The position of women in the Peace Process

15th of November 2016 at SOAS University

Women for Peace and Participation (WPP) organized an event on the 15th of November 2016,

comprising of a panel discussion. The event took place at SOAS University in cooperation with Afghan SOAS society. The purpose of this discussion was to provide an opportunity for both speakers and audience to discuss the progress that Afghan women have so far made on political and social fronts, with a focus on their role in the current peace process in Afghanistan. Moreover, the discussion was intended to provide an in-depth understanding about who peacebuilders are and the various obstacles that woman peacebuilders encounter. This dialogue was also aimed at highlighting the role of international frameworks such as UNSCR 1325 in supporting women to identify their role as peacebuilders and to address the challenges they face.

The discussion panel was the first in a series of events that are scheduled from October 2016 to September 2017, addressing gender aspects and relevant factors of peacebuilding and state-building in Afghanistan. The theme of these events is recognizing and promoting the role of Afghan women in various social and political arenas. A number of core issues and concepts emerged from the discussion.

A critical outlook on UNSCR 1325 implementation in Afghanistan refers to the lack of recognition of differences among communities and women groups. "Gender mainstreaming stems from ideas codified within various UN Security Council Resolutions from UNSCR 1325, to 2122' (1820, 1888, 1889, 2106, 2122). The Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda assumes symmetry in the positions of men and women. But fails to address complex ways in which gender is perceived by power relations within Afghanistan. Consequently it reifies disparities," noted panellist Marrisa Quie.

UNSCR 1325 national action plan has been developed and endorsed by the Afghan government. However, the lack of a detailed implementation plan accompanied by specific indicators, coupled by limited allocation of funds and lack of institutional capacity present challenges in analysing the expected outcomes of the plan.

The fragmentation of women groups in Afghanistan is a central barrier to women's representation and influence in decision-making. There are various issues that should be addressed before women will have an effective role within the peace process. The rural and urban divide, the differing needs of women, the broad spectrum of capacities, of approach, and of access to various opportunities and existing spaces are all important dimensions to consider when discussing the role of women in the peace process.

Bridging the gap among women's groups and their views will support the creation of a unified cause and vision. Such efforts should include building dialogue for women from various sectors, such as the government, civil society and the NGOs; bridging the urban and rural divide is another factor.

Utilizing the sphere of family for women to influence decisions and mind-sets at the very basic level is an important factor.

Another key factor will be to challenge the representation of women in the villages by women from urban centres and the capital. Indeed, there is a gap in accessing, processing, and understanding information for the rural women and many urban women. A significant capacity gap among women is another challenge, with the balance tipped in favour of women in Kabul.

Defining gender in local languages and developing a local understanding of the term is a challenge. There seems to be, it was argued, a lack of cognitive appreciation of gender issues within the society broadly that includes the Afghan governmental institutions where women's rights and gender mainstreaming are deemed as 'foreign' and Western concepts. "It is all the issue of relevance: how would you maintain the struggle of women as a matter of relevance, and who defines what is good for Afghan women?" Hameed Hakimi questioned during the discussion.

Spaces for women came up as a very interesting theme to identify women's role. A range of spaces, from political to social and military, were explored by one presenter. The uniqueness of the various spaces that exist, close or open for women in terms of their variations was also an important aspect of the discussion. "Spaces where many issues happen never overlap, the issues raised by women never overlap, they are very separate and distinct," Sippi Azerbaijani noted. Further exploring the role of women, several questions were raised, such as, "Where can women be best placed in the available spaces…Can they expand the space they occupy? Or enter some of the forbidden spaces for them to finally enter the peace process? Is the space they occupy strategic and effective?"

The panel of speakers agreed that there is a limited formal space available for women in the peace process; however, there are invisible spaces where negotiations take place at different levels. Women struggle to enter into the process at various levels due to limited opportunities. Nevertheless, it is important that the available opportunities are utilized to the optimum level.

Finally, one of the excuses for excluding women from the peace process is that they have not led wars or did not have a key role in making decisions regarding the conflict. Nevertheless, it was agreed in the discussion that as a group women face threats of insecurity at least as much as men do, and more significantly than men in some parts of Afghanistan. Women who are not educated do not get their voices heard and it is difficult for them organize to themselves to promote peace. "Their concerns are often immediate, the most basic and essential of needs," according to Sippi.

Women are highly affected by the decisions that take place at every level often without the recourse to challenging them. However, there is a need to focus on understanding the exact nature of these varying levels of impact of decisions on women. "Women in formal settings are seated by men, the parameters of discussions are set by funding issues and topics. When women enter the spaces of discussion they talk about how much they want peace, though the actual mechanisms to approach peace are neglected. A small number of women in these spaces represent Afghan women as a whole." Noted Sippi.

Key recommendations for future focus:

- There is a need to identify and influence factors around women's ability to be part of the processes such as peace-building at all levels. Generally, the development of women collectively is something that relates directly to peace building.
- We should explore the different needs of a range of women – reflecting that women suffer the conflict in a variety of ways. The interests of all women need to be taken into account – particularly the need to understand the concerns, needs and capacity of women in rural versus urban settings.
- There is a need to find ways to support women in the limited formal role they have available to them, in order to influence decisions and policies around the peace process – which affect women equally to men.