

Intergenerational Peacebuilding Among Women

Leveraging the Power of Collaboration

CASE STUDY: EASTERN AFGHANISTAN

This case study is part of the Intergenerational Peacebuilding Among Women: Leveraging the Power of Collaboration report created by the Women PeaceMakers program.

Intergenerational peacebuilding among women

Compounding crises related to inequalities and violence, health, the environment, and food and water insecurity affect people across generations, and solutions to build lasting peace require the involvement and leadership of people of all generations. This case study forms part of the [Intergenerational Peacebuilding among Women: Leveraging the Power of Collaboration](#) report, focused on understanding how generation and age differences affect peacebuilding work among women by analyzing how women and women's organizations are using intergenerational strategies and partnerships to build peace.

The report argues that women's and women's organizations' intergenerational peacebuilding efforts and potential need to be better recognized, supported, developed, and encouraged at the national and international level alike. Through the case studies, the report shows examples of existing efforts, opportunities, and challenges, with the goal of shaping and influencing how decision-makers and funders approach intergenerational partnerships and strategies as part of peacebuilding work.

The report is co-created as part of the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship, led by the voices and perspectives of the 2021-2022 Women PeaceMaker Fellows. The report drew from the lived realities of women peacebuilders and their partners, and from experts working in the Women, Peace and Security and Youth, Peace and Security spaces. The full report provides both an international analysis and context-specific case studies.

Since 2002, the Kroc IPJ has hosted the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship program. The Fellowship offers a unique opportunity for women peacebuilders to engage in a cycle of learning, practice, research and participation that strengthens peacebuilding partnerships. The Women PeaceMakers Fellowship facilitates impactful collaborations between women peacebuilders from conflict-affected communities and international partner organizations. The Fellows also co-create research intended to shape the peacebuilding field and highlight good practices for peacebuilding design and implementation. This case study was created as part of this process and is also featured in the full Intergenerational Peacebuilding among Women: Leveraging the Power of Collaboration report.

In this case study, Woman PeaceMaker Fellow Heela Yoon explores the state of intergenerational peacebuilding for women in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan. This research demonstrates that there are significant barriers to intergenerational peacebuilding in the Eastern Zone, due to limited funding and capacity in the face of security and social constraints that prevent young women from participating fully.



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Afghanistan Case Study: Intergenerational gaps in grassroots peacebuilding in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan

CASE STUDY

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Highlighting the need for location-specific responses to gaps between generations of peacebuilders in and from Afghanistan



Context

The meaningful inclusion of women and youth is critical for building sustainable peace and facilitating transitional justice.¹ To promote women's inclusion in peace processes and conflict prevention, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in 2000.² Since the adoption of this landmark resolution, UN Member States, including Afghanistan, have adopted National Action Plans (NAPs) to localize the WPS agenda to increase women's effective participation in decision-making processes and executive leadership positions in civil service.³ Since the adoption of Afghanistan's first NAP, implementation of the action plan has been limited by security issues, lack of financial support from the government and lack of intergenerational support at the local and national levels.⁴

In Afghanistan, women's and youths' rights have been severely violated and used by various actors for political gain. As of 2021, Afghanistan is ranked as one of the most challenging places in the world to identify as a woman.⁵ Afghan women and youth are at risk of physical and sexual abuse and exploitation. They also experience serious restrictions in realizing their fundamental human rights, despite the contributions of Afghan women and youth that have shown them to be powerful agents of change benefiting society over the last 20 years.⁶ Although inclusion of women and youth was mentioned explicitly in many dimensions of the Afghan peace talks, their ability to participate at the official local and national levels has not always been meaningful across generational divides, especially in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan.



While senior Afghan women have gained some prominence in peacebuilding activities and discussions over the past 20 years, young Afghan women remain largely absent in these spaces in the context of the eastern provinces. This study highlights such critical gaps in peacebuilding efforts, drawing from data gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted in July 2022 in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan. This focus on the Eastern Zone is important because of its border with Pakistan and the overconcentration of peacebuilding efforts by local and international NGOs in this region. The primary objective of this case study is to inform policymakers and donor organizations about the gaps and opportunities related to intergenerational peacebuilding efforts in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan.

