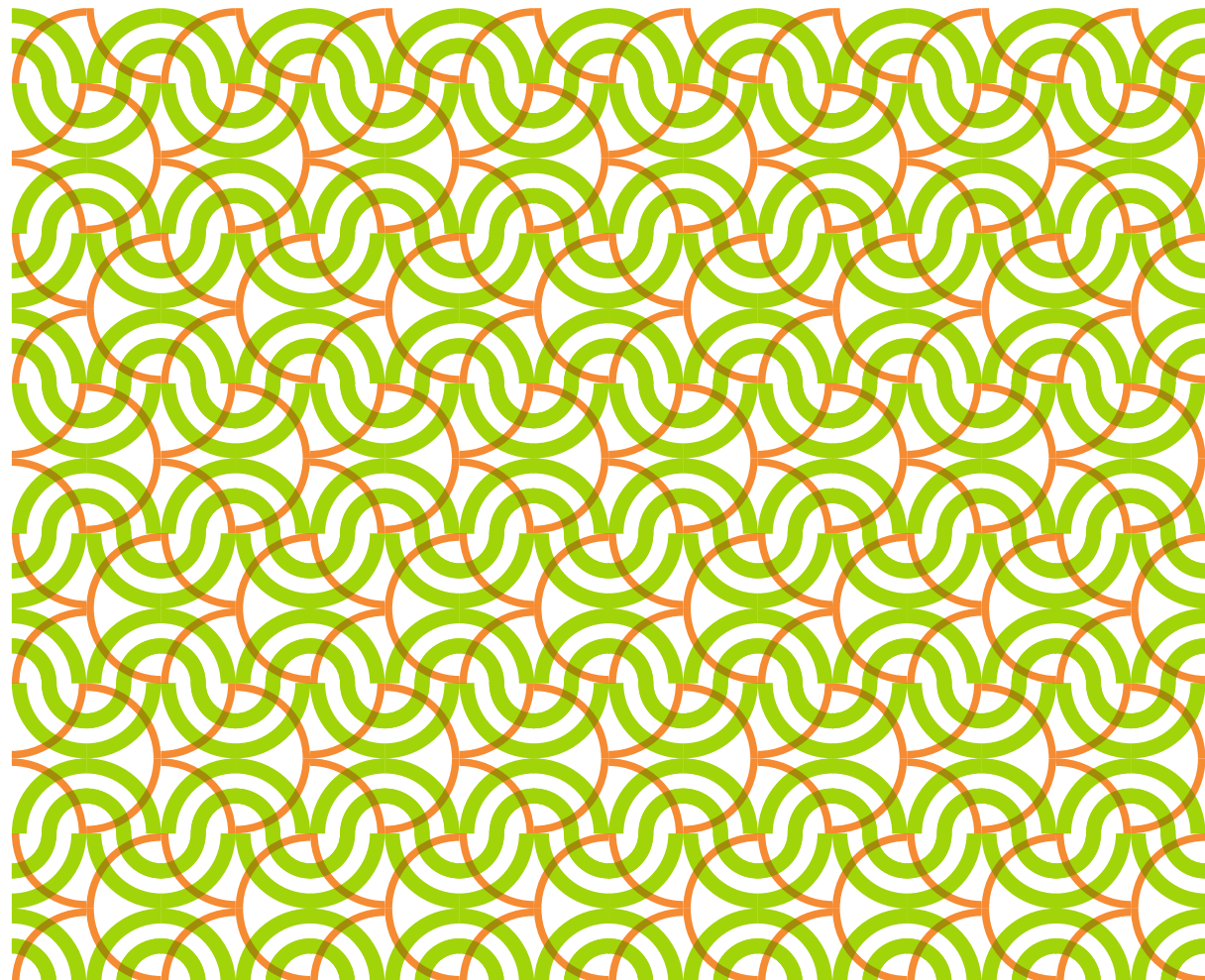




“It is not Charity, it is a Chair of Power” - Moving Beyond Symbolic Representation in Afghanistan’s Transition Politics?

Andrea Fleschenberg



Research Study
Publication Series “Reviewing Gender Quotas in Afghanistan and Pakistan”
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¹ “It is not charity, it is a chair of power and when you are there, you have to get tough with all the vulnerability you face” (interview with MP Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, Kabul, April 2015).

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Research Study, Publication Series: “Reviewing Gender Quotas in Afghanistan and Pakistan”, 2016.

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Cover & Design: Suffi Bilal

Printer: Neshat Graphic

Kabul and Islamabad, 2016

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About the Paper:

“If we had a normal society, so we don’t need the quota system”²– In continuation of the previous 2007 and 2012 studies to document gendered dynamics of parliamentary institution-building and women’s political mainstreaming in post-2001 Afghanistan, this paper showcases and scrutinises the testimonies of parliamentarians and civil society activists, along with identifying parameters of the gender quota-cum-electoral reform debate in Afghanistan’s second Transformation Decade (2014 onwards), as gathered during the course of interviews, conversations and focus group discussions conducted.³

Acknowledgements:

This research would not have been possible without substantial team efforts and support. A special thanks goes to both research assistants - Mateeullah Tareen and Masooda Saifi - who accompanied me during the field research and data analysis process in Kabul and Islamabad and without whom this research would not have been possible. Thanks for being there, running around Kabul for hours and days on end, asking important questions and never giving up in pursuing and convincing interview partners to commit time and expertise! Furthermore, I would like to thank our two research interns Amina Arabi and Elsa Benhoefer who accompanied the early planning stages of the research process and whose desktop research was very valuable. Last but not least I have to thank, for the third time now (hopefully not the last), the wonderful HBS team in Kabul, in particular Marion Müller, Zia Moballegh, Abdullah Athayi, Neelab Hakim, Afghan Gul and Nadeem, for showing interest and supporting this research, making impossibles possible and extending once again their special hospitality.

2 Interview with MP Arif Rahmani, Kabul, April 2015.

3 In a separate comparative policy paper we reviewed the discussion and theorising of empirical findings gathered from both cases studies (Afghanistan and Pakistan) in order to contribute to our understanding of gender quotas and their impact on women’s substantive political representation in South Asia.

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Introductory Remarks: Afghanistan & the Global Shift on Gender Quotas

After the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action process, quotas became one of the preferred tools to generate a historic jump in women's political participation at different levels of a given polity. As of 2015, 125 countries employ one or the other type of gender quotas at the subnational or national levels. With regard to the level of Lower Houses of bicameral or unicameral national parliaments, the following picture emerges: reserved seat provisions can be found in 23 countries, predominantly in Asia, Africa and MENA region; voluntary political party quotas are used in 53 countries, predominantly in the Americas, Africa and Europe, while legislated candidate quotas are employed in 54 electoral systems across all world regions. In Asia, 20 nations apply quotas as an enhancing support mechanism for women's political participation - five with voluntary political party quotas, nine with legislated candidate quotas and seven with reserved seat provisions and different ratios, ranging from 15 to 27 percent of women's descriptive representation in the case of the latter.⁴ The box on the following page elucidates on some of the contesting arguments on gender quotas, positive discrimination and notions of equality, along with an overview of types of quota provisions that exist worldwide.

Rationale

In this action research project, experiences with quota designs, challenges and achievements of quota parliamentarians, in terms of substantive representation, are reviewed in Afghanistan. The focus lies on the concept of political patriarchy, that is, an androcentric to sometimes even misogynist political configuration in relation to (i) power relations, (ii) socio-political culture and gender roles prescriptions, (iii) institutional setups, practices and discourses. This assemblage draws heavily on the subsequent structural constraints through gatekeepers and peers, recruitment and decision-making processes, institutional structures of voice and agency, that shape gender quota parliamentarians' forms and impact, to affect substantive political representation, as well as political effectiveness.

Taking on a case study perspective, I essentially focus on the level of the national parliament, to critically review quota designs, practices and experiences of women parliamentarians on quota seats. In doing so, the intent is to explore the confluencing roles of: individual and

collective civil society representatives which liaise and lobby with the parliament and legislators, for example, women's organisations, human rights activists or electoral watchdogs; peers within the assemblies comprising heads of parliamentary groups, chairs of parliamentary committees/commissions; and gatekeepers & (potential) veto actors/spoilers, such as, political party leaders, ministerial bureaucrats, influential parliamentarians or government members inter alia. Guiding exploratory questions used to obtain information include: What quality, transversality, along with volatility characterises gender quota mandates in Afghanistan? What kind of 'imagined constituency' do gender quota parliamentarians conceptualise and aim to establish, including ensuring their own political mainstreaming and effectiveness beyond a quota regime? Do gender quota politicians advance a pro-women agenda? To what extent is this structured by a specific power configuration within formal and informal institutions, and by (in-formal) stakeholders within society and politics? What changes are required with regard to institutional configurations, engagement with key stakeholders, and the quota system and election system designs, as such?

Logically contouring through the complex phenomenon, and for clarity, reviewed first, is the perceived performance and impact of gender quota parliamentarians, within the ambit of: legislation; government oversight; and representation of constituents, in particular women (albeit neither a homogenous social group nor a coherent constituency). This is followed by investigating the constraints and barriers to gender quota parliamentarians' political mainstreaming and effectiveness by gatekeepers shaping the candidacy pool along with transversality of legislative mandates, recruitment/decision-making and agenda-setting processes within parliamentary groups and political networks/coalitions. Not to mention that these foci are overbearingly influenced and determined by external actors and their transnational/global policies and interventions, influencing Afghanistan at the level of a state-sponsored political patriarchy.

However, given the limited resources of the project, the focus of the analysis is confined to the internal dimensions of institutional constraints and the direct experiences of parliamentarians of both genders, with the gender quota system in place since the 2004 Constitution. Secondly, the case of Afghanistan is marked by a high level of political violence and can be termed as conflict (or even intervention) society, creating particular vulnerabilities for politically active women, who engage in public affairs marked by women's widespread invisibility in the public sphere. However, again, the focus lies not on the nexus of insecurity, politics and gender, but is rather understood as a potentially intervening variable.

