



Colonel Samsoor is the commander of Police District 9 and has been a police officer for 31 years. Freba works in the police station in District 9 in Kabul. Photo: Ellie Kealey/Oxfam

WOMEN AND PEACE BUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN

Building local and national-level peace with the meaningful participation of women

Conflict has destroyed countless lives in Afghanistan. Searching for an elusive peace is a focus for many; but women have often been left with no voice, with the result that a fair and equitable end to conflict remains out of reach. Within and Without the State is working with women to support their meaningful participation in local and national-level peace building.

CONTEXT

Afghanistan has suffered decades of violent conflict. Despite billions of dollars in development aid since the US-led intervention started in 2001, Afghanistan's institutions remain fragile, governance and the rule of law are weak, basic services are lacking for the majority of the population, and the country's future remains uncertain.

At least a part of the problem has been that many development interventions have not understood the deeply rooted local power dynamics. Models of governance and theories of change exported from international experience have had little traction because they have not reflected the reality or complexity of the Afghan context.

Starting in 2011, Oxfam's 'Within and Without the State' (WWS) project has explored an approach to governance work in Afghanistan that is more firmly rooted in local power dynamics and cultural norms.

Women's rights and peace building in Afghanistan

Since 2001, the government and the international community have been actively engaged in promoting women's rights in Afghanistan. To date, the national peace council has only nine female members (out of 70). Oxfam's research has demonstrated that women play only a small role in peace building and reconciliation in the public sphere and, and at a community level, women are usually only involved in settling disputes in the private sphere.¹

Women often lack access to legal recourse because of prejudice, weak law enforcement, and corruption. The use of unofficial, traditional, religious, and tribal justice systems to settle disputes involving women is common. In some instances, a rape victim may find herself in court accused and condemned to death by stoning for immoral behaviour, and girls are sometimes given away in marriage in a practice known as *Ba'ad* to settle disputes between communities.

Attempts to negotiate a peace agreement between the government and opposition groups, and involving regional and international stakeholders, are ongoing. The peace process involves both formal and informal political mechanisms and structures such as the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP), the High Peace Council (HPC), and local-level initiatives that are tackling grievances affecting peace and stability at the community level.

However, women, youth, and other marginalized groups find themselves excluded from peace processes at all levels, not just national, which means that their interests are not being adequately represented, which undermines the chances of the process being successful. WWS in Afghanistan has been seeking to address this.

WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE STATE

Within and Without the State (WWS) is a five-year global initiative (2011–2016) funded by DfID's Conflict, Humanitarian and Security programme. It has enabled Oxfam to pilot a variety of approaches to working with civil society to promote more accountable governance in conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

PHASE I

Phase I of WWS in Afghanistan recognized peace processes as a unique opportunity to strengthen the voice and rights of poor and marginalized groups in society. For this to happen, such groups need representation and effective organizations able to engage with those in power.

Phase I focused on:

- Building the capacity of civil society actors and organizations to work together to engage positively with power-holders at different levels of governance;
- Building the capacity and confidence of individual women and youth;
- Facilitating opportunities – at national, provincial, and community levels – for civil society, particularly marginalized groups such as women and youth, to engage with power-holders involved in the formal peace process and in conflict mediation at community level.

It did this primarily through supporting community-level ‘women peace promoters’ (WPP) to participate in local conflict resolution mechanisms; and providing strategic and financial support to the Afghan Civil Society Organisation Network for Peace (ACSONP) at the national level.

PHASE II

After the end of phase I, a macro-level conflict analysis workshop was held in Kabul in November 2014 with civil society organizations, research institutes and Oxfam staff. This was held at an interesting time in the country’s history as the National Unity Government (NUG) had recently been sworn in, representing a somewhat fragile alliance of the two main Presidential candidates who had been in opposition, bringing an end to the long drawn out and highly contested election process of 2014.

