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Participation in the Afghanistan High Peace Council: Wazhma Frogh's Dilemma

In 2015, Wazhma Frogh, a prominent Afghan women's rights leader and peacebuilder, received an invitation to join the Afghanistan High Peace Council. The High Peace Council, established by the government of Afghanistan in 2010, aimed to integrate anti-government forces, including the Taliban, into a peace process.. As a leading voice in civil society, Wazhma perceived her opportunity to serve on the High Peace Council as presenting both potential benefits and pitfalls.

In 2015, Afghanistan was experiencing high levels of insecurity, and women struggled to access opportunities to serve in public office and engage in high-level negotiations and political dialogue. When Wazhma was invited to serve on the Council, she was excited about the opportunity to expand the work she had done as a civil society leader, leveraging the Council's resources to support peacebuilding efforts. However, she also faced physical security threats.. Additionally, risks to her reputation could emerge from joining an organization that included individuals who had allegedly committed human rights violations.

Wazhma's leadership

Wazhma's family fled Afghanistan during her childhood, leading her to grow up in Pakistan from 1989 to 2001. Even in her youth,, she supported Afghan refugee women and children in camps in Peshawar. She taught women basic health skills, kitchen safety, and sustainable gardening practices. Upon their return to Afghanistan in 2001, Wazhma and her family encountered conflict following the

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US military intervention. Wazhma dedicated herself to the improvement of women's rights, particularly in terms of security. Recognizing a lack of women prosecutors able to address violence against women, she helped twelve women law school graduates find employment in the Prosecutor's Office. Harassment and social pressure created challenges. Nonetheless, three of the women were able to create careers.¹

Wazhma founded the Women and Peace Studies Organization (WPSO) at the same time the High Peace Council was created, with a goal to bring in voices of the women who lived in the communities that were affected by air bombings, war, insurgency, and violence. She endeavored to ensure that women who did not have a high level of education or did not speak English, but were leaders in their own communities, had their voices heard. Wazhma said,

"There was a lot of noise coming from the center, urban areas, but nothing from beyond the cities... that's how we started the movement for peace negotiations, for finding peacebuilding resolution for the conflict. I was working in the space [of peacebuilding] anyway."

Across her work, Wazhma connected individuals and groups of women with ministers and leaders to ensure that their concerns were heard. She organized both formal and informal groups to highlight the needs of women around Afghanistan. In one instance, she facilitated a dialogue in one of Afghanistan's southern provinces with the mothers of suicide bombers, aiming to learn more about how to prevent violent extremism. This work also increased threats and risks to her. In 2013, Wazhma brought the abuses of a local warlord, who was a commander in the Afghan Local Police to the attention of ISAF leadership upon learning of the abuses through networks of women. The commander fled his post, but Wazhma faced a security threat by standing up to him. She fled Afghanistan several times in 2013 until a settlement was reached with the commander's family at the end of the year. The commander agreed to leave her alone if Wazhma apologized publicly. However, he would not guarantee that his supporters would not harm her upon receiving her apology.

The peace talks were controversial among some civil society actors, but Wazhma believed there was value there, even if the process would be challenging. She said, "The dilemma is big when there are grievances." She noted that the international community was supporting women's participation at the highest levels, but it was still challenging for women to be heard. Wazhma said, "[It is hard to be] heard by the very old men who have been in big power politics all their life. It is hard to hear women." Wazhma participated in the 2010 Peace Jirga and said, "What I saw in the six days in the grand assembly of elders was that women do not have a voice, do not have a space, but they have a lot of solutions that the community elders are not looking at."

The President of Afghanistan asked a group of 150 civil society organizations to nominate three women to participate in the High Peace Council, and Wazhma was one of the three chosen. The

¹ Kyleanne Hunter, *The Perils of Implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in Afghanistan: Case Study of Wazhma Frogh*, San Diego, CA: Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, 2017, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/16zyZtVXvoag1Vo64eKPDworKc5OduZSE/view>.