4 Calculated with data provided by the Global Database of Quotas for Women, <http://www.quotaproject.org/uid/search.cfm#> as of 27.10.2015.

Contesting Arguments on Gender Quotas

Contra:

- undemocratic as violating principle of equal opportunity for all and other democratic principles, e.g. voters decisions are prime
- positive discrimination violates principle of meritocracy and qualifications in favour of gender concerns
- narrows women's political representation to women's constituencies and issues
- leads to conflicts within political organisations / institutions

Pro:

- democratic as quotas address the gender democracy deficit of politics - women as citizens have the right to participate in politics and elections primarily aim for people's representation, not male elite capture in terms of educational, political qualifications and capacities in political systems marked by androcentrism and patriarchy
- no level playing field - quotas thus address gender-specific structural and institutional barriers, also those by gatekeepers who control the candidacy pool
- creating critical mass and avoiding stressful experience of women as tokens
- inclusive - quotas allow for women's experiences and needs to be addressed in otherwise androcentric politics
- transformative and democratising - conflicts, if caused, are temporary and address (i) crucial societal inequalities, which are forms of everyday violence and conflict, and (ii) lack of accountability, formalisation and thus intransparencies of political nomination processes

Positive Discrimination and Notions of Equality

In her writings, leading gender quota scholar Drude Dahlerup contends: "Real equal opportunity does not exist just because formal barriers are removed. Direct discrimination and hidden barriers prevent women from getting their share of political influence. In general, quotas for women represent a shift from one concept of equality to another. The classic liberal notion of equality was a notion of 'equal opportunity' or 'competitive equality'. Removing the formal barriers, for example, giving women voting rights, was considered sufficient. The rest was up to the individual women. Following strong feminist pressure in the last few decades, as expressed for instance in the Beijing 'Platform for Action' of 1995, a second concept of equality is gaining increasing relevance and support: the notion of 'equality of result'. The argument is that real equal opportunity does not exist just because formal barriers are removed. Direct discrimination and a complex pattern of hidden barriers prevent women from being selected as candidates and getting their share of political influence. Quotas and other forms of positive measures are thus a means towards equality of result. The argument is based on the experience that equality as a goal cannot be reached by formal equal treatment as a means. If barriers exist, it is argued, compensatory measures must be introduced as a means to reach equality of result. From this perspective, quotas are not discrimination (against men), but compensation for structural barriers that women meet in the electoral process" (quoted from: <http://www.quotaproject.org/aboutQuotas.cfm> as of 27.10.2015).

Types of Quota Provisions

QuotaProject distinguishes between three major types in existence worldwide: (i) reserved seats, i.e. a specific number of parliamentary seats is reserved as outcome of any elections as codified in a constitution or electoral laws; (ii) legal candidate quotas, i.e. a specific number of candidates must be women as mandatory requirement codified in a constitution or electoral law; or as (iii) voluntarily agreed by political parties / electoral alliances in political party quotas. Quotas are not only used to ensure women's political mainstreaming, but a popular tool to engineer inclusive political representation and participation. "In some countries quotas apply to minorities based on regional, ethnic, linguistic or religious cleavages. Almost all political systems apply some kind of geographical quotas to ensure a minimum representation for densely populated areas, islands and the like. (...) Quota systems aim at ensuring that women constitute at least a 'critical minority' of 30 or 40%. Quotas for women entail that women must constitute a certain number or percentage of the members of a body, whether it is a candidate list, a parliamentary assembly, a committee, or a government. The quota system places the burden of recruitment not on the individual woman, but on those who control the recruitment process. The core idea behind this system is to recruit women into political positions and to ensure that women are not only a token few in political life. Previous notions of having reserved seats for only one or for very few women, representing a vague and all-embracing category of 'women', are no longer considered sufficient. Today, quota systems aim at ensuring that women constitute a large minority of 20, 30 or 40%, or even to ensure true gender balance of 50-50%. In some countries quotas are applied as a temporary measure, that is to say, until the barriers for women's entry into politics are removed, but most countries with quotas have not limited their use of quotas in time". (Quoted from: <http://www.quotaproject.org/aboutQuotas.cfm> as of 27.10.2015)

In this case study, the aim is to highlight that gender quota parliamentarians are under constant scrutiny and pressure of justification by various sections of the society - be it women's activists or proclaimed feminists, accusing them for capitulating to the patriarchal state and male dominated political parties, and not representing women and their issues to the level and extent expected. Or be it by conservative, predominantly male veto actors, both at the societal and political levels, for example, male parliamentarians. Their renderings challenge the very notion of positive discrimination. These include resenting women's public participation and quota parliamentarians and enjoying a similar political status, perks and privileges. The mindset remains ingrained despite the fact that women parliamentarians undergo and are subjected to the same electoral competitive process of building constituencies, as well as ensuring votes that qualify them for parliamentary mandate. Not to mention that the general media perception & portrayal and public scrutinising is harsher, often labelling them of not being 'true' representatives of people, or the female populace for that matter. These women representatives are also labelled as those belonging to asymmetric socioeconomic backgrounds, and are the target of judgemental statements like: (i) higher levels of dependency and weaker support systems; (ii) being elite women belonging to influential political families, (iii) serving as proxies and tokens for male power brokers and thus furthering specific vested interests, in addition to (iv) not being 'proper', 'decent', socioculturally 'authentic' women who comply according to dominant (patriarchal) gender roles prescriptions, values and subsequent behaviour in public.

With regard to the above mentioned, this paper endeavours to analyse and understand the potentially ambivalent reality of women's substantive political representation through the prism of multiple theoretical frameworks and empirical insights. It intends to shift the focus from individual agency and performance of women parliamentarians to contextualising it within existing sociopolitical structures and institutions. This shift is important as the latter can be considered to imperil women's substantive political representation, in terms of establishing and/or perpetuating gender-specific opportunity structures and spaces, or handicaps/detriments for that matter. Therefore, we problematise the focus on quota women's political performance and agency alone, as a basis of assessing such gender interventions. Other decisive variables for women's political effectiveness are part of the same equation along the lines of the seminal work: *No Shortcuts to Patriarchy* by Goetz and Hassim (2003). They argue that women's political effectiveness depends on a "chain of responsibility and exchange", which relies on: (i) the type of women elected; (ii) their ability for voice on certain policy issues, as well as agency to follow them through; (iii) a supportive, resourceful gender equity lobby in civil society; (iv) credibility of women politicians and policies in political competition/electoral politics; (v) coalition- and alliance-building across arenas, tiers and levels of the polity; along with (vi) the capacity

of the state and the political system to respond to new policy issues, to accommodate a new set of actors and to implement (novel, transformative) women policies.

Gender quota parliamentarians encounter myriad, often intersecting and interdependent challenges that need to be taken into account when discussing women's substantive political representation. Without clearly mapping, reflecting and discussing these sociopolitical structural and institutional barriers and constraints, it will be difficult to understand the impact of gender quotas for women's political mainstreaming, in particular, and on the existing political patriarchy, in general.⁵ Consequently, we argue here that quotas might not be a sufficient mode of intervention to allow for a quantitative and qualitative decrease in the gender democracy deficit, and for subsequently dismantling the encompassing political patriarchy, alive and kicking, in most sociopolitical institutions of Afghanistan.

Furthermore, a detailed comparative analysis of female and male parliamentarians' political performance is beyond the scope of this study, and hence poses a considerable analytical-cum-argumentative limitation. Given that the focus is on whether quota parliamentarians deliver - ultimately addressing the patriarchal pressure for justification of them being there in the first place - obscures the necessity to ask whether male parliamentarians are scrutinised on an equal footing regarding political performance and representation. Notwithstanding that their presupposed and normatively preordained role and authority tends to go without questioning, given the centuries long legacy of androcentric politics.

Research Methodology

The study employed qualitative research methods, primarily semi-structured interviews with parliamentarians of both genders, members of political parties/groups, and ministerial bureaucrats. While Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to gather information from civil society representatives liaising with parliamentarians and/or women's machineries.

The case study is based on 38 semi-structured interviews with parliamentarians, bureaucrats, civil society activists - be they human rights activists, women's activists or electoral watchdogs and think tank members, journalists and academics. Two focus group discussions, with 12 civil society activists each, be they women activists under the banner of the Afghan Women Network or working on youth, human rights and elections, were also conducted. Legislators interviewed were selected representatively, based on their political affiliations and experience level, ethno-linguistic and provincial origin. These also included first timers and re-elected parliamentarians, those in leadership positions (e.g. leading MPs, as per public perception, chairs or deputy chairs of parliamentary committees), apart from backbenchers. In addition,

⁵ For a more detailed discussion see Fleschenberg 2015, pp. 6-15.

unsuccessful candidates in the 2010 parliamentary elections, and those who decided not to run again for a mandate, were interviewed as well. Furthermore, an in-depth review of theoretical and empirical literature, available surveys, related studies and reports on the topic at hand, along with post-2014 press clippings (national and international) was conducted. Unfortunately, no score cards, transcripts or other reliable data records on assembly debates, petitions, points/questions raised etc. are publicly available, for neither the researchers nor parliamentary watchdogs. Although a number of civil society organisations' monitor proceedings exist, but access to these notes and data also proved to be next to impossible. Our team tried within the Wolesi Jirga with officials in charge, as well as with the Committee for Women's Affairs to access records related to gender-specific debates, but to no avail. The non-accessibility has also been confirmed from a number of interview partners, such as, bureaucrats from the Office of Parliamentary Affairs, parliamentary and electoral watchdog organisations like FEFA, TEFA, AREU etc. Therefore, this study heavily relies on qualitative assessments and perceptions by experts concerned, on issues such as legislative performance and government oversight.