The conflict analysis noted that work on gender seems to have been misrepresented/misinterpreted as a conflict between men and women; that civil society in Afghanistan lacks many channels of influence with the people and groups identified as having real power and influence (especially at local level); and that ‘traditional’ or non-constituted civil society is often squeezed out by a focus on more formally recognized civil society organizations, despite having unique reserves of legitimacy and local influence.

Given all the insights from phase I, WWS phase II at the local level broadened the concept of women peace promoters at the local level to ‘community peace promoters’ (CPPs) to better encapsulate the reality of needing to work with a cross-section of community members and engage in much more thorough power analysis as part of programme activities.

At the national level, the project was reshaped in the light of the new NUG and sought to support better power analysis of the new stakeholders engaged in the national-level peace process and to explore entry points for civil society influence.

Phase II focussed on three main objectives:

- Women and youth at the local level in Kunduz are empowered and equipped with knowledge, capacity and confidence to engage effectively with a range of local power holders including those who may otherwise block their

participation and linked constructively with provincial peace committees and any provincial and national peace processes;

- The Afghan Civil Society Network for Peace (ACSONP) members at the national level are able to effectively engage with formal and informal institutions and positively influence and support peace building efforts and Community Peace Promoters;
- Learning and insights from WWS are captured and actively disseminated for use by other Oxfam projects and external agencies.

BUILDING LOCAL-LEVEL PEACE WITH THE ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF WOMEN

During the first phase of WWS, there was an emphasis on working through the *ulema* (religious leaders) in order to engage in community-level peace building. WWS established contact between *ulema* and women peace activists, opening an enabling environment for women to interact with *ulema* who have legitimacy to shape public opinions and change the attitudes and perceptions of community elders to accept women's social participation. The violation of women's rights, community conflicts and retributive justice were all highlighted as issues the programme needed to focus on. The second phase of WWS began in 2014, this time focusing solely on Kunduz province.

The Empowerment Centre for Women (ECW)

The Empowerment Centre for Women is a grassroots organization in Afghanistan, established with the aim of supporting and providing resources to Afghan women and girls to help them to become empowered, economically independent and socially active.

The ECW vision is to empower Afghan women, with a mission to support the expansion of assets and capabilities of Afghan women to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives

Gender and Conflict Sensitive Power Analysis

Before the second phase of community-level work began, ECW conducted a Gender and Conflict Sensitive Power Analysis to measure women's participation and role in the power and conflict dynamics of Kunduz province. The analysis mapped actors' perception of gender issues, their understanding of women's role in peace building and the conflict resolution process at different levels (e.g. family, village, society, district and provincial). They also analyzed the gender role within the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in the nine communities of Kunduz.

This showed that existing tribal, cultural and ethnic enmities are compounded by discrimination against women. On reflection of the phase of WWS, it was decided by the project team that a more gender-sensitive lens had to be employed when viewing local conflicts. As a result, ECW has focused on training and coordination meetings with CPPs to support them in engaging with local power holders.

Training mixed groups of community peace promoters

ECW established nine groups of CPPs comprised of women, elders, youth, *ulema*, teachers and local officials. Each group of about 20 (roughly half of them women) is divided into four focus groups themed on health, education, security and the resolution of conflicts. They work in different areas of Kunduz city with the aim of supporting the participation of women in local peace-building efforts. People were selected to ensure a good spread of both elders and youth leaders, housewives and doctors in addition to Provincial Peace Council members and government officials to improve dialogue between state power and local communities. After establishing the CPP circles, ECW provided trainings on conflict analysis, conflict mediation, communication, networking, leadership, advocacy, ending violence against women, law and the UN Security Council 1325 Resolution, peace building skills and women's rights from the perspective of Islam. They also covered marriage rights, inheritance rights, *Mahr* rights (payments by the groom's family to the bride), husband's and wife's joint rights and education rights.

