SPECIAL REPORT

Reaching a Durable Peace in Afghanistan and Iraq: Learning from Investments in Women's Programming

By Steven E. Steiner and Danielle Robertson

Women shop at a market in Kalar, in Iraqi Kurdistan. (Photo by DPA Picture Alliance/Alamy Stock Photo)

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Summary

- Afghanistan and Iraq have long been embroiled in violent conflict fueled by deep-seated local grievances and international interests. In both countries, peacebuilding agendas and gender equality advancements have struggled to take hold. Local and international civil society, allied nations, and the US government need to continue their efforts while they fight public fatigue about international investment and financing in peacebuilding and development work.

- To sustain peace in these countries, peacebuilding and development programs need to take seriously the opportunities for learning from years of previous implementation—especially decades of work to advance the rights, agency, and opportunities of women and girls.

- Evidence supports the link between durable peace and women's participation as peacebuilders. Women and girls need to be engaged as key partners for peace by local civil society, national governments, and international implementers in shaping and defining peace agendas.

- For programs to be more effective in advancing gender equality and sustaining peace, they need to follow a participatory design with local voices and ownership, adopt a ho-listic approach to implementation, pursue long-term engagement, and move beyond traditional women's programming by addressing gender dynamics and masculine identities through the engagement of families and communities.

- To be more transformative in peacebuilding work, programs will need to address root drivers of gender inequality in societies and to simultaneously undertake targeted work to support the rights and needs of women and girls. Both approaches in tandem are essential to meaningfully pursue gender equality and sustain long-term peace.

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GENDER

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report provides guidance to improve future peacebuilding and development programming and encourage transformational change by addressing gender dynamics at the community level. Lessons from women's programming in Afghanistan and Iraq over the past decade were distilled to identify barriers and challenges to the effective implementation of the global Women, Peace, and Security agenda as well as to provide recommendations for future work.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Making Peace Possible

Young women in school in Afghanistan (Photo by Ton Koene / Alamy Stock Photo)

Countering Public Fatigue

Afghanistan and Iraq have long been in the headlines of global media, attracting attention for contentious electoral processes, spikes in violence by extremist groups, rising regional tensions, and continued presence and investment by the US government and allied nations. In early 2019, Washington resumed its direct negotiations with the Taliban, reaching an agreement in principle on a joint framework for a future peace deal in Afghanistan. Although debate continues over the size and duration of the US military presence in both Afghanistan and Iraq, what falls in and out of the headlines is the investment—of both financial and human resources—made in grassroots peacebuilding efforts.

Peacebuilding and development are critical to the stability of Iraq and Afghanistan. However, investment by the US government and other allied nations must be made while fending off a sense of public fatigue regarding international commitments to these countries. US foreign assistance spending has consistently accounted for only about 1 percent of all US government spending.[1] Although funding has waned in recent years, Afghanistan continues to be one of the largest recipients of US foreign aid: $632.8 million is anticipated for fiscal year 2019. Iraq is anticipated to receive $199.8 million. These investments seek to cement democratic norms, assist economic markets through turbulent times, provide humanitarian assistance, and support local security forces in stabilization efforts.[2]

The US military has now had a sustained presence in each country for nearly two decades. The public narrative that violence has taken over Iraq and Afghanistan despite past investment—and that it is thus fruitless to spend further taxpayer dollars to advance peace in these countries—only

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stalls funding decisions and hampers efforts to support local populations. Without stability, however, these countries will continue to rely on donors for support. What needs to change, then, is how programs are designed and implemented in Iraq and Afghanistan.

If lessons from decades of investment are ignored, even long-term commitments are likely to be ineffective. And without a learning cycle, best practices will never find their way into project design. One crucial lesson is that women should be fully integrated and able to meaningfully participate in all peacebuilding and development work.[3] Gender equality has strong positive implications on economic growth and political stability. To that end, investing in women's programming in fragile countries is a best practice toward achieving a more durable peace over the long term.[4] Countries will not be able to sustain peace and will continue to rely on support from allied and partner countries—such as the United States—unless their entire populations, women included, are engaged as decision makers and leaders for peace and gender equality.