Mapping Afghanistan's Electoral System

Afghanistan follows a rarely employed majoritarian electoral system, Single Non Transferable Vote (SNTV), in which voters can cast one ballot in province-based multi-member constituencies and where political parties so far don't play a key role in parliamentary politics and societal interest aggregation. It has a bicameral parliamentary system, composed of the Wolesi Jirga (House of the People/Lower House, 249 seats) and the Meshrano Jirga (House of the Elders/Upper House, 102 seats) and predominantly 'independent' electoral candidates and legislators. Quotas exist for two considered marginalised groups - women and Kuchi nomads. According to Article 83 of the 2004 Constitution and Articles 20 and 23 of the 2010 Electoral Law, at least 68 Wolesi Jirga seats are reserved for women. Of these, three are assigned to Kuchi female representatives, and shall not remain vacant or be regarded as a glass ceiling, because Article 23 of the 2010 Electoral Law stipulates that the remaining seats of the respective multi-member constituency are decided according to SNTV rules, regardless of a candidate's gender. In the 2010 parliamentary elections, 69 women candidates were successful and joined the Wolesi Jirga. In the Meshrano Jirga, two-thirds of its members are indirectly elected by the country's 34 provincial councils and one-third are appointed by the President with a gender parity clause applying for presidential nominees, according to Article 84 of the 2004 Constitution. The revised 2010 Electoral Law stipulates in Article 30 that at least 20 percent of the seats in provincial councils shall go to women. The remainder of the seats follows SNTV rules, again regardless of a successful candidate's gender, but is

nevertheless a reduction from the previously codified 25 percent.⁶ Widespread electoral fraud, along with disputes about electoral rules in previous elections, in 2010 and 2014, have led to an understanding among President Ghani and CEO Abdullah that no further elections shall be held without a substantive review and subsequent electoral reforms. For this purpose a Special Electoral Reform Commission was set up in mid-July 2015, running until December 2015, with a potential extension period. The 30-member Commission is tasked with (i) consulting key stakeholders of and experts on Afghan elections, (ii) reviewing laws, regulations, institutional setups and procedures, (iii) drafting short-, mid- and long-term recommendations for electoral reforms with regard to parliamentary and district councils, presidential elections and the overall electoral setup. Ten of its short-term recommendations were endorsed by September 6th, 2015 presidential decree, including an unanimous declaration that the SNTV system is "outdated" and needs to be overhauled in order to strengthen political parties, accountability, socio-political stability and fair representation. Interesting, for the purpose of this study, are the gender-specific recommendations: (i) 25 percent of reserved seats for women in provincial and district councils, (ii) voter registration processes to be made women-friendly, including the waiver of specific identification documents, distribution of and access to polling stations. With 11 out of 13 commissioners in favour of a change in the electoral system at the national level, this will impact on women's descriptive representation, depending on the quota design ultimately upheld or revised, i.e. for political party lists and/or for individually contested seats only. The present set of recommendations of 65 seats for female independent candidates and three reserved seats for Kuchi women representatives appears to uphold the current constitutional provision in place, albeit removing the wording "at least", thus not necessarily ensuring that the quota will not be misapplied as a glass ceiling, as outlined before.⁷

Previous surveys by electoral and women's rights watchdogs have outlined a widespread support among stakeholders for electoral reform, as well as the perpetuation of gender quotas at various levels of the polity. In a recent study conducted by FEFA (Free and Fair Election Forum Afghanistan), among 121 Wolesi Jirga members, nearly half (48.8 percent) were in favour of a mixed system, 70 percent in favour of introducing a reserved seat for the Hindu minority and 53.7 percent in favour of maintaining the current 34 province-based constituencies. Forty percent of the MPs interviewed preferred the provincial council gender quotas to be abolished. Of the 60 percent of MPs favouring the

6 <http://www.quotaproject.org/uid/countryview.cfm?country=4#sources> as of 27.10.2015.

7 Points 1 and 9 as outlined in: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Special Electoral Reform Commission (2015): Summary of SERC Reform Recommendations I, unofficial translation (unpublished); see also: UNDP/UNAMA, 21.09.2015, Briefing Powerpoint Presentation: Afghanistan's Special Electoral Commission (unpublished).

continuation of gender quotas at the provincial level, 41 percent wanted the reinstatement of the 25 percent quota, while 19 percent of the MPs supported an increase to one-third of seats. (FEFA 2013).

A 2015 survey with 125 out of 249 members of the Wolesi Jirga found that 42 percent of all parliamentarians (and 55.8 percent of women MPs) surveyed agreed that “conditions for candidacy must change for women candidates, given the social and economic barriers”, like traditional mindsets and practices, non-refundable candidate deposit fees and/or copies of voters’ registration cards as supporting candidacy files (FEFA 2015: 4). However, a majority of 58 percent (out of which 83 percent were male MPs) contended that there should be no positive discrimination to mitigate gender-specific vulnerabilities and disadvantages of female candidates. Similar to the 2013 survey, a majority of parliamentarians supported a change in the electoral system – 60 percent favoured an electoral system with a key role for political parties (FEFA 2015: 4). In a large-scale public opinion survey in 2014, among 4040 Afghans, more than three-quarter of the respondents believed that women’s political participation in upcoming elections is important, albeit regional differences with Southeast and Southwest provinces, scoring up to 30 percent of respondents rejecting this notion. Reasons given were women’s lack of information, cultural barriers and religious principles, among others. Only nine percent of the respondents favoured an increase in the number of female candidates, and only four percent agreed to an increase of gender quotas for female parliamentarians as measures to increase women’s political participation at the community level (FEFA 2014: 58-60). One of the leading women’s rights networks, Afghan Women’s Network (AWN) conducted a survey in 2014 with a sample size of nearly 500 respondents from 18 provinces on women’s political participation. These respondents comprised members of the business community, those from judicial, academic and medical sectors, religious leaders and common citizens. Analysis of the survey shows that the majority favoured gender quotas at the national and sub-national levels, given the conservative social setup and environment in Afghanistan. Sixty-eight percent of women and 60 percent of men surveyed considered quotas to be an important necessity. Equally, 63 percent of female respondents perceived women to be culturally accepted when participating in political, judicial and trade-related public affairs, while 47 percent of male respondents held an opposite view. (Karlidag 2014: 3, 15-16).

It’s all in the Rules of the Game - Theorising Women’s Substantive Political Representation

The nexus between specific modalities of gender quotas and the quality of gender quota legislators is one of the key determinants of women’s political effectiveness. In other words, the quality of women’s political agency to navigate through structural constraints is central and critically important in promoting women’s interests, among others. Therefore, we investigate whether the current setup of rules, formal or informal, enshrined structures, dynamics and practices of candidate recruitment & selection, transversality of mandate and performance impact on patterns and degrees of women’s substantive political representation and, ultimately, political mainstreaming. We challenge the dichotomy of women’s participation/representation, and the subsequent focus, primarily on women’s agency, as not only recruitment patterns and quota provisions have a determining effect on the ability of women parliamentarians to deliver on substantive concerns, but also other environmental variables in the shape of sociopolitical institutions, contestations and barriers. Although, it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in detailed deliberations on the state of the art and its research findings and debates, nevertheless, some theoretical insights that guide and/or infuse this action research project should be briefly mentioned.

But first things first: when talking about political representation and political participation some terminological clarification and references are required. The seminal work of Pitkin (1967) outlines four dimensions of political representation - formal, descriptive, substantive and symbolic - and coined the difference of delegate and trustee when reviewing understandings of parliamentary mandates and agency. Building on this, Mansbridge (2003) adds three additional concepts of political representation which are of significance: (i) gyroscopic, i.e. interests, common sense and principles from one’s own background to formulate as basis for parliamentary action; (ii) surrogate, i.e. representing constituents beyond one’s own spatial electoral basis and of those whose values, identities one shares; (iii) anticipatory, based on what one thinks constituents will approve at the next election and not what has been promised previously in electoral campaigns/manifestos. This links the framework of assessing quota women politicians’ experiences with questions of performance, outreach, representativeness, accountability, and transversal agency, moving the academic debate from the question of “Do women represent women?” to questions such as “Who claims to act for women? Where, how and why does the SRW

occur?" and thus regarding representation as "dynamic, performative and constitutive". (Celis/Childs/Kantola/Krook 2008; Franceschet 2011).⁸

As argued elsewhere (Fleschenberg 2009, 2013; see also Celis et al. 2008), the frequent heterogeneity of women parliamentarians in terms of interests, policy priorities, support systems or party obligations and dependencies, ideological differences or other societal cleavages, as well as the influence of multiple institutions - be it parliamentary practices, political cultures, gender ideologies, work cultures - and predominant political discourses shape women's substantive political representation. Consequently, Celis et al. (2008) stress that we need to search for critical actors of both genders within and outside political institutions and key arenas, explore possibilities of competition, conflict, cooptation, together with cooperation along with multiple directionalities of reinforcement and reciprocity between different actors, sites and levels of political representation and negotiation, which shape political behaviour and performance of women parliamentarians - be they on quota seats or not.

Razavi and Jennichen (2010) point towards a "rising political prominence of religious actors and movements", be they at the local, national or transnational levels with specific gendered prescriptions and societal positioning for women, using more often than not the informal power of religion in terms of diffusing ideas and norms, thus shaping the political arena and predominant societal culture in a way which is difficult to counter-argue and counter-act. The impact of unwritten constitutions - be they of religious nature or not - on norms, discourses and practices of politics cannot be highlighted enough, although research findings are scarce. Overall, the impact of informal institutions, such as, but not limited to, religiously gendered rules on mobility or dress code, on the arenas of formal politics, its key institutions and civil society are diverse and create a difficult field for women parliamentarians to navigate in:

"A crucial part of achieving gender equitable institutional change (understood here as any institutional change that contributes to lessening gender inequalities) is, therefore, to improve our

understanding of not only the outputs of institutions but also the institutions themselves, in both their formal and informal guises. This will, for example, help gender scholars to understand why the outcomes of institutional change, such as the creation of women's policy agencies (WPAs) and the implementation of gender mainstreaming, are often not as hoped for, or how change efforts are subverted" (Waylen 2013: 2).

