nevertheless, reports of al-Qaeda and the Taliban forming groups of female suicide bombers began emerging.[16] In the aftermath of the Kunar attack, analysts such as Matthew P. Dearing of the Lexington, Massachusetts-based Center for Emerging National Security Affairs argued that a major tactical shift toward including women fighters in militias was underway. He noted that violent extremists "will also likely find cleavages developed within their own ranks that see the inclusion of women in the insurgency as dishonorable and outside the realm of

acceptable jihad."[17] However, since the 2010 attack, there has only been one confirmed incident of an Afghan female suicide bomber—in Kabul in September 2012. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin, then an antigovernment group.[18] Insofar as there have been no reports of the Taliban's use of female suicide bombers since then, it appears that the Taliban chose not to open their ranks to female members.

In recent years, there have been media reports of the involvement of women at different levels in the activities of the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), with women among the suspected militants arrested by the Afghan security agencies. Released testimony of an arrested male IS-K fighter by the National Directorate of Security quotes the militant as saying the group lured him to travel from Kabul to Nangarhar and join IS-K with the promise that he would also get to marry a woman who had been introduced to him on the phone.[19] It is unclear whether the women reported to be in the IS-K ranks are of Afghan or foreign origin. Additionally, while these anecdotal data points are important, they are too few to demonstrate trends. Further research and access to official government information will be necessary to determine the extent of IS-K's involvement with or use of women in mobilization—such as in the recruitment of male fighters—and operations.

Peacebuilding, on the other hand, boasts a more vibrant and visible display of women's activism. The administrations of Presidents Hamid Karzai (2001–14) and Ashraf Ghani (2015–present) have sought roles for women on the High Peace Council (HPC), not only in Kabul but also in the provinces. The HPC's Provincial Peace Committees (PPCs) were a subnational structure that attempted to institutionalize the role of women in the peace process; however, their efficacy seems uncertain, as few respondents referenced their work. The number of women represented in the PPCs of the seven provinces covered by this research never exceeded 10 percent of interviewees in that province. The participation of women in conflict

resolution at the subnational level, though minimal, allows for some representation and inclusion.[20]

In response to the HPC's launch of its "Women's Voices for Ceasefire and Peace" campaign in 2014, the United Nations Development Program's Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program claimed that more than 250,000 women signed the petition, which called for armed insurgents to agree to a cease-fire and participate in peace talks.[21] A number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) also claimed to have established hundreds of women's peace councils across the country. However, none of this study's respondents had been part of these councils or mentioned hearing about them. Similarly, an initiative called "Mothers for Peace" has been championed by the current deputy head of the HPC, Habiba Sarabi. While researchers for this study encountered documents discussing this initiative and periodic program events, respondents did not express any familiarity with the effort. A messaging campaign run by the NATO Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan, "No Peace Without Women," similarly was not mentioned by any of the respondents. It is important to note that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence: these initiatives may have had impact even though they were not able to register their existence with respondents and the parts of society they represent.

Afghan women's activism that seeks to influence and engage in the peace process has also been supported by the country's first lady, Rula Ghani. Speaking at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington, DC, in October 2017, she declared, "Women no longer want to wait for peace to fall in their lap. . . . They are working for it."[22] The first lady's office also ran the National Consensus of Afghan Women on Peace initiative, which included media-intensive provincial gatherings of women to discuss the role of women in peacemaking.[23] These various initiatives indicate a growing activism on the part of Afghan women, with a potentially meaningful impact on peacemaking.

The period during which interviews were conducted for this report (June–October 2018) coincided with senior-level Afghan and international policy discussions on the role of women in peace processes. Most interviewees, however, did not touch on women's public activism or government initiatives to increase women's participation, choosing instead to discuss the role of women in peacemaking within traditional, largely domestic or community-oriented, parameters. The overarching response to the discussion on women's role in peace processes was one of acknowledgment and enthusiasm but was constrained conceptually by societal limits and lack of familiarity with relevant practices outside Afghanistan.

STUDY DESIGN
To ascertain Afghan women's roles in violent extremism and, conversely, the pursuit of peacemaking, interviews were conducted in seven provinces representing different regions of Afghanistan: Kandahar (south), Kabul (center), Nangarhar (east), Kunduz (north), Kunar (east), Herat (west), and Badakhshan (northeast). These provinces not only provided a broad regional sample, they are also ethnically and culturally diverse. Another reason for selecting these provinces was the elevated presence of nonviolent extremist groups, madrassas, and religious influencers. Within each province, two districts were selected with attributes similar to those generally associated with radicalization: high level of corruption, high level of unemployment, and the exclusion of women from power. This was due to an understanding that women's role in violent extremism is generally invisible in Afghanistan, and, if present anywhere, it would be in areas more targeted by or prone to radicalization and extremism. Of the 350 interviewees, twenty-six were men, who were included to help capture a potentially different perspective.[24]

Respondents were engaged through a process of snowball sampling, whereby initial contacts suggest new contacts for interviews. The snowball sampling method was selected because women agreeing to participate

of the seven provinces. The Taliban closely observe the movements of strangers in the areas they control, and conducting interviews on violent extremism in those areas could have been extremely dangerous. This skewing of the sample was corrected for as much as possible by interviewing people who either lived in Taliban-controlled areas or commuted regularly to those places.

The sample included urban and rural residents and people who had and had not previously participated in research surveys. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to be representative of all Afghan women. Respondents included direct victims of extremist violence (such as people displaced by conflict), students, homemakers, employed women, community elders, social activists, government officials, and employees of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. Because of geographic and demographic differences among the respondents, the data show distinct trends specific to the researched communities, some of which are adumbrated in the next section of the report.

in research on violent extremism or countering violent extremism in Afghanistan's context can be considered a hidden population, requiring sensitive outreach. There is an inherent risk of biases in the use of this sampling method, such as community bias (the first identified respondent may have an impact on the whole set for the area), the researchers' lack of control over the sample, and the nonrandom character of the total sample.

Out of safety concerns, the interviews were conducted almost exclusively in government-controlled areas

Women in the Public Space

A formal role in either violent extremism or peacemaking assumes a degree of female public presence. Respondents frequently answered questions regarding women's roles in both violent extremism and peacemaking by referring to women's activities and influence in the private sphere, such as raising families and engaging with their local community. Women's nonpublic roles and responsibilities are critical components of Afghan society but remain difficult to analyze and were beyond the scope of this study.

To identify associations that could be broadly indicative of women's public roles in violent extremism or peacemaking, interviewees were asked two questions: What groups are active in your community? And, what groups in your community are women inclined to associate with or participate in?