Council Secretariat invited her in 2015 to be part of the Council but warned her the president was receiving opposition to her appointment from men on the Council. Wazhma said,

“And these men are very powerful, and we women were not part of the political groups, we were not tribal leaders, we did not have armed men behind us, we were just community, we had the community voice, or we had the people’s voice.”

For her, “being a woman – and particularly being a young woman – made that power disparity even stronger.” Wazhma added,

“There was a fear as well that I’m not able to fulfill the expectation of 150 organizations on my back. At the same time, how am I going to be able to deal with the situation on the Council? It’s a high-level political structure, and I am not a politician. How will I be able to manage? That was a struggle for us women.”

Wazhma started to weigh the benefits and risks of joining the High Peace Council. In 2011, the chairman of the High Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani, was assassinated in a bomb attack, and in 2015, High Peace Council member Sheirin Agha was assassinated. She said,

“The first risk was the security risk. I joined the Council at a time when the Council’s president had been assassinated just a while back. And there were many Council members who had been attacked. Security was the first one. We were soft targets. I did not have a bodyguard or armored cars. So security was the first [concern].”

Wazhma felt she had to consider her family, saying, “[After the security concerns], then the fear was my husband was not happy.” “My family were worried that this might actually create a security situation for them as well. It was risky.” Her husband was unhappy about the appointment offer, and her family was worried that this would also put them at risk. “My family was not happy. My dad was not seriously stopping it, but he was asking if they can protect me, [saying], ‘Imagine if you are attacked. You are an ordinary person; they could attack you.’”

Wazhma thought that she also faced a “reputational risk.” She listened to colleagues:

“Some people said, “No, don’t do it. You’re a civil society activist. If you do it, it will turn into politics, and you will be blamed in the future for this. These warlords have done so many human rights violations, sitting at the same table as them will ruin your reputation.” That came from colleagues in civil society and on a personal level.

However, Wazhma was dedicated to peacebuilding work and saw serving on the High Peace Council as an opportunity to expand and solidify the work she had been doing. She said,

“The work I’ve been doing as a CSO on the ground, leveraging on the community’s efforts for peace, for finding peaceful solutions [...] is so important. If that is not translated into policy, then we are not very successful.”

Wazhma commented, “[Some people said], ‘We should not bring in women, the Taliban will not be happy, they will ruin the process.’” However, Wazhma believed that there was political momentum in the other direction. Wazhma noted,

“The President wanted stronger women because it would give him a good image in the international community, so he was looking at it from his image as well. [He felt that] By bringing these women, [it would contribute to] creating a better image within my government. By bringing people like me, that would open the door, push the Taliban to accept that women could be part of it.”

Wazhma stated that she saw an opportunity to create space for other women to serve in formal peace processes through her participation. Wazhma said,

“I think, for me, it was entirely a gender issue. I was nominated because of gender. We didn’t have stronger women, women who were qualified. At the same time, the groups inside the political figures objected because I was a woman, a woman with a voice, a woman who was prominent in the media and outside in the public, [...] a woman who was not part of a political entity, a political family.”

She continued that it would be valuable,

“If I can bring all [my] work on the ground to a national level. For me, it was also a matter of the Council; there were 33 members, and they were all government appointees: ministers, governors. So the only people who were not government appointees or government jobs were me and the other two women. For us, it was very much that we can actually create some space for other women.”

Wazhma weighed the power and resources she would have if she accepted the offer with the pressure she would face from many different parts of society; her words and actions would be heavily scrutinized. If she remained a civil society activist, she would not have the large platform the Council could offer, but she could retain some freedom of expression and action. Wazhma remarked,

“[Working in the government] is a different form of advocacy, you can’t do it the way you do it in an NGO or outside in the media, for example.” Wazhma pondered, “It’s complicated. It’s not one or the other. Civil society can do many things because you’re free, and in the government, you don’t have all of that.” Just as some colleagues discouraged her from accepting the position, others encouraged her. In her words, “I had friends who were in the Council. They said, ‘You’re doing great work in the CSO, but if you want your agenda, this is the way.’”

