



Women for Peace and Participation Afghanistan Program Report January 2016 – March 2017

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(Director's letter)

Dear friends,

The security and economic situation of Afghanistan has been deteriorating over the last few years. The Taliban has increased in strength and reach, assuming control of ever greater tracts of territory. This is speeding up the rate of the 'brain drain', with greater numbers of young people joining the insurgency due to a lack of trust in the government, and is compounded by persistent economic problems and lack of access to services and social rights, including justice. Women at the grassroots level are equally vulnerable to various kinds of social exclusion and marginalisation. Today, we believe it is ever more critical to work with young people and engage them in this context of insecurity, economic decline and unemployment.

This challenging dynamic also undermines achievements made-to-date on women's rights, intensifying the potential for oppression of women and girls. The current dire security situation and the complexity of the overall situation surrounding the peace process is anticipated to impede women from taking their place at the negotiation table. It is thus imperative that the appropriate framework for engaging women from across the country is developed and implemented. The challenges faced by women peace-builders and youth is not different from the overall challenges faced by the Peace

Process at present: Engagement of women and youth in dialogue and decision making is critical to advance sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

Accordingly, I am pleased to share our annual report which details our Afghanistan program with you. 2016 and 2017 have been two very successful years with the formalization, launch and implementation of our programmes. We have worked with women and youth for the last three years on various issues around peacebuilding and coexistence in Afghanistan. Last year, our youth groups were transformed into formal grassroots groups, the Youth Peace Shuras. There are now ten active Shuras (male and female). In addition to our youth programming, our women peacebuilders programme has been creating opportunities for women to get together and engage in discussions around peace and security, while also developing their social and political roles. It is important to engage and connect communities from the grassroots to institutions and policy makers at the central level, as well as in the international sphere.

We have ambitious plans for the future, and with your support and involvement, we at Women for Peace and Participation will continue to create opportunities for inclusion for women and marginalized youth in the decisions and processes that affect their lives.

Overview

Women for Peace and Participation (WPP) is a non-partisan and non-profit initiative that promotes the social and political inclusion of women and youth in peace-building processes at the grassroots, national and global levels. WPP works directly with marginalized and under-represented individuals in conflict-affected countries with the help of individuals and communities of their respective countries, including Afghanistan, South Sudan, Kosovo, Indonesia, Algeria and Turkey, and provides them opportunities and platforms to enable them to meaningfully participate in the decision-making processes and policy debates that impact their lives. To support in-country work, WPP engages relevant diasporas and refugee youth and women communities globally.

WPP's overall objectives are to:

- Empower woman and youth by building their capacities and skill-sets to engage in peacebuilding and peace-making processes
- Develop the leadership skills of the next generation of young women and men
- Facilitate conflict resolution at the community level
- Enhance opportunities for the inclusion and influence of women and young people in decision-making processes

In pursuit of these aims, WPP conducts research and grassroots consultations, builds networks between female and youth activists inside conflict and post-conflict countries, and develops partnerships with critical stakeholders in development, peace- and state-building processes.

Afghanistan Pilot Program Overview: Empowering Women and Youth

This report focuses on WPP's work in Afghanistan, which aims to promote peacebuilding, resilience and democracy within Afghan communities in a way that can contradict and challenge the prevailing violence, insecurity and extremism. A critical component is to bring the stories and voices at the grassroots level and connect them to the world.

WPP has piloted a range of projects in marginalized Afghan communities and vulnerable populations from the most insecure areas in the country. It is worth mentioning that these activities are conducted by a network of dedicated volunteers at grassroots levels with no donor-funding to date in order to ensure that they are locally-embedded and owned. As we move to expand and consolidate our impactful work, we will seek both financial and in-kind support.

WPP recognizes the critical role of youth in the country and facilitates the development and capacity building of youth organizations and associations within their own communities to address the issues that affect their daily lives. To date, WPP works in Kandahar, Helmand, Nangarhar and in Kabul, including in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in the capital.

This report describes the major activities implemented in Afghanistan between January 2016 and March 2017, detailing two of our main programs: *Youth Peace Shuras* and *Peace Women*.

Program 1: YOUTH PEACE SHURAS

With 64 percent of its population under 25 years old, Afghanistan's demographic profile presents both a serious challenge as well as an opportunity. Young people living in areas affected by conflict and insecurity are being exposed to extreme forms of physical, social and structural violence, negatively impacting their behavior and attitude towards their own communities as well as the outside world. **Their social isolation and lack of voice, combined with limited opportunities for education and employment, has left many susceptible to drugs, criminality and extremism.** With few options available, many have fled the country at great financial and personal cost.



