



GENDER ALERT ON COVID-19 AFGHANISTAN

May 7, 2020

Issue III: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

Following the previous Gender Alerts,¹ UN Women issues this third alert to continue to highlight the gender specific impacts of COVID-19 in Afghanistan. This alert focuses on the implications of COVID-19 from a women, peace and security (WPS) perspective. It encompasses the overarching gendered impacts as described in previous alerts, but also outlines risks specific to women, women’s civil society organizations, and rights defenders focused on building and sustaining long term peace in Afghanistan, as well as opportunities to ensure women can access their rights to leadership in decision-making and building the future of their country. It highlights the urgent need to ensure the continued implementation of Afghanistan’s National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2019-2021), as well as how its implementation can contribute to long-term responses to COVID-19 that promote gender equality.

The alert concludes with a set of recommendations for consideration by national and international stakeholders to ensure the implementation of the full scope of the WPS agenda² during this critical period in Afghanistan. UN

Women Afghanistan is committed to supporting the Government of Afghanistan, the United Nations, and international and national partners to advance implementation of the WPS agenda. UN Women aims to support women affected by conflict and crisis by elevating their leadership, expertise and experiences to inform and shape progress towards sustainable peace and development in Afghanistan. This alert contributes to this aim by providing a basis for an informed discussion on the impact of COVID-19 across the full scope of the WPS agenda, including its impact on women, women’s civil society and rights defenders.

CONTEXT & EMERGING GENDER IMPACTS

The United Nations Security Council, through adoption of its eighth resolution on WPS in 2015, recognized that pandemics, through increasing globalization, were an emerging threat in the peace and security landscape.³ During that same year, Afghanistan adopted its first National Action Plan on 1325 (2015-2022). The National Action Plan details the impacts of armed conflict on women in Afghanistan -

¹Issue I: Gender Alert on COVID 19 in Afghanistan: Ensuring a Gender Sensitive Humanitarian Response, UN Women (24 April 2020) and Issue II: Gender Alert on COVID 19 in Afghanistan: Ensuring Access to Services for Survivors of Violence Against Women and Girls, UN Women (30 April 2020).

²UN Women supports women’s full and equal representation and participation in all levels of peace processes and security efforts. UN Women’s work on women, peace, and security is guided by 10 UN Security Council resolutions—1325, 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106, 2122, 2242, 2467, and 2493—and is bolstered by a number of related normative frameworks, which make up the broader women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda.

³United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015) recognizing global nature of pandemics as part of the evolving peace and security landscape. See also UN Secretary-General’s policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women (9 April 2020).

from vulnerability to sexual and gender based violence to entrenched marginalization on account of limited access to justice, healthcare services, education, and employment opportunities.⁴ Under its provisions on relief and recovery, the National Action Plan outlines the lack of adequate economic resources for women and calls for the creation of funding mechanisms, economic development opportunities, and the equal provision of relief and recovery services.⁵

Overall, the existing gender inequalities in Afghanistan that are caused or compounded by the ongoing intersection of armed conflict and humanitarian crisis only threaten to worsen amidst COVID-19.⁶ In the latest report to the Security Council, the Secretary-General highlighted the continued impact of the conflict on women, with women and children comprising 42 per cent of civilian casualties.⁷ And, despite a lack of data and reporting, the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence, including related to the conflict remains a pressing concern. Indeed, “chronic instability, gender inequality, displacement, inadequate services, access constraints and discriminatory practices” fuels under-reporting of conflict related sexual violence in Afghanistan.⁸ The United Nations continues to document cases of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls committed by parties to the conflict.⁹ Finally, displacement of women rights defenders due to conflict,¹⁰ as well as continued coordinated attacks and targeted killings of women leaders and rights defenders demonstrate the difficult context in which these women work, at great risk to their own lives. These and other trends, as set out in the previous two gender alerts, all threaten to worsen amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 also arrives during critical political junctures, including the prospect of an intra-Afghan dialogue after the signing of a peace agreement between the Taliban and the United States in February. As progress hastens, including with the appointment of a negotiating team by the Government of Afghanistan, COVID-19 has also sparked a call from the United Nations Secretary General for a global ceasefire to support collective responses and solidarity to combat the virus. Today, as in the past, Afghan women leaders, activists, and civil society representatives continue to consistently and courageously advocate for their voices to be heard, their priorities to be addressed, and their agency to be recognized through inclusion and meaningful participation in processes aimed at achieving peace and

stability in Afghanistan. The impact of COVID-19 on their ability to continue to influence peace and security processes, including pandemic responses, is essential to ensuring that those processes and responses protect the rights of women and respond to their evolving needs.