Gender and conflict in Afghanistan

Afghanistan experienced armed conflict for decades, including gendered violence and restrictions targeted at women. Respect for women's rights fluctuated with regime changes and the dynamics of the conflict. During the Taliban's rule in the 1990s, girls' access to education and women's participation in employment and public life were severely restricted. In the period following the US military intervention in Afghanistan, progress was made to strengthen women's participation in political and economic life, laws protecting women's rights and safety were passed, and women civil society leaders gained leverage to push for greater support for women's rights. This pattern was further strengthened under the leadership of President Ashraf Ghani, who supported women's leadership in the political sphere. (For more detail on the history of Afghanistan, including up to the publication of this teaching case, please see Exhibit 1.)

Conflict dynamics in Afghanistan in 2015

In 2015, 36 percent of Afghans felt their country was moving in the right direction, a sharp decline from the previous year. Of those who said the country was moving in the wrong direction, 44 percent cited insecurity as a primary factor.² While overall civilian casualties increased by four percent in 2015 compared to 2014, casualties of women increased 37 percent during that same time. Sixty-two percent of all civilian casualties were attributed to anti-government elements, and 17 percent were attributed to pro-government forces.³

In 2015, many Afghans reported a decline in economic opportunities and a decrease in confidence in government and institutions.⁴ The number of Afghans who were satisfied with how democracy worked in their country dipped to 57 percent, a decline from 73 percent reported in the previous year.⁵

That same year showed progress for women in Afghan politics, with four women ministers serving in the cabinet and the appointment of women as provincial governors.⁶ However, women in public office, government workers, teachers, and activists often experienced threats and intimidation.

² The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2015* (Washington, DC: The Asia Foundation, 2015), accessed from <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-2015-survey-afghan-people>, 6-7.

³ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Afghanistan Annual Report 2015: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, (UNAMA and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016), https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/poc_annual_report_2015_final_14_feb_2016.pdf, 2-3.

⁴ The Asia Foundation, 2015, preface.

⁵ Ibid, 115.

⁶ Ibid, 129.

Prominent leaders such as the provincial head of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Hanifa Safi, and her successor, Najia Sidiqi, were assassinated in 2012.⁷

In 2015, 62 % of Afghans thought that the Afghan government's efforts to reconcile with armed opposition groups would help stabilize the country, a decline from the previous year. Fifty-four % said negotiations with the Taliban were a good idea, 24 % said it was bad, and 20 % said they had no opinion.⁸

Peace processes in Afghanistan in 2015

In 2010, Afghanistan's National Consultative Peace Jirga brought together 1,600 delegates – including 300 women – to discuss a plan to end the conflict. Women's groups were not initially considered essential to this Peace Jirga. Due to advocacy by women's organizations' in 2010, the number of women delegates to the Peace Jirga increased from 100 to over 300. However, some felt the representation was often more symbolic than substantive.⁹

Efforts to include women in formal processes and consultations were uneven between 2010 and 2014, and women were largely excluded from formal peace talks. Between 2010 and 2012, Afghan women were included in only five of the officially recorded peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.¹⁰

The High Peace Council was created in 2010, with offices in each of the country's 34 provinces. The goal of the Council was to work towards integrating anti-government groups into a peace process.¹¹ The council's body of 70 appointed members included women, but only nine women served on the Council between 2011 and 2014.¹² The Council's membership included former Taliban warlords, some of whom were alleged to have committed human rights violations.¹³ Although women were appointed to the High Peace Council, they often played only a symbolic role.¹⁴ In 2014, women

⁷ Oxfam, *Behind Closed Doors: The Risk of Denying Women a Voice in Determining Afghanistan's Future*, (Oxfam, 2014), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/oxfam-us/www/static/media/files/behind-closed-doors-afghanistan-oxfam.pdf>, 8.