Groups and associations frequently mentioned included the government, civil society groups and NGOs, and educational institutions, including schools, universities, vocational training centers, and religious training circles (see figure 1). However, responses varied widely according to location, with, for example, interviewees in Herat demonstrating no inclination to list the government as a form of association, whereas in other provinces the government was widely identified. Also in Herat, religious organizations in general were most often cited as influential, possibly reflecting the growing number of religious groups operating in Herat city, including Jamiat-e Islah and Daar Ul-Uloms (religious education centers) run by clergy, some of whom would qualify as extremist. In all provinces there was insignificant mention of violent extremist groups such as the Taliban and IS-K, likely because the interviews were conducted primarily in government-controlled areas.

Of note, an association with NGOs or with the government was tied to programs that included vocational training opportunities that bridge to the domestic sphere, such as lessons in gardening, literacy, and tailoring. These skills also enable women to earn an income. These economic opportunities offered by one or another organization often drove women respondents' association with them, for they declared themselves to be direct beneficiaries or knew people who had benefited from the programs.

More generally, higher levels of education, reflecting a less entrenched system of patriarchy, allows women to imagine and take on a variety of roles in public life, beyond the home. This was especially true in city centers where the Taliban had little to no tangible presence. But outside commercial hubs such as Kabul and Nangarhar or Herat, researchers found growing engagement in public space and aspirations for enlarged roles. In Kunar Province's Assadabad and Khas Kunar districts, for example, where the Taliban are a distant factor, women stressed education, and specifically becoming a doctor, as a preferred way to engage in society. Respondents in Kunar infrequently referenced political organizations when asked about groups active in their community or groups they would join. By contrast, women respondents in Nangarhar preferred an association with the government to all other groups; in particular, they were unlikely to join religious groups. While the exact reason for a preference for an association with government groups is unclear, it may be that the province is perceived as critical to the political base of President Ashraf Ghani and that the government has made investments in garnering support. For example, there have been reports of cash handouts to women visiting government-administered health clinics.

Figure 1. Groups Women Are Most Likely to Join

Women cited government or educational institutions as groups they would be most inclined to join or associate with, though responses varied considerably by location.

BADAKHSHAN PROVINCE

Government 22.0%   Political parties 19.5%   No interest in any group 17.1%   Peaceful/civil/rights/social groups 9.8%
Educational institutions 9.8%   NGOs 7.3%   Economic and business groups 7.3%   Religious groups 4.9%   Taliban 2.4%

HERAT PROVINCE

Religious groups 30.0%   Educational institutions 18.0%   Peaceful/rights/social groups 14.0%   No interest in any group 14.0%
Do not know 12.0%   Political parties 6.0%   Economic and business groups 2.0%   Not allowed to join groups by family 2.0%
No answer 2.0%

KABUL PROVINCE

Educational institutions 26.0%   Religious groups 24.0%   Government 14.0%   Professional groups 12.0%   Political groups 4.0%
Youth groups 4.0%   Economic and business groups 4.0%   Don't know 2.0%   Not allowed to join groups by family 2.0%
Moderate/progressive groups 2.0%   No answer 2.0%   No group 2.0%   Shuras 2.0%

KANDAHAR PROVINCE

Educational Institutions 32.4%   Economic and business groups 10.8%   No interest in any group 8.1%   Religious groups 8.1%
Community leader 5.4%   Peaceful groups 5.4%   Human rights groups 5.4%   Not able to contribute to any group 5.4%   Government 5.4%
Vocational training groups 2.7%   Profession (medicine) 2.7%   Media 2.7%   Interested in joining educated people 2.7%   NGOs 2.7%

KUNAR PROVINCE

Government 57.5%   Civil society/peaceful/rights groups 20.0%   Educational institutions 15.0%
Human rights groups/organizations 5.0%   Not allowed to join groups by family 2.5%

KUNDUZ PROVINCE

Government 36.4%   Religious groups 15.9%   Educational institutions 15.9%   Peaceful/rights/advocacy groups 13.6%
Taliban 6.8%   Civil society 6.8%   Local powerholders 2.3%   NGOs 2.3%

NANGARHAR PROVINCE

Government 36.2%   Educational institutions 19.2%   No interest in any group 10.6%   Civil society 8.5%
Economic and business groups 6.3%   NGOs 6.4%   Development councils/groups 6.4%   Madrassa 2.1%
"Whatever they like" 2.1%   Local shura 2.1%

It is no longer necessary to be English literate to go online, given the availability of content in Pashto and Farsi. The growing availability and affordability of smartphones, tablets, and data networks are also fostering a shift toward obtaining information from online sources.

Association with violent extremist groups such as the Taliban and restrictive religious educational organizations was more at play in provinces such as Kunduz. In Kunduz, harassment of women in the workplace, a patriarchal society response, was cited as a barrier to women joining the workforce.

Of the seven provinces studied, women in Kandahar were most heavily affected by patriarchal social norms. Respondents listed mullahs, for example, as a resource for solving problems, including domestic conflicts. However, they also expressed interest in public roles in health and education, two spheres where women's participation is generally accepted by extremists. These roles take women out of the private, domestic sphere and into a public space.

This study found that women overall were interested in moving beyond the roles a patriarchal society had set for them and into more public roles. Economic self-improvement, the lighter or heavier presence of the Taliban, and stronger or weaker local enforcement of patriarchal norms were factors influencing which groups respondents were aware of or would consider joining, which can be understood as a readiness to participate in a public sphere larger than the home or immediate community—a necessary precondition for activism. Overall, respondents shunned associating with radical groups not only out of fear but because these groups limited their participation in the broader society.

A desire for more independent decision-making power and political representation of women was frequently mentioned. Notably, women in government positions felt that women had more independence and more influence on society than other respondents did.

The following case studies, focusing on women in Herat and Kunduz Provinces, describe the serious role religious organizations and educational institutions play in supporting or precluding a larger role for women in society.

Herat: Association with Jamat-e Tabligh

Karukh district, located in the northeast of Herat Province about 50 kilometers (30 miles) from Herat city, is an agricultural, rural area. While most respondents in this study noted that women are likely to join religious groups, this was more prevalent in Karukh district. Among the various religious groups operating in the district, women most frequently declared an association with Jamat-e Tabligh (JT). JT is a revivalist group that emerged in India in the 1920s and spread to other Muslim countries, eventually reaching Karukh. JT proclaims apolitical objectives, and the group is perceived to be opposed to militancy. However, critics allege that some of their activities function as precursors to violent extremism, and there are documented cases of violent extremists who had JT roots.[25] That said, the group itself is neither overtly nor covertly engaged in violent extremism or militancy.

Since studying religion is generally believed to be a positive activity for women in rural areas, female family members are often asked to join JT. Respondents noted that JT has female members who instruct other women in religious duties and responsibilities. Attendees learn verses of the Quran, how to pray, and other religious matters. Because praying and correctly reciting the Quran give women a more respected position in society, JT appeals most to women who lack literacy and the ability to read and pray, and recruits them into its activities. Respondents mentioned that JT also gives instruction in women's and men's rights

(generally privileging men's rights over women's), marital relations, and other social issues.

