

# Intergenerational Peacebuilding Among Women

## Leveraging the Power of Collaboration

### CASE STUDY: 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 Zarqa Yaftali explores the state of intergenerational peacebuilding for women's rights activists in Afghanistan. This research demonstrates that women of different generations must work together with mutual trust and respect to challenge the dominant narrative that women are not involved in peacebuilding. Leveraging the strengths of the younger generation in Afghanistan and the older generation abroad is vital for successful partnerships.



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# Afghanistan

## Case Study:

### Two generations, one dream — equality for women in Afghanistan

CASE STUDY

By Zarqa Yaftali, with the support of Besmillah Behin and Matin Hakimi

*Addressing gaps in experience, trust and collaboration between generations of Afghan women's rights activists*



## Context

This case study addresses one of the most tragic periods of women's lives in Afghanistan. Since August 15, 2021, Afghanistan has been ruled by the Taliban, an oppressive terrorist military group. Since coming to power, the Taliban have continually imposed restrictions on women's freedom of movement and limited their area of activity and presence in society. Schools have been closed, female civil servants have not been allowed to work, and women's public appearances have become more harshly limited.<sup>1</sup> As one woman, a former government employee, noted while speaking to Human Rights Watch: "The future looks dark. I had many dreams and wanted to continue studying and working. I was thinking of doing my master's. Now, [the Taliban] don't even allow girls to finish high school."<sup>2</sup>

Women's participation in the peace process is critical to ensuring peace is long-lasting and inclusive.<sup>3</sup> Since men are the primary leaders in war and violent conflict, they are often seen as the primary actors for ending war and building peace. However, peacebuilding is the foundation for creating sustainable human security and equitable development in countries emerging from conflict,<sup>4</sup> so empowering women leaders to participate in peacebuilding is crucial.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past two decades, the women's movement has been one of the strongest movements shaped in Afghanistan; women have been leading efforts to build a brighter future for the country. Women's advocacy, along with international political support, resulted in many critical achievements in gender equality.<sup>6</sup> Women's equal rights were enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2004.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the women's movement successfully advocated for the promotion of women's rights in the country's legal framework by including amendments to the existing laws and introducing new legislation, including the *Elimination of Violence Against Women*<sup>8</sup> and the *Law on Protection of Child Rights*,<sup>9</sup> among others.



Additionally, women in Afghanistan took the lead in implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and the development of a National Action Plan.<sup>10</sup> In 2010, when the Government of Afghanistan announced its willingness to initiate peace talks with the opposition, women of Afghanistan struggled to find a space at the peace talks table. Only nine women were included in the National Consultative Peace Council, compared to seventy men.<sup>11</sup> On the provincial and district levels, smaller Provincial Peace Committees (PPCs) had at least four women as members as a result of effective campaigns led by women's civil society organizations.<sup>12</sup> Through these engagements, women gained valuable experiences and skills and were recognized as peacebuilders, peace messengers and peacemakers.

Women slowly started building coalitions and developing their agenda for peacebuilding in Afghanistan. Women members of the High Council for National Reconciliation had ongoing contact with women in civil society and would seek their opinions on the content of the discussions.<sup>13</sup> However, limited political will in the Afghan government and among international actors and cultural barriers to women being seen as leaders, meant that women were unable to take on a vital role in the peace talks conducted in Qatar in 2020.<sup>14</sup>

August 15th, 2021, which marked the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, had a drastic impact on the women's movement in Afghanistan. The country faced an exodus of professionals, activists and politicians.<sup>15</sup> Women leaders who were critical to building peace and democracy left the country. While most of them are still active and participate in advocacy efforts,<sup>16</sup> their departure left a considerable gap in women's efforts to restore their role and space amid this critical situation in the country.

The situation led to the emergence of new leaders and activists who remained in Afghanistan and worked for the protection of their rights. They have organized demonstrations and staged resistance against the Taliban and their restrictive rules against women.<sup>17</sup> They have faced threats to their lives and have been jailed and tortured extensively by the Taliban.<sup>18</sup> This new generation of women leaders and peacebuilders struggles to secure a space in Afghanistan's current restrictive environment, advocating for women's equal rights to education, employment and freedom of movement.

## Methodology

This case study assesses the situation of the women's movement in Afghanistan, the roles of women leaders in the diaspora and younger leaders who have remained in the country, and the links between the two generations. This case study is concerned with the survival of the movement's achievements in relation to the Afghan peace process, especially as restrictions on women's rights continue to expand. The following questions were used to organize the research:

- What is the legacy of the women's movement in Afghanistan for the new generation of women's rights activists?
- What are some of the long-lasting achievements of the women's rights movements in Afghanistan in relation to the peace process?
- What are the contributions of the new generation of women's rights activists to the peace process in Afghanistan?
- How have intergenerational relationships among women's rights activists developed over the past decade? What are some of the challenges to intergenerational relationship-building, and how can these relationships be strengthened?

