

VOLUME 31

Afghanistan's Transition in the Making

Perceptions and Policy Strategies of
Women Parliamentarians

A study by **Andrea Fleschenberg**



**HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
PUBLICATION SERIES ON DEMOCRACY
VOLUME 31**

Afghanistan's Transition in the Making

Perceptions and Policy Strategies of Women
Parliamentarians

A study by Andrea Fleschenberg

Edited by the Heinrich Böll Foundation

Andrea Fleschenberg dos Ramos Pinéu, PhD, is DAAD Long Term Guest Professor at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan. In 2010/11 she was acting professor of political science at the University of Hildesheim, Germany, and in 2007 visiting professor at the University of the Punjab in Lahore, Pakistan, and in 2006 at the Universitat Jaume I in Castellon, Spain. Her research areas are comparative politics, democratization and peace and conflict studies with a particular focus on South and Southeast Asia, gender and politics, state- and institution-building, transitional justice issues, on which she has contributed numerous publications. Selected publications: *Women in Asian Politics – A Springboard for Gender Democracy?*, co-edited with Claudia Derichs, Zürich/Singapore 2011; *Women in Asian Local Politics – A Springboard for Gender Democracy?*, co-edited with Claudia Derichs, in: ASIEN, Autumn 2010; *Afghanistan's Parliament in the Making. Gendered Understandings and Practices of Politics in a Transitional Country*, 2nd edition, Berlin 2011; *Goddesses, Heroes, Sacrifices. Female Political Power in Asia*, co-edited with Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, Zürich et al. 2008.



Published under the following Creative Commons License:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>. Attribution — You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Noncommercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes. No Derivative Works — You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Afghanistan's Transition in the Making
Perceptions and Policy Strategies of Women Parliamentarians
A study by Andrea Fleschenberg
Edited by the Heinrich Böll Foundation
Volume 31 (English edition) in the publication series on democracy

Graphic design: feinkost Designnetzwerk, Sebastian Langer (according to designs by blotto Design)
Cover photo: Gulbuddin Elham
Printing: Lokay Druck, Reinheim
Editing: Robert Furlong
ISBN 978-3-86928-097-4

This publication can be ordered from: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Schumannstr. 8, 10117 Berlin
T +49 30 28534-0 **F** +49 30 28534-109 **E** buchversand@boell.de **W** www.boell.de

CONTENT

Preface	7
Executive Summary	9
Envisioning Transition – Issues, Challenges, and Commitments	13
Rationale, methodology, and outline of the study	15
Women in Afghanistan’s Transition Process	20
Women’s Voices on Transition	28
Reviewing the intervention: Issues and concerns post-2001 and post-2014	28
Mapping the terrain and tasks to be addressed: Understandings of «transition»	31
Evaluating the impact on political institutions, own agenda-setting, and agency	34
Is «stay» or «leave» the right thing to be asked by the international community?	38
Afghanistan 2024: Sleepless or dreamless nights? Sweet dreams or nightmares?	40
Instead of Conclusion or Recommendations: Food for Thought	43
References	45

PREFACE

In 2001, when the military intervention in Afghanistan began, the implementation of human and women's rights was often cited as one of the rationales behind the campaign. Today, these rights are still a top priority regarding the sociopolitical mission of the international coalition. The degree of progress made regarding the political participation of women and the general improvement of women's rights is seen as a yardstick for the country's democratization. It is true that, compared to the era of Taliban rule, women today are able to participate in public life and influence political decision-making processes. There have been numerous achievements: For example, in 2003, women participated in the first Constitutional Assembly, the Loya Jirga. That same year, the Afghan government signed, without reservations, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Following that, equal rights for women and men were enshrined in the 2004 Afghan Constitution. In 2009, a statute banned all forms of violence against women as well as child marriage. On top of that, Afghan women today have better access to education and healthcare, they are starting small enterprises, and are working for national and international organizations. In the first parliamentary elections, held in 2005, there were 91 women elected. Since 2009, women have held 69 of the 249 seats in parliament, and one of them even won a direct mandate. Finally, in 2012, a government committee was instituted to supervise the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 regarding a gender perspective in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction.

All these achievements are encouraging, yet fragile. Support by the Afghan government for the implementation of constitutional and other rights has waned substantially over the years. Thus far, international donors have done little to counteract the slackening political will of Hamid Karzai's government and have failed to respond accordingly. In Afghanistan, violence against girls and women is still very much an everyday occurrence. It is exactly in everyday situations that women's rights have to be won and implemented. However, almost everywhere, the political will to do so is lacking.

Many observers are afraid that, once Afghan institutions achieve full sovereignty, women's rights will be further neglected. Thus far, the so-called peace talks between the Afghan government and insurgents have failed to confirm that women's rights, as enshrined in the Constitution, are non-negotiable.

Generally, women's involvement in the debates and negotiations about transitional and peace processes has been rather insufficient. The parliamentary elections in 2015 will show whether the comprehensive opportunity for women to run for office and to cast their votes without having to fear retribution still exist.

The aim of the present study, authored by Andrea Fleschenberg, is to contribute toward the improvement of the situation for Afghan women. The study analyzes possible strategies and political outlooks for women parliamentarians and women's rights activists during the transition period as well as during the withdrawal of foreign troops, set to begin in 2014. In addition, it portrays the self-image of women parliamentarians and offers a summary of their policy recommendations concerning peace and security in Afghanistan. The study presents some specific recommendations that are addressed to national and international political representatives, and it outlines how women's interests and needs may be met during the transition period. A further goal is to create a wider audience for the voices of Afghan political actors within national and international debates about the future of Afghanistan.

This publication will be complemented by a podcast (available, as of December 2012, at www.boell-afghanistan.org) and by a further policy paper titled *Afghanistan's Transition in the Making: Updates on Women's Political Participation* (available at the above-mentioned website as of January 2013). One building block for the present paper was the 2008 study *Afghanistan's Parliament in the Making: Gendered Understandings and Practices of Politics in a Transitional Country*, authored by Andrea Fleschenberg (www.boell.de/publications/publications-7075.html), which discusses the everyday realities of Afghan women parliamentarians' lives.

I would like to thank the staff of the Heinrich Böll Foundation's Kabul office, namely Musarat Hussain, Neelab Hakim, Abdullah Athayi, and Marion Regina Mueller, as well as the author of this study, for their contributions to this project and for their commitment; without them it would have been impossible to throw a light on the intricate background of this issue. Special thanks are due to the women parliamentarians and activists from Afghanistan's civil society who have, for a long time, worked with the Heinrich Böll Foundation and who are making courageous efforts to defend the rights of women and democracy in Afghanistan.

Berlin, November 2012

Barbara Unmüßig
Co-President, Heinrich Böll Foundation

Executive Summary

Afghanistan represents a very particular case of military intervention-cum-state-building-cum-democratization with high levels of political and sociocultural violence, ideologically based grievances, intersectional cleavages, a paucity of meritocratic, non-fragmented political elites, and scarcity of a close-knit social fabric in a sustained conflict and insurgency context.

Peace, security, and conflict resolution; democracy and institution-building; human rights and their protection – these are the things that were promised to national and international audiences on either side of the intervention theater at the start of this millennium. In the intervention society itself, Afghanistan, those promises were heard, acknowledged, and taken into serious consideration by actors who intended to pick their chance for sociopolitical change and for an end to the decades-long fighting and violence. Fast forward to late 2012, the same international intervention actors announce that the first transition period is about to be (more or less) successfully completed – so goes the narrative – in order for another one, a locally owned one, to begin. However, 2014 might prove to be a watershed year in several ways, given the announced withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan and the planned series of crucial elections and their impact on the sociopolitical transition and peace-building process in Afghanistan. Questions arise regarding the direction and speed of the transformation, its timing, support in terms of presence (civil and/or military), resources, as well as monitoring and capacity-building by the international community. (Inter)national debates oscillate between opinions of «too late, too much,» «as good as it gets» / «good enough,» «too early, too little» to «staying engaged.»

In national and international debates, some actors dominate while other voices are seldom present, acknowledged, or taken into consideration, regardless of previous promises and commitments of UN Resolution 1325: namely, acknowledging the voices of Afghan women. At the same time, women will be particularly and most likely significantly affected by the transition process – be it in terms of a possible power-sharing deal or a reconciliation agreement between the government and the insurgents; be it in terms of safeguarding the gender-specific achievements of the past decade in the fields of education and health or socioeconomic and political participation; be it in terms of gender-specific vulnerabilities and lack of sustainable support nets. Given the experiences made in previous decades, particularly from the early 1990s onwards, most of those interviewed are of the opinion that the space to lobby for and implement gender equality policies will ultimately shrink and that women's rights might once again become a bargaining chip for a potential power-sharing deal, thereby circumcising women's public engagement and access to state institutions. The fear is of an autocratic regression, a backward transitory cycle, or even a cancellation of achievements. The signs identified are the continuously and increasingly high

levels of conflict and incidents of violence against women in areas under transition, and those that have yet to make the transition.

Building on a previous study on gendered aspects of Afghanistan's political institution-building in 2007/2008, the current study traces the nexus of gender and the post-2014 transition through in-depth interviews with women rights activists and women parliamentarians conducted in Kabul in the first half of September 2012. Interviewees were questioned on their understandings and perceptions of: (i) issues, concerns, interests, and agendas of the post-2001 intervention as well as the post-2014 transition process; (ii) what «transition» actually means and encompasses; (iii) the impact of the transition process on the recently established political institutions, their work and agendas; (iv) the role of the international community post-2014; along with (v) visions for Afghanistan in 2024, one decade after the supposedly completed withdrawal and another decade of transformation.

Analyzing the perceptions and narratives gathered, a distinct debate about the 2014 transition in Afghanistan crystallizes. Furthermore, a prolonged high level of dependency from external actors and their resources – in a cognitive as well as a material sense – becomes apparent in most of the perceptions and opinions collected, which stands in contrast with the projected intention of local ownership and transfer of responsibility post-2014. Which normative regime and which political actors will dominate in the post-2014 scenario? Can the fragile and precarious steps toward state- and institution-building – including the constitutionally and legally enshrined gender provisions – be maintained and enlarged? Or will there be a reverse trend, a re-directing of the system? Will the precarious public spaces of discourse and agency options for democratization agents survive, allowing for continued activism? What will be the impact of external support, monitoring, and pressure on local and regional events and processes such as elections, peace/power negotiations, or interference from neighboring countries? What will be the legacy of the 2001 international intervention and its impact on Afghan politics and society – another episode of foreign occupation followed by a relapse into conflict and a reversal of changes introduced?

Reviewing the track records of international and national summits, in which transition-related issues were addressed and the role of the international community debated, it becomes evident that a gender-specific transition agenda and women's concerns were outlined and communicated from a very early stage of (inter)national transition politics. While achievements in terms of women's political citizenship and basic service provisions are frequently cited as positive achievements of the intervention decade, some question their extent, depth, and viability. Women's rights and participation in the transition process become thus a litmus test – so far with a rather negative outcome. The question of what transition means for the women of Afghanistan has been partially answered by those concerned, and discussions started early at a nation-wide level. However, women activists mostly challenge that international actors are honest with – and considerate of – women's perspectives and interests and regard the decision-making as being male-dominated and even mostly male-exclusive, similarly to dominant national transition actors. A significant number of women's rights activists who were interviewed (but fewer women parliamentarians)

criticize the paucity of space and voice granted to women in national and international negotiations, along with doubts about the representativeness and effectiveness of the few women at the negotiation tables. The latter are judged as not having delivered, as being symbolic and serving as window dressing.