Respondents noted that JT has affected the behavior of male family members toward women, making them restrictive in some cases and respectful in others. Several women interviewees considered JT gatherings an effective way to raise awareness of women's rights among men. A married housewife in Karukh, aged forty, said:

> Yes, I once went to the gatherings of Jamat-e Tabligh. They were talking to each other and I was listening. They were talking about ways to reach God and the rights of neighbors. As I listened to their words, I cried further and further. In Ramadan, Maulawi Sahib had come from the city to talk about certain issues. I went to perform morning prayer and sat there for two hours just to listen to him. He talked about the rights of the husband, the responsibilities of having children, and the rights of neighbors.

Kunduz: Ashraf Ul-Madaares

Kunduz Province in northern Afghanistan has been a volatile location in recent years. The provincial center has fallen into the hands of the Taliban twice since 2014. A multiethnic province, Kunduz has been a major focus of violent extremism and countering violent extremism efforts.

The country's biggest madrassa that educates women, Ashraf Ul-Madaares, is in Kunduz city. Women are taught religious subjects such as interpretation of the Quran and Hadith, preaching, and what is expected of women according to Islam. The madrassa education is not limited to "Islamic" teachings; it also includes discussions of social, religious, and economic topics. Ashraf Ul-Madaares is known to propagate a very strict set of religious interpretations, including opposition to watching television, listening to the radio, or taking photographs. Its students hold strict beliefs about acceptable roles for women and have reportedly labeled women infidels for working outside the home. One of the respondents, who was also featured in the Al-Jazeera documentary *The Girls of the Taliban*,

described being labeled an "extremist" by the madrassa for comments she made on the rights of women to work outside the home. Women students at Ashraf Ul-Madaares are instructed that watching television, listening to nonreligious songs, attending weddings, and other seemingly mundane activities are extremely inappropriate for women.

Despite these strictures, interviewees noted that Ashraf Ul-Madaares has increasingly gained influence in Kunduz Province, especially among women. Some respondents noted that women may be influenced to join the madrassa as a result of outreach by current students to women in the community.
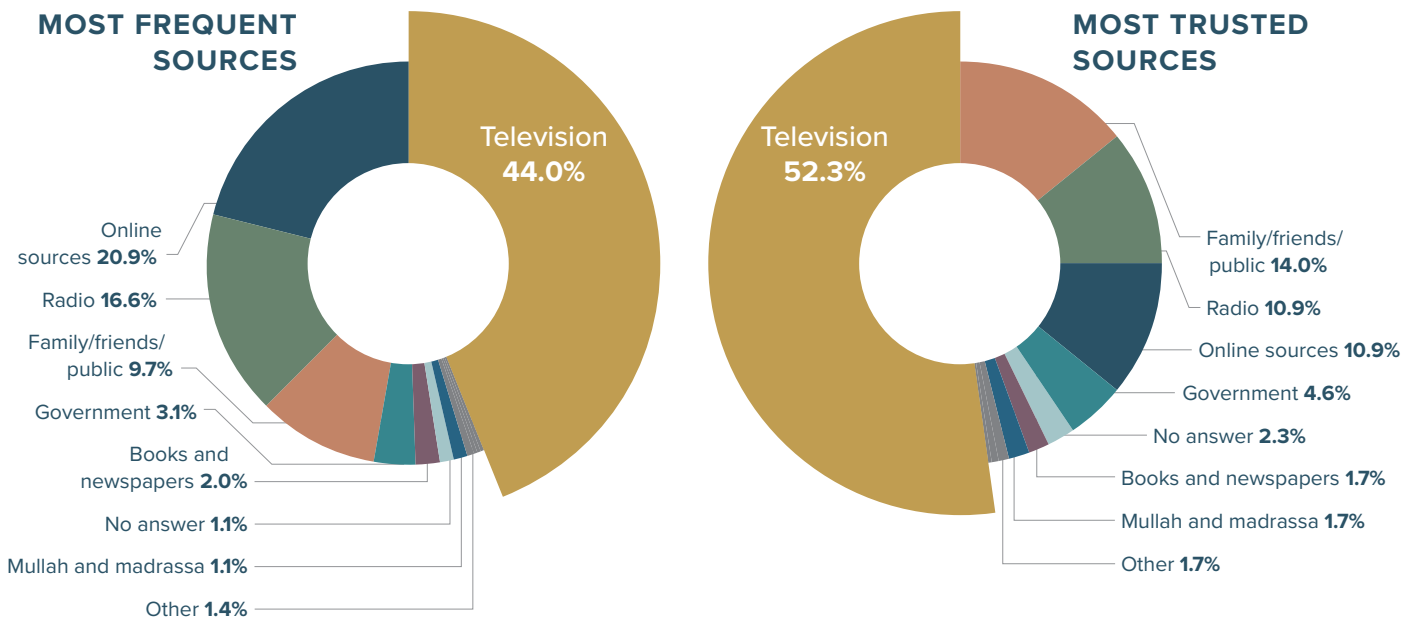
SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Association and activism choices are directly tied to the information one consumes or works with. Despite the prevalent patriarchy, Afghan women are increasingly in possession of greater information and means of access to information than ever before. Their contribution to the information sphere in the country is also growing into a major factor shaping perceptions and perspectives inside and outside the country.

Access to electronic means of information—television, radio, and internet-based platforms—is a recent and growing development in Afghanistan overall. While respondents identified television as the most popular medium for getting information (with the exception of Kunar Province), online sources were cited as the second-most commonly used (see figure 2). Specific outlets mentioned by respondents included Facebook, YouTube, news websites, and even Wikipedia. Of note is the growing localization of all these platforms in Afghanistan. It is no longer necessary to be English literate to go online, given the availability of content in Pashto and Farsi. The growing availability and affordability of smartphones, tablets, and data networks are also fostering a shift toward obtaining information from online sources.

Figure 2. Sources of Information

Although television dominates as a source of information, the availability and affordability of smartphones, tablets, and data have facilitated a shift to online sources—even though they are viewed as less trustworthy.

MOST FREQUENT SOURCES

Television 44.0%

Online sources 20.9%

Radio 16.6%

Family/friends/public 9.7%

Government 3.1%

Books and newspapers 2.0%

No answer 1.1%

Mullah and madrassa 1.1%

Other 1.4%

MOST TRUSTED SOURCES

Television 52.3%

Family/friends/public 14.0%

Radio 10.9%

Online sources 10.9%

Government 4.6%

No answer 2.3%

Books and newspapers 1.7%

Mullah and madrassa 1.7%

Other 1.7%

While the frequency of use of online sources has overtaken radio, the two are about equal as trusted sources. In general, the survey found a discrepancy between the most often used sources of information and the most trusted. For example, in Kunduz Province, while 20 percent of respondents mentioned online sources as most commonly used, only 4 percent listed online sources as the most trusted. It is also telling of the shift to more modern sources—television in parts of Afghanistan still remains a very new outlet—that while respondents in Kunar cited radio twice as often as television as the most commonly used source of information, their trust in televised information was overwhelmingly higher than their trust in information provided over the radio. The lower ranking in frequency of

television may be attributable to difficulty in accessing electricity, but may also reflect remnants of what was once a widespread cultural and even religious sanction against viewing television.