How Women Contribute to State Security

In 2000, the global platform for Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) was launched on the unanimous adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. The resolution addressed how women and girls are differentially affected by conflict and war and recognized the critical role women can and already do play in peacebuilding efforts at the local, national, and regional levels. UNSCR 1325 affirmed that peace and security efforts are more sustainable when women are equal partners in efforts to prevent violent conflict, to deliver relief and promote recovery, and to forge lasting peace.[5] After two decades of the WPS agenda, a substantial body of research now ties the status of women directly to national security. Texas A&M scholar Valerie Hudson's work linking gender equality to state security bolsters arguments made by policymakers, activists, scholars, and practitioners that investing in women's agency and empowerment contributes to peace and security.[6]

Other scholarship has revealed specific ways in which women's participation is critical to peace and security. For example, the participation of civil society groups, including women's organizations, makes a peace agreement 64 percent less likely to fail.[7] The meaningful inclusion of women in peace processes increases the probability of an agreement lasting at least fifteen years by 35 percent.[8] This stands in stark contrast to the overall rate of conflict recurrence—with peace lasting only seven years, on average, once a conflict ends.[9] The abbreviated periods between conflicts means that learning from previous conflict settings and programming is increasingly important. However, peacebuilding agendas in general, and gender equality advancements in particular, have faced serious challenges to progress.

In October 2015, the UN Security Council held an all-day open debate on women, peace, and security to review implementation of Resolution 1325. (Photo by Luiz Rampelotto/ Pacific Press/Alamy Live News)

Although advancements have been made at the global and national levels—with some UN member states adopting National Action Plans to implement UNSCR 1325 or by enacting legislation— local-level implementation has stalled.[10] Fifteen years after UN-SCR 1325, UN Women launched a global study to evaluate the impact of the resolution. The study found women's participation in national governance bodies in postconflict countries has increased but has yet to trickle down to local governance. And, although global initiatives have been launched to prevent sexual violence during conflict, evidence suggests that violence against women often increases in the aftermath of conflict.[11] Global policy frameworks can set forth platforms for advocacy, but their pillars need to be modified and translated for local peacebuilding interventions. Structural and political barriers preventing progress for effective women's programming need to be unpacked.

Women's Rights on the Political Stage

Despite the potential for a meaningful transformation of gender norms in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rights of women and girls are very much at play on these countries' political stages. The fragility of the Afghan and Iraqi states and societies creates openings for violent groups, making advancements in stability a particularly difficult challenge. Violent nonstate groups and others hostile to women's advancement can play a significant part in any peace negotiation or political process, and that engagement poses a great risk of serious rollbacks in women's rights.

AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan's recent history has seen advancements in women's equality, but internal conflicts have strained political processes, creating a precarious scenario for future progress and the maintenance of recent gains. Even though NATO withdrew some troops and officially returned some control over to the Afghan army in 2013, the United States and other countries have remained on the ground there. In 2014, a contested presidential election was resolved by forming a US-supported National Unity Government, which divided power between two candidates: Ashraf Ghani, who became president, and Abdullah Abdullah, who became chief executive officer. The

Journalist Saleha Soadat, a candidate in Afghanistan's 2018 parliamentary elections, speaks at a campaign event. (Photo by Hedayatullah Amid/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

presidential election set for 2019 continues to be pushed back.

The Taliban had advanced, despite the military efforts of US and allied forces, facilitated in party by internal divisions within the Afghan government and national security forces. Using these weaknesses to their advantage, the Taliban are increasingly on the offensive. The Taliban now control some 12 percent of districts in Afghanistan; another 34 percent remain contested.[12] Major talks have been held between the Taliban and the US government, resulting in a draft framework for peace, but these conversations excluded the Afghan government. Earlier discussions saw the Taliban signaling their willingness to engage in peace talks with the Afghan government, but these have not yet occurred and have been sidelined during US negotiations.

Afghan women have yet to be integrated into any of these conversations, and it is unclear whether women will ultimately get a seat at the peace table.[13] US negotiations with the Taliban are a worrying sign for women's rights moving forward in the country given the lack of any indications that these rights will be safeguarded. The presence of ISIS also poses a serious threat to the status of women. Since its emergence in Afghanistan in early 2015, the violent extremist group has spread throughout the country, although it continues to have its most significant presence in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar Province.[14]

Women continue their efforts to revive their traditional role as peacemakers at the local level—seeking to settle disputes within their communities.[15] These efforts have shown signs of shifting perceptions of women's expanding role within societies and could signal progress for broader gender equality across the county. But a national-level peacebuilding agenda will need to address women's rights in a systematic and meaningful way—one that both takes into account the specific postconflict needs of women and girls and recognizes the roles they can play in advancing the country's security.

