

A peace agreement in Afghanistan won't last if there are no women at the table

Written by Susan Hutchinson, PhD Candidate, Australian National University

Over the past weeks, the US government has been in peace negotiations with the Taliban. It has been 17 years since US and allied troops first deployed to Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban and support a democratically elected government.

The current peace negotiations have progressed further than any other attempted during the conflict. But they have two serious problems. Firstly, they have [have not included](#) the democratically elected government of Afghanistan, led by President Ashraf Ghani. Secondly, they have failed to include a single woman.

The situation so far

Peace negotiations can take many forms. At their most basic, they cover ceasefires and division of territory. But they often go further to address underlying causes of conflict and pave the way for durable solutions. They include extensive informal discussions before any formal agreement is signed.

In 1996, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. It banned women from attending school and denied them their most basic rights. The Taliban provided safe haven for those responsible for the attacks against the US on September 11, 2001.

The US is keen to withdraw its remaining troops. But they want to secure a commitment from the Taliban that Afghanistan will not be home to terrorist groups planning attacks against the United States.

The most recent [reports show](#) the Afghan government controls 56% of Afghan districts, or [65 % of the population](#)

. The Taliban controls 15% of the districts, with 29% remaining contested.

Peace negotiations are often fraught with tension about who is allowed at the table. So far, the Taliban has refused to allow the government of Afghanistan to participate in the current negotiations. The [chief US negotiator, Zalmay Khalilzad](#), has been briefing the Afghan government on the progress of negotiations taking place in various Gulf States.

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Khalilzad is under pressure from US President Donald Trump to move the negotiations forward. But [excluding the government](#) is problematic. It could indicate the likely failure of negotiations, end up making the government look even weaker than it is and/or pave the way for a return to deeply conservative religious rule for Afghanistan.

It is often tempting for power brokers to prioritise the participation of armed groups in peace negotiations. But it's important to ensure broader participation of civil society.

Research examining every peace agreement since the Cold War shows the participation of civil society [makes a peace agreement](#) 64% less likely to fail. The key reason is the peace process is perceived as more legitimate if civil society is included. But including civil society also ensures the concerns of the broader community are accounted for and that those who carried arms do not receive positive reinforcement by monopolising the benefits negotiated in the agreement.

What about the women?

Afghan women are angry about being excluded from the peace negotiations. The country's leading women's rights group, the [Afghan Women's Network](#), released a statement calling for "the full, equal and meaningful participation of women" in the negotiations.

Life for women in Afghanistan remains hard. The [latest Reuters Poll](#) said Afghanistan was the second most dangerous country to be a woman, down from the most dangerous five years earlier. The country still makes the top of the list for violence against women, discrimination, and lack of access to health care.

But significant progress has been made in the past 17 years. Data from the [UN Development Program](#) [show gender inequality](#) dropped by ten percentage points between 2005 and 2017.

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Women have [strengthened their political](#), economic and social presence through efforts to advance their status and respect for their rights. Girls have been able to go to school. Women have become members of parliament, governors and police.

Read more: [Trump and Turnbull have little cause for satisfaction over progress in Afghanistan](#)

[Afghanistan's 2004 constitution](#) includes a hard won provision that enshrines the equality of men and women. But the Taliban is calling for a new constitution and it is highly unlikely if this was agreed, such a provision would survive.

Research drawing on extensive quantitative and qualitative data [has shown that](#) the way a country treats its women is the best indicator of its peacefulness. This is a better indicator than wealth, ethnic and religious identity or democracy.

We also know [that women's participation](#) in peace processes makes for a more effective outcome. [A peace processes is 35% more likely to last at least 15 years](#)

if women are at the negotiating table, have observer status, or participate in consultations, inclusive commissions or problem-solving workshops.

Women can negotiate with the Taliban

Even so, men and people from the international community often believe the struggles faced by Afghan women mean they are not in a position to negotiate with the patriarchal Taliban.

But Afghan women like Palwasha Hassan have been working for years to pursue peace with the Taliban. Hassan sits on the country's High Peace Council and has seen how women across the country have already negotiated with local Taliban leaders. [She says](#) "the international community is failing to value what we have achieved together and the progress we have made

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so far.”

She [conducted a workshop](#) in 2010 with women across local communities. Stories included one woman who had negotiated to keep a local girls' school open by arguing that educated girls could do better in Islamic studies, including learning to read the Quran. She also guaranteed to her Taliban interlocutors that a prayer space in the school would be reserved strictly for women and girls only.

Another woman explained how she and others negotiated the release of hostages being held by the local Taliban commander. She appealed to Islamic values of life and justice, and persuaded the captors that the hostage was being held unjustly.

International agreements

The importance of women's participation in international peace and security was codified by [U N Security Council resolution 1325](#) nearly 20 years ago.

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[Seventy-nine countries](#) , including [Afghanistan](#) , have National Action Plans to guide the resolution's implementation and the subsequent seven [Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace and Security](#)

In October 2017, the US became the first country in the world to pass a [Women, Peace and Security Act](#) , signed off by President Trump himself. It was passed explicitly to

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ensure that the United States promotes the meaningful participation of women in mediation and negotiation processes seeking to prevent, mitigate, or resolve violent conflict" across the world.

Democratic Senators [have urged](#) the Trump administration to ensure Afghan women's involvement in the peace negotiations. But so far no one has invoked the new law.

There are few who wouldn't hope for peace for Afghanistan, but as [Palwasha Hassan says](#), the negotiations "have to include women, both to protect our rights and also to ensure the durability of the peace that follows."

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