Important also to note is the reference to "public"— common people—as a source of information, a phenomenon particularly notable in Kunar (and only slightly less so in Kandahar). Afghanistan remains a largely oral culture, with a history of public square announcements and word of mouth being influential ways to disseminate information. However, trust in these public sources is lower than their frequency of use. For example, no respondent in Herat register trust in "public" sources.

Violent Extremism and Afghan Women

To ascertain how respondents understood and viewed extremism, options to counter its ideology, and circumstances under which perpetrating violence against civilians might be deemed acceptable, interviewees were asked the following questions:

- What do you consider to be extremism?
- In your view, why do some people support violent extremist groups?
- In your view, what is the most effective way to prevent and counter extremism? Especially, what can women do to prevent and counter extremism?
- In your view, how justified is violence against civilians and unarmed people?

It is important to note here that, as previously discussed, the research did not include women currently living in areas under Taliban control. The views and attitudes of women in these areas are therefore not reflected in the following discussion.

UNDERSTANDING OF EXTREMISM

Across all provinces, "extremism" was seen as carrying negative connotations. Violent extremism in particular was seen as a major threat to lives, livelihoods, and the well-being of communities and individuals. Respondents across all provinces defined extremism as excess, crossing the limits, or a lack of moderation in opinion and action. Their understanding of the meaning of "extremism" likely reflects a literal interpretation of the word (*ifratiat*) used in the question. The word is derived from *ifrat*, or "excess." An excess of what, however, is not clear, leading to more eclectic definitions.

Responses ranged from definitions as simple as "extremism means crossing the limits. When someone crosses the limit, it is extremism" (offered by a twenty-year-old woman, a government employee, in Panjwai, Kandahar) to more complex ones that referenced Islamist ideology: "Though we can see extremism in many different ways, religious extremists believe that there are certain red lines and whoever crosses one of those red lines, it becomes incumbent to perform jihad against them; thus the killing of that person becomes halal and legitimate" (offered by a twenty-nine-year-old married woman, a government employee, in Herat city).

Another respondent, a twenty-three-year-old woman living in Herat city, noted that the method used to express an idea, even an extreme idea, was what distinguished a moderate position from an extremist one:

> The definition I have is that you can keep any ideas that you have, but for the propagation of your ideas do not use violence. Extremism, in my opinion, in this society is that these groups are trying to impose their ideology through using violence against people, and this is extremism. . . . If an extreme idea is expressed in words, that is not extremism to me. As long as no weapons or physical force is used, it is not extremism.

And finally, a twenty-two-year-old man employed by the government and living in Faizabad, Badakhshan, implicitly characterized the actions of Western countries as extremist:

> In my view, those who attack the culture of a society are extremists. Today in Islamic countries, hundreds, even thousands of innocent people are being killed. Those who are actively participating in the destruction of their [Muslims'] places, those who are funding explosions, those who are killing women and children are extremists.

The different understandings and characterizations of extremism trended along provincial lines, most likely tied to the general situation in the area and the profile of the respondents. In Kandahar, several respondents linked extremism to violence, even "terror," and characterized it as "imposing views through the barrel of a gun" (mentioned by six respondents from both Kandahar city and Panjwai district). One thirty-year-old male resident of Panjwai, a high school graduate, described extremism as "[posing a] threat to life, forbidding others' will, eliminating opponents for opposing views." In Herat Province, however, far fewer respondents referred to violence in their definition of extremism. In Karukh district, the majority of respondents chose "don't know" when asked about their definition of extremism. (It should be noted that most of the respondents in Karukh associated with JT.) At Herat University, a twenty-one-year-old female student called wearing the hijab her definition of extremism, while another twenty-year-old female student—also employed as a religion teacher—offered "There is no room for extremism in Islam" as her response to the question "What is your definition of extremism?"

VIEWS ON WHY PEOPLE SUPPORT VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS

In response to the question, "Why do some people support violent extremist groups?," respondents frequently referenced a lack of "awareness" (*agahi* in Dari, *pohana* in Pashto). "Awareness" in this context denotes an ability to transfer and receive wisdom, with undertones of being educated in some way, not necessarily through formal schooling. Lack of awareness, or "ignorance" (a widely used word), was considered to be a major factor driving people to violent extremism.

"Ignorance" was also used interchangeably with "lack of education." Educational centers—schools, universities, and madrassas—were seen as the main centers for spreading awareness and creating "enlightenment."

Other factors mentioned as inducing people to join violent extremist groups were more pragmatic. They ranged from the need to associate and find a purpose, to financial incentives, and even the appeal of dispute resolution mechanisms.

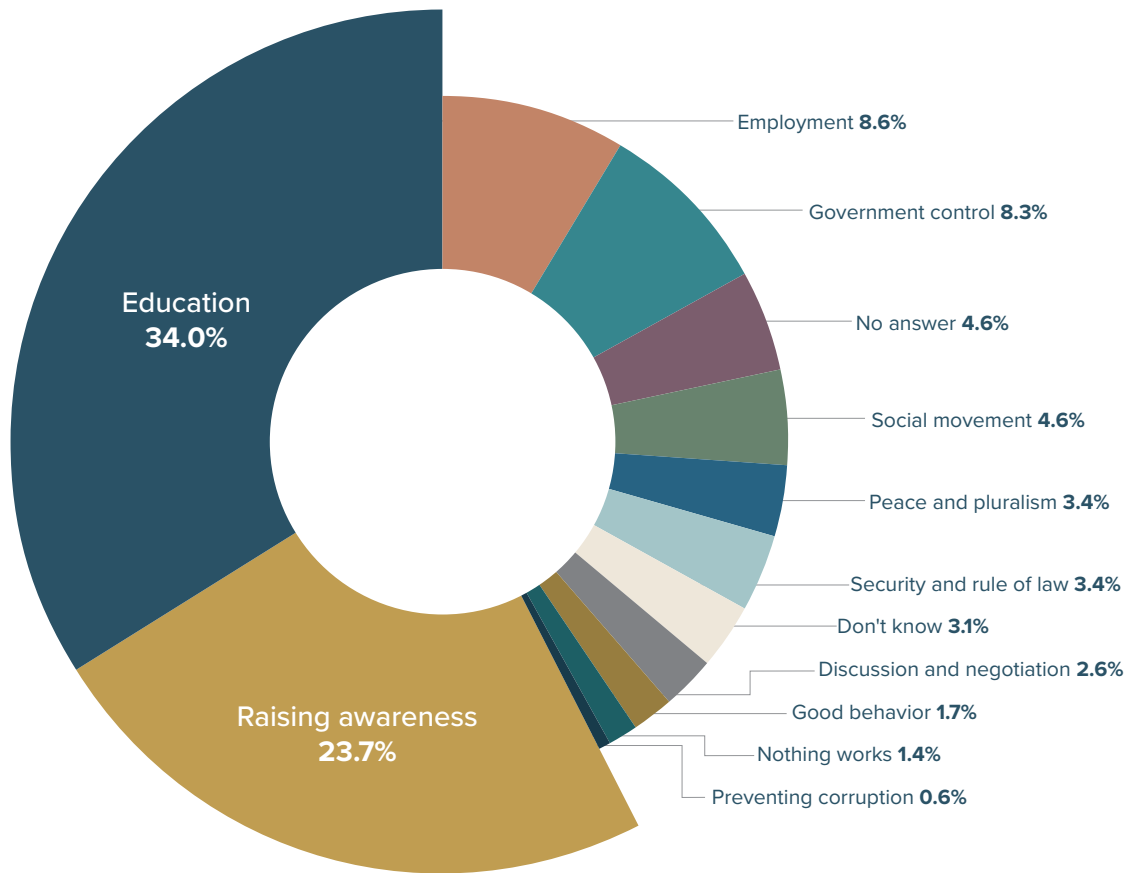## VIEWS ON WAYS TO COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM

To elicit ways perceived to be effective in countering violent extremism, interviewees were asked, "In your view, what is the most effective way to prevent and counter extremism? Especially, what can women do to prevent and counter extremism?"

With the exception of Herat (particularly Karukh district), the majority of respondents believed women could play a role in countering both nonviolent and violent extremism, although more specific discussion of the role was regularly limited to inside the family dynamics. In Kunduz in particular, respondents indicated that women could create an atmosphere inside the home that would constrain the spread of extremism.[26] This argument is rooted in the strong family bonds still prevalent in Afghan culture, with women playing a defining role in maintaining those bonds.

Female activism as described by respondents included women "raising their voices"—in other words, utilizing the space for freedom of expression by vocal activism in public spaces and on the airwaves (see figure 3). Other forms of activism identified by respondents included launching protests, establishing grassroots movements, setting up civil society organizations, and engaging in advocacy. "Awareness" was again one of the most frequently referenced words. In this context, the term was used to denote reading, acquiring knowledge and skills, and expanding one's horizon

Figure 3. How to Prevent Extremism

On the question of how to prevent and counter extremism, more than half of all responses focused on acquiring an education or fostering awareness of the detrimental effects of extremism.

- Education **34.0%**
- Raising awareness **23.7%**
- Employment **8.6%**
- Government control **8.3%**
- No answer **4.6%**
- Social movement **4.6%**
- Peace and pluralism **3.4%**
- Security and rule of law **3.4%**
- Don't know **3.1%**
- Discussion and negotiation **2.6%**
- Good behavior **1.7%**
- Nothing works **1.4%**
- Preventing corruption **0.6%**

to the extent that a person could distinguish between good and evil. Respondents believed that to have a meaningful impact in reducing society's risk of violent extremism, women needed first to raise the level of their own awareness. Then they could work to raise the awareness of others as to the detrimental effects of violent extremism—such as disruption of families and loss of life—on vulnerable individuals and communities.

Respondents were very clear and categorical in the use of the word "education" to refer to attendance at an educational institution, particularly schools and universities. Education could also mean attending the training sessions, seminars, and workshops convened by the Afghan government and NGOs. The most empowered women were considered to be those

who had achieved high levels of formal education, perceived to correlate with higher incomes. However, formal education for women and by women was not, across the board, particularly highly ranked among the attributes useful for women to counter violent extremism. Madrassa education was more pervasive in Kunduz than in the other six provinces. Those attending or teaching in madrassas saw them as a front against, rather than helping, the Taliban's cause. And, as was the case in many provinces, respondents in Kunduz viewed those waging violence in the name of Islam, such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda, as lacking knowledge of "real" Islam. Education per se was also lower on the list of attributes useful for countering violent extremism among the women of Herat, since educational opportunities are ample in the province,

Students share a textbook during class in one of the overflow tents at Rustam School in Yakawlang, Afghanistan, on May 19, 2019. (Photo by Jim Huyle-broek/New York Times)

especially in the city of Herat. The nature of the educational institution and the type of education offered were considered more important in relation to countering extremism.

The need for unity and solidarity among women as an important step toward women's collective empowerment was emphasized more in Badakhshan than in any other province. Predictably, many respondents believed women could use their role as mothers to prevent or counter extremism within their families. It was mentioned multiple times that mothers can influence their children through the "right" upbringing, especially if they are already aware of the dangers and signs of extremism. The emotional influence of a woman as a sister or wife to discourage family members from joining extremist groups was also mentioned. The responses highlighting associations (someone's

sister or mother) as the basis for discussing the role of women in countering violent extremism reaffirm the understanding that respondents of this research treated violent extremist actors as mainly men.

The most surprising finding in Herat was the number of respondents who had a bleak outlook on women's ability to counter violent extremism, and their relative ineffectiveness in doing so. Two-thirds of the respondents who believed that women have no influence to counter violent extremism came from Karukh district, of whom more than 90 percent were barely literate. While there are growing opportunities for education and gaining literacy across Afghanistan, the availability of opportunities does not imply utilization of those opportunities. In Karukh as in many other rural settings, if women are allowed by the controlling male members of their family to engage in a broader space outside their homes, the

likely immediate choice for most is in religious settings, such as mosques, madrassas, or religious discussion groups. Herat respondents associated violence with the Taliban, and they had difficulty imagining circumstances under which women could engage with or resist them. This response could have been registered in part because the Taliban are an all-male group with the harshest rules regarding women.

In contrast, respondents in Kandahar (more than 95 percent of whom were women) overwhelmingly believed women could play a meaningful role in countering violent extremism. But they had to be educated first in order to have the capacity to take action. Women in Kandahar face restricted mobility outside their homes, which has affected their ability to attend schools and universities. While multiple respondents in Herat spoke of reading clubs, women in Kunar told stories of young girls reporting their fathers to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission for not allowing them to continue their education, and women in Nangarhar boasted about their work in NGOs, few female respondents in Kandahar mentioned an opportunity to work outside the home. Respondents stated that educational institutions gave them the best chance of having a formal role in society, which could in turn allow for impact. This may partly explain the emphasis on employment as offering the only avenue for women to have influence. Some Kandahar respondents expressed hopelessness and disappointment: "Women are powerless. Your questions . . . have little to do with our reality," concluded a university-educated interviewee, a sixty-eight-year-old female, who is married and works in the private sector in Kandahar city.

In Kabul, much as in Herat, education was not viewed by the all-female respondent group as a prerequisite for women to have efficacy in countering violent extremism. Women in Kabul were more concerned with practical actions to prevent violent extremism, such as the establishment of civil society organizations or

changing school and university curricula (as opposed to merely sitting in a classroom).