IRAQ

Iraq has battled violent extremism and other internal political challenges over the past several decades, resulting in severe social, security, and political fragility. The country faced a major crisis in 2016 when ISIS took over significant parts of its north, including its second largest city, Mosul.[16] Moreover, after a period of relative unity in the face of ISIS, Arab-Kurdish tensions have come to the fore again. Against the backdrop of intense regional protests, a Kurdish referendum

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for independence was pushed forward but ultimately failed, resulting in armed conflict between Iraqi government and Kurdistan Regional Government forces. At the same time, Iranian influence increased in many parts of Iraq and the Iraqi government, especially in terms of Iranian funding of nonstate armed groups.[17] These challenges destabilized opportunities for a robust peacebuilding agenda and the advancement of women's rights.

Despite the violence, the military victory over ISIS engendered a sense of pride among Iraqis in working together to defeat a common enemy. In the May 2018 parliamentary elections, no major coalition openly advanced a sectarian agenda, marking a significant step in Iraq's democratic evolution. The moment proved fleeting, however: political coalitions that had been relatively stable have since begun to fragment. Pockets also remain of ISIS fighters who continue to stage attacks, and violence remains high in many parts of the country. It is within this still-violent and unstable context that issues regarding gender and women's empowerment must continue to be addressed.

Events in the last few years have triggered several contradictory developments for women. Women have directly engaged in the fight against ISIS as soldiers in Iraqi Kurdistan's Peshmerga forces. Women have also taken leadership roles in building Iraqi civil society and providing support during the humanitarian crisis. At the same time, ISIS dramatically curtailed women's rights by issuing strict dictates on their mobility and presence in public spaces.[18] The Iraqi Parliament also reintroduced a personal status bill, known as the Jaffari Law, which allows for girls as young as nine to be married.[19] Although the bill was eventually rejected, its reoccurrence in parliamentary debate for a third time since the fall of the Baathist regime in 2003 demonstrates a continuing threat to women's rights in Iraq.

As fighting slows, which it eventually will, Iraq will again require serious efforts in postconflict reconstruction and reconciliation. Key to the peacebuilding agenda will be the question of women's role in its formation and implementation. The liberated areas of Iraq offer opportunities to renegotiate the gender roles, responsibilities, and practices that were previously constricted under ISIS. This space has the potential for positive transformation for women, especially when examining the new roles that women often take on in times of violent conflict.

A Decade of Investment

Fragile countries experience breakdowns in the social contracts between people and their governments. This fragility can cause chaos, but it can also shed light on new opportunities to advance women's rights in a country.[20] From local civil society organizations to larger international donors, projects are being implemented across Iraq and Afghanistan to advance the rights and opportunities of women and girls. Although each project is seeking to better the lives of their participants, key lessons are often ignored or forgotten in the design and implementation of this work.

> "The international community has done a lot of lessons *identified* work, but not lessons *learned* work. We have not truly learned from these compiled lessons or fed them back into our programming cycles."

In December 2017, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) partnered with the Washington, DC-based think tank New America to begin a process of reflection and evaluation of women's programming in fragile countries, with a particular emphasis on Iraq and Afghanistan.[21] The organizations convened two roundtable discussions bringing together several dozen representatives from the US government, local civil society, allied embassies, development implementers, and humanitarian and peacebuilding organizations. These forums tested the relevancy of lessons compiled in 2011 following the ten-year anniversary of UNSCR 1325. The work in 2011 culminated in a report listing twelve lessons and eleven best practices.[22] The effort led by USIP and New America, which continued throughout 2018, sought to revitalize the original work against nearly a decade of additional programming—reviewing both successes and challenges.

A key objective of this effort was not to simply reflect on the impact of specific projects but to ensure that findings are built into the learning cycles of women's programming more broadly.[23] As one participant observed, "The international community has done a lot of lessons *identified* work, but not lessons *learned* work. We have not truly learned from these compiled lessons or fed them back into our programming cycles."