⁸ The Asia Foundation, 2015, 48.

⁹ Shukria Azadmanesh and Ihsanulah Ghafoori, *Women's Participation in the Afghan Peace Process: A Case Study* (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit and UN Women, 2020), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345128457_Women's_Participation_in_the_Afghan_Peace_Process, 6.

¹⁰ Oxfam, *Behind Closed Doors: The Risk of Denying Women a Voice in Determining Afghanistan's Future*, (Oxfam, 2014), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/oxfam-us/www/static/media/files/behind-closed-doors-afghanistan-oxfam.pdf>, 16.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Rivas and Safi, 2022, 88.

¹³ Oxfam, 2014, 17.

¹⁴ Oxfam, 2017, 15.

members collected a quarter of a million women’s signatures calling for peace,¹⁵ but meaningful inclusion and participation remained low.¹⁶ At the provincial and district levels, provincial peace committees were created to support the High Peace Council, and they were mandated to include at least four women out of 25-34 members. These gains were also the result of the advocacy of women’s organizations.¹⁷

Women inside and outside the formal peace process questioned how state actors defined “peace,” and some worried that any settlement that included the insurgency – particularly the Taliban – could jeopardize women’s rights. Additionally, limited space open for women to participate also created concern about which women could legitimately represent the wide diversity of Afghan women. The few women involved in the process were often criticized for not speaking with a single voice and for not representing many different communities and experiences.¹⁸ Women members were also criticized for being unable to make meaningful changes in the Council and drive the direction of decision-making.

The High Peace Council, with the support of the provincial peace committees, focused on encouraging insurgents to renounce violence, increasing security, initiating a debate on the political approaches to peace, and promoting regional cooperation. These activities included reintegration of fighters, socioeconomic development programs, as well as communication and outreach at national and subnational levels.¹⁹

Thinking Forward

In 2015, Wazhma had to decide whether to continue her civil society-based advocacy or join the Afghanistan High Peace Council. She weighed where her voice could be most effective. She felt that if she accepted the offer, she would face heavy scrutiny and possibly threats of violence. If she remained a civil society activist, she would not have the powerful platform the Council could offer, but she could retain some freedom of expression. Wazhma wondered which option would help her achieve her goal of amplifying the voices of Afghan women who have lived in communities affected by bombings, war, insurgency, and violence and building a more peaceful Afghanistan. Which option offered more benefit than harm for Afghan women, her family, her colleagues, and herself?

¹⁵ “Afghan High Peace Council Members Present 250,000-Signature Petition Calling for Peace to UN,” United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, March 6, 2014, <https://unama.unmissions.org/afghan-high-peace-council-members-present-250000-signature-petition-calling-peace-un>.

¹⁶ Oxfam, 2014, 15.

¹⁷ Rivas and Safi, 2022, 87-88.

¹⁸ Ibid, 97.

¹⁹ Ibid, 99-100.

Exhibit 1

Timeline of key events in recent Afghanistan history related to conflict and gender²⁰

Year	Event
1979	USSR invades Afghanistan
1989	Geneva peace accords guaranteeing Afghan independence and the withdrawal of Soviet troops
1995	The Taliban rises to power
2001	The US invades Afghanistan following the September 11th attack
2001	Hamid Karzai is sworn in as leader of the interim government in Afghanistan
2001	The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is established by UNSCR 1386
2002	The Loya Jirga elects Hamid Karzai as interim leader
2003	NATO assumes control of ISAF forces and expands role across Afghanistan
2004	The Loya Jirga adopts a new constitution, which enshrines women's rights