Kunar was the only province where a large proportion of the respondents (more than 90 percent of whom were women) complained about "old" traditions that are making women's lives difficult; some even mentioned the need to abandon certain traditions, such as early marriage, to increase women's participation in countering violent extremism. Notably, women in Kunar launched a campaign to advocate for including the Taliban in the peace process. In the summer of 2017, dozens of women in eastern Afghanistan, primarily Kunar Province, reportedly came together and declared they were forming a delegation to send to the Taliban to ask them to cease violence in their areas. This effort caught the attention of the special representative of the secretary general of the United Nations for Afghanistan, who called it an act of "an incredible amount of courage."[27]

Even though Kunar is in a remote area, and parts of it have experienced some of the fiercest clashes between the Taliban and American forces, many NGOs are still active and provide some employment opportunities for women. Women also work for government institutions, and respondents observed that there are even female judges in Kunar. While nascent progress on female political and economic participation is evident, the women of Kunar still believe they need more education and awareness "to change old traditions into new ones," as a thirty-five-year-old woman from Khas Kunar put it. Women in Nangarhar enjoy relatively easy access to educational institutions and therefore are looking at other ways of countering extremism and violent extremism—namely, by raising awareness among both women and men. "We have to resist extremism by any means," opined a twenty-three-year-old single woman interviewed in Jalalabad.
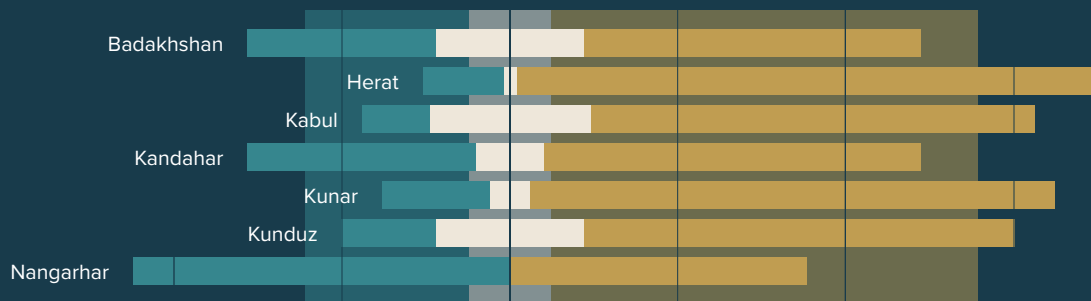
Figure 4. Attitudes toward the Use of Violence against Civilians
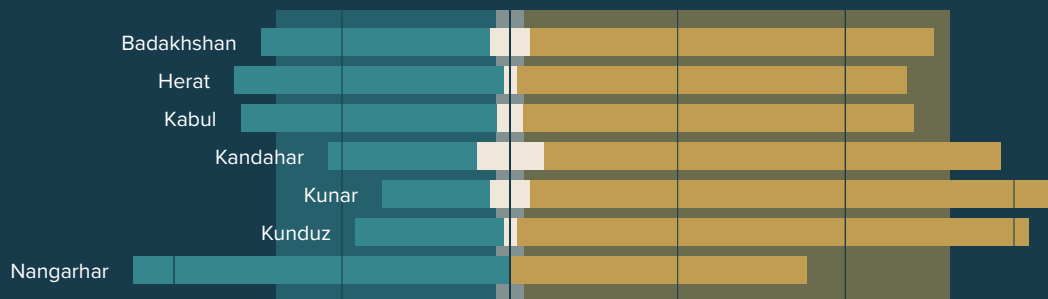
■ Yes   ■ No answer   ■ No

JUSTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE FOR CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT POLICY

Badakhshan
Herat
Kabul
Kandahar
Kunar
Kunduz
Nangarhar
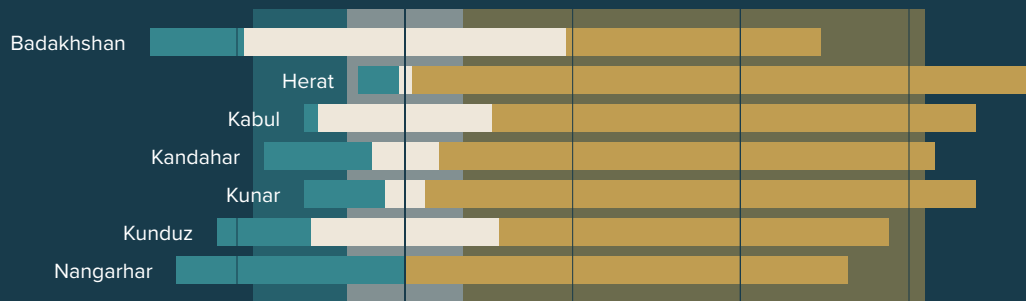
JUSTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE FOR RELIGIOUS VALUES

Badakhshan
Herat
Kabul
Kandahar
Kunar
Kunduz
Nangarhar

JUSTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE FOR SELF-DEFENCE

Badakhshan
Herat
Kabul
Kandahar
Kunar
Kunduz
Nangarhar

Each bar represents 100% of the responses for each province. The larger rectangles represent the distribution of responses for all respondents in the seven provinces.

VIEWS ON THE USE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST UNARMED CIVILIANS

To understand respondents' views on the use of violence, interviewees were first asked whether or not violence against unarmed civilians could ever be justified, which resulted in a resounding "no" response across all seven provinces. The initial "no" response was then tested by a number of subquestions. The first subquestion specified violence directed first against the individual interviewed, then against her or his family, and finally against the respondent's community. This gradual refinement of the question revealed that the initial response might not have been absolute in all cases. The second subquestion examined the impact of beliefs, and was aimed at finding out whether the respondent would consider using violence in defense of the sanctity and honor of his or her religion. The majority of respondents asserted they would refrain from using violence and would engage in a discussion if they felt their beliefs were threatened. In a few instances, the respondents said they would prefer inaction ("silence") to a violent act. However, some respondents answered that violence would be justified to prove the truth of their religion. In response to the third subquestion, which asked respondents if the use of violence was justified to challenge or change state policies, very few said it would be—and then only as a last resort. (See figure 4 for province-by-province responses for each of these questions.)

It is important to recall that more than 90 percent of the respondents were women, and women's role in perpetrating antistate violence in Afghanistan is profoundly limited. In addition, the respondents were mainly from areas controlled by the state. Nevertheless, the findings do provide interesting insights into justifications for the use of violence against civilians. The responses were especially provocative because in many cases, respondents had been in real-life situations that aligned with the scenario presented in the subquestion. Many respondents expressed altruism when talking about themselves and said they would give their lives to save innocent civilians. However, they found it difficult to accept the same fate for a family member. Interestingly, those who said they would not use violence regardless of what befell their families had the least education. Respondents with higher levels of education, such as university graduates, were more likely to justify the use of violence to save the lives of their loved ones.