Based on the roundtable dialogues, four key areas were identified as critical to informing the design of future programming in order to more effectively advance the rights of women and girls:

- follow a participatory design with local voices and ownership,
- adopt a holistic approach to implementation,
- pursue long-term engagement, and
- move beyond traditional women's programming by addressing the intersection of gender norms and masculine identities through the engagement of families and communities.

PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

In Iraq and Afghanistan, where foreign security interests so often take center stage, local ownership of peacebuilding and development work is critical to sustainability and accountability. Practitioners have seen that co-design and co-ownership of projects with local communities takes advantage of local knowledge and local solutions already in place. However, a joint study by Oxfam and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan found that, despite government ownership of development work in principle, "key funding decisions and strategies are not made in Kabul, but in capital cities of donor countries."[24] One participant with years of experience working for several US agencies observed that "the message was always clear—ensure there wasn't a rollback of women's rights. But that message was not accompanied by a deep commitment to listening to the women." To be most effective, projects seeking to advance gender equality must be designed and planned with input from local communities and the women they intend to serve.

Project designers and implementers need to seek input from Iraqi and Afghan women across religious, ethnic, and class identities on the needs of their communities and the dangers and challenges they face. Participants, however, said that participatory design is often sacrificed in

A displaced family flees Mosul in May 2017 following ISIS's advance into the northwest of the city. (Photo by Nicholas Hel/Shutterstock)

the name of tight deadlines and design sequencing. When concept notes have rapid turna-round deadlines or partners cannot be identified until a project has been funded, participatory design becomes an often-difficult task set aside for later in the process.

Taking these factors into account, organizations could ensure that they are working from relevant and timely conflict and gender analyses before designing any project. Saferworld, an international nongovernmental organization based in the United Kingdom, has piloted a gender analysis of conflict in northern Uganda using participatory methods to examine both the masculine and feminine drivers and consequences of conflict. The findings now shape the organization's full portfolio in Uganda. This tool could be piloted globally. Furthermore, donors and funders should ensure that when developing requests for proposals, these too are based on inputs from the communities they intend to serve. Additionally, donor organizations should encourage and provide necessary resources for their implementers to integrate a gender analysis into the project itself. A gender analysis can be a tool to test assumptions embedded within the project's design.

Global policies such as the WPS agenda can put forward useful principles, but it is critical that these principles are adapted and translated for local contexts. In 2014, Iraq became

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the first country in the Middle East to adopt a National Action Plan on WPS due to the stalwart advocacy efforts of Iraqi women.[25] Through a grant, USIP supported an alliance of thirty-three civil society groups that developed an implementation plan on UNSCR 1325. Following the emergence of ISIS in Iraq in 2014, the alliance recommended that the National Action Plan adjust to the national emergency with a focus on urgent humanitarian issues, emphasizing support for displaced women and minorities.