As a result of the project, interviews with CPPs have demonstrated that women can play a greater role than men in mediating family disputes, especially disputes between women. Examples were provided where female CPPs were able to mediate in marital disputes; one of these involved mediation between two wives in a polygamous family unit.

Fatima, a participant in the ECW training: 'This programme had a very big effect on us. In the past, I couldn't discuss community issues with men or talk and stand in front of them, but now I can discuss and talk with them and ask for our rights.'

Inclusion of key stakeholders

Having identified the key stakeholders, monthly coordination meetings were held at the provincial level by ECW between CPPs, local police, local power holders, Provincial Peace Council members and the relevant governmental authorities. These occurred in addition to quarterly peace hearings and the provincial peace campaign conducted by ECW.

'Before, I didn't feel a sense of responsibility and didn't dare to get involved in dispute resolution but now my level of awareness has increased and I consider it my job to get involved in resolving disputes.'

–Female CPP, Kunduz

'At first there were prohibitions from my family...from [working with] this group because of the insecurity and because of the lack of trust between the people and the government...but now I am encouraged by my family and my friends.'

–Female CPP, Kunduz

'Women can be successful in some small family and social disputes but if there are disputes between powerful men or tribal elders then the women cannot interfere'

–Female CPP, Kunduz

One example of a successful outcome was when ECW complained that a male police officer was representing the police at meetings of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Commission at the Women's Affairs Department. The protest was successful and an agreement was reached where it was understood the police at such sensitive meetings should be represented by a women police officer.



Women police officers in weapons training, Afghanistan. Photo:Ellie Kealy/Oxfam

'No one had anticipated the fall of Kunduz to the Taliban in 2015. Through its longstanding presence in the area, ECW was able to restart activities and adapted the project's approach to work with the government and communities asking the key question of why the Taliban had been able to get such a strong foothold in Kunduz city and use this as an opportunity to demand for more sustained and inclusive peace.'

Sodaba Khairkhowa WWS
Afghanistan Project
Coordinator

Local-level post-conflict peace hearing

In September 2015, the Taliban captured and held large areas of the city of Kunduz. This was publicized widely in the international news due to the attack on an MSF hospital in the city.

On November 24, 2015, a peace hearing conducted in Kunduz province was attended by 70 and included delegations from the Governorate of Kunduz, Provincial Council, Court, Justice Department, Information and Culture, Haj and Endowment, Provincial Peace Council. The municipality, media and civil society were also present in this peace hearing. The purpose was to highlight the social, political, security and economic issues of Kunduz after its collapse and to know relevant administrations' priorities for the future. This peace hearing also paved the way for CPPs to access the authorities after the collapse of Kunduz.

It helped governmental authorities understand that there is a strong desire from civil society for better follow-up regarding government work for the improvement of security, social and economic issues. CPPs questioned those in authority about how the situation in Kunduz was allowed to deteriorate so rapidly.

Broadcast at a national-level conference

On 24 December 2015, ECW conducted a debate called 'National Level Interaction'. The debate was conducted in a studio of the Saba TV network and 70 people attended, including Community Peace Promoters along with representatives of political parties, university students, religious leaders, civil society activists, relevant ministries and journalists. The purpose of this debate was to provide Afghans with a clearer picture of the reasons behind the collapse of Kunduz and to bring the attention of the government and others to Kunduz province, both at a national and an international level, through engagement with high-ranking authorities in this open debate.

The panel, which included state and security personnel, publicly committed to work on more inclusive security planning for Kunduz province. This was the first debate at national level which focused on Kunduz. The programme was broadcast nationally by Saba Radio and Saba TV, as well as by Roshani TV broadcasting only in Kunduz province.