The subquestion on violence directed against the respondent's community was challenged in some regions, particularly the north and northeastern provinces of Kunduz and Badakhshan, on the grounds that it could inflame ethnic discrimination. In Kunduz, the ethnic dimension of violence is discernible, with some respondents attempting to gloss over ethnic divisions by resorting to the language of harmony and reconciliation and others blaming one or another ethnicity outright for the violent conflict.

Views on Afghan Women's Role in Peacemaking

One of the most famous images from the June 2018 cease-fire in Afghanistan depicted a young woman activist from the restive province of Nangarhar. Muqadasa Ahmadzai, who ran in the parliamentary elections of October 2018, traveled to Taliban-controlled areas on the second day of the cease-fire. The photograph shows her interacting with Taliban fighters while dressed in veiled attire, although not conforming fully to the Taliban's restrictions. In one hand she holds the Taliban banner, in the other the flag of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. In a powerful way, Ahmadzai was making a case for inclusion—of both women and the Taliban—and for an active public role for women in the peace process, a role that was previously hardly imagined let alone visualized and exhibited.

One of the aims of this study was to determine how an active role for women in peacemaking has been imagined, and to assess aspirations for such a role. To understand women's current and potential roles in peacemaking and countering violent extremism in Afghanistan, interviewers asked direct and indirect questions to identify role models, current peacemaking activities (and opinions about women's involvement in peacemaking), barriers to be overcome, and the kind of support required.

ROLE MODELS FOR WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AROUND PEACEMAKING

The question about role models was often met with generic answers, although they varied across provinces. Family members featured prominently as role models in Herat, followed by religious role models, such as figures from the history of Islam. In Kandahar, Kunar, and

Nangarhar, in addition to family members and historical religious figures, both local and international political leaders and writers were cited. In these three provinces respondents also chose to answer descriptively as opposed to naming individuals, often specifying character traits, such as honesty, hard work, and having a positive impact on society, as crucial characteristics required of a role model.

CURRENT PEACEMAKING ACTIVITIES

When asked about steps women have taken to prevent or counter violence in their communities, respondents in Herat city pointed to reducing domestic violence as the first step toward preventing violence in the community. Respondents in Herat also listed increasing awareness, promoting advocacy for women, undergoing vocational training, attending educational seminars, and participating in social and political initiatives as steps they had taken to prevent and counter violence in their communities. In Nangarhar, Kandahar, and Kunar Provinces, raising awareness and acquiring an education (or educating others) were mentioned repeatedly as ways to counter violent extremism. In Kunar Province, several respondents also mentioned participating on community councils as important to preventing and countering violence.

In light of the still limited public role for women in Afghanistan, respondents' conservative vision of the role of women as peacemakers is not surprising. Literate female respondents across all seven provinces cited as their contributions to peace their education-related activities and jobs held outside the home. They believed they were already contributing to reducing violence and

supporting the peace process through their broader involvement in society. To them, the mere act of going to school or university was an important step toward freeing society of extremism and preventing violence, as becoming educated was understood to be a means to counter patriarchy and oppose restrictive social norms, as well as a way to acquire skills and knowledge that could allow for an impactful social role.

SHOULD WOMEN BE INVOLVED IN PEACEMAKING IN THEIR COMMUNITIES?

All respondents were asked whether they believed women can or should be involved in promoting nonviolence in their communities. The question elicited a resoundingly positive response. There was no shortage of enthusiasm on the part of the women interviewed: they want women—themselves included—to play a meaningful role in the peace process. Frustration with the high costs of violence borne by women was a common theme among respondents and articulated as justification for involvement in peacemaking. Some respondents even lamented the government's inability or lack of political will to give women a greater role in the peace process.

A majority of respondents, however, chose to discuss the role of women in peacemaking within the bounds of the family structure. A number of them pointed to the importance of women as agents of peace within their families. There was particular emphasis on the role of women as mothers and on the centrality of mothers to raising peaceful children and stopping their sons from engaging in violence. This associational role for women was most prevalent among the male respondents. As one forty-seven-year-old married man, a government employee in Watapur, Kunar Province, told the interviewers:

> A woman is a mother, she is a sister, and a woman's lap is the first school. For example, if a woman starts a campaign for peace from her home, if she starts public awareness in her home, her words have influence on her husband, sons, and daughters; they have influence on everyone. They [women] have already started a peace movement.

Similarly, when asked whether they believed that women can and should be involved in promoting peace in their community, respondents in Herat overwhelmingly stressed the role of women in raising children and their decisive role in whether their children would grow up to be peacemakers or extremists.

There were, however, notable interprovincial differences as to the nature of women's roles in peacemaking. Notably, respondents in Kandahar focused on their role at the family level, whereas respondents in Nangarhar emphasized civil society activism and formal roles in the peace process. This contrast between Kandahar and other provinces was reinforced by responses to questions about groups women were likely to join. Kandahari women emphasized the need for peace so that women could start leaving the house to get educated.

In Kandahar, Nangarhar, and Kunar, respondents highlighted the role of women in public office and social activities as a positive contribution. All respondents said yes when asked whether women should be involved in promoting peace and countering violence. However, some qualified their responses by stating that women should work with the support and assistance of men, in particular when it related to improving women's access to public spaces. It is often easier for women to operate in spaces previously untouched by women activists if they have supportive male counterparts. The required "support," if broken down into tangible actions, could be as simple as men not being restrictive of women's movement and engagement in public spaces to men offering services and resources. In nonliberal settings, even urban ones, it is not unusual for some women activists to work while having a male family member accompany them; the presence of the man is perceived to allow greater space for activism. So prevalent is this perception that even a recent minister of women's affairs who had hired a family member in her office through extraordinary use of her executive power and was accused of nepotism explained that she did so in order to create more space for her work.

If the challenge of insecurity can be effectively dealt with through progress in peacemaking, and a culture more accepting of women's activism is encouraged, Afghanistan will benefit from harnessing the enthusiasm and influence of women in a way unprecedented in Afghan society.

Respondents in Herat observed that women were sometimes included symbolically in events or organizations, which allowed officials to highlight their participation without actually engaging the female perspective.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACEMAKING

Respondents were also asked about barriers in their communities that prevent women from playing an active role in peacemaking. Barriers were identified in all provinces, with variations depending on whether the woman respondent had a public life (studying or working outside the home) or not. The usual barriers of lack of security and stringent social norms featured prominently in responses, with illiteracy also noted by a majority of respondents. Harassment on the streets was mentioned by some of the respondents. In one form or another, all respondents referred to the limited acceptance of public roles for women—citing traditional cultural barriers or other family restrictions—as the primary obstacle to greater female activism around peacemaking. If the challenge of insecurity can be effectively dealt with through progress in peacemaking, and a culture more accepting of women's activism is encouraged, Afghanistan will benefit from harnessing the enthusiasm and influence of women in a way unprecedented in Afghan society.