ISSUES FOR ATTENTION

The women, peace and security agenda and its implementation must remain a priority amidst immediate pandemic security, health and humanitarian responses.¹¹ The imperatives of the WPS agenda require continued investment in civic space and protection mechanisms for women’s civil society and peacebuilders. In addition, pandemic responses must be informed by prevention, protection and equal and meaningful participation and leadership of women. This is critical as the Government of Afghanistan moves towards an intra-Afghan dialogue to reach an agreement to end the conflict with the Taliban.

Women’s meaningful participation across peace and security processes and in decision-making in Afghanistan is not only central to ensuring that solutions and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic address the gaps noted throughout this and previous alerts, but also to ensure that peace in Afghanistan can last and women are able to exercise their rights to participate in decision-making about the future of their country. Balancing immediate public health concerns and the long-term impact an inclusive dialogue and peace agreement can have on the future of Afghanistan is a critical task. The below sections provide preliminary highlights across WPS issues of primary concern among partners.

Women’s meaningful participation in an intra-Afghan dialogue

Despite improvements in women’s representation and participation in public and social life in Afghanistan over the last 19 years, the foundational building blocks for women’s meaningful participation in peace processes remain under pressure, including equality before the law, broader inclusivity, security and protection from violence, and access to essential and social services.¹² These ongoing challenges and the continued lack of women’s meaningful participation in efforts to resolve conflict and build peace means there are significant possibilities for regression, particularly as it relates to the negotiations around peace with the

⁴Afghanistan’s National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 (2015-2022) (hereinafter NAP 1325 (2015-2022), page 2. See also Afghanistan’s National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 Phase II (2019-2022) (hereinafter NAP 1325, Phase II (2019-2022), pages 6-8, pillar 1, strategic objective 2.

⁵Ibid., NAP 1325 (2015-2022), page 7 and NAP 1325, Phase II (2019-2022), page 8-9, pillar 4, strategic objective 4.

⁶See UN Secretary-General’s policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women (9 April 2020); Njoki Kinyanjui, COVID-19: a double burden for women in conflict settings, London School of Economics (23 April 2020); Gender Implications Of Covid-19 Outbreaks In Development And Humanitarian Settings, Care (April 2020).

⁷Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security (S/2020/2010), para. 36.

⁸Ibid., para 80.

⁹Report of the Secretary General on conflict-related sexual violence (S/2019/280).

¹⁰Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of women human rights defenders (A/HRC/40/60).

¹¹UN Secretary-General’s policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women (9 April 2020). See also United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015) recognizing global nature of pandemics as part of the evolving peace and security landscape.

¹²For an overview of the “building blocks” required for women’s meaningful participation in peace processes, see UN Women, Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Women’s Meaningful Participation in Negotiating Peace and the Implementation of Peace Agreements (2018).

Taliban, and the importance of continued advocacy for their rights and preservation of efforts towards an inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue.

Direct Participation, Inclusion & Coalition Building

Despite an initial appointment of five women to the official negotiating team,¹³ integration of gender considerations and women's rights protections, as well as broader inclusion and consultation remains an area where concerted efforts will be needed. COVID-19 has resulted in restrictions on movement and public gatherings. This creates new challenges for coalition building across women's civil society organizations to facilitate mechanisms and modalities for broad inclusion and influence over a potential intra-Afghan dialogue. In addition, cultivating a safe civic space, and promoting transparency will be critical to ensuring that ongoing planning of a process to achieve peace with the Taliban reflects broad inclusivity.

To date, many strategies aimed at fostering and preserving inclusivity have focused on methods and modalities that require in-person engagement, diplomacy and dialogue. All actors will need to adapt current strategies to widen women's and other groups ability to participate, influence, and monitor the efforts of the conflict parties toward a peaceful settlement, across all constituent issues related to peace, including confidence building, ceasefire arrangements, humanitarian access, prisoner exchanges and more. Finally, as the drive towards facilitating peace-related dialogues in an online space accelerates, it is essential to recognize the limited reach of access to technology in Afghanistan and respond with the required level of innovation and dedication to inclusion. With only 14% of the population having access to the internet, the online architecture in Afghanistan is limited and primarily restricted to urban areas.¹⁴

