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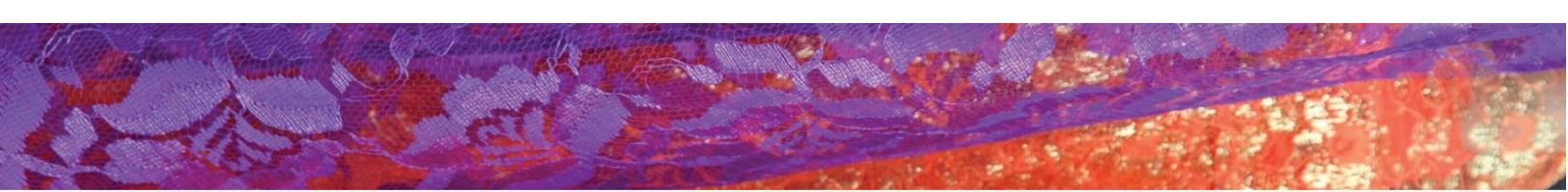
Women Keeping Peace: a Gendered Perspective on Countering Violent Extremism

Compiled by: Nooria Sultani

WRN recently spoke with Sajia Behgam, associate professor of Public Policy at Kabul University and advisor at the Chief Executive Office on Women and Youth Affairs in Afghanistan, about her views on youth and gender in Afghanistan. Sajia has worked extensively on both women and youth issues. She received her Master's degree in Public Policy from the University of Erfurt in Germany and was the Gender and Policy Advisor for the German development agency GIZ's Gender Mainstreaming Project. She has previously worked as the program director of Afghan Women Skills Development Center, an organization dedicated towards rehabilitating women who have been victims of violence, abuse, and torture. She was also closely involved with the Supreme Court's campaign to prevent child marriages and forced marriages. When the Taliban were in power, Sajia ran an underground school for girls in [khair khana Kabul].

Previous governments in Afghanistan have been accused of tokenism when it comes to promoting women's participation in politics. How do you evaluate the presence of Afghan women in the current government? Do you see any positive changes?

Despite numerous challenges, the current National Unity Government (NUG) remains committed in the implementation of gender-friendly policies and laws to empower women in politics and society. Previous governments only made assurances of women's rights, but didn't take the necessary steps to make real change happen. This past March on Women's Day, the state launched the National Economic Policy for Women, which is a very important move towards boosting women's economic empowerment and self-sufficiency. While the number of women in parliament and ministerial positions is on the rise, women leaders are still barred from decision-making. To improve women's political clout and support their participation during elections, the NUG is planning to appoint one female deputy minister in every ministry and establish a gender unit at the ministries. Yes, tokenism is still a problem, but women leaders in Afghanistan are gradually creating a space for themselves within the system and making their voices heard through sheer hard work, which I consider as a positive change.



Despite the dramatic strides that women leaders have made, what do you see as the major challenges?

Unfortunately nepotism and favoritism are huge problems in Afghanistan. To make it into politics, women like men, need deep ties to a particular ethnic group or party. So when they are in power, they have to obey the party whip and take decisions that benefit their ethnic group or community members rather than women as a whole. There are currently 68 women in the Afghan parliament, but when it's time to vote on gender-friendly laws the women are rarely ever united. Lack of public security and social support are the other major challenges to women's political representation. For example, a woman who wants to start a political career faces immense social pressures and runs the risk of ostracization. Discouragement from family members, community, as well as local political leaders, makes it incredibly hard to even get a foot in the door. Even if she is able to overcome these initial barriers, without a source of steady income she has to depend on others for constant financial support. Women leaders from Kabul to the most remote regions are up against such hurdles.

As a women's representative in NUG, what is your primary focus?

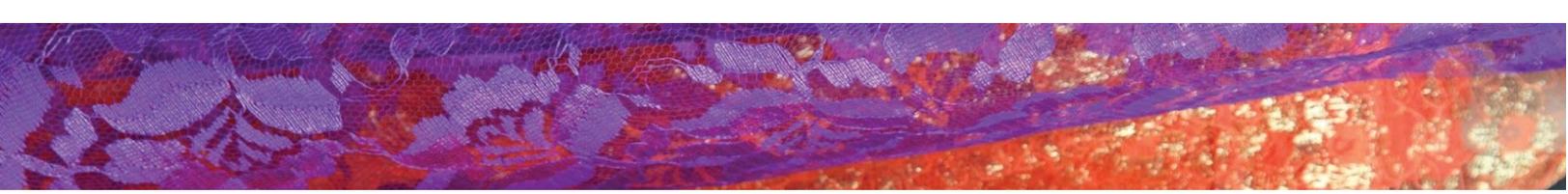
As a civil society activist my focus was on informing policies and laws in favor of Afghan women. After joining the government, I have a more executive role. Currently, I am focusing on two major issues: first is to form executive committees for Women and Children Affairs. These committees will be further divided into five working groups under different ministries and will oversee the review of policies as well as the implementation and enforcement of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law and programs related to women's social, economic, and political empowerment. My long-term goal is to improve the capacity of women government employees by helping them gain higher education. They will have the opportunity to study part-time while working in various government positions.

What roles do you see the youth of Afghanistan playing in the country's development?

As a professor, I have noticed that our new generation is reflective, proactive, and immensely hardworking. However, to harness their full potential the government must deliver on its promise of providing opportunities for employment and enterprise within the country.

What strategies do you use to navigate through Afghanistan's male-centric, male-dominated public spaces?

As women, we must believe in our abilities and show the courage to stand up against inequality and injustices. When people question my skills or capability, I use my expertise and professionalism to prove them wrong. I have created a space for myself through hard work, determination, and honesty, and a great degree of persistence. Anyone who has worked with me knows that I am highly dedicated and always fulfill my responsibilities; so they want me in their team again. Sometimes it is essential to work alongside people who don't believe in you or who



challenge your ways. I use that as an opportunity to convince them of my competence and to make them accept my presence.