Any discussion on Afghanistan's «transition» conducted in the framework of this study was linked, rather sooner than later, to the following terms, which are understood to be fundamental prerequisites or features for any kind of successful process outcome: «responsible,» «transparent,» «accountable,» «participatory-inclusive,» «gender-sensitive,» and «interdependent.» While the sequencing of different process components or foci might change from interviewee to interviewee, the above-mentioned catalog of necessary transition qualities was nearly always stressed in its entirety.

The majority of women parliamentarians and civil society activists have positioned themselves against a complete withdrawal of the international community – military and/or civilian actors – by 2014, which is considered premature. This is not a new opinion, but one that has been communicated repeatedly in the international media and public debates. According to this line of argument, the international community needs to secure and consolidate its achievements, the funds pledged, and the projects undertaken to avoid relapsing into a conflict of transnational proportions and triggering a reoccurrence of previous misogynist regimes. Tasks assigned and roles to be played by the international community continue to be wide-ranging and are jeopardizing, to a certain extent, steps toward strengthened local ownership, reduced external dependency, and increased self-sustainability. The international community is supposed to: (i) *invest in development and capacity-building* – regarding human, social, economic, political, and security needs; (ii) *smooth the funding gap* in the coming years with budget support and more direct funding; (iii) *reduce insecurities and instabilities* – be they related to corruption, narcotics, or insurgency; (iv) *institutionalize democracy* within state institutions and support civil society. Women's rights activists, along with women parliamentarians, identify a certain liability and obligation of international intervention actors, and the international community in general, obligations which extends well beyond the current 2014 exit-cum-transition scenario.

«Staying engaged» within the framework of a «responsible, inclusive, participatory, and gender-sensitive transition» is a prerequisite for any minimal success story of change processes initiated, which remain highly precarious and contested within the continuing conflict dispensation. The extent of such a commitment as well as the instruments used to achieve it should not necessarily be subjected to further securitization and militarization, but rather revisited and subjected to an inclusive assessment and monitoring of all relevant stakeholders – not only traditional and neoconservative power-brokers. Promises made should guide the international community's dealings with those change agents who put their lives on the line, who simply cannot or do not want to «exit» post-2014. The first significant steps have been made and precarious achievements should be safeguarded.

Given the historical legacies and needs identified on the ground, the role played up to now by international intervention actors, and the potential impact on future

intervention scenarios, «good enough» does not seem to be an adequate response vis-a-vis the multi-faceted challenges and high stakes of the Afghan transition process. Afghanistan post-2014 should not become, once again, a negative precedent for the perils and outcomes of international interventions.

Envisioning Transition – Issues, Challenges, and Commitments¹

«And I want to stress, as I did in Kabul, that the hard-won rights of women and all Afghans cannot be rolled back; and the growth of civil society must be not quashed.»

Hillary Clinton in October 2011, as quoted in: Smith 2011: 2-3

«(...), we have remained steadfast in our commitment to pursue gender equality and the empowerment of women in all spheres of life.»

Hamid Karzai in 2008, as quoted in: Smith 2011: 3

Peace, security, and conflict resolution; democracy and institution-building; human rights and their protection – these are the things that were promised to national and international audiences on either side of the intervention theater at the start of this millennium. In the intervention society itself, Afghanistan, those promises were heard, acknowledged, and taken into serious consideration by actors who intended to pick their chance for sociopolitical change and for an end to the decades-long fighting and violence. Fast forward to late 2012, the same international intervention actors announce that the first transition period is about to be (more or less) successfully completed – so goes the narrative – in order for another one, a locally owned one, to begin. Hence, transition becomes synonymous with a transfer of ownership, agenda-setting, and responsibility rather than being synonymous with transformation in the genuine (political) meaning of the term (for a detailed analysis of the transition process see: Stapleton 2012).

However, 2014 might prove to be a watershed year in several ways: With the announced withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan (and most likely

1 This study would not have been possible without those persons I am writing about and whose struggles need to be highlighted and appreciated. They are courageous women and human rights activists, femocrats in the very sense of the word, striving unremittingly in precarious conditions for sociopolitical change, day by day, even as their own lives and those of their families are threatened and despite the uncertainty of what will happen after 2014, when they face the chance of being left alone again in this struggle. Many took time from their busy schedules to answer our many questions for a second time since 2007/08, to share their ideas, dreams, and fears – tashakor!!! A special thanks to Marion Regina Mueller, who invited me back, and the whole team at the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Kabul, facilitating the interviews in every possible way, despite security and logistical difficulties. Moreover, a very special thanks to Abdullah Athayi, the «man behind the scenes» (although not for most of the time), for his research support commitments, which were fundamental to the success of this study. And tashakor to Nadeem for navigating us safely and calmly through hectic traffic and difficult roads.

a reduction of a significant number of civilian development agencies), dynamic measures will need to be kickstarted whereby decisions will have to be taken, challenges will have to be met, and questions will have to be answered. Supposedly, the intended transformation period has started, comprising of socioeconomic and political transition processes along with a peace-cum-reconciliation process. Its direction – either regressive, status quo, or progressive –, timing, support in terms of resources, and capacity-building remain subject to heightened national and international debates and contestations, oscillating between «too late, too much,» «as good as it gets» / «good enough,» «too early, too little» to «staying engaged.»

One needs to revisit some of the current key terminologies in national and international narratives and debates to establish a position and appreciate the perceptions, demands, and policy strategies of Afghanistan's women's rights activists and women parliamentarians. They are calling the envisaged transition «too early» to be responsible and sustainable; «too little» to be participatory or inclusive; and, yes, «too little, too late» to successfully safeguard achievements made, pathways laid, and transitory dynamics that have developed incrementally.

Prevent, protect, and rebuild are the three underlying key principles and standards of the United Nations' paradigm of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), by which the international community attempts to establish a normative regime and subsequent source of legitimation for international interventions – be they authorized by the United Nations or by a regional organization such as the European Union. This includes not only precautionary and operational principles for military interventions, but also a comprehensive agenda for any kind of intervening actor or actor's alliance to ensure human security, coordination with civilian (humanitarian) actors, proportionality of means, along with a commitment to political, economic, and social reconstruction – that is, the base of a responsible exit strategy in terms of conflict resolution and avoiding a relapse into yet another cycle of violence or even war. Not only forms of forcible interventions, but also the array of non-forcible interventions to facilitate conflict mediation, resolution, and post-conflict rebuilding are being discussed under this global normative regime (Wheeler and Bellamy 2005). *Prevent, protect and rebuild* represent (gender-sensitive) baseline standards for the multi-dimensional transition process: (i) *prevent* a resurgence of violence, subsequent rights violations, and destruction as well as a non-participatory, exclusive «peace and reconciliation» process; (ii) *protect* the multi-faceted achievements made, the spaces created for civilian agency and development, along with codified rights commitments and participation provisions; and (iii) *rebuild* the social fabric, trust, and confidence destroyed; the social, political, and economic infrastructure; and capabilities required for a peaceful, self-sustainable Afghan Islamic democracy in 2025.

Moreover, the Busan summit in late 2011 established the concept of a new deal in development cooperation, aid effectiveness, and «peace conditionality,» with Afghanistan as one of its pilot countries. Under the framework of a mutual compact between stakeholders involved and a declared nexus of aid, security, and politics, a set of goals was outlined: *legitimate politics*, in particular with regard to inclusive peace negotia-

tions; *people-centered security and access to justice*; along with *economic and fiscal capacities* to provide for basic services provision (CARE 2012: 5–6).

Having said that, one needs to appreciate that «transition» is predominantly understood as a process of sociocultural, economic, and, in particular, political change – one that has been strongly connoted with «democratization» since the 1980s. However, democratization, similarly to «democracy,» represents a contested concept with diverse conceptions of preconditions as well as qualitative and quantitative characteristics, dynamics, and progressions. Different legacies and context dependencies lead to different processes, transition paths, politics, and polity outcomes – from (civil) war, state collapse, and semi-autocratic forms of government to either hybrid, facade, or consolidated participatory democracies or to democratic erosion and autocratic / conflict relapse along with the special case of fragile, dependent «donor democracy.» The latter is particularly prone to the threat of «hijacking» by anti-democratic forces and their interests, as well as to precarious or unsustainable transition processes given outside intervention, expectations not met, and subsequent delegitimation of externally sponsored/supported change agents (Burnell 2011).

The Afghan government communicated its own vision for the transformation decade and its long-term development objectives in the summer of 2012 with gender as a cross-cutting issue: «establish a platform for self-reliance, prosperity, stability and peace in our country» with the «goal of a secure, self-sufficient Afghanistan» (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2012: 3, 7–8). Among the few photos included in the report, many of them portrayed Afghan women actively involved in the country's development and politics. The official document repeatedly highlights a special focus on women's issues and rights as well as women-specific achievements: «The role of women in society has grown; 27% of parliamentarians are women and successful women have emerged as political, business and civil society leaders and role models» (ibid.: 6). The Karzai administration stresses the importance of civil society involvement (ibid.: 22) and further pledges a commitment to implement UN Resolution 1325, in addition

«to ensure that Afghan women are meaningfully represented in the planning stages and during the reconciliation and transition process. The protection of rights of women, girls, children, and ethnic minorities remains high on the agenda of the government and will continue to be addressed during the Transformation Decade (...）」 (ibid.: 21).

These commitments and pledges give leverage to the demands and concerns of women activists and women parliamentarians gathered during the course of this study.

Rationale, methodology, and outline of the study

Afghanistan represents a very particular case of military intervention-cum-state-building-cum-democratization with high levels of political and sociocultural violence,

ideologically based grievances, intersectional cleavages, a paucity of meritocratic, non-fragmented political elites, and scarcity of a close-knit social fabric in a sustained conflict and insurgency context.

In national and international debates, some actors dominate while other voices are seldom present, acknowledged, or taken into consideration, regardless of previous promises and commitments of UN Resolution 1325: namely, acknowledging the voices of Afghan women. At the same time, women will be particularly and most likely significantly affected by the transition process – be it in terms of a possible power-sharing deal or a reconciliation agreement between the government and the insurgents; be it in terms of safeguarding the gender-specific achievements of the past decade in the fields of education and health or socioeconomic and political participation; be it in terms of gender-specific vulnerabilities and lack of sustainable support nets. Given the experiences made in previous decades, particularly from the early 1990s onwards, most of those interviewed are of the opinion that the space to lobby for and implement gender equality policies will ultimately shrink and that women's rights might once again become a bargaining chip for a potential power-sharing deal, thereby circumventing women's public engagement and access to state institutions. The fear is of an autocratic regression, a backward transitory cycle, or even a cancellation of achievements. The signs identified are the continuously and increasingly high levels of conflict and incidents of violence against women in areas under transition, and those that have yet to make the transition.