Challenges for continued peacemaking and peace-building at the local level

Further restrictions on women's movement and assembly for public health effectively means that women's organizations previously working on building momentum and coalitions to ensure their rights are reflected in any upcoming intra-Afghan dialogue are in many ways on hold. UN Women's partners working at the district and provincial level have halted local level peacebuilding work and convening aimed at strengthening the role of women with little to no education in advocating for their rights, as well as elevating their experiences and perspectives on peace to the national level. At the same time, some women's organizations are out of necessity and dedication to the communities they serve pivoting and responding to the immediate

needs of those communities. These realities pose operational, financial, and safety risks for existing women's organizations who will require steadfast support to weather these challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic creates a unique scenario where physical distancing and required public health measures necessarily stymie this momentum towards organization at a critical juncture in progress towards an Afghan peace process.

These challenges also extend to the underlying technical, operational and financial hurdles presented during this period. Women's civil society organizations, human rights defenders, victims' associations, and other partners will require exceptional support to overcome the increased individual economic, social and other pressures, as well as the regular challenges of implementing programmes in Afghanistan. To the extent feasible, initiatives such as the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund COVID-19 Emergency Response Window, which includes Afghanistan as an eligible country, should be elevated and localized to deepen much needed support to women peacebuilders at all levels.

State police and security forces enforcement of lockdown orders and the impact on women's civil society and rights defenders

Across the world, there have been increasing reports of rights violations by police, including excessive use of force, targeting of particularly vulnerable groups and failure to take measures to protect those most vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁵ Issues specifically related to access to services for survivors of violence and engagement with police and judicial services during this period were highlighted in the **previous alert**.¹⁶ However, in Afghanistan, women and others who are rights defenders, journalist, activists, political and social leaders and women's movement builders also experience alarming levels of violence, including public harassment, threats of violence, and direct targeting and assassination for the work that they do, including challenging traditional gender norms and stereotypes in both the public and private sphere.¹⁷ This is true for women in political leadership positions, serving as police and in the armed forces, as well as civil society and other sectors.

As impunity for these ongoing violations and other forms of violence against women remain widespread, the addition of central lockdown orders enforced by police and security forces can leave citizens, particularly women and other vulnerable groups, at risk of victimization through abuse of power and lack of recourse. It also can prevent documenta-

¹³"UN Envoy Welcomes Afghan Negotiation Team," TOLO News, 1 April 2020 (accessed 5 May 2020).

¹⁴See Individuals using the internet, World Bank (accessed 5 May, 2020).

¹⁵Statement of the Special Rapporteurs on COVID-19 security measures no excuse for excessive use of force (17 April 2020).

¹⁶Gender Alert on COVID 19 in Afghanistan | Issue II: Ensuring Access to Services for Survivors of Violence Against Women and Girls, UN Women (30 April 2020).

¹⁷For one example, see Violence against Women in Afghanistan's 2018 Parliamentary Elections, UN Women and Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) (2019) and Violence Against Women in Elections in Afghanistan: An IFES Assessment, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2019).

tion of violations or early detection of spikes in targeting due to lack of reporting and lack of access to those affected by such violations. It is imperative to ensure that orders are clear and promulgated with clear oversight and accountability mechanisms in line with national and international law. Engaging women and vulnerable community members' in the design of security policies and risk mitigation strategies to ensure appropriate oversight and respect for the law amongst security forces enforcing lockdown orders is a critical first step in accountability.

Relief & Recovery: Women's leadership and meaningful participation in the design and delivery of humanitarian assistance

In the context of the COVID-19 response, it is imperative to not only commit to the consideration of women's needs in the design and implementation of relief and recovery programs, but to engage them early and often. Ensuring women's full involvement in humanitarian response planning, leadership and delivery is essential in shaping and delivering a response which meets the humanitarian needs of both women, and men.