The Eastern Zone of Afghanistan includes Laghman, Kunar and Nangarhar provinces. Nangarhar province is located on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and is bordered by Kunar and Laghman provinces to the north, Pakistan to the east and south, and Kabul and Logar provinces to the west. The topography is composed of rangeland, bare soil and rocky outcrops. The vast majority of the population belongs to the Pashtun ethnic group, though Tajiks, Arabs, Pashai and others reside there as well.⁷ The literacy rate in Nangarhar is 27 percent.⁸ Figures show that approximately 1.7 million people live in the Nangarhar province.⁹ There are no official data for women inhabitants in recent years, but an estimated 701,000 women lived there in 2013.¹⁰

Kunar province is located on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in north-eastern Afghanistan. It borders Nangarhar province to the south, Nuristan province to the north, and Laghman province to the west, and has a border with Pakistan in the east. The province contains mostly mountain ranges covered in natural forest and is home to just under 500,000 people; most of them are Pashtun, with only five percent Nuristani and other minorities.¹¹ The overall literacy rate in Kunar province is 20 percent.¹²

Laghman province is also close to the Pakistan border and has a population of roughly 493,000 people.¹³ Just over half the people are Pashtun, with more than 40 percent Tajik, Pashai and Kata. Like Kunar, Laghman is primarily a mountainous province. The overall literacy rate is highest compared to the other eastern provinces at 31 percent¹⁴ but still falls below Afghanistan's national average of 37 percent.¹⁵

There has been a notable lack of analysis of the situation of women and girls in these provinces specifically. Against such a backdrop, this case study explores the intergenerational challenges that Afghan women and girls face in peacebuilding in the Eastern Zone.¹⁶

Methodology

This case study highlights the gaps and challenges related to intergenerational peacebuilding in the Eastern Zone, particularly those faced by young women, who have been disproportionately marginalized. In addition, this research shows the importance of understanding gender and age dynamics among women peacebuilders and community groups in order to design transformative programs that address the needs of junior and senior peacebuilders in the Eastern Zone. Addressing those needs is key to building a more inclusive, equal and peaceful Afghanistan.

This case study aims to answer the following research question and sub-questions:

- What are the intergenerational challenges Afghan women face in their peacebuilding work at the grassroots level in the Eastern Zone?
- What methods do women use to overcome these challenges and engage in intergenerational peacebuilding initiatives at the grassroots level in the Eastern Zone of Afghanistan?
- Are the gaps and challenges related to women's intergenerational peacebuilding similar in all three eastern provinces of Afghanistan (Kunar, Laghman, and Nangarhar)?

The research proceeded in two phases. First, researchers conducted a literature review of existing research on intergenerational partnerships, interactions and challenges in women's and youth's peacebuilding and development programs in the Eastern Zone. However, very few documents were available. The existing literature, including the Afghanistan NAP, focuses on WPS implementation but does not focus specifically on the Eastern Zone. Second, to gather primary data, researchers conducted in-person and online interviews in the Pashto and Dari languages. The participants were Afghan women and men activists between the ages of 20 and 45 and included senior and junior peacebuilders, local peacebuilders inside Afghanistan, and those who have left the country. The participants were selected due to their involvement in peacebuilding, women's rights, civil society and human rights activities. In-person interviews were conducted in Nangarhar with the support of two local researchers. Due to the current context and high security risk, face-to-face interviews were limited to five to ten participants in Nangarhar province. Online interviews were conducted via various communication platforms, including Zoom, WhatsApp and phone calls, with 55 activists of different ages and genders. Participants were given the option to remain anonymous, and the researchers have taken precautions to protect participant safety in the drafting of this case study. Furthermore, participants had the option to edit and clarify their responses and comments, if necessary.

Intergenerational peacebuilding in the context of this case study

Understandings of intergenerational peacebuilding

General understandings of intergenerational peacebuilding were mixed across provinces. Fewer than half of the 45 women participants from Nangarhar province between the ages of 21 and 45 were familiar with the concept of intergenerational peacebuilding to some extent. Most of these participants, who came from Behsood, Jalalabad, Khogyani, Shehzad and Kama districts, understood women's intergenerational peacebuilding to mean women's participation in political and social decision-making.