The adaptability of the USIP grant process allowed for a quick response to the changing dynamics on the ground as recounted by the women leading the design process. Many from the alliance of Iraqi women have seized this opportunity and sought to open political space for themselves and exercise leadership at the community, provincial, and national levels in both government and civil society. Although implementation has been limited due to a lack of available funds, this process provided the opportunity for local Iraqi women to define and develop their own emergency plan based on the needs of their communities. Funders should consider applying similar flexibility in planning and implementation schedules to allow for rapid adaption to changing contexts informed by local voices.
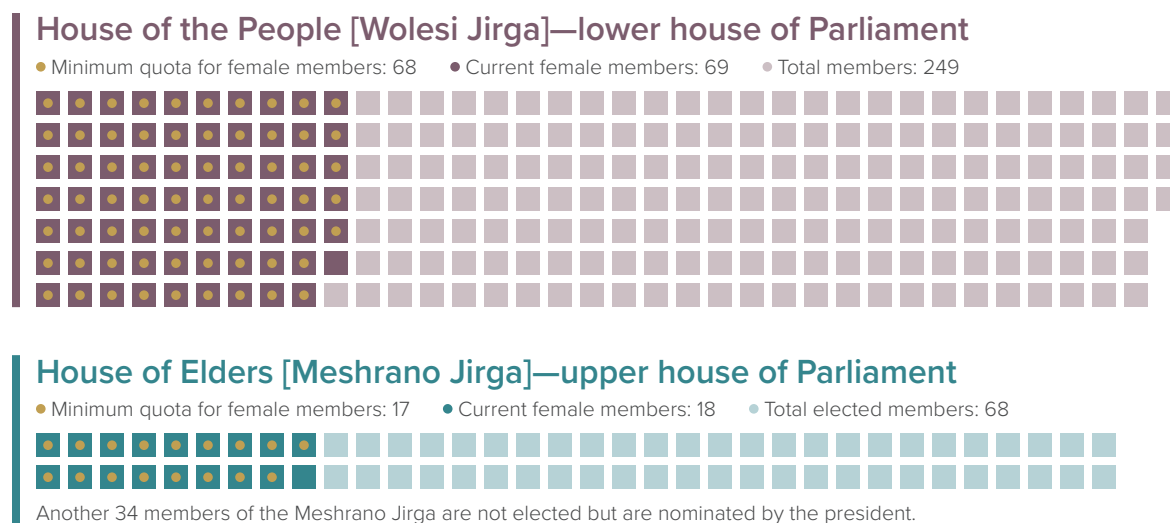
A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Programs that seek to advance women's rights and agency need to better address the full context that women face. Women are not simply mothers or shopkeepers or politicians; they occupy multiple identities across multiple spaces in society. Projects need to go beyond addressing only "women's issues" and include issues such as security, health, sanitation, governance, and corruption. "[They need to] see women beyond their roles as mothers and teachers, see them as negotiators with armed actors," one participant working in development spaces noted. "Think of the different roles women take on and dive deeper."

Key principles of the WPS agenda are not often integrated into reconciliation, security, justice, or agriculture programs. By continuing to silo these approaches, programs will remain fragmented, along with efforts for sustainable peacebuilding. Drawing on their years of experience working in Kabul, one participant emphasized that "we need to connect economic empowerment with security. In order to have stability, we also need women in the workforce." One participant highlighted the program She Leads, implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, which provides leadership training for women in political and electoral processes as well as concrete advice on how to use this training in their own contexts, beyond just the political space.

Programs to advance gender equality and women's empowerment would benefit from a more holistic and intersectional approach. For example, programs should understand the challenges that women face differ between rural and urban settings. Funding mechanisms need to be more adaptive to varying objectives in program design, and funders should always look beyond traditional implementers in any given space.

FIGURE 1.

Female members of Afghanistan's Parliament
2019

House of the People [Wolesi Jirga]—lower house of Parliament

● Minimum quota for female members: 68   ● Current female members: 69   ● Total members: 249

House of Elders [Meshrano Jirga]—upper house of Parliament

● Minimum quota for female members: 17   ● Current female members: 18   ● Total elected members: 68

Another 34 members of the Meshrano Jirga are not elected but are nominated by the president.