Building on a previous study on gendered aspects of Afghanistan's political institution-building, the current study traces the nexus of gender and the post-2014 transition through 25 in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion with women's and human rights activists and women parliamentarians (either re-elected or first-timers). The interviews were conducted in Dari or English in the first half of September 2012 in Kabul, Afghanistan. In total, 18 parliamentarians, 12 civil society activists, and 2 bureaucrats were part of the interview sample and questioned on their understandings and perceptions of: (i) issues, concerns, interests, and agendas of the post-2001 intervention as well as the post-2014 transition process; (ii) what «transition» actually means and encompasses; (iii) the impact of the transition process on the recently established political institutions, interviewees work, and agendas; (iv) the role of the international community post-2014; along with (v) visions for Afghanistan in 2024, one decade after the supposedly completed withdrawal and another decade of transformation. Women parliamentarians were selected according to provincial origin, political experience and positioning, as well as age in order to achieve a representative sample of the wider population of female *Wolesi Jirga* members. Civil society activists and representatives of government ministries were selected by purposive sampling – many of them were already part of the first study. Informal conversations with male members of parliament and representatives of think tanks were included as well in this study.

Analyzing the perceptions and narratives gathered in the interviews, a distinct debate about the 2014 transition in Afghanistan crystallizes – less so in the conventional sense of discussing sociopolitical and/or economic transformation and more

so in the sense of debates within gender studies and feminist political science on gender and transition. Furthermore, a prolonged high level of dependency from external actors and their resources – in a cognitive as well as a material sense – becomes apparent in most of the perceptions and opinions collected, which stands in contrast with the projected intention of local ownership and transfer of responsibility post-2014. Which normative regime and which political actors will dominate in the post-2014 scenario? Can the fragile and precarious steps toward state- and institution-building – including the constitutionally and legally enshrined gender provisions – be maintained and enlarged? Or will there be a reverse trend, a redirecting of the system? Will the precarious public spaces of discourse and agency options for democratization agents survive, allowing for continued activism? What will be the impact of external support, monitoring, and pressure on local and regional events and processes such as elections, peace/power negotiations, or interference from neighboring countries? What will be the legacy of the 2001 international intervention and its impact on Afghan politics and society – another episode of foreign occupation followed by a relapse into conflict and a reversal of changes introduced?

The following deliberations are less of a «reality check» or assessment of «facts on the ground,» but rather a representation of imaginations, opinions, agendas, and demands of a specific, crucial, and significantly endangered group of actors: women's rights activists and women politicians. They are actors with the motivation and the potential to serve as change agents, actors who are in a precarious position, as they are «at the mercy of uncivil society» (Azerbaijani-Moghaddam 2007: 134) and dependent on external support to follow up on their agenda and continue with their work. In focus are their assessments of: the international intervention; its agenda(s) and strategies; the envisioned transition process and early experiences; the post-2014 scenario; and the role of the international community.

This is even more important given the fact that these voices have been largely marginalized in national and international negotiations over the past two and a half years, regardless of previous announcements and commitments made. It is also important given the rather opaque nature of political negotiations with insurgent groups. These groups are perceived as a threat to women and serve as another form of exclusion for women and their concerns regarding crucial decision-making processes, which has serious impacts on this half of the Afghan population. Will proclaimed «red lines» be respected, or will they be sacrificed for a political compromise and power arrangement, unsanctioned by the withdrawing international community?

Exemplary are the concerns raised by the co-founder of the Afghan Women's Union, Soraya Parluka: «I am not optimistic at all. We do not know the agenda of the talks and this worries all women in Afghanistan. Women are at risk of losing everything they have gained» (quoted in: Ferris-Rotman 2011). For Martine van Biljert from the Afghan Analyst Network, these fears and concerns are partly caused by the international community itself, because «[a]t the moment there is no one standing up as a guarantor of the process; no one who says it's really important this is done well. There are a lot of mixed messages» (quoted in: Ferris-Rotman 2011; see also Hancock and Nemat 2011: 2, 6, 23). Smits and Schoofs (2010) are even more critical in their assess-

ment of international agenda-setting: «Gender» is generally seen as a luxury to be left aside until the supposedly gender-neutral objectives in the domains of security and governance have been achieved» (quoted in: Hancock and Nemat 2011: 20). Head of UN Women, Michelle Bachelet, thus rightly warns of the negative gender impacts of the transition process in a column for the *International Herald Tribune* by stating that,

«[t]he once remarkable gains in protecting and promoting equality between women and men in Afghanistan are now facing their most serious challenges. (...) We must stop relegating women's issues to a side agenda at international forums on Afghanistan. (...) If Afghan women continue to be ignored within the major political decision-making processes affecting their country, the vision of a more secure, prosperous and stable Afghanistan cannot be realized» (Bachelet 2012).

Given past and present experiences, it comes as no surprise that «femocrats» in parliament and civil society interviewed for this study regard the withdrawal of the international community as a threat to their engagement, to the sustainability and safeguarding of achievements made, and, last but not least, to themselves.

«It is difficult to imagine what the future will be like for women's rights groups and activists now that the Taliban know the key women. These women will be the key targets for them. These women will have no choice but to leave.» (Women's rights activist quoted in: ActionAid 2011: 9)

This concern has been repeatedly raised at national and international levels and documented in previous analyses on the issue at hand (see: Kouvo 2012 and 2011d; Ferris-Rotman 2011; Hamid 2011: 22-23; Ruttig 2011b; Human Rights Watch 2009: 22).

However, there is a significant disconnect between this discourse and the one of international and governmental transition parties, as accurately described by Barbara J. Stapleton (2012: 21ff), who classifies the timeline of the international community's «(security) transition process as delusional and the components as incomplete»:

«Representatives of NATO, the UN, the US and the Afghan government continue to report that conditions are in place to complete the transition by the end of 2014, labeling transition as 'irreversible.' International media reports questioning the viability of the transition timeline, however, started to surface following a spate of attacks on international targets in Kabul in the second half of 2011. These left the US and NATO struggling to maintain a credible narrative on the feasibility of the security transition as fears intensified within and beyond Afghanistan that the country is heading towards a widening civil war, and that Afghanistan is being handed back to the Afghans, for better or for worse.»

It is hoped that this study and the sound bites presented from parliamentarians and civil society activists alike will help to close this communication gap and advance a vivid debate on prioritizing narrowly defined political expediency measures as well as reconnect important stakeholders and their strategizing efforts on the Afghan transition process.

Women in Afghanistan's Transition Process²

What has been the track record so far of the transition process and its inclusiveness and responsiveness toward gender commitments and women's participation? In the following sections, the 2010 and 2011 conferences in London, Kabul, and Bonn will be analyzed. All conferences focused on the international debate about international troop withdrawal and political negotiations with insurgents. These issues were met with communiqués from Afghan women activists, predominantly coordinated by the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), established in 1995. It will be argued that right from the beginning of transition negotiations and transition politics, the voices of Afghan women representatives could have been heard and a comprehensive agenda could have been acknowledged and included.

Since the withdrawal announcement and the enactment of transition negotiations, women activists and those committed to women's rights have been trying: (i) to influence national and international summits and donor meetings through prior civil society consultations, statements, and policy briefings; (ii) to streamline international agendas with their own gender-responsive agenda-setting; (iii) to communicate demands, in particular so-called red lines, for potential political compromises and power-sharing deals with insurgent groups. The identified red lines that are not to be crossed in any kind of transition arrangement are: the 2004 Constitution and its codified gender equality commitments, such as quota provisions; and ratified national and international «regulations regarding women's equal participation in politics, education, social development and other civic activities» (Afghan Women's Network 2011a: 4). Women activists have repeatedly warned about the gendered dimension of the transition process.

«Afghan women are the first to benefit from stability and pay the heaviest price for the resurgence in violence. They are mobilized as never before to protect the gains they have made with the help of the international community since 2001 and to contribute to the peace process by promoting security and good governance grounded in respect for human rights and equality.» (Afghan Women's Leaders' Statement, January 27, 2010)

2 This section's analysis is based on a more comprehensive study by the author of women activists' strategizing. The study is titled «Afghanistan plus 10 – Demokratisierung per Intervention? [Afghanistan plus 10 – Democratization by Intervention?], in: Susanne Schroeter (ed.), Islam, Gender und Demokratisierung [Islam, Gender and Democratization], Frankfurt et al.: forthcoming.

There has been continued criticism about the paucity of women's participation in official negotiations and decision-making processes, although most countries present at the table are bound by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. The question then is why women represent «the most under-utilized resource in Afghanistan – a resource that could be instrumental for successful peace and a stable country in the years to come. Afghan women have the right, the capacity and the desire to participate» and to shape transition politics (Afghan Women's Network 2011a).

Reviewing the first phase of the transition process, critics challenge the absence of gender-sensitive benchmarks and qualitative indicators along with a nonexistent sanctioning of misogynist actors in sociopolitical positions of authority and their passive or active violations of gender commitments. Analysts not only observe a noticeable downturn in gender-related international declarations and commitment pledges, but question the genuineness of an international political will on promises of gender equality made post-2014. At the beginning of the intervention, gender-related rhetoric was employed as a source of legitimation for a contested military intervention – a facade for predominantly security policy-related interests. As in the study findings presented below, voices of women and human rights activists – active within civil society or state institutions – are becoming louder, questioning (inter)national commitments and highlighting the necessity for the long-term support of locally owned and locally directed gender-sensitive transition processes, because to date, progress remains fragile and precarious, and the implementation record is insufficient and potentially reversible (see Afghan Women's Network 2011a: 1; CARE 2012; Smith 2011).

Former senior Afghan Affairs analyst Citha D. Maaß referred to the problem of a «negative Afghanization» of the political system, that is, in the case that reform elites are not included in political negotiations at the national and international levels, initiated political and sociocultural transition dynamics and processes will stand no chance of proceeding.

The London Conference in early 2010 took place without official Afghan women representatives and was met with criticism regarding the absence of gender-related topics. At the same time, women activists had presented conference participants with a comprehensive statement – a result of consultations in Dubai and London – focusing on the areas of security, governance, and gender-just development. In line with the United Nations concept of «human security,» activists aimed to link questions of military policies with the nexus of security and development, that is, the imperative of basic needs as a core peace-building component. Such requests for the provision of basic services coincided with a call for (i) gender-specific social and political changes in public and private spaces and decision-making, along with (ii) referring to gender-specific dimensions and contortions of insecurity.

Another universal reference frame availed was UN Resolution 1325, which prescribes the safeguarding of women's rights and women's participation in processes of conflict mediation, reconciliation, and reconstruction. Accordingly, the communique for the London Conference included, among other things, the following peace-, security- and development-related stipulations: (i) a 25 percent gender quota provi-

sion in (sub)national peace negotiations and decision-making forums like the National Security Council or the «peace jirga» in Kabul; (ii) recruitment of women to civil and military security forces as well as international peace missions; (iii) gender-sensitive trainings of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to ensure awareness-raising and compliance with gender equality commitments and rights granted; (iv) safeguarding of women-friendly commitments in negotiations with insurgents; (v) establishment of donor conditionalities in accordance with the National Action Plan for Women, the National Development Strategy, and Gender Mainstreaming principles; (vi) enlargement of gender quota provisions to subnational levels of political decision-making and of ministerial bureaucracies; along with (vii) measures of positive discrimination to dismantle barriers of public communication and participation (Afghan Women's Leaders' Statement 2010).