In explaining how they understood intergenerational peacebuilding, one of the young women activists especially stressed the importance of participation by different generations, stating:

I believe intergenerational peacebuilding is the idea that peace should be built by and for every generation. This is because every decision made today is based on the events of the past and will affect the events of the future. Therefore, conflict can be inherited and passed down through generations, but that should not further ruin future generations. So, future generations must grow up in a safe and conflict-free world. A better world than the one that they themselves were born into. So, it makes sense that to build long-lasting, positive peace, the voices of every generation are important.¹⁷

Moreover, young women participants from Nangarhar also shared their experience of attending different workshops on gender equality but not having a clear understanding of the terms "women" and "young women." Najiba from Khewa District of Nangarhar stated, "In our culture and in Nangarhar, all the girls above 16 or 15 are called women, and we don't understand the difference between senior women and young women."¹⁸ This suggests that the previous workshops or trainings conducted in Nangarhar over the past 20 to 22 years did not have clear references to the diversity of women and young women.

Based on the interview findings, participants from Kunar and Laghman provinces lacked knowledge of intergenerational peacebuilding and did not have experience participating in peacebuilding projects that focused on intergenerational themes. One of the participants from Kunar stated, "I do not know much about this term, but I think it is the peace between the generations who have important rules inside society, such as activists and politicians."¹⁹ According to this participant, intergenerational peace involved politicians and activists, not women peacebuilders or community peacebuilding leaders from different age groups. All but two of the 15 participants aged 25-40 from different districts of Laghman, such as Dawlat shah, Mehtarlam, Qarghayi and Alishang, were unclear about this concept. One of the participants stated, "I had been in this field for four years and heard different terms regarding peace, but I have not come across what intergenerational peace means."



Intergenerational peacebuilding programs in the Eastern Zone

This study revealed that intergenerational peacebuilding has not been an area of focus in peacebuilding training and support programs in the Eastern Zone, but there have been limited opportunities to establish intergenerational relationships. For example, a 2020 UN- and Nangarhar University-supported event series on peacebuilding in Kunar, Laghman and Nangarhar provinces²⁰ and a 2021 WPS workshop²¹ both focused on peacebuilding more broadly but did not specifically address generational or age-related differences, according to participants. However, the 2021 workshop did indirectly foster some level of intergenerational collaboration, as it included women and men of different ages and from a range of districts in Nangarhar province. Additionally, the participants were mostly younger and interacted with more senior women peacebuilders in a follow-up dialogue. Four young respondents from Nangarhar stated that they had participated in past programs to foster intergenerational harmony through peace activities with participants of various generations. A female law graduate and activist from Nangarhar stated, "I am aware of several friends and co-workers who founded a program at Nangarhar University called Peace House. People of various ages, genders and ethnicities engage in this program and offer their thoughts on conflict resolution and peace."²²

According to the findings in Nangarhar province, the young women peacebuilders felt that established NGOs focus on empowering senior women and promoting their inclusion in policies and peacebuilding practices without emphasizing the inclusion of young women or girls. In the context of the Eastern Zone, senior women and men peacebuilders are typically seen as authority figures, providers and protectors, while young women or girls are considered learners and asked to assist in menial tasks expected of people of their age.

The findings also showed that Kunar and Laghman provinces did not have many programs that focused on intergenerational peacebuilding, probably linked to the high illiteracy rate and security risks in the provinces. According to the participants, most people view women and girls in Afghanistan as victims of war and conflict, not changemakers. For instance, a 35-year-old woman peacebuilder from Kunar said, "The Eastern Zone has always been deprived in terms of peacebuilding initiatives. Maybe that is why I am unfamiliar with initiatives entitled with the name; most men in our province do not let their daughters or female members participate in any initiatives or go to schools."²³ A 23-year-old woman, Mursal from Kunar, highlighted that:

*Intergenerational peacebuilding requires two key elements: peace and a literate generation. Both, in my opinion, are lacking in contemporary Afghan culture. The first is a lack of educated youth, and the second is peace on its own. Our older generation is largely uneducated. As a result, there is a profound difference in thinking between the younger and older generations. It becomes more challenging for them to reach a consensus on a single issue. Therefore, I would suggest that the main obstacle to these endeavors is a lack of education.*²⁴

Another woman activist from Laghman stated, "I do not know about other Eastern Zone provinces, but Laghman is a very small province; we do not usually get this type of initiative due to security and because more focus is on Nangarhar province."²⁵

Limits to participating in intergenerational peacebuilding

Even though there is a great demand and need for such initiatives, participants from these provinces stated that due to the security situation and cultural barriers, international and local NGO presence was very limited. Nearly all the women who responded to the survey who were asked about limits on involvement in public life and civil activities reported being prevented from engaging in the civil and peace-related activities they had been undertaking before the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021.

Across the provinces, most of the women respondents viewed intergenerational peacebuilding through the lens of economic empowerment. They believed economic empowerment initiatives such as vocational trainings are the only peacebuilding work. They did not understand the different dimensions of intergenerational peacebuilding, including political participation, freedom of speech, meaningful participation in decision-making processes and others. As many as 45 women participants stated that they have not participated in intergenerational peacebuilding initiatives involving young women or male allies. Khadija from Laghman province stated, "Yes, as a youth of this society, I know the value of peace, and I have participated in different peace-related programs. However, I have not participated in intergenerational peacebuilding initiatives."²⁶

Funding opportunities for women peacebuilders in Kunar and Laghman provinces also limits women's participation in intergenerational activities. According to participants, Laghman and Kunar provinces do not have many CSOs and other councils to promote women's participation in peacebuilding efforts or initiatives. There are not enough funds from the government or international NGOs to start intergenerational efforts. Nooria from Mahtarlam District of Laghman stated, "Most trainings that happened in Laghman province were focused on learning how to sew and make clothes. We never had trainings that can teach us what intergenerational peacebuilding is. NGOs had fundings for vocational trainings only."²⁷

Participants also emphasized the lack of academic research and resources available to understand the importance of intergenerational peacebuilding efforts and the role of men as allies. Participants also noted the lack of participation of the young generation in peace-related initiatives as a significant barrier.

Most young women reported feeling sidelined by senior women in leadership positions. They felt that most peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan involved young men but not young women. The research showed that young Afghan women felt that their needs were not considered in peacebuilding initiatives because their needs were considered to be the same as those of older women. Most of the young women participants showed frustration about their exclusion from local peacebuilding, the decision-making process and engagement with tribal and religious leaders.

Perceived impact of intergenerational peacebuilding among women

All participants in the case study noted that intergenerational peacebuilding work is highly valuable and essential in the current situation in Afghanistan. They considered intergenerational work, coordination and cooperation beneficial, timely and effective for peacebuilding, highlighting that society needs everyone involved in result-oriented efforts. In this case study, many participants believed that intergenerational efforts could create new levels of understanding key to building sustainable peace. For example, one of the participants stated,

*The main challenges are that we Afghans do not understand each other and do not talk with each other. Last year we had three-day trip to Herat for a program called "Let Us Talk." Before this, I thought maybe Herat's people did not understand the struggles of women in the eastern provinces and vice versa. However, I was wrong; I learned so much once I started talking to different women and girls.*²⁸

One of the other participants stated, "I think intergenerational peacebuilding could be the best solution for our problems in the current situation. This way, we can have an opportunity to discuss the root causes of conflict and misunderstanding and become stronger as one generation. This unity can help us achieve what other countries have."²⁹

Across interviews, participants emphasized and provided examples of work experiences at the local level and how intergenerational work positively affected their peacebuilding work and activities before the Taliban regime. In Nangarhar province, young women mentioned their experience attending community peacebuilding dialogues with senior women from government and civil society organizations. They highlighted the positive impact it had on their careers and future collaboration to address the needs of young girls in Nangarhar province. Notably, many participants believe that they are experiencing more barriers under the Taliban government to freedom of expression or restrictions on their intergenerational cooperation efforts, especially when working among or with women and men. For instance, one of the participants stated, "Freedom of expression and social activities can be a force to stand up together as responsible citizens and work for peacebuilding easily."³⁰ Another participant stated, "Activism is the only peaceful way to reach positive consensus in peacebuilding efforts. Women should be freed from cages and seen as half of the society."³¹

The participants emphasized that different groups within society, including people of different ages, perspectives, ethnicities and genders, are facing various problems and have common goals, and combating those problems requires joint or intergenerational efforts. They stressed the need for solid intergenerational programs, specifically centered on women's participation.