These theoretical considerations provide some brief insights on the gendered nature of political institutions and how this reproduced gender power in recruitment and performance processes of women in politics. However, in nowhere theorists argue that these structures are stable, fixed or unchangeable; the role of agency and structure is seen as dynamic and mutually constitutive. The trajectory of institutional change is the contestation of conflicting interests of institutional actors. Self-interested actors through their strategic actions puncture institutional resistance. Women politicians on gender quota thus can and do attempt to influence and transform male dominated political structures through their parliamentary performance, caucusing and networking with the women's movement - with quota provisions being one factor, but not the only or sufficient one to do so.

Consequently, Franceschet, Krook and Piscopo (2012: 4) argue that (i) "quotas may interfere with existing gendered dynamics"; (ii) "public controversies surrounding quota adoption may shape expectations about who 'quota women' are and what they will do once they reach political office"; and (iii) diverse designs and implementation practices generate "diverse effects on the composition of political elites". They contend that this "may influence the capacities of quota women to pursue legislative change and may shape the broader meaning of quotas for democratic legitimacy and women's political empowerment" (ibid.: 4). In their review of the research literature at hand, they summarise that the introduction of gender quotas can generate ambivalent outcomes and dynamics - ranging from (i) a feminist turn among male politicians to a gender-conservative or even misogynist backlash and obstructive legislative behaviour among male politicians, from (ii) increased effectiveness and unity of smaller numbers of women MPs due to a lower threat perception of women's concerns in terms of dismantling male dominance to a large and diverse number of women elected, increasing the heterogeneity of interests and positions on women's issues (ibid.: 8).

"Women elected through quotas report feeling obliged to act for women, as a group (...) and are inspired to bring new issues to the table (...). However, others have sought to disassociate themselves from the quota and women's issues to demonstrate that they are 'serious' politicians (...). At the same time, many have been accused of acting only as proxies for men (...) and of being excessively loyal to party leaders (...). In part, this is because quotas are often not rooted in processes of constituency formation (...), preventing quota women from gaining skills that would make them less vulnerable to manipulation (...). In other cases, the situation is more complex:

⁸ In addition, such an understanding opens up the concept of political representation in terms of spaces, actors, agency and manifestations, considering legislative arenas, as well as other arenas of politics, a wide range of actors, sites, goals that inform political processes, highlighting diversity in probabilities, levels, ways, strategies, locations, attempts and expressions/articulations "to act for women as a group" (or not), Celis et al. (2008) argue. Substantive female political representation thus needs to be considered to take place and to be negotiated at different levels - from the local via provincial, national to transnational and international, using strategies of uploading or downloading reference frameworks for policy-making, framing of agenda issues or negotiating issues through the use of various platforms and amplifiers, not only within the confined space of national parliamentary politics. This also means to review the role of male parliamentarians, cabinet members, civil society representatives or bureaucrats, state agencies and institutions beyond the usual focus upon women's policy machineries, state feminism and women's movements. (Celis/Childs/Kantola/Krook 2008)

quota women may support women's rights legislation but tread carefully in response to harassment, intimidation, or security concerns (...)" (Franceschet, Krook and Piscopo 2012: 11).

Additional food for thought in this regard is provided by feminist political theorist bell hooks (2000: 86) who argues that women obtain transformative power more than often within existing systems, leading to diverse positions and behavioural patterns, for example, as parliamentarians adopt imitation, cooptation, corruption, difference, transformation or incorporation, to name a few. This means for hooks (2000: 87, 89) that women might "not conceptualise power differently" than men and might "focus their attention on gaining as much power and privilege as they can within the existing social structure". At the same time, she contends that "[w]omen, even the most oppressed among us, do exercise some power. The powers can be used to advance feminist struggle", understanding power as the "ordered use of power to disbelieve" (hooks 2000: 92). This disbelief must ultimately be one of patriarchy, and political patriarchy for that matter - an invasive power system "based on control as core principle around which entire societies are organised", entailing "dynamic relationships between fear and control" and whose engine is mostly "driven by how men both cause and respond to it", often resorting to misogyny (Johnson 2001: 95, 97, 103). Thus, resorting to a primary focus on women to dismantle patriarchal institutional setups, norms and practices does not address the core issue at hand, argues Johnson (2001: 100) as the control of women is "neither the point of patriarchy nor the engine that drives it", making male members of a given society or male political stakeholders, for the matter of our research focus, liable as prime targets and agents.

Reviewing the state of the art, Franceschet, Krook and Piscopo (2012: 13, 26) conclude that gender quota provisions potentially generate divergent and multiple effects within different polities and societies as "based on current theories and evidence - quotas may have positive, mixed, and sometimes even perverse effects on women's political representation", because

"[t]he features of each country's political, institutional, and cultural background play a central role in shaping the effects of quotas on all aspects of women's political representation. The relevant factors that emerge (...) can be classified into three broad categories: (1) the degree of democratisation and, in some cases, the path a country takes towards democracy; (2) the types of political institutions, including both formal rules and informal norms; and (3) the social and cultural norms associated with gender equality".

With this very case study-based empirical research, the intention, thus, is to contribute to this debate, reviewing evidence from Afghanistan in terms of political performance, constituency-building, along with gatekeepers and institutional constraints of women's substantive political representation.

"I am a voice, their voice, of those who are not loud" - The Issue of Constituency

As in previous research findings¹⁰ and similar to their male counterparts in both houses of Parliament, women legislators imagine their constituency to be (i) members of their community - mostly defined at the district or provincial levels, (ii) specific social groups, predominantly women, as well as often youth along with an otherwise across-the-board claim of (iii) representing 'people', 'the whole country', 'everyone' who approaches them for problem-solving, regardless of which part of Afghanistan constituents they come from. Notwithstanding that there are limitations to constituency-building which are of a structural nature. One key issue is influential ethnolinguistic identity politics and close-knit electoral communities, whose members will only vote for a candidate of their kind and no one else "even if you are [a] superwoman or [a] superman, they will never"¹¹ accept an outside candidate. Secondly, in highly fraudulent elections, marked by corruption of various kinds and insecurity, money, goons and guns circumvent a level playing field in particular for progressive, pro-democracy candidates and for performance-based track records of candidates to decisively matter. So the issue is not so much if quota politicians manage to build their own constituencies, but rather that if they find a suitable political environment in which their own political capacities and performance parameters do play a role, or if so-called political mafias and violent power brokers can manipulate the electoral pool of candidates and electoral success, to ensure their proxies to be voted into power:

"(...) [T]he warlords, the people [who have] money, always take the weakest woman and help her win. They don't want a strong woman from their community to be part of [the] parliament. Because the strong women can [...] protect their interest[s]. (...) So that's why they try to have control over women's seats and so that is the biggest problem".¹²

Thirdly, Afghan politics is still marked by conflict features and legacies of previous political regimes, amounting to influential conservative power brokers and former conflict actors shaping voters' preferences. Change agents like a number of outspoken women parliamentarians thus pose a significant threat to such traditional stakeholders who have no interest in altering the system and thus losing power and privilege or facing prosecution. Fourthly, some outline that constituency-building can also

9 Interview with MP Shukria Barakzai, Kabul, April 2015.

10 See Fleschenberg 2009 and 2012.

11 Interview with MP Shinkai Karokhail, Kabul, April 2015.

12 Interview with MP Shinkai Karokhail, Kabul, April 2015.

be marked by gendered connotations of leadership and representation, as not all communities equally accept and endorse women politicians as their national representative, regardless of previous constituency work either as a social worker, provincial council member, parliamentarian etc.¹³

"Generally, women are not acceptable the way men are accepted. Still they think she is a woman. She is not (...) I am not equal. (...) Generally it is always difficult for women to get enough respect from the security, from the police to the ministries, male ministers, (...). So women have not that much strong voice or like force too strongly".¹⁴

"I wish that in future years we don't need the quota system and can compete with men and earn more votes than them. (...) and we hear from some of them 'you are coming from quota', but it also belongs to the power of women how to show men that we are strong. (...) if we don't show ourselves strong, we can't do anything".¹⁵

A number of women politicians reiterated, during the course of interviews, that they were able to achieve a high number of votes; sometimes saying they were building a sustainable constituency to rely on in upcoming elections and actually not being quota politicians; sometimes, nevertheless, referring to obstacles in reliable constituency-building and emphasising the need for quota system. Different is the confidence and conviction of the first time MP Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, quoted below, on the reservations she has about the perceptions and dynamics created around quotas in Afghanistan, "because at the same time unskilled, inexperienced women were also elected who had to confront a sophisticated political game they have to learn how to play", as she and other women MPs frequently phrase it. Considered to be one of the leading figures among female legislators, she remains a strong defender of quotas for women in leadership positions across various public affairs sectors:

"Quota for me personally, I always felt uncomfortable with the concept of quota, because they are being like a charity of right to me, just because I am a woman. My hard work, my efforts and, maybe, if I was lucky to build up some kind of skills was undermined. (...) For me, it was like mercy. For him, it was like he deserved it. He was qualified. (...) It is not charity, it is a chair of power and when you are there, you have to get tough with all the vulnerability you face".¹⁶