The Peace Jirga in Kabul in early June 2010 saw women's representation reach 21 percent of the delegates – a milestone. Women demanded a 30 percent quota for women in decisions-making forums and national program development; the safeguarding of gender policy achievements since 2001; and the rejection of all political decisions and policies that are not committed to principles of social and gender justice (Hamid 2011: 26). However, women activists criticized the intransparent selection process of jirga members and the limited options for participation (e.g., chairing or speaking in committee work sessions). Some women activists and women delegates argued that «they had been deliberately excluded from the jirga because they were too outspoken about women's rights prior to the assembly» (Human Rights Watch 2009: 40).

In the Declaration of the First Women's Council for the Kabul Conference on July 20, 2010, women activists alluded to basic principles of good governance, combined with demands for inclusion and participation in accordance with the 2004 Constitution and the National Development Strategy (2008–2013). The latter formulates the goal of Afghanistan as a «stable Islamic constitutional democracy, in peace with itself and its neighbors» by 2020 (Maaß 2008: 2). Yet again, the focus remained a general 30 percent quota provision for decision-making forums at various levels of the polity to position women as indispensable agents of change and peace. This demand referred to women's unique experiences as survivors of conflict and to the necessity of a National Action Plan for UN Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions. The Declaration also refers to the recommendations of the peace jirga committee for national reconciliation: women's rights should not become a bargaining card in peace negotiations; instead, women and the safeguarding of their codified rights are constitutive elements of any kind of political deal (Afghan Women's Network 2010). In addition, reconstruction and development measures have to be more gender-sensitive to allow for sociocultural change: «Social and cultural constraints should not be used as an excuse, rather they should be dealt with determination and innovative strategies where more women from remote and war affected areas can benefit from development interventions» (ibid.). Along the lines of universal and transnational demands, other components of the Declaration include family-friendly employment policies,

flexible work hours, and improved work and educational environments through measures against sexual harassment (ibid.).

The 2010 Declaration is not only focused on safeguarding and expanding rights and gender equality commitments, but also on the necessity of their adequate institutionalization through the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which is regarded as the central institution for oversight, control, and strengthening respective ministerial implementation agencies. Beyond that, women activists postulate the strengthening of Afghanistan's parliament in order to subject policymaking and legislation to rigorous gender assessments along with gender budgeting for governmental and donor development programs. Not only are responsible actors included, such as members of key political institutions, the executive, the legislature, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs, but also femocrats within civil society as participatory consultants and monitors (ibid.).

Besides issues of security and governance, three additional topic clusters were identified with subsequent comprehensive stipulations formulated in the 2010 Kabul Declaration: (i) agriculture and rural development (gender-disaggregated data sets; access to information technology; participatory rural, gender-sensitive planning, and programming across rural sectors); (ii) building human capital through training and scholarship programs, employment services and women-friendly environments (e.g., measures against sexual harassment to the point of gender-segregated educational infrastructure); (iii) gender-inclusive, strategically planned economic and infrastructural development without child labor and with adequate monitoring (ibid.).

Following the steps of the London Conference, Petersberg II generated diverse controversies in late 2011. According to information provided by the head of the Heinrich-Böll Foundation office in Kabul, Marion R. Mueller, civil society representation was included in Bonn 2011 – quite different to previous summits. Leading up to Petersberg II a six months long consultation process, financed by the German Foreign Office, took place to consult with civil society representatives and ensure their voice. During the conference, sixteen female and eighteen male civil society activists from across Afghanistan were present in the audience during the deliberations. Two of them, as selected speakers for the Afghan civil society, were given time to present civil society's policy recommendations in the Petersberg Conference. In addition, a separate civil society forum took place in Bonn before the actual conference. While AWN did participate in the pre-Bonn meetings and consultations for the civil society in Afghanistan, AWN leaders opted to travel to Germany with a separate, otherwise internationally funded, women activists delegation to ensure a specific presence during Petersberg II. This, however, meant that this separate AWN delegation, to which some of the important AWN activists belonged, were no longer part of the official civil society delegation and were thus barred from participating in a number of important meetings or to be present in the audience (different to the official civil society delegation which still held some AWN members). The reason for the separate women activist delegation was that AWN would have liked to see a stronger participation of specific women activists in the Petersberg II conference process. According to Marion R. Mueller, this is indicative for the strength of the AWN women activist lobby. In contrast, during the Tokyo process, AWN was an integrative part of the official

civil society delegation and then AWN director, Samira Hamidi, was elected as one of the speakers of the civil society delegation. Having said that, criticism continues that despite the official international community's rhetoric to address civil society concerns, e.g. to ensure women's rights and participation in the transition process, it remains to be seen in how far the respective implementation process and its strategizing is actually compliant with this rhetoric. The Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework is such a case in point, stresses Mueller.

In late November 2011, there were 500 women activists from 20 provinces of Afghanistan who met under the aegis of the Afghan Women's Network. They produced the Afghan Women's Declaration on December 5, 2011, on the basis of the position paper *Afghan Women: Towards Bonn and Beyond*, which had already been published in early October 2011 by AWN. The preamble of the Bonn Declaration underscores, on the one hand, an essential long-term international commitment and, on the other hand, underlines achievements in the fields of education and participation in various areas made by individual women and women's organizations, parliamentarians, and government officials to be safeguarded in a sustainable manner.

The overall objective is a rupture with previous gender regimes, that is «a different Afghanistan from the past, in which our daughters and their daughters will be able to actively engage in peace building and nation building in an equitable environment» (Afghan Women's Network 2011b, nos. 3–4). Demands raised in the Bonn Declaration can be clustered around the terms «women and good governance,» «transition» (in the sense of troop withdrawal by 2014), «peace and reintegration» as well as «international commitments.» Similarly to the 2010 Declaration, the terms are aligned with central maxims and reference frameworks of international conventions and national commitments. At the same time, involved representatives of civil society organizations perceive themselves as «the main agents of change and inclusive democracy in Afghanistan,» to be protected by the United Nations and the international community on a long-term basis (Afghan Women's Network 2011b, nos. 2 and 17).

In more detail, clauses of the Bonn Declaration identify the presence of misogynist (former) conflict actors in reconstruction and reconciliation processes as well as the corruption and embezzlement of funds within state institutions as significant obstacles to women's representation and participation in the multi-level governance and justice system. The government is charged with the responsibility to abolish these abuses and to ensure that women's security and participation at all levels become prime performance indicators of the ongoing transition process. Accordingly, further clauses stipulate standards for Afghan-led (sub)national peace and reconciliation forums and decision-making processes: (i) a 25 percent gender quota provision for (sub)national peace councils (see 2010 Declaration); (ii) transparent, community-oriented and -controlled reintegration processes that are not centered around individual insurgent combatants (i.e., normally men) but around the interests and needs of their family members and the community to be reintegrated (Afghan Women's Network 2011b, nos. 7–14).

In the corresponding position paper, questions of security and participation are highlighted. A message crystallizes that civil society representatives perceive

themselves as competent as (or even more than) (inter)national security forces in understanding and assessing sociocultural idiosyncrasies and security-related necessities and their root causes. Consequently, explicit and comprehensive claims of inclusion and consultation are deduced (Afghan Women's Network 2011a: 2). Similarly, stipulations for a 30 percent gender quota provision for the High Peace Council (Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Program) and provincial peace councils are outlined, in which so far there is 10 to 15 percent female representation (ibid.: 4). Additional stipulations deal with: (i) a comprehensive gender-mainstreaming of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (i.e., gender-sensitive indicator sets such as restrictions, threats, attacks on women organization/activists); (ii) gender-sensitive safety inspections in recruitment of national security forces, that is, the exclusion of misogynist recruits and perpetrators of violence against women; (iii) 25–30 percent gender-specific earmarking of the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Program budget for reconstruction and social infrastructure programs and services, directly benefiting women in affected communities (ibid.: 2–4).

In preparation of the 2012 Chicago summit, AWN consulted with around 300 women from various parts of the country on their perceptions of the security-related aspects and impacts of the transition process. Most of the participants had not been involved in the planning of ongoing security transitions. They were not part of a «citizen-articulated vision» nor did they perceive the ANSF as being responsive to women's needs and rights standards (Afghan Women's Network 2012: 1).

With these declarations and statements, a gender-specific transition agenda and women's concerns with the transition process were outlined and communicated from a very early stage within national and international transition politics. While achievements in terms of women's political citizenship and basic service provisions are frequently cited as positive achievements of the intervention decade, some question their extent, depth, and viability. Women's rights and participation in the transition process become a litmus test – with a rather negative outcome thus far. The question of what transition means for the women of Afghanistan has been partially answered by those concerned, and discussions started early at a nation-wide level. However, women activists mostly challenge that international actors are honest with – and considerate of – women's perspectives and interests and regard the decision-making as being male-dominated and even mostly male-exclusive, similarly to dominant national transition actors. A significant number of women's rights activists who were interviewed (but fewer women parliamentarians) criticize the paucity of space and voice granted to women in national and international negotiations, along with doubts about the representativeness and effectiveness of the few women at the negotiation tables. Those are judged as not having delivered, as being symbolic and serving as window dressing (see also Smith 2011: 5f).

«However, there are [a] number of women in [the] peace council, but in reality they are powerless. (...) they are there, but they cannot be there, which means, politically, they are not there. They are only there to show that women are there.

(...) Women are not in the winning seat, but they are in the losing seat.» (Aziz Rafie, head of the Afghan Civil Society Forum)

«But if we see realistically, their participations were symbolic, especially in rural areas of Afghanistan. So their role in [the] transition process [is] also symbolic as the transition process itself is a symbolic process. (...) However, as much as we demand women's rights, we face problems related to women's rights.» (Ministerial Gender Advisor Maryam Bahar)

On a more critical, self-reflective note, women activists participating in the focus group discussion bemoan that only selected women's voices are heard at the national and international levels – a bias that needs to be addressed through increased and different forms of women's networking and mobilization:

«But whose voice was that? I think it was our own voice (...), [of] the people at the center and the big cities. (...) But do we really know the expectation of women who live in a far place from [the] capital? There is no road there. We have to take a donkey to reach these women. Did we manage to take their voice at the international level? That is something that is lacking. (...) If we are representing women, then we need real representatives.»

Civil society activists such as Human Rights Commissioner Soraya Sobhrang, Abdul Jalil Benish from Afghanistan Watch, or Soraya Parlika regard the current government of President Hamid Karzai as paying only lip service to women's rights and as including women's rights as a bargaining chip for a potential political deal between the government and insurgent groups. Leading MP Shinkai Karokhail points toward the male-dominated society, state institutions, and control of resources, as well as male-oriented traditions as the backdrop for her activism: «The government is not comfortable with us.» Without equality in citizenship – along with a lack of internal and external support within and outside of parliament, so Karokhail – excuses can easily be made to sideline and subordinate issues of women's empowerment in the face of «apparently» more urgent issues of terrorism and insurgency. Women activists and their agendas become relegated to a minor status once again, and simple «consultation» is regarded as sufficient. This marginalization is heightened by a lack of unity and solidarity among women parliamentarians themselves, who thus cannot function as a pressure group to be reckoned by cabinet ministers, among others. However, there is also a potential for resistance and change, says Karokhail: «So everybody tries to control us or how to keep our voice in much low profile or silen[t]. Still they [are worried] of our voice (...) and try to convince us, but things are not in their control.»