Encouraging connections and civic participation among youth creates resilience and immense potential for self-help, peer-to-peer support and collective action. In our *Youth Peace Shuras (YPS)*, youth in extremely insecure areas come together for mutual support, and reach out to socially isolated young people in their communities to connect them, facilitate support, and help them recognize their own agency and role in addressing their problems.

Through continuous engagement and dialogue, these *shuras* are identifying the needs of their communities and especially those most vulnerable and isolated including orphans, the disabled, and widows. They do so by connecting the needs of these individuals to fellow youth in the cities, who in response identify and provide necessary support services. Many disabled youth in Helmand and Kandahar, for example, are being supported by their respective shuras.

Our *Youth Peace Shuras* operate in Jalalabad, Helmand, Kandahar, and the IDP camps of Kabul

and meet either weekly or bi-weekly to share their concerns and provide mutual support. In each location, there are separate male and female groups although they do interact when there is need for collaborative discussions and actions. More recently, these shuras have connected with one another in larger gatherings in Kabul to exchange ideas and discuss mutual concerns ranging from security to economy and education to issues around the needs of youth and women in their own communities. These larger gatherings provide the space to discuss strategies for support and solidarity against insecurity, deprivation and extremism.



The key aims of the **Youth Peace Shuras** as described by its members are:

- Identify the diverse and divergent ways in which insecurity affects local communities and citizens across different regions in the country
- Address the key issues affecting the most vulnerable and marginalized
- Train young women and men as change agents for peace in their communities
- Network and build capacity to organize and promote collective action

WPP volunteers support shura members, building their capacity and linking them to appropriate institutions and individuals. WPP also organizes large-scale programmes for youth involvement at universities, professional institutions, community level and household levels. **Given the great demand for these services, WPP is seeking support to expand and learn from its current programming. In particular, WPP seeks to expand its initiative to more IDP camps in Kabul and other cities and districts around Kabul, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Helmand, Herat and Ghazni.**

Youth Peace Shura Activities

Engagement with Experts and Policy Makers



An initial survey conducted by WPP volunteers with members of youth peace shuras found that there is a critical information gap regarding national-level programmes and policies. The lack of basic knowledge of key policies not only at provincial and village levels but also across major cities including the capital was identified as a major hindrance to advocacy and inclusion.

Focus groups discussions with Shura members also found that young people are often at the receiving end and get very little or no opportunity to take part in discussions

and platforms or lead them in order to influence from the bottom up – Shuras in the capital as well as those in the provinces and districts experience similar treatment.

To address this gap, various programmes were organized at the central and local levels to engage Shura members in debates and discussions, with the involvement of experts in the areas of peace building, economic empowerment and women's rights. Examples include:

- Five regional-level and two national level conferences with Youth Shuras, providing them and other youth a platform to organize and influence. Panel discussions were held with women's rights experts, peace and security advocates and civil society activists.
- In addition to such large-scale engagements, shuras also hold smaller meetings with individuals and groups of local-level advocates of education and human rights.
- A number of training sessions were organized with volunteer trainers on the topics of leadership, advocacy and social entrepreneurship.

The Need for Inspiring Role Models and 'Heroes'

Four decades of war in Afghanistan have destroyed community structures and eliminated good practices of peaceful coexistence in Afghan communities, yet oral histories that engage the moral imagination remain an important source of inspiration.

Identifying historical and contemporary role models in the area of peacebuilding has been a major and innovative function of Youth Peace Shuras. They have decided to capture oral histories and conduct detailed research on a number of prominent role models, such as Bacha Khan, Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, who advocated for non-violence. Their aim is to identify some informal and community driven approaches to promoting non-violence and peaceful co-existence.

WPP will publish their research next year and organize a series of community level conferences to inform other young people about the work of the identified role models. The Shuras have also come up with the slogan "*Youth Power for Change*". (*Qowat e Jarwanaan brai Tagheer/Da Zwanano Qowat da Badlon Lapara*)

Awareness Raising Campaigns: Tackling Sensitive Issues

Youth Peace Shuras have started creating awareness among people at the grassroots, about how peace is essential for better service delivery and addressing issues around economic development, promoting for peacebuilding while addressing conflicts at the local level. From 2016 to 2017, they worked closely with their communities to enhance awareness regarding gender equality, specifically addressing the issues of violence against women and children, girls education and girls and mothers health development.