Case study

'A woman had a dispute with her husband due to lack of payment of life subsistence for her and her four children. The woman with her maternal uncle and her husband along with his father came to the coordination meeting of the established circle in Kunduz. A representative of the education department and the provincial Independent Human Rights Commission were present. The woman told her story and complained to the audience about not receiving support from her husband who married a second wife and now lives with her. His first wife and her four children are living in one of his friend's houses, where she does not want to live any more. Her husband was convinced that he made a mistake and he promised to support his wife and his children. Their case was resolved peacefully.'

–Participant during a coordination meeting of CPPs

BUILDING NATIONAL-LEVEL PEACE

As well as working in Kunduz and using this as a pilot province to test the effectiveness of working with mixed groups of peace promoters and working with religious leaders to promote women's involvement, WWS has been working with a national coalition to promote peace.

ACSONP

The Afghanistan Civil Society Organisations Network for Peace (ACSONP) is a network of around 140 civil society organizations and has been involved with the WWS project in lobbying and policy work with national-level peace actors since 2011. Its aim is for members to be able to effectively engage with formal and informal institutions and positively influence and support peace building efforts and Community Peace Promoters. ACSONP is engaged in lobbying and advocacy work with peace actors such as members of the High Peace Council (HPC) and Members of Parliament.

Routes to peace with policy and power mapping

Phase II of WWS in Afghanistan was designed to adapt effectively to the changes in power following the recent formation of the National Unity Government. Although the recent alliance between the two main presidential candidates Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah put an end to the election stalemate that brought the country to a standstill for most of 2014, the alliance was fragile, bringing together such opposing sides as a result of protracted election process and deeper ethnic and political fault-lines in the country. This posed both challenges for reaching a sustainable peace process at the national level in Afghanistan, but also allowed civil society to gain more entry points for influence if they could effectively and legitimately represent the views of the population – and crucially women’s rights organizations – to ensure their voices were heard during any future peace negotiations.

In order to engage more effectively with power holders following the formation of the National Unity Government, Oxfam worked alongside ACSO NP to organize a policy and power mapping workshop in August 2015 to bring together a diverse range of actors, and to discuss the challenges Afghanistan faces in building peace. The conference was designed to explore where various actors stood on the subject of peace building and to learn what they perceived as impediments to peace. These actors included the High Peace Council (HPC), representatives of the NUG, independent civil society and human rights activists, women’s rights (WROs) and civil society organizations (CSOs), as well as several anti-government elements, which was in itself a major breakthrough as these groups have not traditionally been involved in such face-to-face discussions, previously reverting to confrontational means to voice their opposition.

Due to the diverse nature of attendees, they were divided into their respective groups, where they shared their views and inputs on questions developed prior to the conference. The questions were broad, ranging from ‘Have women been involved in peace talks and in designing the process? If yes, what were their roles? If not, why not? How can we best involve women?’ to ‘Considering the current situation, what would be the top issues actors involved should consider? How to consolidate and integrate the priorities that meet multiple actors’ interests, positions and needs?’

This process showed ACSO NP project staff that there is a lack of consensus and political will for an Afghan-led peace process within the Afghan government. Another learning outcome was that the roles of local-level political leaders and parties have been ignored in peace negotiations to date. Oxfam staff have also come to understand that Afghan intellectuals and key stakeholders have been marginalized in the peace talks and process. It was felt that the peace talks have been co-opted and monopolized by a limited group of elite elements in Afghanistan’s various regional power constellations and have been harnessed for their own political leverage. Another sector-specific learning was that women and civil society organizations have been sidelined.

Out of this process, the actors involved recommended that:

- ACSO NP should create a volunteer team of advocates consisting of civil society and human rights activists, politicians, as well as journalists, to advocate for developing an inclusive Peace Process Strategy, Action Plan and Logical Framework Approach. ACSO NP should launch advocacy meetings to

‘We knew that the whole architecture of the government had changed significantly as a result of formation of the National Unity Government. We had a unique window of opportunity to exert influence of civil society on the peace process and to demand an inclusive, sustained and consultative peace, so we took it. We had to think politically and engage with, at times, uncomfortable power holders.’