Source: International IDEA, www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/country-view/44/35.
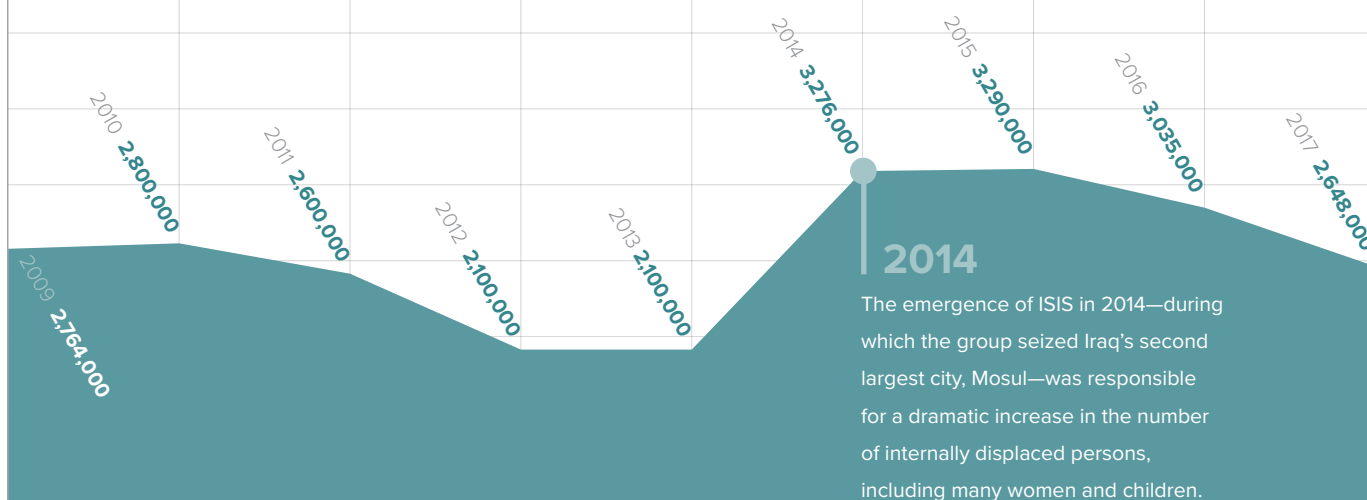
Although extended violence has deeply damaged Afghanistan, fragile gains have come into focus. Afghanistan's current constitution, adopted in 2004, recognized women as equal citizens and—given its well-written law prohibiting violence against women—is considered one of the more progressive in the region.[26] In Article 83, it also establishes minimum quotas for female members of elected bodies: "At least two females shall be the elected members of the House of the People [Wolesi Jirga] from each province." As of early 2019, this body—the lower house of Parliament—had sixty-nine female members, or 28 percent of the total. The constitution also requires at least seventeen of the 102 seats in the upper house of Parliament to be held by women (see figure 1).[27] Women are increasingly recognized as political and civil society leaders in Afghanistan, and twelve of the sixty-three members of the High Peace Council are women. Prominent women politicians and activists, however, still regularly face threats of violence made against them and their families and confront extreme pressures to toe the party line.

Women's political participation remains in jeopardy when movement is limited in response to security risks. Political empowerment programs often assume that a lack of leadership skills or political entry points limit women's political activity; lessons from the economic empowerment and security spaces, however, reveal the enormity of the human and financial barriers that curb their participation. Several roundtable participants highlighted that given the Taliban's control of so many territories, the more women acted as activists, the more their families were threatened.

It becomes critical that implementers integrate risk analysis into programming design and implementation—combining core tenets of political participation with security.[28] Not only does

FIGURE 2.

Annual number of internally displaced persons in Iraq
2009–17

2009 2,764,000
2010 2,800,000
2011 2,600,000
2012 2,100,000
2013 2,100,000
2014 3,276,000
2015 3,290,000
2016 3,035,000
2017 2,648,000

2014

The emergence of ISIS in 2014—during which the group seized Iraq's second largest city, Mosul—was responsible for a dramatic increase in the number of internally displaced persons, including many women and children.

Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, www.internal-displacement.org/countries/iraq.

the physical security need to be addressed in the implementation of programs (such as location choices, promotion activities, and the like), but participants should also build their capacity to assess risk in public, political, and economic spaces.

The violence and destruction caused by ISIS in Iraq displaced hundreds of thousands of women and children, leaving humanitarian scars that will last for years (see figure 2). Emigration is at an all-time high because of the violence, and it is critical that interventions adapt to the lives of those affected and emphasize skills that are valuable and useful in many different contexts. Many programs across Iraq seek to advance women in business and enterprise. Prosperity Catalyst, for example, emphasizes support for female heads of household and seeks to empower women as entrepreneurs. This program focuses on providing transferable skills such as financial literacy, project management, and business development, and also helps women expand their networks with professionals in other business sectors.

Roundtable participants explained that new technologies such as cell phones and digital money have opened new avenues for outreach as well. A USAID-funded program that provided legal training to widows in Iraq was able to continue because it worked in the cloud. When participants were forced to flee in the face of ISIS attacks, the program's legal documents and training materials were saved and remained accessible. One participant working for an Iraqi alliance organization shared details of a separate mobile literacy campaign, explaining that cell phones are often the only source of communication for many. The violence and mass displacements have shown women need skills that are portable and easily transferable.