Youth Peace Shuras have also conducted extensive work with their communities on the sensitive issue of violence against women and on highlighting community benefits for female inclusion and improved rights within an appropriate cultural framework. Members of the shuras conducted a door-to-door campaign during the sixteen days of activism for Violence Against Women in 2016. They arranged meetings in the community to discuss prominent issues around women rights during the first week of March 2017, as part of the celebrations for International Women's Day (*a report is forthcoming*).

Support to Community-Level Campaigns and Womens' Activities

The *youth peace shuras* work with our *Women's Peace* groups, by supporting their activities and delivering their messages to conservative individuals in the communities who initially would not want to talk to women or listen to them.

YPS also provide support to volunteer activities by other organizations, for example, Pen Path which works to promote education and provide educational material to needy children in conflict affected areas.

Besides helping to organise Youth peace Shuras during this period, WPP volunteers also conducted focus group discussions in universities, professional venues and institutions with women and young people. The discussions were around youth and economic empowerment and their engagement in leadership programmes. A number of interesting recommendations arose from these discussions:

- Policy makers should engage young people in the higher education sector in the design and development of plans and strategies.
- Creation of platforms and infrastructure for young people to enhance their participation at the grassroots.

A key criticism highlighted the inadequate way the government is working on development policies and strategies, specifically their lack of engagement with the people and wider stakeholders at the regional and local levels, and focus only at central institutional levels.

Program 2: PEACE WOMEN PROJECT

WPP takes an expansive view of women peace builders to include housewives, school teachers, community health staff, midwives, students, civil society members and rights activists. WPP has supported the organization of womens' groups and facilitated community-level discussions around the challenges and opportunities for their inclusion in peace processes at the grassroots and national level.

Women as peace builders can be a challenging issue to discuss in war affected communities, especially in areas with an active insurgency. Even so, women in Afghanistan are already actively working at

very local levels to promote peace and many opportunities to get involved in the process more effectively and strategically.

In the words of a Peace Women Group member: **‘Women are equal victims of the long lasting war and insurgency socially, politically and economically and shall be equal partners in addressing the cause of insurgency and the peace process’** in the words of a Peace Women Group member.

Peace Women Groups



Today, our **women’s peace groups** hold regular meetings amongst themselves and with influential women in their communities, such as those in the Provincial Peace Councils and female government workers. Key members of these groups also conduct advocacy meetings with government and non-government institution to build constituencies for support for the inclusion of women in peace processes at all levels.

Peace Women Groups receive regular support from WPP volunteers and affiliated grassroots organisations. They engage in discussions around individual and community needs and how some of these women can be actively engaged to provide an enabling environment for other women to come together and take part in social and political discussions. The meetings provide opportunities for women who have never been part of group discussions around issues and topics of their concern.

Some key issues raised in discussions included;

- Domestic violence against women, children and disabled individuals
- Economic concerns, working women in the provinces (Helmand, Kandahar and Nangarhar) find their families economic situation as a blessing in disguise, believing their earning power has been the reason and enabler for them to come out of their homes and participate in society.
- Insecurity and intimidations of professional women in the peace groups, such as teachers and health staff, made it difficult to regularly attend work
- Non-accessibility of basic services and information.
- Persisting taboo issues – e.g. child marriages, girls education, the right for girls to choose a life partner – were raised as critical concerns that were difficult to discuss without fear.

'Women Peace Tables' to Engage Stakeholders

Multi-stakeholder and advocacy meetings that go beyond our Peace Women Groups are called Women Peace Tables: these roundtable discussions aim to highlight some of the important work that women do to pacify society beyond their representation in the formal peace talks and negotiations tables.

As part of a global campaign for peace, WPP between October 2016 and February 2017 organised a number of peace tables with women in Kabul, Helmand and Nangarhar, who proved to be most successful in terms of interest, participation and outcomes.



Due to Taliban control in most of Helmand province and their high influence in other WPP working areas such as Kandahar and Nangarhar, opportunities for women are restricted. Nevertheless, women continue to organise in groups and utilise this platform for awareness raising about their basic human rights and means to identify steps towards attaining these rights. Women in these groups organise informal gatherings aimed at discussing the challenges they face due to continuous insecurity and the lack of opportunities.