Annabel Morrissey WWS
Global Programme
Coordinator

put these into practice;

- The role of women in peace building was also noted, with it being suggested that there is a need to push for the implementation of the National Action Plan for UNSCR 1325, which would provide a stronger and more formal foundation from which to advocate increased women's participation in the peace talks;
- WROs and CSOs need to utilize international aid to create advocacy tools and mechanisms, alongside a greater focus on their advocacy messaging, in order to influence women's social and political inclusion at the level of peace negotiations, as well as in other initiatives on gender.

'When we decided to do the policy and power mapping, it was very challenging to work out how to bring such different stakeholders with such competing interests together, such as political parties, conservative members in the high peace council, and women's groups. In the past, they have often felt themselves to be in opposition to each other, so bringing them to sit at one table was a daunting prospect. Through our work alongside ACSNOP we managed to navigate how to do this, and by bringing them together for a collective aim – how to bring sustainable peace – we rallied them around an agenda beyond their own immediate interests. Now although the formal peace process is slow, we do have a civil society and a women's rights organization representative in the quadrilateral peace talks, which is what we had been pushing for.'

Sodaba Khairkhowa WWS Afghanistan Project Coordinator

National-level lobbying meetings

Following the policy and power mapping, ACSNOP held meetings between high-level presidency representatives, high peace council members, media, civil society organizations, women-led organizations and activists as well as social activists. These were to highlight and discuss women's and youth problems (at the grassroots and local levels) in the peace process, to advocate for its solution at the national level, to advocate for the role of women and civil society participation in the peace process, and to identify influential people in peace building at both local and national levels. As a result, a volunteer Advocacy Group was set up, positive suggestions and recommendations for changes in the peace strategy and policy of the High Peace Council and government were put forward.

At the end of the project, ACSNOP signed an MoU between the High Peace Council and the Administrative Affairs of the Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan aimed at establishing a long-term collaboration between the three sides. As a result of this, the Director of Political, Social and Cultural Affairs agreed to share the concerns of participants (the lack of women and CSOs' membership in the negotiation team of the High Peace Council) with the President.

The peace process today

At the beginning of 2016, Afghanistan launched an official quadrilateral peace process with China, Pakistan and the US. A key victory was the agreement and nomination of a civil society representative and a women's rights organization representative. Civil society organizations were also gathered to start inputting in a second track of peace process negotiations. The Taliban have not engaged in

these four nation talks and so the process has currently stalled. However, it is clear that initial foundations have been laid for the importance of civil society and women's rights organizations voices to be included in any future peace negotiations.

LESSONS LEARNED

Adapt the programme to make the most of key moments in time

WWS phase II was very much built on lessons learned from phase I, especially in terms of how best to engage women in local-level dispute resolution and the role of a CSO network in shaping the peace process. However, WWS in phase II had to consistently adapt and readapt to changes in the political and security outlook at the national and local levels in Afghanistan throughout 2014 and 2015.

The national-level component was designed to respond to a change in power at the national level and to urge that a new government put women and civil society's role in any peace process at the forefront. At the local level, while the fall of Kunduz to the Taliban impacted the project significantly and somewhat restricted the space and scope of work in Kunduz, especially around the link between formal and informal dispute resolution structures, ECW was also able to use this incident to advocate more widely for the government to be held to account for the causes behind the fall of Kunduz and to make commitments for a more inclusive planning for peace and stability in the future.

Work with men to support women's involvement

The Gender Conflict Sensitive Power Analysis carried out in 2015 revealed actors' perception of gender issues, their understanding of women's role in peace building and the conflict resolution process at different levels (e.g. family, village, society, district and provincial). Women's greater involvement in family-level dispute resolution was seen to be a building block for involvement at other levels. The programme switched from just training women to training men and women so that men were supportive of women's involvement. Women were empowered to speak out in mixed groups as a result of the work ECW was able to do. This in part arose from their participation in 'jirgas' or community council meetings when they were empowered by ECW trainings to have confidence to speak out.