²⁰ "A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan," PBS News Hour, updated August 30, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june11-timeline-afghanistan>; "Afghanistan Peace Talks Since 2018: A Timeline," International Crisis Group, August 11, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistan-between-february-2018-and-august-2020-timeline>; "The U.S. War in Afghanistan: 1999-2021," Council on Foreign Relations, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>; Patricia Grossman, "Afghan High Peace Council Fails to Reflect Afghan Civil Society," United States Institute of Peace, Peace Brief 74, (2011), https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/PB74-Afghan_High_Peace_Council_Fails_to_Reflect_Afghan_Civil_Society.pdf; Riazat Butt, "Two-Year Timeline of Events in Afghanistan Since 2021 Taliban Takeover," ABC News, August 13, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/year-timeline-events-afghanistan-2021-taliban-takeover-102244200>; "Timeline of Events in Afghanistan Since Taliban Takeover," Associated Press, August 12, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-ayman-al-zawahri-poverty-kabul-taliban-bffb3714a1de529e2e305f229a2ab863>; "Women in Afghanistan: The Back Story," Amnesty International UK, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/womens-rights-afghanistan-history>; Belquis Ahmadi and Scott Worden, "Two Years of the Taliban's 'Gender Apartheid' in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, September 14, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/09/two-years-talibans-gender-apartheid-afghanistan>.

2005	Karzai is re-elected as president
2006	Afghanistan holds first parliamentary elections in 30 years, and quotas for women's participation are mandated in the lower and upper houses of parliament
2006	Violence increases, especially in the south
2009	Hamid Karzai is re-elected as president
2009	Afghanistan adopts the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law
2010	Afghanistan holds Peace Jirga, which leads to the creation of the High Peace Council
2013	NATO completes transfer of control to Afghan security forces
2014	Ashraf Ghani is elected president through a power-sharing agreement
2014	NATO ends combat mission in Afghanistan
2018	Ghani offers the Taliban unconditional peace talks
2018	The Taliban match Ghani's declaration of a ceasefire for Eid al-Fitr
2018	US officials meet with the Taliban and conduct "pre-negotiation" meetings
2018	The US and Taliban conduct bilateral negotiations in Doha
2019	Taliban representatives meet with Afghan political opposition figures
2019	The first attempt to hold talks between the Taliban delegation and Afghan government delegation collapses
2019	Unofficial talks take place between the Taliban and an Afghan civil society delegation, including women representatives
2020	The US and the Taliban sign a peace deal that serves as a preliminary step for US withdrawal by 2021

2020	The "Prisoners Jirga" approves release of 400 Taliban prisoners to make way for peace talks
2020	Negotiating teams from the Taliban and Afghan government meet in Doha
2020	The US withdraws from Afghanistan
2020	The Taliban take control of the country amid violence
2020	Afghanistan's economy collapses
2020	Girls are not allowed to return to school past 6th grade. Co-education is banned. Women are banned from attending and teaching at Kabul University
2021	Women are ordered to stay indoors and ordered working women to stay home until further notice
2021	Protests and slogans that do not have prior approval from the Taliban are banned
2021	Women are banned from traveling more than 45 miles without a male companion
2021	The US freezes \$3.5 billion in Afghan assets
2021	A promise to allow older girls to return to school is reversed
2021	The Taliban Virtue and Vice Ministry orders that all women in public must wear robes that cover them completely and cover their face except for their eyes. Women are advised to stay at home.
2022	Poverty and hunger worsen
2022	An earthquake hits eastern Afghanistan

2022	Women are banned from using gyms and parks nationwide, attending university, and working with national and international nongovernmental groups
2022	Women are banned from traveling abroad without a male companion and without a "legitimate" reason.
2022	Women are banned from entering health centers without a male companion.
2022	The government stops issuing driver's licenses to women
2023	The Taliban orders beauty salons to close, restricting work for women entrepreneurs and closing spaces for women outside the home
2023	The Taliban uses stun guns on women protesting the ban on beauty salons

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4. The Asia Foundation, 2015, preface.
5. Ibid, 115.
6. Ibid, 129.
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