Although many interview partners refused to name outstanding MPs in terms of constituency-building and political performance, those giving names mostly indicated at Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, Shinkai Karokhail, Fawzia Kofi, Shukria Barakzai, Nilofar Ibrahim, among others

cited less frequent. These listed women MPs, shared an interesting feature in terms of constituency-building. Out of this small group of leading women legislators, regarded as politicians in their own right (also in comparison with male legislators), three were part of this interview sample and highlighted having a multiple constituency with educated people, and those sharing the same democratic political values. The theme of 'education' and the concern with the nexus of illiteracy, political awareness and citizens' capacity to take adequate decisions in governance processes, such as elections, is mirrored in all their interviews. A case in point is Shinkai Karokhail who describes her constituency as "different or multiple" - composed of "tribal, traditional society" and a majority of illiterate people who "give me support and they trust me. Most importantly, they choose me among the warlords, among the strong politicians (...) - women, who have no money, who don't have any" along with a more urban-based, highly educated and ideologically divergent group of (potential) constituents composed of civil society activists, in particular women activists. The peril with the latter group, though, is that they generally have a lower voter turnout or propensity to participate in elections, and thus, do not necessarily translate in reliable electoral support for women politicians like her.¹⁷

A number of women MPs were confident that they were able to establish a positive public image due to their services provided to constituents, or at least efforts thereof.¹⁸ However, many parliamentarians, male or female alike pointed towards challenging expectations from constituents - from finding jobs for family members, changing school or university exam results, seeking medical appointments or shorter waiting lines in hospitals to other demands for social security and service provisions in a fragile, volatile state with limited functional state institutions, outreach beyond urban centres into rural spaces where the majority of constituents lives and a legacy of patronage driven politics and clientelistic service provisions.¹⁹ *Moving mountains or the sun* - a blatant example of exaggerated expectations and demands by constituents is a case narrated by one female MP who was visited by a group of women in her office and complaint to her that their houses, built on a hill side, don't get enough sun, expecting her to address this issue beyond human capacity.

In conclusion, key issues of sustainable constituency-building for re-election bids repeatedly pointed out by a number of women parliamentarians interviewed include:

- fraud and vote-buying by competitors in an uneven level political playing field; enabled or exacerbated by a

13 Interviews with parliamentarians, election analysts and civil society representatives, Kabul, April 2015. In the words of MP Shinkai Karokhail: "And these people are very conservative. I am a threat because I will never ever support what they want".

14 Interview with MP Shinkai Karokhail, Kabul, April 2015.

15 Interview with MP and Caucus Chair Humaira Ayoubi, Kabul, April 2015.

16 Interview with MP Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, Kabul, April 2015.

17 Interview with MP Shinkai Karokhail, Kabul, April 2015.

18 Deputy Chair of the Committee for Women's Affairs, Shireen Mohseni argued "if people see you try, but can't solve the problem, they know and understand it" (Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015, see also interviews with MP Shukria Barakzai, Kabul, April 2015, and with MP Shah Gul Rezaie, Brussels, November 2015).

19 Interviews with male and female parliamentarians, Kabul, April 2015.

- structural lack of resources of women candidates - be it financial/economic or sociocultural capital along with
- mobility issues due to reasons of political instability, outright insecurity and conflict, as well as sociocultural constraints imposed by family and/or community members, political power brokers and/or religious stakeholders, among others.²⁰

“I just changed the public perception”²¹ - Assessing Women’s Political Performance

There seems to be no controversy that women’s presence has had an impact, changed the rules of the game and traditions to a certain extent despite conflict legacies and a politicised, volatile environment. However, this research, as well as the reports and surveys that evaluated the issue of women parliamentarians’ performance regarding legislative work, government oversight, constituency work, and their participation in parliamentary and public debates presented mixed or difficult to rate opinions. The assessments, based on opinions gathered from the interview partners and those from the FGD discussions (comprising of those involved in parliamentary watchdog, electoral or women’s advocacy effort, i.e. under the umbrella of the Afghan Women’s Network), ranged from “zero, zero, zero”, “50/50 performance rate” to “good achievements” in terms of legislation, government oversight, level of overall activity and constituency work, along with participating in parliamentary and public debates, respectively.

Qualifying the above and as outlined in previous studies, a smaller number of about 10 to 25 women MPs were always assessed in terms of good, transformative and/or outstanding performance, of bringing change, understanding politics and contributing on an equal footing. Among the popularly acknowledged were: Fawzia Kofi, Shukria Barakzai, Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, Nilofar Ibrahim and Shinkai Karokhail. This led AWN director and women’s activist Hasina Safi to question women’s performance in parliamentary and public debates stating that “they were just some faces; some very limited faces which we could see everywhere”.²² Whereas, women’s

activist and (currently) presidential advisor Nargis Nehan problematises female parliamentarians’ gender-related substantive representation as being vested interest-driven for many, who rather follow personal agendas:

“Unfortunately, except very few, that we can just count them like [on] our fingers, female MPs, rest of them have [been] totally ineffective when we are talking about gender equality and the role that they could have played. (...) And if women’s issues and women’s rights are fitting into their personal agenda, they think, they would support; otherwise, they would not support”.²³

Neither detailed information nor concrete evidence could be obtained as indicators for political performance assessments, despite multiple follow up questions. Instead, what came up repeatedly were concerns and objections raised over the focus on women’s performance only, as many regarded male parliamentarians often as worse, more absent, less committed and engaging, as being equally challenged by a lack of political literacy and legislative proficiency.

“It’s not fifty-fifty, it’s, you’re generous. (...), we haven’t just women in parliament, we have also men in parliament [who] don’t know their job, for what they are in parliament (...)”.²⁴

Thus, while scrutinising women’s substantive representation is important and timely, there is an equal need for a comparative performance assessment, to compare and contrast, and thus to also investigate the track record of male parliamentarians to determine how they have served their own constituents for example, men and women alike, who voted them into power.²⁵

Interestingly, a high ranking official from the Office for Parliamentary Affairs, a liaising and lobbying institution between all three pillars of power, Syed Abdul Latif Dadshani, testified positively on women’s political performance, based on frequent interactions with women MPs. His performance assessments bracketed them as (i) doing well in the field of reviewing and reporting on budgetary issues and implementation, (ii) well connected and aware of different ministerial departments and projects, (iii) receiving crucial and meaningful information from whistleblowers within the government and from

20 Working at one of the leading Afghan electoral watchdogs, FEFA, women’s activist Wazhma Azizi, among others, highlighted that “mosque[s] do not let women get out from their home, meet”, that women at the district level don’t have enough access to other women or need the support of family members to access voters, to campaign on their behalf, be it due to sociocultural constraints or the prevailing overall insecurity (interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015).

21 Interview with MP Shinkai Karokhail, Kabul, April 2015.

22 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

23 Nevertheless she contends that despite women MPs not meeting expectations, they have made a difference in terms of changing traditions by demonstrating male colleagues that women are equal as politicians, as parliamentarians (interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015).

24 Opinion raised during focus group discussion with women’s activists held at AWN, Kabul, April 2015.

25 A number of interview partners from within parliament, as well as civil society problematised this particular focus and scrutiny and lack of comparative performance assessments of male and female legislators alike, among them two members of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission. Former MP, civil society activist and member of the Special Electoral Reform Commission Sabrina Saqeb consequently opinions: “I can guarantee you, if more women MPs are active in each province, they can tackle and they can address them on issues better than any man. For men, these are not priorities - discuss and talk about the women issues” (interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015).

people, (iv) accepted as visible in the political leadership positions assumed, and thus, exerting an impact, despite multiple challenges faced. While constituency work might be, more than often, difficult to realise on ground due to the security situation, Dadshani verified that women MPs were in touch with constituents, employed communication technology and were accessible in Kabul. While serving well, as stated, and contributing to making a difference, the stakes are indeed high for female legislators, be it in terms of the sheer number of policy issues and problems to be addressed, or paucity of resources, capacity, or just simple struggling or grappling with the deep-rooted systemic corruption or power-grabbing. For him, differences among parliamentarians are not gender- but issue-based, since he hasn't, as stated by him, "heard, even in the last ten years, even once that 'you, shut up, you are a woman! No, they have the same voice'". His remarks stood in contrast to many others who referred to multiple barriers to women's substantive political representation.²⁶

In the overall context, perceived obstacles to performance in Afghanistan comprise of an alleged visible lack of capacity in legislation-making, lack of awareness and understanding of adequate levels of policy-related knowledge, influence and even direct interference from religious clergy in parliamentary proceedings and debates, political mafias and their interests in the weak functioning of parliament as an institution to further their own corrupt, illicit and/or patronage-driven interests. However, most interview partners were more critical of the paucity of government oversight by the Wolesi Jirga, in particular during the Karzai administration. They regarded it as a weak performance point by interviewed parliamentarians, bureaucrats and civil society representatives alike. In addition, a frequent concern was the overall level of corruption within the political system, Parliament being no exception to the rule - be it in terms of allegations that cabinet nominees buy votes to secure their endorsement (including claims of male MPs that a number of female colleagues benefit heavily in this process, hinting towards a perceived weaker power status and capacity), chairs of parliamentary committees being paid-for and mounting to money-making positions (e.g. in public tenders), and other forms of misuse of authority, leading to a failure in oversight and policy-making.²⁷

"Unfortunately, I must say that this parliament is the most destructive one we have had whether we are talking about corruption, whether we are talking about nepotism or whether we are talking about the violation of laws themselves".²⁸

Among others, the editor-in-chief of Pajhwok news agency, Danish Karokhail, claimed that there were only a few handful of non-corrupt, not self-interested and power-driven, well performing MPs, counting ten each per

gender and "others of them [being] part of the big mafia, honestly".²⁹ The same was expressed in the Focus Group Discussions, conducted with civil society activists. Adding further, these activists also expressed their concerns about the endemic corruption of political institutions, and how this impacted women as political actors - either by being inducted into the corrupt system, through learning on the job, using this culture to further their own personal interests in order to get contracts and personal work done, or in the absence of alternatives, to play along to the tune as "all of them are corrupt, because if you don't do corruption, they kick you out from the system".³⁰