Use detailed power analysis to shape activities

The second phase of WWS was itself designed in the light of a recently conducted macro-level conflict analysis. This highlighted the influence and power of different stakeholders in Afghanistan and helped the team to map out the different potential scenarios for peace. It encouraged us to think politically and to work with outside-of-the-box allies in order to leverage influence.

At the national level, WWS partners carried out detailed power mapping of the key players in the peace process to thoroughly inform them who needed to be invited to key meetings. They then used this information to determine a strategy which ensured key local and national figures were included in their plans.

At the local level, a gender- and conflict-sensitive power analysis which formed the baseline for the project was essential to identify the blockers of women's

involvement in dispute resolution and identify the key stakeholders to engage throughout the project.

Work with unusual suspects in order to influence change

At both the national and local levels, WWS engaged with influential, but sometimes outside-of-the-box allies in order to exert influence on women's role in peace building. At the national level, this involved engaging anti-government elements in policy and power mapping, bringing them to the table with mainstream politicians and other stakeholders.

At the local level, initially the *ulema* were suspicious of women being empowered, but came to see they were enhancing their own role as change agents in their communities if they supported women. The *ulema* were powerful advocates to community leaders of the role of women in local-level peace mediation. As a result, women took a more active role in *shuras* or local-level justice processes. Training was run which included women's rights from an Islamic perspective. (For more information on this, see WWS case study 'Working with Religious Leaders in Afghanistan: The process of working with the *ulema* to support women's representation').²

Work with the media to leverage wider influence

Throughout the time of WWS in Afghanistan, working with the media has been included as a vital part of our work. Linking up with local and national broadcasters has enabled programmes to achieve two goals. The first is raising awareness of women's involvement in the search for peace. The second is as leverage to engage powerful local and national actors in supporting women's role the peace process. ECW organized a series of local and national TV and radio debates with panels of civil society representatives, academics, Islamic scholars and prominent women's rights activists. There is some evidence that these activities helped to increase government commitment and responsiveness towards women's issues.

Develop more stringent MEAL systems for remote management

The fall of Kunduz as well as the security restrictions before and subsequently meant it was extremely difficult to access reliable data on the project. WWS chose to run an iterative real-time evaluation by external consultants to evaluate programme activities on the ground and support management to bring remedial actions. However, at the time the project started, it was not anticipated that Oxfam would not be able to visit Kunduz throughout the duration of the project, so one weakness is that better remote management and monitoring systems were not developed at the beginning of the project.

Linking local and national-level peace processes

WWS has found that linking peace processes at the grassroots level in Kunduz with key stakeholders at both the local and national levels is an effective way of highlighting the importance of women's participation. Linking the work of ACSONP and ECW has enabled the two organizations to have more impact than if they were just working alone.

NOTES

- 1 E. Cameron and J. Kamminga. 2014. Behind Closed Doors: The risk of denying women a voice in determining Afghanistan's future. Oxfam. <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/behind-closed-doors-the-risk-of-denying-women-a-voice-in-determining-afghanista-335875>
- 2 T. Donnelly and B. Osman. 2016. Working With Religious Leaders in Afghanistan: The process of working with the ulema to support women's representation. Oxfam. <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/working-with-religious-leaders-in-afghanistan-the-process-of-working-with-the-u-593378>

© Oxfam International September 2016

This case study was written by Richard Chilvers, Sodaba Khairkhowa and Annabel Morrissey. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of ACSONP, Babrak Osman and ECW in its production. It is part of a series of papers and reports written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email Dr Jo Rowlands at jrowlands@oxfam.org.uk

This publication is copyright but the text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged. Email policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk.

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-0-85598-780-0
Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of 18 affiliates and 2 observer organizations networked together in more than 90 countries as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit www.oxfam.org