Participants also emphasized the work of Afghan women and girls over the past 20 years, which resulted in the creation of local councils at the district level for women and girls. Participants claimed that these trainings and programs significantly impacted women's knowledge of the concept of peace. For instance, one participant stated,

I do believe that such programs can have a great impact. For example, previously, peace was an unknown term for women; yes, they knew what it means, but they could not understand their contribution and importance to this concept. After different INGOs started programs and trainings related to this concept, we are witnessing many women involved in peace-related issues.³²

Conclusion and recommendations

Despite the different barriers to intergenerational peacebuilding, participants still prioritized the need for future intergenerational peacebuilding initiatives. While both young Afghan women and young Afghan men appear to experience similar types of marginalization from decision-making processes, young women face additional gender-specific obstacles, particularly in Kunar and Laghman provinces. This research demonstrates that the barriers to intergenerational peacebuilding in the Eastern Zone remain significant, due to limited funding and capacity in the face of security and social constraints that prevent young Afghan women's participation in expressing gender- and age-specific needs. To address these barriers and concerns, the research revealed the following recommendations.

Recommendations for academia:

- Support additional academic research and data on intergenerational peacebuilding efforts, which are needed to understand the context and the existing gaps in the Eastern Zone.
- Facilitate academic cooperation between international academic institutes and universities in Kunar, Laghman and Nangarhar provinces for research trainings in order to allow Afghan women to participate in filling these information gaps.

Recommendations for UN Member States and the donor community:

- In collaboration with the Afghan government, develop and implement concrete plans that promote intergenerational peacebuilding efforts and the meaningful inclusion of young Afghan women in peace and security initiatives, as well as in political decision-making processes.
- Invest in the capacities of women and young women by ensuring that safe and accessible learning opportunities are provided in all three provinces.
- In collaboration with the Afghan government, address the structural barriers limiting intergenerational efforts and young women's meaningful participation, including lack of access to education, economic opportunities and resources in Laghman and Kunar provinces.
- Provide accessible, flexible and long-term financial support to local civil society organizations in the Eastern Zone working on intergenerational peacebuilding.
- Recognize the expertise of senior and junior women peacebuilders and include them in design and implementation processes for peacebuilding efforts.
- Support grassroots women-led intergenerational peacebuilding initiatives in all three provinces of the Eastern Zone.
- In collaboration with the Afghan government, provide safe spaces and protection for women and young women peacebuilders in the Eastern Zone who are advocating for intergenerational peacebuilding.
- Ensure the availability of consistent gender-disaggregated monitoring, evaluation and reporting data related to the implementation (or lack thereof) of intergenerational peacebuilding initiatives in Eastern Zone.

Recommendations for civil society and the private sector:

- Hold the Afghan government accountable and pressure the government to increase training opportunities, funding for workshops and capacity-building, institutionalized accountability and good governance.
- Ensure the availability of consistent gender-disaggregated monitoring, evaluation and reporting data related to the implementation (or lack thereof) of intergenerational peacebuilding initiatives in Eastern Zone.
- Allocate intergenerational peacebuilding-focused funding and resources to the Eastern Zone and ensure intergenerational participation at all levels of the decision-making process.
- Mobilize young Afghan women at the grassroots level, in rural and remote areas, to ensure their full participation, recognizing and highlighting the intersectionality of senior Afghan women's and young Afghan women's experiences and contributions.
- Consider the language barriers in the Eastern Zone and include all the ethnic and religious groups in trainings and workshops.



Endnotes

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