Interesting is the Parliamentary Anti-Corruption Caucus, supported by USAID, which is headed by Humaira Ayoubi, that currently has 23 women members from the Wolesi and Meshrano Jirga. For Ayoubi and her colleagues, their anti-corruption drive is not only linked to the issue of government and parliamentary oversight and governance accountability, but also to promote people-oriented, pro-poor policy-making. Simultaneous to these views, Ayoubi also dwelt on a number of challenges in her work. While corruption is a major, as well as highly contentious political issue, the caucus strives to establish connections with civil society organisations working in the same field, it lacks help and cooperation in its work, for example from security forces to attend meetings or providing civil society representatives with access to parliamentary premises, or from colleagues - "when we prompt availability, no one is supporting us, neither parliament nor government".³¹

Last, but not the least, as analysed in detail in previous studies conducted by the author, lack of unity, caucusing and networking among women parliamentarians to operate as a joint force on women-specific issues seems to have led to infighting among women MPs themselves, increased levels of tokenism along with individual-based and/or ad hoc networking. This also appears to have tarnished public perceptions and expectations of due diligence in terms of gender-specific representation as quota politicians.³² A negative consequence is a lack of legislative strength to counter misogynist legislation and policy measures curtailing women's rights and post-2001 achievements as in the case of the Provincial Councils' quota revisions, Marriage Law, Shia Family Law or the EVAW Law, where it took a national and international outcry-cum-lobbying pressure on President Karzai and other key stakeholders to revert or mitigate decisions passed in the Parliament. Ultimately, it is a failure in sustainable interest aggregation, which could translate in more sustainable and empowered substantive representation, hence questioning, to a certain extent the use and function of gender quotas per se - exacerbated by the electoral system in place which enables a fragmented parliament. In contrast, despite a similar sociocultural heterogeneity and ideological diversity of

26 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

27 Interviews conducted with parliamentarians and representatives of parliamentary watchdogs, Kabul, April 2015.

28 Interview with civil society activist and presidential advisor Nargis Nehan, Kabul, April 2015.

29 Interview with journalist Danish Karokhail, Kabul, April 2015.

30 Focus group discussion with women's activists held at AWN, Kabul, April 2015.

31 Interview with Humaira Ayoubi, Kabul, April 2015.

32 See Fleschenberg 2009, 2010, 2012; reconfirmed in interviews conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

male legislators, their political networking and alliance-building appears to be more resourceful and successful, thus translating into their “control of the agenda, the oversight, everything in their hands”.³³

Women parliamentarians are well aware, it appears from the data collected, of the need to perform and to demonstrate quality performance. They are also cognisant or wary of other women parliamentarians who they perceive as lacking political motivation, intellectual capacities and experience along with the necessary support system to perform, in particular in terms of representing women’s interests within parliament. This is yet another indicator for the perceived precariousness and volatility of gender-specific achievements, and may serve as bargaining chip in post-2014 peace negotiations and power brokerage.

“So therefore we need to prove more and more, we need to work more and more to say ‘excuse us’. We are here and we are not exactly what you are judging [...] us. (...) They believe if we are not in parliament then they can have these seats. (...) We are here not because of ourselves, we are here to be [the] voice of other men and women”.³⁴

A number of women parliamentarians described themselves as active in all the four dimensions of parliamentary work outlined above, often also vis-a-vis their male counterparts – whether in terms of representing people/constituencies and subsequent problem-solving, being trusted, being punctual and present in parliamentary sessions³⁵. MP Zakia Sangin, in the interview for this study, shared that unlike before entering politics, she now enjoys a higher social status, can confidently communicate with men and travel, even abroad. The same expressions were outlined by a number of other women parliamentarians interviewed. They also mentioned that an increased societal acceptance, political empowerment and exposure has earned them trust, respect and support from men, who also now listen to them.³⁶

Pondering on her experiences in both legislatures and as head of the Parliamentary Anti-Corruption Caucus, Humaira Ayoubi sees a changing environment because, “[E]s]o many women face[d] challenges, but now we are comfortable in the Parliament. We can speak free and there is nobody to stop us”. Adding on, she reflected on the incident with Malalai Joya, and her subsequent removal from the Wolesi Jirga over challenging warlords-turned-politicians. She is of the strong opinion that women’s performance has improved manifold as compared to the first post-2001 Wolesi Jirga, and that they are now comfortably assuming leadership positions, even heading parliamentary committees. However, talking about herself, she mentioned that despite the feeling of being respected, with voice and agency, she has not become a member of a

parliamentary group nor a political network, out of sheer fear that warlords-turned-politicians might misuse her membership, as well as pointing towards their reluctance or inability to dealing with parliamentary women.³⁷

This mixed assessment, linking achievements in substantive representation with experiences of significant hurdles set up, as either discursive practices or actions from male colleagues and counterparts in government, were common in interviews. In the words of deputy chair of the parliamentary commission on women’s affairs, MP Shireen Moseni, “women are very active and, yes, we have many people in parliament [who] are against us”.³⁸ Seeing beyond one’s own political role and contribution, and understanding oneself as a potential gatekeeper for future generations of women politicians is a rare vision formulated so far by women politicians interviewed. While male parliamentarians appeared far more confident and assertive in the portrayal of their mission and vision, women parliamentarians were more concerned with practical reflections about achievements and failures. They seemed to be more embattled in securing an ever shrinking political space; and most likely an expression of who speaks from a position of societal authority and power, with a more secure support system, and who is still reminded of being a novel entrant into the field of androcentric public affairs and societal conservatism as overarching parameters of the given political system and a limited number of visible, invulnerable success stories.

“So that’s why I just changed the public perception. (...) They were not accepting me. Second time, they were ok. Third time, [...] now [they are] coming to tell me that, well, none of the men can replace you. You have to run this time”.³⁹

“(...) [T]here are many changes because of our participation in elections, in political participation and solving the problems of people and changing people’s mind and their belief about women’s participation in politics. And the trust of people, day by day, it is increasing”.⁴⁰

Despite difficulties to overall rate 69 women parliamentarians, marked by sociocultural heterogeneity and diversity in political performance, many describe themselves as being well known to the general public and more accessible than men, having earned trust, being more involved in constituency work, such as, development projects or having an agenda mostly based on community- and grassroots-oriented issues, with direct relevance for constituents in areas like education, health, employment, infrastructure and development. While, men are described to have higher levels of security, they still tend to be less accessible, not answering their phones and less involved in grassroots affairs, under the garb of so-called “big issues/ politics”.⁴¹

33 Interview with MP Shinkai Karokhail, Kabul, April 2015.

34 Interview with MP Shukria Barakzai, Kabul, April 2015.

35 Many media reports, as well as civil society representatives and analysts interviewed, strongly criticise the widespread and enduring absenteeism of significant numbers of parliamentarians, leading repeatedly to a lack of quorum to pass legislation or engage in other parliamentary deliberations and decision-making.

36 Interview with MP Zakia Sangin, Kabul, April 2015.

37 Interview with MP and Caucus Chair Humaira Ayoubi, Kabul, April 2015.

38 Interview with MP Shireen Moseni, Kabul, April 2015.

39 Interview with MP Shinkai Karokhail, Kabul, April 2015.

40 Interview with MP Zakia Sangin, Kabul, April 2015.

41 Interviews with MP Shinkai Karokhail, Shireen Moseni, Shukria Barakzai, Humaira Ayoubi, Farida Kochi, Kabul,

“We are between the future and the past”⁴²

- Challenges and Obstacles of Quota Legislators

On our first day in Kabul, we interviewed two women parliamentarians - one had survived an attack on her life a couple of months ago and the other being probably the most heavily guarded female legislator I interviewed in Afghanistan since 2007. “I am the nation’s mother, I am Afghanistan’s mother”⁴³ the latter claimed whilst outlining the heavy price she pays for trying to solve the problems of her community, the Kochi community. While she is of the opinion that, as senator, she doesn’t face any particular problems, her interview was nevertheless dominated by conversing about the hostilities, fightings and killings she has to address and mediate in her political work, about how the Taliban are one of her key obstacles apart from generally high levels of sociopolitical violence, injustice and enemies made when trying to represent people’s issues and needs. Fearing for her own life, in the wake of the threats she receives and placed under permanent police protection, she is adamant to serve again. One of her police guards interjected at one point during the interview stating “she will not be left alive. They will kill her”, in case of failing to secure another mandate. In that regard, and being a nominated Meshrano Jirga member, Farida Kochi, confident and assertive, is not that concerned about the issue of constituency-building, but is rather wary of insurgents and corrupt stakeholders: “If I am not nominated, I would like death for myself (...). (...) I have no other option but to do something to myself. (...) They might vote for me again, but the Taliban will not let them vote for me. (...) The other women like me, who do not do corruption, cannot make it to the Wolesi Jirga”⁴⁴.

The other woman politician had survived an assassination attempt in November 2014, and was recently defeated as Ghani nominee to chair the Special Electoral Reform Commission. Undeterred by threats and attempts on her life, Shukria Barakzai shared her sense of determination, which was also visible among a number of other women parliamentarians, who are adamant to defend the post-2001 gender achievements during the post-2014 second Transformation Decade:

“So and we are like the red line, we are here to make them stop, to do [no more] victimising [...] of the rights of Afghans and particularly women. (...) Being the red line, we need to be. I shouldn’t let anyone [...]

cross the line”⁴⁵.