Recalling the dynamics outlined in the previous alert, **Issue I: Gender Alert on COVID 19 in Afghanistan: Ensuring a Gender Sensitive Humanitarian Response**, early data indicates that women and girls face distinct and increased risks due to COVID-19 from health to the economy, security to social protection, including increasing levels of violence. In addition, it is estimated that the pandemic will result in a one-third reduction in progress towards ending gender-based violence.¹⁸ Moreover, as the levels of violence against women are expected to increase, dynamics are also becoming more complex, as the COVID-19 virus may also be used as a threat by abusers to exploit women's inability to seek help for risk of exposure. As noted in the previous alert,¹⁹ increasing challenges for accessing essential police, justice and health services must be addressed.²⁰ Lack of ability to focus on prevention as well as protection limits the possibilities for transformative change. In Afghanistan, among 65,045 individuals displaced due to conflict,²¹ 7% are displaced in hard to reach areas, which increases vulnerability and prevents access to health and other services.²²

At the same time, women remain significantly excluded in the design and delivery of relief and recovery, including humanitarian action, such as ad hoc economic packages in crisis contexts. Failure to consult or failing to action the priorities outlined by women risks outcomes that are not only unsustainable, but further entrench gender inequality

in the long-term. Without adequate levels of women's representation in pandemic planning and response, their specific needs will largely go unmet. Assessing, coordinating, and responding to the trends identified and discussed throughout this alert and previous alerts therefore provides an opportunity for stakeholders to come together and integrate women's human rights and gender considerations across their responses in the immediate, medium and long-term.

Intersectionality and Engaging Marginalized Groups in Pandemic Responses

Across each of the gender alerts, UN Women has raised the need to prioritize intersectional approaches to analyzing and assessing the needs of women, and meaningfully engaging their leadership and experience in the design of relevant responses. This requires acknowledging and addressing the distinct positions and situations of women in Afghanistan. This includes, but is not limited to, women who are elderly, living with physical and intellectual disabilities, indigenous, in prisons, returnees, refugees, and migrants and internally displaced. One of the major impacts of COVID-19 as it relates to engaging communities and those most vulnerable in peacebuilding and pandemic response efforts is the limitation on direct engagement at the district and local level, and even provincially. Restricted movements for international organizations, as well as non-governmental and civil society organizations, means that accessing populations with little to no access to technology remains nearly impossible, apart from the delivery of essential services and relief. Increased support for implementing partners through increased virtual or phone interactions, technical and operational support for civil society organizations whose activities need to pivot is one temporary measure that can be taken.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following preliminary recommendations reflect an overall need for WPS actors to increase coordination and direct attention to the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of WPS agenda in Afghanistan. In follow up to this brief, UN Women will continue to open dialogues and assess the situation to support international and national partners to ensure that responses result in real impact on the lives of women and girls in line with the WPS agenda. National and international actors can engage and improve the meaningful participation of women and women's civil society in peace and security and humanitarian processes, including in design and delivery of the pandemic response through the following actions:

¹⁸Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage Pandemic threatens achievement of the Transformative Results committed to by UNFPA, UNFPA (27 April 2020).

¹⁹Gender Alert on COVID 19 in Afghanistan | Issue II: Ensuring Access to Services for Survivors of Violence Against Women and Girls, UN Women (30 April 2020).

²⁰UN Secretary-General's policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women (9 April 2020).

²¹See Internal Displacement due to Conflict, OCHA (accessed 5 May 2020) outlining that among those displaced by conflict 20 per cent men, 21 per cent adult women, 60 per cent children under the age of 18.

²²Internal Displacement due to Conflict, OCHA (accessed 5 May 2020).

1. Continue support to the implementation of Afghanistan's National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2019-2021), including by addressing limitations on programming during phases of the COVID-19 crisis.
2. Adapt current strategies on women's meaningful participation in an intra-Afghan dialogue to ensure the protection and promotion of women's human rights, including through technology innovations and new strategies for direct and consultative engagement or coalition building to address the disparate access identified in this alert.
3. Engage women and women's civil society organizations to analyze the current states of lockdown in Afghanistan and elevate the discussion of how operating principles for the security sector can contribute to greater protection of human rights.
4. Consider opportunities for protection mechanisms for women's human rights defenders in the context of COVID-19 and document relevant trends related to their protection.
5. Facilitate rapid and flexible funding opportunities for women's civil society organizations, including providing additional support to implementing partners struggling in the context of lockdown and other measures to implement projects. To the extent feasible, initiatives such as the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund COVID-19 Emergency Response Window, which includes Afghanistan as an eligible country, should be elevated and localized to deepen much needed support to women peacebuilders at all levels.
6. Continue the provision of services for conflict affected and internally displaced women particularly those in hard to reach areas in line with the recommendations of the two previous alerts.
7. Improve coordination system amongst national and international organizations working on COVID-19 on women, peace and security, including as efforts toward an intra-Afghan dialogue intensify to ensure support for inclusivity, respect for gender equality and women's human rights, and the availability of gender expertise and analysis.