LONG-TERM ENGAGEMENT

Peacebuilding work requires a long-term perspective. Recent research presented in a joint study by the United Nations and World Bank shows that violent conflicts involving state forces that ended in 2014 had lasted 26.7 years on average.[29] This contrasts sharply with the conflicts that ended in 1970, which had lasted 9.6 years on average.[30] One-year projects simply cannot address the often deep-seated grievances behind today's conflicts. A US agency employee explained that "programs are typically short term due to reporting requirements, but these time-lines do not allow for goals that typically require generations." The United Nation's Sustaining Peace agenda emphasizes the importance of long-term investment, especially when working to prevent conflict through institution building and securing governance structures.

Short timelines put a strain on projects to demonstrate impact without providing enough time to generate lasting change or truly monitor and evaluate the results. One participant noted that although practitioners have been engaged in Afghanistan for nearly two decades, "sixteen years of investment appears more like sixteen one-year, fragmented interventions." Projects should begin with at least a five-year commitment and seek to engage across generations. Long-term investment should address local conflict dynamics to tackle larger generational goals, not short-term objectives.

One place to begin thinking long term is in the area of participant selection. When selecting participants for programs, the international community needs to cast a wider net, moving beyond the English-speaking urban elite and using technologies and networks that allow for broader outreach. Specifically, it is crucial that younger non-elite populations are engaged in programming either as direct participants or through mentorship opportunities that can provide sustainability and opportunities for future engagement. An Afghan American participant explained, "Peace is created from within, it cannot be created from the outside. If you leave the youth behind, you cannot achieve peace."

The UN Population Fund reports that roughly 64 percent of Afghans are under the age of twenty-five.[31] The enlarged youth bulge sparks concern over employment prospects and education opportunities. A total of 9.2 million children, including 3.5 million girls, are now in school, relative to an estimated one million children (mostly boys) in 2001. Moreover, of the three hundred thousand students enrolled in universities, one hundred thousand are women.[32] This rise in girls' and women's education is a positive sign. International actors should build on these gains.

UN Women and others have supported internship programs for young Afghan women that seek to support university graduates entering the job market. Other organizations that offer these internships have noted that "these women are proof that Afghanistan's strength lies in the potential of its young women."[33] Roundtable participants also encouraged support for programming that creates space for more women and youth to be involved in informal, community decision-making structures. Failure to reach out to the burgeoning next generation will do a disservice to the peacebuilding efforts currently under way and reduce their long-term sustainability.

BEYOND WOMEN'S PROGRAMMING

Women's agency, opportunities, and power are often affected by factors they cannot control, such as gender roles ascribed by society and tribal codes, governance structures, informal justice mechanisms, and so on. These systems do not often involve women and girls as decision makers. Programs that seek to support women's agency at personal and structural levels need to

> Women's programming in Iraq and Afghanistan has targeted women for economic empowerment initiatives or political participation efforts, but has not always considered the broader context within which they live.

involve those who control the decision making. Programs thus need to move beyond traditional targeted interventions that only reach women and involve men, boys, communities, and families. To advance gender equality, the broader system that works to hold back or control women in a society needs to change.

Although targeted programming for women should not be overlooked, these programs should be implemented alongside other initiatives that address broader gender dynamics.

Women's programming in Iraq and Afghanistan has targeted women for economic empowerment initiatives or political participation efforts, but has not always considered the broader context within which they live. Women's economic empowerment programs—such as cash-transfer and micro-credit programs—that do not engage men as well can inadvertently result in an increase in intimate partner violence against women.[34] It has become clear that if the broader context is not addressed, a backlash can occur against the very population the program seeks to support. To avoid unintended consequences, then, work to advance women's and girls' rights must be undertaken with an understanding of family and class dynamics and religious and social biases.

In predominantly patriarchal societies such as Iraq and Afghanistan, male family and community members are typically in positions of leadership, decision making, and control. Men, and often boys, dictate the rules and norms that govern a society and the boundaries women and girls live within. If real progress in advancing women's rights is to be made, men and boys need to be engaged in understanding and addressing masculine identities and norms, and programs need to be developed that unpack the roots of gender inequality.

Programs for men and boys should emphasize that expanding the role of women in public and private life brings benefits for families, communities, and a country, and that women's empowerment is not a zero-sum game taking power away from men. These programs should seek to unpack the harmful structures in place that perpetuate gender inequality. Without the support of men and boys, efforts to prevent violent conflict or violent extremism and advance gender equality could face serious and detrimental challenges.