Such gender-specific, often threatening or even violent contestations in previous election rounds have been observed, documented and highlighted by electoral watchdog activists, such as, Naeem Asghari from FEFA:

“(...) Women couldn’t reach their people to talk with them about their programmes. And most of the time the intimidation cases on women [came] from the warlords, as well as from the male candidates. (...) Because there were not just warlords, the male candidates also created problems for them and warlords intimidated both women and men, depending on the warlord. They don’t want [...] women’s existence in [the] parliament so [that] they can have the seats [for themselves]. (...) They intimidated their family, and another thing: when women wanted to campaign, they did some fighting and didn’t let them do [the] campaign[ing] around the area and that’s why that candidate couldn’t go [to] that area and late [at] night, they threatened them from outside of their house”⁴⁶.

Discussing the significance of gender quotas for public institutions, a similar stance was taken up by top female bureaucrat Maliha Hassan in a rather pugnacious manner.

“(...) They all are, be, stand against you, not to let you learn more or develop more skills or do something better. The lives of women still are very hard, but when you are a woman and then belonging to a minority ethnic group, then this is another big problem. I am Hazara, (...). Nobody loves me. Shall I leave there? Shall I? No, I don’t (...) It’s not easy what I said and we are still vulnerable and still have lack of support. (...) Although we cannot change all the system, at least we might be opening a foot step for others that they can follow us. I think they all would be very pleased if I said good bye and leave, but this is not the solution”⁴⁷.

Civil society activists, in particular women’s activists and electoral watchdogs, similarly identified security as one of the key challenges, not only for their own lobby and advocacy work, but also for particularly outspoken and active women parliamentarians. This holds true in the public arena, given the existence of numerous violent actors or within the parliament, given the existence of powerful political players, such as mullahs and warlords, who reject women’s political presence and refuse to take them as serious political actors (or ultimately do, thus identifying them as targets). At the same time, addressing insecurity is high on a number of women legislators’ agenda:

“So [...] security and the discussion about the security of my province is the most important thing for me, because we should negotiate with [the] government, we should say our problems [to] the government (...)”⁴⁸.

April 2015, among others.

42 Interview with MP Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, Kabul, April 2015.

43 Interview with Senator Farida Kochi, Kabul, April 2015.

44 Interview with Senator Farida Kochi, Kabul, April 2015.

45 Interview with MP Shukria Barakzai, Kabul, April 2015.

46 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

47 Nevertheless, Hassan questions in how far the current quota system, ministerial gender units along with the Ministry of Women’s Affairs actually allow for gender mainstreaming and do not merely amount to symbolic or rhetorical gender equality (interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015), paper tigers of sort one could argue.

48 Interview with MP Shah Gul Rezaie, conducted in Brussels,

Secondly, it also holds true, given the lack of government and societal support for the outspoken, the publicly visible women, as well as, for the institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming/women's machineries, which remain precarious, limited and highly dependent on international funding and pressure-cum-intervention.

"One clear cut issue: [the] majority of the members of the parliament do not believe in gender, and majority don't believe in democratic values or the modern values we talked about. The major concerns come with the conservative ones, who are almost, you know, having or showing [...] two faces. One face is when they are with us, they are with us and when they are with others, they are with the others. (...) You might be aware that during the EVAW Law, majority of the ones who were conservative, they are [saying] yes we will vote for it, we all vote for it, and you know, this is how Fawzia Kofi was deceived by them. (...) That is something worrying. Unfortunately for women, because they were all thinking against women, and they were very united".⁴⁹

"So if this law [EVAW Law], which can guarantee a better life for women in the country and in the society, and the women in the Parliament do not have the ability to pass that single law, so you can see that how strong they [i.e. conservative, religious MPs, commanders present in the Wolesi Jirga] are. I mean, there is nothing wrong with themselves but how the system works. No matter how strong [a] woman you are, like a politician, at the end of the day, the way they look at the woman politician and the man politician is different. (...) we have to risk as women to bring changes in women's life, in gender issues. We have to take risks and go to the streets and risk our lives to bring the change. (...) So, women's movement and gender-based works are not institutionalised in this country".⁵⁰

Many are deeply concerned and disturbed by an apparently increasing shrinking space for civil society activism and for raising women's concerns.⁵¹ In the light of the recent events in Kunduz, and the Taliban takeover, where deliberate attacks and virtue policing efforts were under way against the city's women's radio station, a girls college and the women shelter run by Women for Afghan Women, as well as the recent threat against Tolo TV and 1TV, those alerting and warning the wider (inter-) national public, are some of the stark realities that elucidate genuine concerns of women parliamentarians and other supporters. These events should also be seen in the light of the years' long deliberate campaign of insurgent attacks against publicly outstanding women serving in different sectors and capacities, such as the Ministry of Women's Affairs, security forces, media or civil society organisations.

The majority of women parliamentarians narrate frequent experiences of hegemonic patriarchal institutional practices or outright misogyny and/or ideological challenges from formal and informal political institutions, often powerfully manifested and legitimised under the garb of religion and declared indigenous, Afghan values - in contrast to alleged 'foreign', 'alien' or 'Western' values imposed by intervention actors or Afghans understood to be marked by Westoxification. Sabrina Saeqeb experienced this not only as a young, progressive and outspoken woman parliamentarian, from 2005 to 2010, but also presently, while she continues to work from within the framework of civil society: liaising with the government at the central level; with female members of the province-based Peace Councils; and with local community members.

"(...) Especially because it's women's issues, human rights issues, they are very sensitive towards these values. I think there is a misperception among, like in the society when we talk about women's issues. And they always are concerned that they will create problems for them, like by raising the awareness among the women (...). Of course their demand will be higher, they are more educated, more knowledgeable, and then they will question their activities, you know, at the centre of the capital. And this will cause [a] challenge for the government itself. (...) Even from my experience in Parliament, the first challenge that I was facing was that we had [to] prove ourselves that we are Muslims, that we are not doing anything against our own cultural values and religious values. So this was, I think, religion always was a challenge when you are taking on women's issues and this is difficult".⁵²

Many perceive Afghan politics as male-dominated, based on regional ethnolinguistic politics-cum-networks and outright traditional, despite inroads made by women parliamentarians. This is despite the fact that women have amply demonstrated their strong debating skills on various issues in parliament and in media, of "women in Parliament [being] part of different hot debates like [the] EVAW Law".⁵³ Exemplary is again Sabrina Saeqeb's account of how her marriage impacted her personal agency, as well as social capital - leading to increased and extended reputation and respect in a predominantly androcentric and patriarchal public space and political environment:

"(...) Just his presence, being with me, that I have a man with me, that is enough. And I do not think that these are the good feelings that I get; [it] is that no matter who you are, how hard you work, what capacities you have, you know, only one thing, the reason can harm your activities, your personal life. So being a woman, I think, this is also one of the

November 2015.

49 Interview with civil society activist and director of the Afghan Civil Society Forum (ACSF) Aziz Rafiee, Kabul, April 2015.

50 Interview with former MP, civil society activist and member of the Special Electoral Reform Commission Sabrina Saeqeb, Kabul, April 2015.

51 Interviews conducted with civil society activists such as Nargis Nehan, Soraya Parlika, Hasina Safi, Wazhma Azizi, Aziz Rafiee as well as focus group discussions at AWN and at HBS, Kabul, April 2015.

52 Former MP Sabrina Saeqeb, member of the Special Electoral Reform Commission, works with the think tank Research Institute for Women, Peace and Security, and faces this tagging as 'Westerner' when working on women's issues such as political participation, peace and security (interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015).

53 Interview with MP Farkhunda Zahra Naderi as well as with former MP, civil society activist and member of the Special Electoral Reform Commission Sabrina Saeqeb, among others, Kabul, April 2015.

challenges".⁵⁴

In addition, the post-2014 withdrawal of international forces and the decrease in civilian commitment, along with international media attention is interpreted by a significant number of stakeholders and traditional power brokers as a potential turning point or lowering of thresholds of value-based commitments made vis-a-vis calls for a political conflict solution. Consequently, this leads to increasing perceptions of women's rights and quota achievements as being jeopardised or becoming bargaining chips, along with repeated experiences of threats against and actual attacks on publicly visible, outspoken and active quota politicians, in what appears to be a deliberate campaign against empowered and publicly active women across different sectors like politics, ministerial bureaucracy and security forces.⁵⁵

"(...) - The way they [international community] are moving back, they're taking everything back with them. They thought okay, it is not rooted, but we actually proved that no, these rights are not coming from an, you know, imported country. We are actually believing these are our human rights, those are our Islamic rights, these are our Afghani rights, so we have to have it or we have to have them".

Given this scenario, the list of challenges imposed by male colleagues includes (i) not letting women MPs speak and not listening to them; (ii) not allowing or supporting women MPs to take up leadership positions, (iii) explicit gender stereotyping (e.g. domestic chores-related comments, sexism, dress code/appearance), (iv) harassing or demeaning behaviour (e.g. not extending greetings, not communicating) or (v) negative remarks about gender quotas, considered as either too high in percentage or men deserving the seats due to votes cast for respective candidates.