KINDS OF SUPPORT NEEDED BY WOMEN TO COMBAT VIOLENCE

When asked what practical support they thought would help them and the women of their communities play a more effective role in combating violence, respondents in Herat named giving women opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, educational and capacity-building initiatives, awareness raising, and employment opportunities. Some of these support requests seemed to be the result of existing international support and initiatives. A more in-depth and innovative needs assessment is required to spur more critical thinking around women's roles in peacemaking. This could potentially include highlighting success stories and best practices for women's involvement in peacemaking in related situations outside Afghanistan.

Respondents in Kunar, Kandahar, and Nangarhar Provinces pointed to the need for more educational and employment opportunities for women and a greater societal acceptance of women's roles in the public sphere. In Badakhshan more so than in any other province, linkages were apparent between peacemaking and formal structures such as Afghanistan's High Peace Council and the government. This distinction may be due to the relative literacy of the interviewees as well as to such factors as the vocal contributions of the province's two female members of parliament, Fauzia Koofi and Nilofar Ibrahmi, to the national debate on critical issues. The majority of respondents in Badakhshan, however, were critical of the way women have been brought into formal peacemaking processes so far. As one woman in Faizabad city, a thirty-five-year-old government employee, saw it, the female members of the HPC are merely functioning in a symbolic role.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Participating in acts of violence and, conversely, working in pursuit of peace in Afghanistan continue to be activities dominated by men, with women beginning to make inroads into the latter. In fact, women's roles are changing quickly, as underscored by their aspirations for greater participation in the public space and their growing visibility in a largely restrictive society. In all seven provinces surveyed, women are questioning patriarchal norms. The women interviewed for this report also expressed an overwhelming aversion to resorting to violence under any circumstance, including under threat of harm to their families. Moreover, women generally did not desire a role in extremist groups because these groups limited their roles to the domestic sphere.

Women outside Afghanistan's urban centers, but also in certain cities such as Herat and Kunduz, are more likely to join religious groups than political groups because of the multitude of religious groups and the ease of access to them, the role of religion in determining the status of a woman in society, and the lack of capability or incentives for political parties to engage women. The growth of modern media and technology in Afghanistan is expanding the roster of sources of information available to women, with the majority of respondents declaring electronic sources of information as their main sources. This shift from traditional to digital sources of information opens the door to both opportunities and threats, largely dependent on which form of content is packaged and presented to the newly digitally connected women of Afghanistan. The permeation of digital access to information is also breaking restrictive barriers by enabling direct access

to information and expression even in places where previously male-imposed checkpoints persisted.

Interviewees viewed the role of women in peace processes with enthusiasm, but also noted that such participation was constrained conceptually by broader social restrictions on women and a lack of familiarity with best practices that could be tailored to Afghanistan. Female social activism around peacemaking is understood as women "raising their voices," but it also includes launching protests, establishing grassroots movements, setting up civil society organizations, and conducting advocacy. More specifically, the practice of Afghan women sitting across from violent extremist groups—the Taliban in particular—at conferences and negotiations is an increasingly acknowledged, crucial element of any macro- or micro-level effort to counter violent extremism.

As noted throughout the report, economic empowerment and other activities designed to increase women's influence in their community can be valuable to countering violent extremism and encouraging more active participation in peacebuilding.

Key to encouraging and enabling greater female activism in efforts to counter violent extremism is facilitating access to formal education, as well as providing avenues for group interaction and collective initiatives. To this end, it is important to utilize technology to help overcome limits imposed by the patriarchy and to provide greater security for women activists. Targeted, application-based education and content sharing will help. More focused, longer-term initiatives that enable

women and men to access and utilize technology, in particular smartphones and tablets, can create the space within which interactions and ideas flow and initiatives form. While the inclusion of men is essential to any effort to address patriarchy and reshape norms, values, roles, and expectations, to get there it is necessary to overcome the current constraints through the creative use of technology that enables women to engage more. Simple efforts, such as creating and fostering online and offline community groups to work in the peacemaking and peacebuilding arena, may be most effective as first steps. Such communities can be created through moderated groups on Facebook and other social media platforms, and facilitated discussions on women in peacemaking and peacebuilding in traditional and non-traditional spaces where women actively gather.

There is a need for the development and dissemination of accessible content in local languages on peacemaking, peacebuilding, and moderation, especially content specific to roles in the Afghan peace process. This content may be presented in audio or video form and ideally would substitute for some of the media content currently broadcast that is disconnected from Afghanistan's context, such as Turkish and Indian TV shows. Also to be encouraged is the active sourcing and placing of women's perspectives in televised and other media-based discussions related to both violent extremism and peacemaking. Within this content

development and engagement effort, it is important to factor in women who are caught on the violent extremist side or who live in areas restricted by violent extremist groups. The idea of creating formal and informal opportunities for women on the countering violent extremism side to engage with women associated with violent extremist actors could help enlarge this space. This effort could take the shape of nonmedia events involving women of public stature and activism engaging women who are in the violent extremist orbit.

As the space and need for countering violent extremism activism grow, attention should be given to enhancing the visibility of leading activists in the peacemaking arena so as to inspire and invite imagination. Developing greater knowledge of comparative case studies in other countries, and highlighting inspiration from relevant situations where women have played influential and effective roles in steering communities away from extremism and toward peace, are essential for impact. It is also essential to depolarize the flow of information and recognition of challenges and resolutions from the current urban versus rural setting to a more interactive engagement between the two spheres. This will require bridging the urban-rural gap and initiating engagements in urban settings for activists from rural areas while also encouraging urban activists to reach out directly to rural Afghanistan.

Notes

1. Anne Sweetser, "Afghan Nomad Refugees in Pakistan," *Cultural Survival*, March 1984, www.culturalsurvival.org/publications /cultural-survival-quarterly/afghan-nomad-refugees-pakistan.

2. Valentine M. Moghadam, "Building Human Resources and Women's Capabilities in Afghanistan: A Retrospect and Prospects," *World Development* 22, no. 6 (1994): 859–87.

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26. This could be in reference to the cordial versus confrontational inside traditional family cultures in Afghanistan. Cultural norms often dictate segregation of even the family space, with the adult men spending their time separate from women even inside the homes. Expression and exhibition of familial affection is also not universal within most Afghan families, and the reference to creating the right atmosphere may be about the need to institute more cordiality. Beyond the intimate family arrangements, this reference could refer to the use of emotional bonds to dissuade from destructive actions.

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Participation in violence and, conversely, efforts at peacebuilding in Afghanistan have historically been dominated by men. Today, the country exhibits a growing space in which women actively contribute to society beyond the immediate confines of the home and their local community. Based on interviews with 350 respondents—more than 90 percent women—in a mix of urban and rural communities across seven provinces, this report sought to understand and explain the emerging role of Afghan women in countering (or supporting) violent extremism and in working for peace. Among the many key findings is a widespread belief that limited acceptance of women's roles in the public sphere continues to be the primary obstacle to greater activism of women in pursuit of peacemaking.

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