Ten Afghan women peacebuilders were interviewed for this study. The interviewees included women active in the peacebuilding process in Afghanistan over the last two decades, both senior and emerging young women activists engaged in peacebuilding and women's political participation in Afghanistan. The participants were mostly women who had been displaced recently from Afghanistan, though four of the participants were still living in Afghanistan at the time of data collection. The participants are from different ethnic groups. Four of the interviews were conducted in person, and the rest were conducted online.

## Participants included the following profiles:

1. A law graduate from Kabul who stepped in and assumed leadership of the women's network after the fall of the Taliban. She is based in Kabul and works daily to ensure women can access their fundamental rights;
2. Nargis Nihan: A high-profile leader involved in peacebuilding efforts through an organization she established. She works with women's groups at the community level to support peacebuilding and conflict resolution. She was the acting Minister of Mines and Petroleum in the previous government;
3. Nigina Yari: A young peacebuilder activist and founder of several civil society initiatives involving women and peace;
4. Humaira Saqib: A journalist and emerging civil society activist since 2018;
5. Hasina Safi: A Minister of Information and Culture in the former government, the acting Minister of Women's Affairs before the fall of the previous government, an activist and a civil society leader for the past two decades;
6. Naira Kohistani: A journalist, activist and civil society leader for the past 15 years;
7. Habiba Sarabi: A high-profile peacebuilder, minister, provincial governor and member of the National Peace Council, active for more than 20 years;
8. Robina Hamdard: A law graduate, UN staff member and peace activist for the past 16 years;
9. Fawzia Koofi: A high-profile political leader, head of a political group, former member of parliament and member of the peace negotiations;
10. Parwan Ibrahimkhail: A young woman and peace activist for the last ten years, one of the protesters who was arrested by the Taliban after they took control of the government.

The researchers also conducted two focus group discussions in Kabul and Balkh provinces with a total of 12 participants. All the participants were members of civil society and women's organizations and active in the peace processes in their provinces. Each focus group discussion included six participants and was conducted in Farsi.

Access to women leaders outside of Afghanistan was one of the main limitations, along with identifying and interviewing those women in Afghanistan, considering the security threats against them. Identifying focus group participants and finding a safe place for the discussions was another challenge in conducting this study. All possible precautions were taken to limit the risks and ensure the safety of everyone who took part in this study, research assistants and research participants alike.



## Intergenerational peacebuilding in the context of this case study

This case study focuses on intergenerational peacebuilding across the groups of women peacebuilders active before and after the fall of the Afghan government in August 2021. In this context, the first generation mainly refers to women leaders and activists who were active in peacebuilding programs over the past twenty years, while the new generation refers to the women who are currently in the country and working to build peace since August 2021, in the absence of many senior women leaders who left Afghanistan.

According to the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, peacebuilding is the,

*Development of constructive personal, group, and political relationships across ethnic, religious, class, national, and racial boundaries. It aims to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways and to transform the structural conditions that generate deadly conflict. Peacebuilding can include conflict prevention, conflict management, conflict resolution and transformation, and post-conflict reconciliation.<sup>19</sup>*

Peacebuilding for the women of Afghanistan includes a wide range of activities and initiatives, such as women's political activism securing space in political dialogues and peace talks, advocacy for inclusion in the Afghanistan High Peace Council, and participation in the Qatar talks and other forums. Women also play a critical role in community development and peacebuilding in Afghanistan, by, for example, working with youth, training volunteers as mediators and training communities about conflict resolution techniques.

## Successes and challenges in intergenerational peacebuilding among women in Afghanistan

### Perspectives on the peacebuilding process

Almost all participants in this study agree that Afghanistan's peacebuilding process is highly politicized and that the process of ending war does not necessarily mean bringing peace. They also agree that, given the collapse of institutions dedicated to the peace process, it is unclear what shape peacebuilding will take in the future. The women who have been active in the peacebuilding process in Afghanistan over the last two decades firmly believe that they have laid a strong foundation upon which the new generation of emerging leaders in the country can build. They also think there is no clear-cut division between the women of the two generations. Women leaders who were forced to leave the country are still active and support the women's movement in the country. The participants in this group confirm that since leaving the country, they have been actively and vigorously involved in advocacy, fundraising, program creation and support for capacity-building for the emerging generation of women peacebuilders. They acknowledge that the young generation of women peacebuilders are brave, responsible and passionate.

Opinions about the state of peacebuilding in Afghanistan differ by generation. Some participants who are currently in Afghanistan and are considered part of the new generation of women peacebuilders hold that there is no such thing as intergenerational peacebuilding networks among women. They believe that most of the peacebuilding work conducted by women in the past two decades was not sustainable, as they see it being based on short-term objectives and not a long-term sustainable vision. At least one respondent mentioned that "there is no peacebuilding process, and no women are participating, Afghan women are hopeless."<sup>20</sup> The respondent was frustrated because she felt that most of the work done under peacebuilding programs in Afghanistan was not practical and specific but rather frequently merely performative, and that even small initiatives had disappeared. However, she hoped that women would still be able to learn step by step. In contrast, some participants, primarily those from the more senior generation of women peacebuilders who have mostly been forced to move out of the country, believe that what women do today in peacebuilding is what they inherited from the older generation. The respondents in this older group maintain that the current peacebuilding and women's empowerment efforts have learned a great deal from the women leaders who strived to establish a legacy for today.