At this point, the role of the international community is perceived to be crucial, because even if the government holds only a rhetorical and symbolic commitment to women's rights, this can serve as an entry point for pressure to ensure compliance. Moral and actual support of international actors are key, says Afifa Azim, head and co-founder of the Afghan Women's Network. For this, women have «to take respon-

sibility as Afghan women in this sensitive time» and have «to have strong voices in bringing change» to the national and international levels in order to implement commitments.

Women's Voices on Transition

«Be confident my sisters, our achievements made on the basis of the Constitution, achievements towards progress of the country and towards the better condition of our women will not be damaged or slowed down by any peace deals.»

Hamid Karzai on International Women's Day,
March 8, 2011, as quoted in: Smith 2011: 6

Any discussion on Afghanistan's «transition» conducted in the framework of this study was linked, rather sooner than later, to the following terms, which are understood to be fundamental prerequisites or features for any kind of successful process outcome: «responsible,» «transparent,» «accountable,» «participatory-inclusive,» «gender-sensitive,» and «interdependent.» While the sequencing of different process components or foci might change from interviewee to interviewee, the above-mentioned catalog of necessary transition qualities was nearly always stressed in its entirety.

Reviewing the intervention: Issues and concerns post-2001 and post-2014

With promises of peace and security; reconstruction and development; elimination of terrorism; rule of law and democracy; and an improvement in women's status and rights situation, the international community is judged by a variety of national and international audiences. A positive assessment and acknowledgement will be crucial for local stakeholders at various levels of Afghan society and politics to follow through with the scheduled transition process and to struggle against the myriad of challenges and threats to be faced. Security is the all-encompassing buzzword; insecurity the overall fear.

On a positive note, efforts in terms of political institution-building, the provision of basic services, as well as an improved situation of women in the country are cited as achievements of the intervention decade by a number of women parliamentarians and women's rights activists. Nevertheless, sustainability is questioned on a number of fronts: in terms of adequate capacity-building and provision of resources for sustaining projects and institutions, and because «they did not teach us how to get fish, but just taught us how to eat fish,» as MP Safura Elkhani put it.

At the heart of women parliamentarians' understandings of the post-2001 intervention and the post-2014 transition process is the nexus of security and political transition (i.e., democratization) as well as of security and socioeconomic development/reconstruction.

While highlighting certain achievements, many criticized the withdrawal of the international community as just another failure in a series of mistakes committed in the past decade that present Afghan society with parallel, interdependent, and apparently «unsurmountable» challenges in the areas of security; narcotics cultivation and trafficking; elimination of terrorism; reconstruction and infrastructural development for a pro-growth environment; state- and capacity-building; along with the early co-optation of certain conflict actors into the political processes. These non-achievements, among other factors, are perceived to result in general disenchantment, desperation, disconnect, and lack of confidence among Afghan people vis-a-vis the international intervention and the intended transition process, as highlighted by MPs Babakarkhail, Azad, and Nayel, to name a few. Shukria Barakzai adds that the multiplicity of (sometimes conflicting) intervention strategies, focal points, and models – thus the absence of a clear, coherent, and visible joint strategy – generated confusion among Afghans and were paired with a lack of understanding of Afghanistan’s idiosyncrasies and a scarcity of professionally qualified and committed Afghan leadership figures. As a consequence – and given the degree of destruction – the conflict was prolonged while patience and the will for cooperation and commitment to join agendas for a common vision receded: «(...) and I remember George W. Bush. He promised promoting democracy and from Germans we heard rule of law and women empowerment. Very beautiful words – but where are those beautiful words and aims?» (MP Shukria Barakzai). Apart from these failures, others challenge the focal point of intervention strategies and programs – «security first».

«Since long, I have been one of the Afghans who have difficulties with these big agendas. (...) We need scholars, we need engineers, we need doctors, we need people to share their experience with us, to support us, to build up the capacity, because soldiers always mean bullets, bombs and the cost of life.» (MP Shukria Barakzai)

Additionally, the timing of the withdrawal and the transition to local ownership is being met with skepticism and criticism of being: (i) externally-driven rather than being a response to the necessities and developments on the ground – in the «intervention society», and its interests and agenda; (ii) an expression of fatigue on both sides – Afghans and internationals – given the huge cost of violence with the little amount of impact in the past 10 years. On the one hand – and in the sense of «too little, too early» – the national and international «strategy» would require more time for its implementation: «2014 is too early for the exit policy. Does not matter what they call it – whether it is transition or transaction, whatever it is, any agenda, we are not ready for that!» (MP Shukria Barakzai; similarly MP Fawzia Raofi, among others). On the other hand, the timing is animadverted as being out of sync between de facto power relations and a potentially successful outcome – to avoid a return to the past and the country’s re-marginalization, an exit strategy should be considered from a position of power rather than weakness. It is also perceived that the task remains unfinished

and no one has taken responsibility for it; a common threat has not been addressed adequately, jointly.

«The first problem is that people don't know what the transition process is. Even the youth and intellectuals don't know. The people only know that the international community withdraws after 2014. Nowadays, people move and migrate because they do not believe. I believe that the transition process (...) is too early. Now we established institutions which do not have capacity. You better know that the Taliban entered the police, [the] local police. Unfortunately, our friendly foreigners are killed by the police and the national army – these are our concerns. (...) Terrorism is not only the enemy of Afghanistan, but also is the enemy of the world. (...) The trust people have right now in the international community will be lost on that time [2014] and worsen.» (MP Raihana Azad)

Some believe the transition occurs exactly because of the failures identified – not as an expression of achievements made. Is the handover then maybe a chance? Should it be a complete or a partial handover of responsibilities, considering deficiencies in resources and capacities? What form of oversight and monitoring of the process should be extended by the international community?

The transition should not just be about a change in flags and unfulfilled promises, so say MP Fawzia Kofi and colleagues, but about being consultative and transparent, about ensuring that the Afghan government takes up its responsibilities, and that democracy and human rights are safeguarded adequately by stakeholders involved. First evidence from transitioned areas seems to indicate otherwise. Women MPs and women's rights activists point to the worsening security situation, particularly for women, in provinces such as Bamyan – previously considered among the safest in the country.

«The transition process causes insecurity. (...) Not only me, but most of the women in Afghanistan are concerned that we might face dark crises after 2014, as we had [a] dark situation in the past. It may come back like the time of the Taliban regime.» (Ministerial Gender Advisor Maryam Bahar)

In addition, the upcoming elections for the presidency, parliament, and provincial councils were regarded by many as watershed events, determining the outcome of the intervention and dynamics created.

While some saw a security transition as a precondition for any further developments – be they political, sociocultural, or economic. Others deemed that the political transition needed to come first before the security transition could be successful. So, security first, then accountability, good governance, and rule of law later? Or vice versa, in order to eliminate the root causes of popular discontent fueling the insurgency? A number of women parliamentarians highlighted the need for strong leadership and strong government institutions in order for any kind of security and political transition to be successful and to be supported by the population at large.

Concerns surround the necessity for adequate training, equipment, and monitoring of the ANSF by the international community for years to come. Apart from that, the strategic governmental planning and institutional capabilities for tackling veto actors and sanction violations of rights provided, especially for women, were understood to be lacking, albeit instrumental for safeguarding achievements.

Another concern was the «shadowing» influence of neighboring countries such as Iran and Pakistan on the political developments of Afghanistan. Insecurity due to cross-border attacks and insecure border areas, which allow for reinforcing insurgents, were repeatedly cited as major concerns and tasks to be tackled by international actors.

Mapping the terrain and tasks to be addressed: Understandings of «transition»

Two main conceptions of women politicians and women's rights activists emerged from the interviews: (i) transition understood as a multi-dimensional process, encompassing security/military, economy, and reconstruction, technical and social infrastructure alongside social and political dimensions; and (ii) transition understood as «a security process» (MP Fawzia Raofi).

All agreed that this is a precarious, fragile, and uncertain process, instilling concerns and fears: «(...) the transition process is very vulnerable at this time and it will have its own problems. Maybe it has a positive impact right now, but in the long term, it will have a negative impact» (MP Najia Babakarkhail). Linking the conceptualizing of transition with political realities, the announcement of withdrawal has negatively impacted the security situation and potential transition outcome – those opposing the current political setup with violent means are understood to be increasing the pressure on withdrawal and simply waiting for their chance to regain power and capture the transition process for their own agenda – «because they know their capacity, unfortunately» (MP Farkhunda Naderi).

A number of women parliamentarians and women's rights activists refer to the gendered nature of the transition process and women's specific concerns and perspectives when it comes to security, conflict resolution, and the ongoing insurgency, in particular. Femocrats such as Fawzia Kofi and Shinkai Karokhail refer to United Nations Resolution 1325 and subsequent Afghan commitments to ensure women's part in transition politics and to safeguard women's rights and demands. So far, the assessment of women MPs from transition-completed areas and women's rights activists ranges from critical to negative in terms of the limited space provided, women's strategic organization and mobilization, and in terms of security-related transition results (see also CARE 2012). The rise in insecurity and violence against women in transitioned areas will affect women's decisions to remain active in public life and to participate in the country's political and socioeconomic affairs. The timeframe for determining a different outcome is understood to be extremely short – a maximum of two years – because «already the donors are sitting back, the feeling and smell is like

[when] the Russians left Afghanistan (...)» (woman activist participant in focus group discussion).

«It shows that after the transition process, the problems of women increased. It means that the transition process [only] took place symbolically, like changing flags, but no activities have been done as replacement. Before the transition process, sufficient capacity to solve people's problems should be created, then transition should take place.» (MP Shah Gul Rezai)

«So we always tried to raise [our] voice, to write about that, to have our press conferences and positions and share [it] with national and international authorities. So that is why women are not silent or quiet about that. At least they talk, they raise concerns. (...) [Women need a] clear agenda, try to expand the networks, contacts and not only empowering women, providing services. But [also] how to strongly advocate, to protect what we have achieved, expand our activities and to be included in [the] whole decision which is taken by [the] government of Afghanistan.» (MP Shinkai Karokhail)

Security, when gendered in terms of concerns and needs, is not only understood as an absence of threats, violence, and restrictions in agency and mobility, as Shinkai Karokhail stresses:

«Well, security is always connected with other things. During Taliban time, we had wonderful security, but there was no life actually. Women were much more secure. (...) But what about mental security, about education, what about freedom of speech, what about other activities of life (...). Was it security? That is why we see security different; (...) not only having war on the street but asphalt roads, a clinic (...), education, a secure job for the family, freedom of women. [If] something happens to women, domestic violence, how to go to [the] judiciary system? So security is absolutely different. Security is not that we are talking about Taliban life; we still want that kind of security.»

This implies the notion of a gender-sensitive and gender-inclusive transition with gender relations and women's status serving as indicators for assessing instruments, policies, tracks, developments, and outcomes. Such a notion is all the more crucial due to the securitization of Afghanistan's transition, which requires women's voices and perspectives to be acknowledged, to be included in all phases of the transition process, not only in the initial stages of withdrawal.

Those regarding security as the primary issue of Afghanistan's transition process, such as MPs Raofi, Amini, Zaki, Ayobi, Babakarkhail, and Nayel, highlight adequate equipment, motivation, and monitoring of the ANSF as being a fundamental precondition to any following socioeconomic and political developments. Many interview partners were highly critical of the current capacities of their country's security forces. Some even suggested that the military equipment of international forces should be

transferred to the ANSF instead of being sent back as part of the withdrawal. In turn, others demanded continued, long-term equipment and training provisions from the international community, given the strength of the insurgents and the looming threat of interference by neighboring countries.