Key messages and recommendations from Women Peace Tables include:

- More research identifying individual and specific interventions that can contribute for women's development, thus providing sustainable solutions and options for specific problems women face at the grassroots.
- Physical centres for women at the community level should be established to provide safe spaces for debate. This was seen as a key step towards engaging women in a sustainable and safer manner, and that this also would enhance a sense of ownership among women.
- More focus on providing information to women that not only help them get awareness on their rights but also methods of attaining those rights gradually
- Involving men and elderly people in activities supporting women's inclusion is key to sustainable women's empowerment agenda.

THE IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEERISM

Promoting the culture of volunteerism in communities is essential. The Youth Peace Shura and Peace Women groups function on a purely volunteer basis at the moment and key individuals behind their success are also volunteers who work tirelessly supporting the projects.

We currently work with around twenty-five dedicated volunteers, who are based in Kabul and in the provinces where we work. These volunteers support the shuras and women groups, often engaging their members either in group settings or on an individual basis as needed.

We also engage with community-level organisations to promote partnership and amplify our joint efforts towards peace.

Our multi-stakeholder approach tends to be unique in the current context: we are not only promoting collective action but also encouraging mutual coexistence and tolerance, along with promoting a culture of sharing resources for better sustainable impact.



Our Plans for 2017

Enhanced networking

WPP's success at networking and building collaborative relationship with multiple stakeholders, has made its work sustainable, responsive and inclusive. To expand and consolidate our initiatives, WPP will:

- Continue to work with civil society and educational institutions in a coordinated manner, mobilising groups of people to support each other's efforts towards sustainable peace, and leveraging existing and new resources to implement and align plans. WPP's strategic approach focuses on combining efforts with civil society and grassroots organisations and individuals that reach the most deprived and underprivileged areas.
- Continue to work closely with government and policy-makers, to enhance the effectiveness of their policies, frameworks and decision-making processes and implementation.
- Create networks in the Afghan Diaspora and connecting Afghan youth in Europe to Afghan youth at the grass roots. Diaspora engagement with policies in their countries of residence.

Capacity building

As noted above, the Youth Peace Shuras and Peace Women Groups identified the need for continued capacity building and awareness raising, specifically through 'training exposure programs'. Such programs will meet their demand for being better informed about major government policies, initiatives and frameworks addressing issues around peace and security, civic engagement and development.

Specific policy strategies highlighted and trainings planned are:

- The Citizen Charter
- Afghanistan Peace and Development Strategy
- UNSCR 1325 resolution for Women Peace and Security National Action Plan
- Government institutions including local government and its functions; Electronic governance as a method forward.
- Sharing of women peace and security initiatives in the country and in the region.

Outreach and Advocacy

Reaching wider communities and other stakeholders through targeted advocacy is essential for better effectiveness and improving access. Efforts will involve:

- Developing key messages with local communities and effectively communicating those messages by targeting the right audiences (e.g. authorities, institutions, individuals, public)
- Utilizing multimedia and video conferencing to facilitate discussion between Youth Shuras and governmental authorities, international community and broader human rights and civil society networks (especially when physical meetings are not possible).
- Short video stories highlighting the role of Youth Shuras in social reform, e.g. peacebuilding, behavioural transformation and community support.
- Using multiple platforms to reach a wide audience, including social media platforms, print publications in schools, universities and public spaces, etc.
- Utilizing TV and radio for Shuras to deliver ideas and facilitating debates at grassroots levels.

Oral History and Research on Role Models: 'Reviving the History of Peace'

Under the theme 'Reviving the History of Peace', *Youth Peace Shuras* have started identifying role models at the local, regional and international levels. This aims to understand how some well-known and lesser known figures in history made peaceful coexistence possible in Afghanistan and the wider region, as well as globally. This will involve:

- Identification of role models in each community
- Conducting research, primary and secondary to obtain details
- Developing a story; written and visual; and a strategy for dissemination

Stories of these individuals and communities will have an inspirational impact for young people. It also highlights the culturally-driven local practices in the past that held society together and to see how those principles can be applied to Afghan communities today.

Engaging Youth Peace Shuras in Women peace building work

Through collaboration between the youth peace shuras and the women peace groups, WPP will focus 'breaking social taboos' – those practices that provide justification not only for violence against women but also for insurgents manipulating and exploiting cultural norms to control youth.

Involving *Youth Peace Shuras* will provide an opportunity for men and women to work together towards problems that affect their communities and families equally. In addition, the *Youth Peace Shuras* will have a special agenda of women's inclusion for their 2017 and 2018 plan of action. Peace Women groups will do the vice versa.