## Perspectives on women peacebuilders' intergenerational relationships

Respondents from the new generation of women peacebuilders, who are still based in Afghanistan, believe that a respectful relationship is being created gradually with the older generation of women peacebuilders, though this experience is not universal; these relationships depend on experience and the level of support the younger generation receives from the older generation. As these relationships are built, the concept of intergenerational peacebuilding also becomes clearer. Some members of the younger generation noted that they receive support and mentorship from some of the older generation about how to address life under Taliban rule, and the women who participated in the study believe strongly that women's intergenerational peacebuilding efforts will bring results. The new generation believes that there is a lot that they can learn from the older generation of women peacebuilders. However, peacebuilders from the older generation understand that the new generation is working in a different context; most of the strategies and learnings from the past will not apply to the current situation.

The older generation of women peacebuilders believe they have made considerable investments in building the capacity of the young generation of peacebuilders. They reference a significant number of initiatives, projects and programs implemented during the past two decades aimed at building the capacity of young women and girls. They believe that the past two decades provided many opportunities for women leaders to transfer skills and experience to young women and girls and prepare them to become involved in peacebuilding efforts in a meaningful way. They also believe that the young generation is equipped with better education and skills than the older generation and can continue building on existing peacebuilding efforts using their skills and unique approaches. In addition, some members of the young generation of women peacebuilders acknowledge the fact that they were able to attend training initiatives organized for youth by the older generation of peacebuilders and benefited from their experiences.

## Successes and challenges

Women's role in social peacebuilding at the community level was highlighted as a success during this research process. Many of the participants in this study support local initiatives for peacebuilding and conflict resolution at the community level. They help women's councils and groups in several provinces of the country participate in community-level peacebuilding by providing resource mobilization, training and capacity-building. Surprisingly, these community-level structures mostly survived the shocks of the political change in the country and are still active in their local communities.

Participants highlighted the role of social media in allowing women to continue engaging in peacebuilding work. Most interviewees believe that social media is crucial in ensuring that women's voices and their situations are heard and understood by people worldwide. Reaching out to the world and connecting the two generations of women peacebuilders, even after the older generation left the country, has been an instrumental part of their work.

However, challenges remain in communication and partnership between the two generations of women peace leaders. The participants identified a trust deficit as one of the critical challenges facing the two generations. The young generation of peacebuilders expressed that, because most of the women's movement leaders left the country after the Taliban took control, they were left alone. Respondents from the older generation instead think the young generation is in a better position than the older generation was, as they can start working from where things were left by the older generation and they can also rely on the experiences of the peacebuilders who spent their lives working in this area. In addition, several respondents of the new generation feel excluded and that there is no intergenerational peacebuilding process. On the other hand, women leaders of the older generation of peacebuilders believe they did not purposefully exclude anyone but rather think that women leaders may have rushed decision-making to make the best use of time and resources. Most participants agree, however, that the mental stress of growing up during a war may contribute to the feeling of exclusion common among the younger generation.





Factors like trust and respect were consistently raised by several respondents. The respondents in both generations believe relationships between the two generations of women peacebuilders in Afghanistan must be based on trust, respect and experience.

In addition to the generational dimension, divisions based on language, tribe and political ideology contribute to the loss of trust among peacebuilders. This division and the lack of a common, practical, clear vision regarding peacebuilding in Afghanistan have caused women to step away from working together.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The current situation in the country is fragile; there are no state institutions and structures to be held accountable. Nevertheless, almost all participants agree that dialogue between the two generations should continue. Peacebuilding is an ongoing struggle that needs everyone's efforts and sacrifices. Respondents of both generations agree that a critical contribution women peacebuilders of all generations can make is to break taboos. Since women are not heavily involved in the war, it is also assumed that they have no role in bringing peace. Women in Afghanistan challenge this stereotype under the new regime through ongoing struggle, activism and dialogue. Women peacebuilders of both generations try to open up space for themselves and other women at the peace negotiation table. Leveraging the strengths of the younger generation in Afghanistan and the older generation abroad is vital.

### **Recommendations for international and regional organizations:**

- Support capacity-building for the younger generation of women peacebuilders and for women living outside of Afghanistan; this assistance must be tailored to their unique circumstances.
- Fund women peacebuilders both inside and outside Afghanistan; provide both technical and financial resources.
- Connect Afghan women peace leaders to international networks of women peacebuilders so that they can learn from practical examples put in place by other women.
- Provide consistent, inclusive and consultation-based support to advance equality and protection for women and girls in Afghanistan, especially from the US, Canada and the EU.

### **Recommendation for Afghan women peacebuilders and international allies:**

- Create mentorship programs and networks to build connections among the two generations of women peacebuilders; focus on building trust and facilitating joint advocacy opportunities.

## Endnotes

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