Those who understand transition as being multi-faceted and multi-dimensional highlight a number of features that need to be addressed by any potential Afghan transition process, requiring them to be extended to the predominantly rural «peripheries.» In *legal aspects*, transition should be about the rule of law, an awareness-raising of rights and laws among citizens, especially among women, given recent achievements of signed international conventions and the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women. In *educational terms*, a focus is required on reestablishing a minimum level of social fabric through the education and socialization of children. In *political terms*, a transition should also include the buildup and strengthening of state institutions to allow for access to basic services and social infrastructure, along with a fight against the corruption that currently pervades public institutions. Legislators and civil society activists have repeatedly highlighted the need for «strong government/ state institutions,» not just accountable and corruption-free ones. One reason given was the need for improved revenue collection, as it is instrumental for providing services, developing the country, and thus supporting a social transition. Furthermore, civil society activists have demanded that civil society be involved – as change agents as well as a crucial monitoring force.

Women parliamentarians disagree on the sequencing of different transition phases or, in other words, on the prioritization of certain dimensions: «*security first*» to allow for poverty alleviation, employment opportunities and overall economic development; «*economy first*,» that is, stimulating economic growth and job opportunities to fight insecurity and insurgency; or «*politics/democratization first*» to establish credible, legitimate leadership as well as functional, capable institutions at the various levels of the Afghan polity to follow through with the necessary transition policies, supported and endorsed by Afghan people in order to avoid further conflict. In contrast, the outright majority of civil society activists highlighted the challenging nature of a simultaneously occurring, multi-dimensional transition, with security being one part of the equation, but not the dominant one. They regard any kind of transition process as being incomplete and deficient without political transformation and reconstruction. Security is insufficient and unsustainable if key questions about community life (social provisions, ethnolinguistic cleavages, economic development and reconstruction), the protection of human rights, access to justice, and the challenges of the governance structure remain unaddressed.

Most agree on the outcome-dependency of the future role of the international community as a deal-maker or deal-breaker, externalizing to a certain extent local responsibilities and required decision-making for transitory politics to strengthen local ownership and subsequent self-sustainability at this point in time. Some highlight the importance of transition as being an inclusive, participatory process – be it in terms of setting the transition agenda, developing programs and policies, or monitoring subsequent transition steps and outcomes through comprehensive indicators. Critics

not only emphasize the exclusion of women representatives, but also the marginalization of certain political institutions – in particular the parliament – from transition negotiations and decision-making. Among others, civil society activist and former MP Sabrina Saqib understands that the parliament has a monitoring role to play, similarly to its key functions of government oversight etc., instead of remaining ignorant of and marginalized from the transition process – be it in terms of budgeting, implementation, or representing people’s voices. In comparison, she asks, how come in intervention countries do parliaments usually decide about troops, budgets, and deployment durations, but in Afghanistan, parliamentarians are as (un)informed as their constituents, who receive most of their information through the media? If parliamentarians cannot convince their constituents that they have a role to play, argues Saqib, significant problems arise. First and foremost, it negatively impacts on people’s perceptions of the transition process, presenting it as being non-participatory, externally driven, and not responsive to people’s needs; secondly, it further weakens the standing of the key political institutions required for a successful outcome of a democratization process. Nevertheless, a distinction might have to be made between government and parliament, say observers like Aziz Rafie, because the government finds itself in the winning seat so far – with access to negotiations and funds.

Many interview partners regard the transition process as being inseparable from – and interdependent with – a parallel process of peace negotiations and sociopolitical reconciliation, for better or for worse. Again, a number of them are apprehensive about the timing of peace and reconciliation negotiations, as becomes evident in the exemplary statement of Soraya Sobhrang from the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission:

«(...) it has its time and [in a] situation where your enemy is strong and you are weak: how can you sit [at] the table and talk. Now our government is weak, and [the] enemy is strong. And saying «please do not fight with us, please believe [in] democracy, please believe [in] human rights and women’s rights, my brother»... Now they [Taliban] are in power and they are giving suggestions and we [are] worried (...). (...) But at first, [you] should beat your enemy, they have to become weak, and then they will sit at the table and say ‘please, I will be with you; I don’t want to continue fighting with you.’»

Evaluating the impact on political institutions, own agenda-setting, and agency

Eventually, the international intervention and interference in Afghan affairs will have to end and local ownership of responsibilities will have to be ensured, but transition is more than a handing over of responsibilities. It is a process of socioeconomic and political change, often understood as leading toward democratization, as promised within the international agenda in the early years of the intervention. Thus, it is not only about security, but moreover about political and socioeconomic affairs. It is about local actors as well as institutions, their capacities, resources, and agency

options to envision, negotiate, decide, and implement transition objectives. It is also about inclusiveness and rights granted and protected. Within such a transition process, parliament is understood as playing a constructive role, as highlighted by MPs Zaki, Babakarkhail, and Ayobi.

However, the transition date and process initiation is largely regarded as premature and symbolic, given the lack of capacity-building and readiness of the Afghan actors and institutions concerned. Exemplary are the challenging questions raised by civil society activist and former legislator Sabrina Saqib: «I will say: What was your mission? Did you complete your mission or not? Why did you come?» Furthermore, transition has so far been perceived as opaque, exclusive, and ill-defined in its approach and sequencing. Before considering the impact on one's own work and agency options, the question that has been repeatedly raised concerns the reform standard/level employed for strategizing the transition. Are warlords in political institutions and the uneducated and unmotivated security forces at the appropriate levels for this transition? Are the topics of increased levels of insecurity – particularly apparent in the attacks on publicly active women – the establishment of militias after the handover, and indicators concerning the proliferation of arms taken into consideration for the next transition phase? To what extent are indicators developed to assess the required functioning of institutions, resources, and equipment for the transfer of responsibilities? Are the indicators employed centered on the needs of the Afghan people, or others? Has there really been a change in mentalities of those operating within state institutions, given restrictive laws such as the Shia family law and juvenile or media law? Will it be acceptable for elections to be postponed and what will be the impact? Or, whose transition scenario is it? Among others, MPs like Shukria Barakzai bemoan the lack of guarantees and moral support from international actors: There have been no signals indicating «go ahead, we are with you.»

Consequently, women parliamentarians and women's rights activists underline the uncertainty and stress created by the transition process for many Afghans, visible in the fall of property and land prices, decreased investments, and heightened interests in migration. Women legislators fear a disturbance of their already restrained relationships with constituents due to insecurity-related mobility restrictions and the lack of trust in the adequate provision of protection by Afghan security forces – national or even local for that matter. The viability of the parliament and the government serving as key political institutions and as the supposed democratic engines become questionable for a number of women parliamentarians.

«Institutions in Afghanistan are very weak. I always say that we have the skeletons of institutions in Afghanistan (...). We have got parliament, but parliament as an institution is not strong (...). (...) The good thing about [an] institution is: I enter, I work and get out. Another person comes and starts from where it is developed, but this thing is not happening in Afghanistan. The executive in terms of professionalism is weak. Yes, in comparison of 11 years back it is better, I cannot deny that. But to maintain and transfer the responsibility to Afghans,

you have to build the institutions strong, to know that all those benefits will not go to individuals.» (MP Farkhunda Naderi)

«When there is no security, there will not be any parliament. We are always threatened by the Taliban, so it will have a negative impact on all political institutions. (...) Afghans are not able to ensure security, so the democratic system established by the international community, the money and funds they have spent in Afghanistan and their sons that have been killed – all will be dismissed.» (MP Safura Elkhani)

Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission member Soraya Sobhrang reported in our interview that she received numerous threats and is currently dealing with 16 complaints by women's and human rights activists, some of whom have left the country. She fears that the situation will deteriorate substantially after 2014, as do others who were interviewed. If the international community, with its security resources, is not able to provide peace and security to ensure the gender commitments that have been made, what will happen when the ANSF takes over? No previous track record suggests a positive outcome, but instead a reversal and further weakening of women's rights and protection against violence.

Some doubt that people will continue to participate in the upcoming elections and that inclusive elections will be held as scheduled. Others expect certain veto actors and non-democratic forces to hijack political institutions for their own purposes, thwarting previous attempts to establish democratic parliamentary politics and enhance women's political mainstreaming. Apart from a fear of possible institutional hijacking or infiltration, the co-optation of insurgent groups under a power-sharing deal would similarly lead to anti-democratic institutional excavation.

«(...) and then democrat[s] will be in the minority again and they will defeat us with the values that we believe in. They will use democracy values against democracy and it will be easy to change the Constitution on that time. They are part of the team [which] will change the Constitution. [The] Constitution is something we cannot change (...).» (Sabrina Saqib)

«It has a negative impact on my political agenda, especially on women because the police and army are still traditional and they do not regard women's rights. Right now, there is a political process that you can come to parliament through campaign[ing] and distributing posters and using any other legitimate ways. So, if transition takes place, influential people and commanders will come to parliament and they don't let women access politics and, specifically, join parliament. (...) So, by that time, warlords and commanders will be the politicians whether they know politics or not (...).» (MP Najia Babakarkhail)

Non-inclusive, fraudulent, or delayed elections are considered to have a serious impact on a constructive, positive transition process as well as on women's political participation and agency options. If elections do not take place – for instance, due to a worsened security situation across the country –, the whole political system could be considered illegitimate and result in a lack of parliamentary oversight of the various branches and levels of government, worries Nematullah Basharwal, spokesmen for the State Ministry for Parliamentary Affairs.

However, few optimistic views were offered in the interviews, be it in terms of the potentials of the youth and a changing of guards – from the old aged elite to a younger generation – or be it in terms of shaping political networks and alliances anew. The latter intend to break up the predominant power groups of the Karzai family and mujahideen groups through a coalition of technocrats or non-ethnic based parliamentary groups with a mid-term goal of 2020: «Afghanistan is shaping. (...) This is very positive, because we actually [break] with [the] new coalitions (...) the ethnic, language, region, political affiliation[s] (...)» (Aziz Rafie, head of Afghan Civil Society Forum).

The withdrawal could also lead to a change of heart and to the destroyed confidence of parliamentarians and activists to continue with their struggle for democracy and human rights. It could also destroy the confidence of people to endorse these struggles once they are under increased levels of threat and influence from veto actors. With the backdrop of a conflict-induced loss of social fabric, which has not been rebuilt since 2001, vulnerabilities are rising – of people as individuals and as members of a community, a nation (Aziz Rafie). Moreover, any kind of sustainable peace process, conflict mediation, and transition consolidation requires social reconciliation and the establishment of a national consensus that society's members can refer to and adhere to. However, one woman activist participating in the focus group discussion, alongside others, professes the challenges of such fundamentals: «But if somebody has lived [with a] survival strategy for 30 years, for you that country does not mean home; your home and your family is [w]hat you have safe. And to create that nationhood idea and everything else – I think we need [a] long time to achieve that.»

It is feared that the potential withdrawal of international organizations and development agencies alongside military forces will lead to lower international attention levels on Afghanistan's civil society, which continues to be highly dependent on external support in terms of financing and capacity-building. In a similar vein, concerns were expressed that the international community's interests have shifted already, once again, toward Arab countries, which has a detrimental effect on Afghan civil society's capacity to maintain its organizational integrity and sustain its projects and future development. These challenges might be exacerbated if democratic institutions fail in the transition process – and not only if the security situation worsens – and will discourage citizens' participation in civil society activities, as interviewees highlighted.