Specifically, it is critical that men act as mentors and engage young men and boys in what is known as *peaceful masculinity*, that is, the disassociation of violence as a primary form of problem-solving from ideas of masculinity or manhood. Men themselves are often able to call attention to the fallacy of certain narratives around manhood or adulthood that place violence at the center of control. Organizations such as Promundo-US, USIP, CARE, and others have all implemented projects that seek to promote nonviolent notions of manhood for young men through youth camps, vocational trainings, and social media campaigns. This is just a first step, however. Beginning conversations on masculine gender norms opens the door for programs to examine the intersections of all gender norms and push for positive transformation.

Several local civil society members underscored the importance of implementers and funders recognizing and valuing the role of families and communities. "Trust of families and communities is really important, especially in rural communities, and requires program investment in the informal structures of communities," one participant said. Given the rise of violent nonstate actors,

Women harvest saffron flowers in Herat, Afghanistan. According to reports, the saffron industry has hired more than five thousand farmers, 40 percent of whom are women, to cultivate about a thousand acres of land. (Photo by Jalil Rezayee/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

conflict prevention is no longer the sole responsibility of the nation-state. Families—including mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, and grandparents—are channels for cultural beliefs and values and are critical in shaping attitudes around nonviolence.

With the military defeat of ISIS in Iraq, reintegration efforts will need to address community dynamics to be successful. Significant program emphasis must now be placed on the more than 2.5 million internally displaced persons in Iraq, many of whom are youth, as well as returned fighters. Failure to work with these populations and to understand the full dynamics of reintegrating into a community could lead to another generation of young men and women vulnerable to recruitment by violent groups.

Families are at the heart of social networks within a community—often directing relationships with community leaders, religious actors, and education systems. Building on these relationships, social networks broadly can either aid or prevent processes of radicalization toward violence. Taking a family-centered approach to preventing violent conflict builds resilience from the basic building blocks of a community.[35] These approaches create a strong foundation against state fragility by harnessing existing social connections.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

As countries transition away from conflict, communities are vulnerable to falling back into violence. This is even more likely in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, which have faced decades of more or less continuous conflict. Poorly implemented peace agreements, system shocks, or unaddressed grievances can spark new violence. Conflict prevention efforts and postconflict interventions need to ensure that they not only seize moments of opportunity but also are implemented in sustainable ways. The following recommendations synthesize key steps to improve efforts on women's programming.

Above all, peacebuilding work should be rooted in the local context, advancing the local voices for peace. Programming donors should seek to support existing local and community-based projects, particularly on sensitive issues such as domestic violence, inheritance laws, or divorce law, and take care not to give the appearance of advancing a foreign cause.

Additionally, a gender analysis should be integrated into the design process of any project. Whether a project seeks to directly address gender dynamics, or its goals are broader in scope, a gender analysis can ensure that the project is attuned to the current dynamics in a community and illuminate additional areas for intervention. To ensure real gains are made for women, the WPS agenda needs to be implemented in alignment with broader security, governance, and political efforts. The core principles of protection of women and girls and their meaningful participation will not be advanced within a silo. Policies and programs should connect goals of advancing women's status with broader security and resiliency goals. Programs should also be designed with an integrated, holistic approach—linking elements of political participation with economic empowerment, as an example.

Longer project timelines are also essential. Programs should not be implemented within only a one-year horizon but instead should be locally driven with significant long-term investment. With longer-term investments of five to ten years, programs can integrate true learning models into their design. Monitoring and evaluation plans that address specific program and safety indicators can feed into learning periods that allow for adaption and improvements as programs proceed.

Finally, projects should be transformative. Programming that seeks to advance the rights of women and girls should move beyond traditional, targeted programming for women and girls only, and unpack the root causes of gender inequality. It should also focus on families and communities, including men and boys. Gender programming should both emphasize peaceful and nonviolent notions of masculinity while also advancing the local voices and leadership of women. Gender equality will only be advanced if the entire community is engaged in the process.

Programming that fully integrates these lessons and takes seriously recommendations from the field will be far more likely to achieve a durable peace in fragile communities and countries. Women who have control over their access to resources, mobility, and opportunities will be critical allies in countering violent extremism, ending violent conflict, and sustaining the often-fragile peace that exists in the aftermath.

Notes

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