Is «stay» or «leave» the right thing to be asked by the international community?

«Was it responsible transition? Do they realize what will happen? Do they pay enough [attention] to the women of Afghanistan?»

MP Shinkai Karokhail

«(...) insecurity of Afghanistan will be insecurity of the world or if Afghanistan is unstable, so all the world will be unstable and insecure.»

MP Aziza Jalis

The majority of women parliamentarians and civil society activists have positioned themselves against a complete withdrawal of the international community – military and/or civilian actors – by 2014, which is considered premature, as previously outlined. This is not a new opinion, but one that has been communicated repeatedly in the international media and public debates. According to this line of argument, the international community needs to secure and consolidate its achievements, the funds pledged, and the projects undertaken to avoid relapsing into a conflict of transnational proportions and triggering a reoccurrence of previous misogynist regimes.

Tasks assigned and roles to be played by the international community continue to be wide-ranging and are jeopardizing, to a certain extent, steps toward strengthened local ownership, reduced external dependency, and increased self-sustainability. The international community is supposed to (i) *invest in development and capacity-building* – regarding human, social, economic, political, and security needs; (ii) *smooth the funding gap* in the coming years with budget support and more direct funding; (iii) *reduce insecurities and instabilities* – be they related to corruption, narcotics, or insurgency; (iv) *institutionalize democracy* within state institutions and support civil society.

Several interviewees were of the opinion that, at this point in time, security will be impossible without the presence and continuous support of international forces. Furthermore, women should become a focal point of the country's development and transition indicators – an approach and commitment that should be monitored, and to a certain extent sanctioned, by the international community. Merely citing the date of 2014 is not acceptable as a reference point for the exit strategy of the international community. Indicators should be developed to assess a subsequent phasing-out once specific levels have been reached for: self-reliance; human security and rights protection; development; capacity-building; resource and revenue collection; inclusive democratic politics; along with the establishment of sustainable institutional safeguards. Thus, 2014 might not indicate the appropriate time horizon for the perceived long-term commitment of the international intervention forces. Given decisions taken in 2001, the responsibilities of the international community have been outlined for its involvement in ensuring that the events of 1990s are not repeated all over again. The repeated buzzwords are «responsible transition, responsible withdrawal» (MP Shinkai Karokhail). MP Raihana Azad, who was elected as a member

of a minority in a province other than her home province, offers a statement that is exemplary for its understanding of the international community's responsibilities and roles – prior and post – to any kind of Afghan transition process.

«I think the international community should change their mind regarding the transition process. They should help us in the upcoming election. They should deeply think of the transition process. They should not think that terrorism is only Afghan's enemy but it is their enemy, too. They should postpone the exact date of the transition process. At least we should have the next president in two years, then the transition process should take place. It is important that the international community lost their sons and youth, helped financially. So they should not easily leave Afghanistan alone and loose 10 years' achievements. Yes, both military and civilians should stay in Afghanistan, because I believe if one of them withdraws from Afghanistan, it will have a negative impact on people and the government. It is obvious that the current government depends on the international community's support. That we have thousands of pupils, students; that we have civil society, universities, security, women's rights – [these] are the achievements that Afghanistan got by the support of the international community. We expect the international community to stop their support of warlords. Today, we, the democrats, cannot speak whenever the international community does not stop their [warlords] support. We have lots of democrats, youth, educated and open-minded people. So the international community should invest in them; in new democratic parties and civil society and promote them to establish a real democracy.» (MP Raihana Azad)

In this regard, the scheduled elections have been identified by a number of parliamentarians and civil society activists as a watershed event for the transition process. They are believed to have the potential of setting either a positive or a negative path dependency for Afghanistan's political development.

Fewer people envision a less direct role and presence of the international community post-2014. For them, the international community should depart with its security forces and maintain a role largely as an external monitoring, advisory, and pressure group vis-a-vis the government, its agencies, and those neighboring countries that have the potential to interfere and impede with the full independence and self-sustainability of Afghanistan (i.e., Iran and Pakistan). Few see the departure of international troops as an opportunity to develop and implement an Afghan-based transition agenda and to revert military spending to the necessary development work, which is perceived as having been scarce, hurried and largely unfulfilled during the first intervention decade.

A series of interview partners highlight the crucial role of the international community in controlling the region, that is, safeguarding non-interference in Afghan affairs and developments, and becoming an instrumental mediator for the perceived indispensable regional conflict resolution and enhanced regional integration.

Afghanistan 2024: Sleepless or dreamless nights? Sweet dreams or nightmares?

«So I think all Afghans have both of them in their mind and I wish the positive to come to reality, but there are not such signs to believe in it. But after all, it does not mean that we are hopeless. We still have many, many opportunities and many, many challenges. If we raise our voice enough [...], if we act as [a] united nation, as [a] united population and [a] united government, we can deal with many of them.»

Civil society activist and former MP Sabrina Saqib

There is no doubt that the forthcoming decade will bring critical and challenging times for Afghanistan. Waiting for one of our interview partners, we spent some time in the guest room of a parliamentary group with only male parliamentarians, plus the husband of the interviewee who was present. When asked about their visions for Afghanistan in 2024, many found the question difficult to grasp and difficult to answer. None of the five male, older-aged MPs could conjure a positive vision, reverting always to the violent history of the country as a potential scenario for the future. In contrast, half of the women parliamentarians interviewed proclaimed themselves to be cautious optimists and highlighted the need to do so, albeit most expressed rather modest expectations of what the future would bring.

«As a politician, I am not allowed to be pessimistic, because I am fighting for that reason. I have to highlight the positive aspect of that [transition], but at the same time, I should not deny the reality (...). To be optimistic, we have to make our voice [heard] for certain actions to be taken, even though we don't have much time (...).» (MP Farkhunda Naderi)

Interestingly, though, not being able to imagine a positive future might not be linked to gender so much as age/generational background. Experiencing various cycles of conflict and violent political regime-changes impacts the psyches of younger people in different ways, as the past intervention decade constitutes a significant portion of their lives. Therefore, a number of interviewees pin their hopes on the young generation, as they are utterly disappointed in the current older generation in power.

«I have hope for the future when then the new generation come[s]; (...) that generation will be a decision-maker after 10 years, because right now we have the old generation [as] obstacle. We have this confusion among foreign countries about Afghanistan [that] they might not be in the right direction in Afghanistan.» (MP Shukria Barakzai)

Most positive expectations and dreams envisioned depend on the continuous support of the international community as well as Afghanistan not being left to its own fate yet again or being left to revert to another cycle of violence. Other interdependen-

cies and prerequisites for positive prospects mentioned were: legitimate, strong, and non-particularist leadership; functional, empowered, political institutions, such as parliament and its commissions; and the absence of particularist, fragmented policy-making.

Many women interviewed pointed to the fact that women will attempt to continue their struggle for ascertaining their rights. They also mentioned that traditions are changing and that there will be a struggle to continue, whether the Taliban return to power or not.

A number of themes emerged: (i) *Afghanistan becoming developed and sovereign*, that is, at par with the region's countries – security-wise, economically and politically, and with no interference from its neighbors; (ii) *Afghans with secure and better livelihoods*, that is, good governance, corruption-free and accountable politics, security; (iii) *Afghan women with a better status* across the country, secure and mobile, with a stake in public life beyond Kabul, in the provinces.

«I dream that there will be no violence against women. Regarding reconstruction and development, Afghanistan will be on a relatively good level, witness a real democratic government, lack concern with security issues, implementing rule of law, practically implement equal rights as mentioned in the Constitution.» (MP Shah Gul Reza)

Pessimistic outlooks were based on an assessment of the present. A number of questions were raised as answers to our interview questions on dreaming about Afghanistan in 2024: How can the country's situation be maintained if Afghanistan is left alone? How fast can one rebuild a country, its society, and politics after 30 years of war? Was the short timeframe of international engagement, 15 years, sufficient to rebuild the country and have a sustainable, transformative impact? Can a better livelihood situation, security, and stability be achieved without either the presence or at least the (pressuring, monitoring) support of the international community?

Those women MPs who share a rather pessimistic vision reckoned that the fundamentals will not have been laid by 2014 for a self-sufficient Afghanistan a decade later. In this assessment they are not alone, as several positive-oriented and undecided women MPs made their assessments based on these fundamentals: positive developments in terms of security, democracy, and economics in addition to continued international support and pressure given the lack of resources, capacities, the high level of corruption, as well as weak political institutions and leadership in a «problematic» regional location.

Women's activists and other civil society members interviewed were similarly ambivalent about their dreams and prospects for the future, oscillating between (i) hopes and visions of a country with good governance; prosperity and development; security; and respect for democratic values and human rights vis-a-vis (ii) experiences and reality check-induced fears of civil war, destruction, repression, and overall human insecurity. «I do not dream, because we cannot express the reality of our society with dreams,» explains ministerial gender advisor Maryam Bahar about how

she is torn between positive visions and nightmares when looking into Afghanistan's future. Similarly, Sabrina Saqib asserts that she holds both visions, which are shifting, however, because «for the moment, there [are] a lot [of] signs to see Afghanistan as [a] broken Afghanistan rather than [as a] united and welfare and developed Afghanistan.» Others emphasize the indispensable, multi-faceted conditionalities and high stakes for envisioning positive developments: institutionalized democracy, transitional justice, capacity-building, rule of law, peace and security, and the results of the upcoming elections and peace negotiations. Subsequently, it is not surprising that a number of civil society members interviewed were unsure whether they will remain in the country if the situation worsens.

Instead of Conclusion or Recommendations: Food for Thought

«What has been impossible to achieve over the last ten years will not be miraculously transformed by Afghan ownership, especially with overall security and economic indicators trending downwards.»

Stapleton 2012: 3

In view of a successful gender-sensitive, sociopolitical, post-conflict transition in Afghanistan – imagined and outlined by a number of representatives from state institutions and civil society organizations and enshrined in several national and international conventions and regulations – one needs to put on the record that such a transition process is not in contradiction with the sociocultural foundations of Afghanistan. It is rather the scarcity of genuine political will and commitments by national and international stakeholders and power-brokers, non-inclusive and non-participatory proceedings, and insufficient awareness about rights and knowledge within large parts of the population, all of which represent key challenges for a successful transition process. In that regard, women and human rights activists, along with women parliamentarians, identify a certain liability and obligation of international intervention actors and the international community in general, obligations which extend well beyond the current 2014 exit-cum-transition scenario discussed and implemented (apart from above-mentioned interview findings, see also ActionAid 2011: 3; Afghan Women's Network 2011a: 5).

Many of the concerns raised and assessments made about the ongoing transition process have been highlighted in other policy briefs and studies conducted in the past two years. They have strengthened the findings of this micro sample study on gender and transition conducted in the first half of September 2012 with women parliamentarians, bureaucrats, and civil society members. Most analysts highlight the (gendered) challenges of (in)security and their impact on women's citizenship. They also highlight the challenges of conflict mediation and peace consolidation along with the demand for qualitative benchmarks that are developed inclusively and in a participatory manner among national and international stakeholders for an accountable, sustainable, and responsible transition process with realistic timelines that are accompanied by long-term international support (see: Afghan Women's Network 2012; CARE 2012; International Crisis Group 2012; Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination 2012; Stapleton 2012; EU Institute for Security Studies 2011; Smith 2011).

Tendencies of previous years appear to lead to approaches that are «good enough» or «as good as it gets» for the outcome of the international intervention in Afghanistan. These approaches amount to a predominantly externally-driven strategizing in response to: a certain intervention fatigue; fiscal constraints under austerity policies in the wake of the worldwide economic crisis affecting most intervention parties; revisited security priorities; and new agenda-setting following the «Arabelions.» Indicative of such tendencies are (i) the endorsement of fraudulent elections, which leads to large-scale disenfranchisement, protracted institutional conflicts, and negative popular perceptions of newly established governance institutions. Also indicative is (ii) the paucity of genuine political commitment, inclusive participation rights, and qualitative benchmarks of national and international transition negotiations for complying with prior promises and commitments.

Is the 2020 vision still guiding international and national activities or has there already been a foreclosure? «Staying engaged» within the framework of a «responsible, inclusive, participatory, and gender-sensitive transition» is a prerequisite for any minimal success story of change processes initiated, which remain highly precarious and contested within the continuing conflict dispensation. The extent of such a commitment as well as the instruments used to achieve it should not necessarily be subjected to further securitization and militarization, but rather revisited and subjected to an inclusive assessment and monitoring of all relevant stakeholders – not only traditional and neoconservative power-brokers. Promises made should guide the international community’s dealings with those change agents who put their lives on the line, who simply cannot or do not want to «exit» post-2014. Why not safeguard the critical spaces and institutional edifices already created, which would allow for a discourse on – and subsequent realization of – locally owned and self-supporting transition models that transcend biases toward conflict parties and perpetrators? The first significant steps have been made and precarious achievements should be safeguarded.

«But, generally, there is an attitude change that is happening for a lot of women (...). Now they are at [a] different mental level. It is difficult for those women to sit at home. Can you keep N.N. [one of the discussion participants] sitting at home? Even if Mullah Omar comes to power, she will not sit. But maybe 10 years back we didn't have the strength. So now we have reached a different level and we are [a] threat to many others. Some of us may break in the way and some of us will be stronger.» (Women's rights activist Palwasha Hassan)

Given the historical legacies and needs identified on the ground, the role played up to now by international intervention actors, and the potential impact on future intervention scenarios, «good enough» does not seem to be an adequate response vis-a-vis the multi-faceted challenges and high stakes of the Afghan transition process. Afghanistan post-2014 should not become, once again, a negative precedent for the perils and outcomes of international interventions.

REFERENCES

- Afghan Women's Leaders' Priorities for Stabilization Statement and Recommendation. January 27, 2010.
- Afghan Women's Network (2010): Afghan Women's Movement from First Women's Council to Kabul Conference. Conference Statement. July 17–18.
- (2011a): Afghan Women: Towards Bonn and Beyond. Position Paper. October 6.
- (2011b): Afghan Women's Declaration International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn. December 5.
- (2012): Women's Security and Transition in Afghanistan. Measuring the Success of Transition by Lasting Protections for Women's Security. Position Paper. May. Available at: http://www.peacewomen.org/portal_resources_resource.php?id=1684 (last accessed Nov. 12, 2012).
- Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, Sippi (2007): On Living with Negative Peace and a Half-Built State: Gender and Human Rights. *International Peacekeeping* 14(1): 127–142.
- Bachelet, Michelle (2012): A Precarious Crossroads for Afghan Women. *International Herald Tribune*, April 14–15, p. 6.
- Biljert, Martine van (2010): Dreaming of a Pliable Parliament and a Ruling Family. Blog from February 24. Available at: <http://aan-afghanistan.com> (last accessed Mar. 13, 2012).
- Boone, John (2010): Afghanistan's Women Find Their Voice. *The Guardian*, April 18, 2009. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/apr/18/afghanistan-womens-rights-politicians?INTCMP=SRCH> (last accessed Mar. 13, 2012).
- Burnell, Peter (2011): Democratization. In: Peter Burnell, Vicky Randall, and Lise Rakner (eds.), *Politics in the Developing World*. Third edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 257–276.
- CARE International (2012): Policy Brief: Women and Transition in Afghanistan. London. Available at: <http://www.care.org.au/document.doc?id=881> (last accessed Nov. 12, 2012).
- European Institute for Security Studies / Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2011): Afghanistan 2011–2014, and Beyond: From Support Operations to Sustainable Peace. Joint Report. Paris. June. Available at: http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Afghanistan_2011-2014_Joint_Report.pdf (last accessed Nov. 12, 2012).
- Ferris-Rotman, Amie (2011): How Will Afghan Women Fare in Taliban Reconciliation? *swissinfo*, June 13. Available at: http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/news/international/How_will_Afghan_women_fare_in_Taliban_reconciliation.html?mobileTopicId=1226030&view=mobileDetail&cid=30449218 (last accessed Nov. 12, 2012).
- Hamid, Zarin (2011): UNSCR 1325. Implementation in Afghanistan. Kabul: Afghan Women's Network.
- Hancock, Luise, and Orzala Ashraf Nemat (2011): A Place at the Table. *Safeguarding Women's Rights in Afghanistan*. Oxford: Oxfam International. October. Available at: <http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/place-table-safeguarding-women-rights-afghanistan> (last accessed Nov. 12, 2012).
- Human Rights Watch (2009): *We Have the Promises of the World*. New York: Human Rights Watch. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2009/12/03/we-have-promises-world-0> (last accessed Apr. 23, 2012).
- (2010): *The «Ten-Dollar Talib» and Women's Rights*. New York: Human Rights Watch. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2010/07/13/ten-dollar-talib-and-women-s-rights-0> (last accessed Apr. 23, 2012).

- Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2012): Towards Self-Reliance. Strategic Vision for the Transformation Decade. July 8. Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan. Available at: <http://www.afghanistan-un.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Towards-Self-Reliance-27-6-2012-final-version.pdf> (last accessed Nov. 12, 2012).
- International Crisis Group (2012): Afghanistan: The Long, Hard Road to the 2014 Transition. Asia Report No. 236. Brussels. October 8. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/236-afghanistan-the-long-hard-road-to-the-2014-transition.pdf> (last accessed Nov. 12, 2012).
- Kabeer, Naila, Ayesha Khan, and Naysan Adelparvar (2011): Afghan Values or Women's Rights?: Gendered Narratives about Continuity and Change in Urban Afghanistan. IDS Working Paper No. 387. London: Institute of Development Studies.
- Kouvo, Sari (2011a): Shelter in the Storm: The Controversy over Women's Safehouses, Blog from February 18, 2011. Available at: <http://aanafghanistan.com> (last accessed Mar. 13, 2012).
- (2011b): Women and Reconciliation (3): One Step Forward and a Running Match Backwards. Blog from October 8, 2011. Available at: <http://aan-afghanistan.com> (last accessed Mar. 13, 2012).
- (2011c): Women and Reconciliation (4): A Response to Anatol Lieven's Afghan Books Review. Blog from February 3, 2012. Available at: <http://aan-afghanistan.com> (last accessed Mar. 13, 2012).
- (2011d): Women and Reconciliation: What are the Concerns? Blog from July 28, 2011. Available at: <http://aan-afghanistan.com> (last accessed Mar. 13, 2012).
- (2012): Women's Day in Afghanistan. Where the «Personal Is Still Political.» Blog from March 8, 2012. Available at: <http://aan-afghanistan.com> (last accessed Mar. 13, 2012).
- Kreile, Regina (2010): Fragil und umkämpft – Frauenrechte im neuen Afghanistan [Fragile and Contested – Women's Rights in the New Afghanistan]. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 21-22/2010: 41–46.
- Lemmon, Gayle Tzemach (2010): Kabul Conference Afghan Women's Warning for International Donors. Blog from July 19, 2010. Available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-07-19/Kabul-coference-afghan-womens-warning-for-international-donors/p/> (last accessed Mar. 13, 2012).
- Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination (2012): Implementing the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in Afghanistan. Summary Report. Princeton: Princeton University. January. Available at: <http://dataspace.princeton.edu/jspui/handle/88435/dsp01ff3655288> (last accessed Nov. 12, 2012).
- Lough, Oliver (2011): Practicing Democracy in Afghanistan. Key Findings on Perceptions, Parliament and Elections. AREU Policy Note Series. May. Available at: <http://www.areu.org.af/EditionDetails.aspx?EditionId=540&ContentId=7&ParentId=7&Lang=en-US> (last accessed Nov. 12, 2012).
- Maaß, Citha D. (2008): Paradigmenwechsel in Afghanistan [Change of Paradigms in Afghanistan]. *SWP Aktuell* 44. May. Available at: http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/produkt-detail/article/afghanistan_paradigmenwechsel.html (last accessed Mar. 13, 2012).
- Mahmodi, Mohammad Musa (2012): Afghanistan's Terrorised Women. *The Straits Times*. January 25.
- Mojumdar, Aunohita (2009): Helping Afghan Women Find a Voice. *Aljazeera Online*. August 17. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/afghanistanelections2009/2009/08/2009813141122712355.html> (last accessed Apr. 23, 2012).
- O'Connell, Helen (2011): What Are the Opportunities to Promote Gender Equity and Equality in Conflict Affected and Fragile States? *Gender and Development* 19(3): 455–466.
- Ruttig, Thomas (2011b): Women's Rights after 2001: Progress, but Not Much of It. October 5. Available at: <http://aan-afghanistan.com> (last accessed Mar. 13, 2012).
- Smith, Ben (2011): Women and the Afghan Transition. SN/IA/6132. London: Library of the House of Commons, International Affairs and Defence Section. Available at: <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN06132> (last accessed Nov. 12, 2012).

- Stapleton, Barbara J. (2012): Beating a Retreat. Prospects for the Transition Process in Afghanistan. Afghan Analyst Network Thematic Report 1/2012. May. Available at: <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=2750> (last accessed Nov. 12, 2012).
- Uwatra, Anjali et al. (2011): A Just Peace? The Legacy of War for the Women of Afghanistan. London/Johannesburg: ActionAid, September. Available at: http://www.actionaid.org.uk/doc_lib/a_just_peace.pdf (last accessed Nov. 12, 2012).
- Wheeler, N. J., and A. J. Bellamy (2005): Humanitarian Intervention in World Politics. In: Peter Burnell and Vicky Randall (eds.), *Politics in the Developing World*. First edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



At the beginning of the military intervention in Afghanistan, gender-related rhetoric was employed as a source of legitimization for the intervention. Initially regarded as the barometer of success for democratization, today human and women's rights are in danger of being dropped of the national and international transition agenda. The present study by Andrea Fleschenberg shows that in national and international debates about the transition process in Afghanistan, women's voices are seldom present, or taken into consideration. This is despite women being particularly and most likely significantly affected by the transition process – be it in terms of a possible power-sharing deal or a reconciliation agreement between the government and the insurgents or be it in terms of safeguarding the gender-specific achievements of the past decade in the fields of education and health. Framed by interviews with women rights activists and women parliamentarians recommendations are lined out for future international policy commitments and responsibilities in Afghanistan.

Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung
The Green Political Foundation

Schumannstraße 8, 10117 Berlin

T 030 265340 F 030 26534109

E info@boell.de W www.boell.de

ISBN 978-3-86926-097-4