"(...) And we hear from some of them 'you are coming from quota', but it also belongs to the power of women how to show the men that we are strong. (...) If we don't show ourselves strong, we can't do anything".⁵⁶

"So many times, because you come from quota, you can't do anything. (...) Women must do better to show men that they can play politics".⁵⁷

"Still we [are] relying on men's revenue and still we are suffering (...) domestic violence in this country. Still we are not in the decision-making level. Still we are not considered as equal citizens. Still men are making decisions for us".⁵⁸

"They will not look at women in a serious manner and they will think okay, you just came like that. We need to change all these views and it is a very tough job".⁵⁹

Such widespread reports, experiences and perceptions shared by women parliamentarians, women's activists and some male civil society activists stand in contrast to those of a number of male civil society activists, most male parliamentarians and bureaucrats who negate having observed or experienced gender-based discrimination of quota parliamentarians. This is exemplified in the following quote which displays in itself a certain bias when hinting at quota women not disposing of an equal electoral mandate (see also the following section on male MPs and the gender quota for further detailed analysis):

"No, well, I actually never heard anything in that sense, where a female candidate [was] challenged [...] because [she came] through quota and because [of] lesser votes they had. And the fact that they are much more aggressive, the female[s], is testimony of it [...] on public media. I haven't seen a demonstration of less confidence, driven by the fact that they are not like a full elected. (...), I haven't heard from any female or male MP".⁶⁰

A crucial dimension of substantive representation is voice, being acknowledged as/to be listened to, to being included in political deliberations, decision- and policy-making processes beyond one's symbolic presence and rhetorics of gender equality and women's rights. What women parliamentarians often describe gives the expression 'raising one's voice' a new dimension - of having to shout not be silenced, not to be overheard, of being recognised apart from addressing and representing the interests, problems and needs of women as prime constituency group.

"(...) We really shout our problem, but the government doesn't want to hear us and they can't solve that problem [...] raised in parliament. [They] didn't hear what we are just saying and are not working. There aren't any people that [...] hear".⁶¹

"[T]hey shout at us and they destroy us on legislation; (...) they take revenge (...). They shout and whisper

politics, they can bring big changes in parliament".

54 Interview with former MP, civil society activist and member of the Special Electoral Reform Commission Sabrina Saeed, Kabul, April 2015.

55 See also Fleschenberg 2012 in more detail. The attack against outspoken and active women working either in Parliament, the police or for the Department of Women's Affairs has continued as have attacks against women and girls on a more endemic level of violence against women, with the mob killing of Farkhunda Malikzada being the last prominent case, but not the only one as a number of media reports reviewed for the period of 2014 to mid-2015 indicate.

56 Interview with MP and Caucus Chair Humaira Ayoubi, seconded by observations and conversations with women MPs by civil society activist Mina Khashei (conducted in Kabul, April 2015).

57 Interview with Raihana Azad, Kabul, April 2015. According to her "[w]omen didn't learn how to play politics until now. I am optimistic about the future and if they can play

58 Interview with MP Shinkai Karokhail, Kabul, April 2015.

59 Interview with MP Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, Kabul, April 2015.

60 Interview with political analyst and director of AREU, Nader Nadery, conducted in Islamabad, June 2015. Having said that, he continues to narrate some incidents personally observed during a previous Loya Jirga gathering where a female participant complained to him that "everybody treats her as a sex figure. They tell that you don't have the right to say anything because you are [an] appointee, you are not an elected representative. (...) She has become much stronger and confident. And she is doing excellent", he concludes.

61 Interview with MP Shireen Mohseni, Kabul, April 2015.

(...) and I shout louder, that a mullah did that".⁶²

This is not only the case in daily interactions as a member of parliament, but also when it comes to passing laws which are concerned with women's needs and rights such as polygamy, alimony, age and consent for marriage, resource allocations etc. One case in point is the very brief parliamentary debate on the ERAW Law, regarded as an indicator that "people, some, are against us".⁶³ Linked to the issue of voice in parliamentary and public debates is the increased mediatisation of Afghan politics, highlighted by a number of interview partners, and parliamentarians' role in talk shows, news broadcasting and other platforms of public debate.⁶⁴ Pajhwok's Danish Karokhail even claims that without media coverage MPs "are useless" and he attests women MPs such as Shukria Barakzai, Fawzia Kofi, Shinkhai Karokhail and a number of others a positive scorecard - of being present nearly daily in media, being outspoken and thus counter-balancing male-dominated shows and media reporting, despite many others being silent or not knowledgeable enough in the public realm.

"Some women have something better than men to say and we need them. There [are] a lot of women that [...] can't talk, they [don't] have [anything] to say in media. But I think we have ten strong women [who] really [have] something to say".⁶⁵

62 Interview with MP Raihana Azad, Kabul, April 2015, who refers here to a parliamentary debate, in which she highlighted a recent rape case of a young girl by a local mullah in northern Afghanistan. She herself is seen as a controversial legislative office holder, the argument being that she didn't run in her home province, where she previously served successfully in subnational politics, as well as that she only secured a couple of hundred votes and became MP while most other candidates would have needed a multiple of it to secure a mandate - a frequent argument by those who are against gender quotas per se or would like to decrease them. Despite facing such criticism (of which she is well aware as pointed out in an informal conversation by a spin doctor involved with a number of Hazara MPs), Raihana Azad herself, elected from the province of Urozgan, confidently aims to become a national MP: "If I nominate myself next time, I will (...) from Daikundi [her home province] and I want to compete with men, not with women" (interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015).

63 Interview with MP Shireen Mohseni, Kabul, April 2015. In her interview, MP Raihana Azad portrays a nexus of mujahideen-turned-parliamentarians and their gender conservatism with the attempt to abolish the ERAW Law upon its reintroduction to the Wolesi Jirga, the decrease of provincial council quota provisions along with prominent cases of violence against women such as the mob killing of Farkhunda Malikzada, among others, with an overall misogynist and androcentric environment towards women politicians: "They really try to kick us out of the system (...) [as] they think that Islam is at risk, that's why they don't want us".

64 Editor-in-chief of Afghanistan's leading independent newspaper Daily 8am, Parwiz Kawa, argues that there are a number of MPs who are not in favour of democracy and the related role media has to play - be it in terms of public information dissemination, debate and critique of those in power. Investigative reporting, for example on government and parliament, remains problematic, be it in terms of access to information, whistleblowers being sanctioned or dismissed after leaking information. However, he reports that working on the parliament is easier in terms of accessing information and receiving reports for critical media coverage (interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015).

65 Interview with journalist Danish Karokhail, Kabul, April

"(...) But there have been quite influential women in [the] past decade, who are active and [are] trying to have their own voice and their own issues [addressed]. And in every law they consider the role of women on that law. And, really, they did well. This [is a] male-dominated country".⁶⁶

Reflecting upon the media coverage on women politicians and women's issues, journalist Parwiz Kawa sees a disparity between most media outlets and the few he considers independent like Tolo TV, 1TV and his own newspaper Daily 8am, classified as the only ones attempting to report on and highlight women's political participation and achievements in their own news coverage, in an effort to shape public opinion. This endeavour doesn't remain uncontested: "(...) warlords don't want the women to sit in the media beside them, and religious people still believe that women can't play politics and try to put pressure that [we] stop supporting women".⁶⁷

Challenging experiences described above are further exacerbated by an overall political environment which is problematic for male and female parliamentarians alike. Systemic obstacles and challenges of parliamentary work highlighted in the interviews were, among others:

- criminalisation of politics due to corruption and manipulations in electoral and parliamentary politics, e.g. by (political) mafia groups and business interests represented within Parliament;
- disconnect, lack of cooperation and patronage politics among political institutions and a subsequent experience of unresponsiveness from the government and the bureaucracy;
- ineffective capacity-building programmes for MPs, categorised as overlapping, overly selective and divisive;
- conflict legacy of mistrust, identity politics and subsequent fragile social fabric, necessitating time-consuming measures for building trust and common understanding as a basis to formulate common interests and establish unity among MPs (further exacerbated by the SNTV dynamics);
- "changing the course of the sun" or the monetarisation of politics and "projectification" of public and private lives due to the international intervention funding and operational dynamics, leading to a rentier mentality, fraud and corruption combined with perils in constituency-building (e.g. unrealistic expectations from constituents, buying of constituencies by few wealthy MPs or those with access to external funds).⁶⁸

2015.

66 Interview with journalist Parwiz Kawa, Kabul, April 2015.

67 Interview with journalist Parwiz Kawa, Kabul, April 2015.

68 Compiled from interviews, informal conversations and discussions with political and societal stakeholders in Kabul, April 2015.

Given the prevalent pattern of sociocultural inequality, manifested in gender roles prescriptions and practices, such systemic and institutional constraints translate in the political arena in divergent asymmetries and vulnerabilities, because the scale of men's autonomy and capacity to negotiate and navigate such a political environment appears to be significantly higher than that of women. This might be due to predominantly androcentric political support systems and access to resources, cultural norms for agency and mobility, along with gender-specific requirements of protection in an overall insecure and volatile environment. Along with other MPs and analysts interviewed, MP Farkhanda Naderi termed it "the vulnerability of the women in [...] politics", alleging that the so-called political mafias find it easier to capture women MPs as their victims, manipulate them for their own agendas, in addition to exploiting a number of women legislators' need for political support and protection.⁶⁹

"I do not want to speak of the women of Parliament"⁷⁰ - Male MPs and the Gender Quota

The 2015 micro sample of male parliamentarians interviewed is of limited representative nature, given the sample size and due to over-sampling of outspoken conservative legislators and chairs of parliamentary commissions, deemed necessary to capture institutional constraints on the basis of values and gender conceptions of (parliamentary) political culture, parliamentary practices and political power structures. Interesting is that most male parliamentarians interviewed since 2007 share women legislators security concerns, and the impact it has on their mobility and constrained interaction with constituents at the community level. However, equally interesting is the fact that they usually do not, as frequently, narrate problems in exercising their parliamentary mandate to the extent experienced by their female counterparts.

Exemplary is the following quote of one male parliamentarian, who himself already received threats

and warnings, but because "the people are with me, I do not face much difficulties. We cannot go openly to our constituencies".⁷¹ In addition, they highlight similar challenges for government oversight, performance in terms of service delivery along with unsatisfactory to conflicting legislature-executive relations, mostly under the previous Karzai administration. Many are certain and confident enough to be endowed with a constituency or built it when coming into office, to contribute autonomously to parliamentary proceedings in terms of legislation, government oversight and constituency work, and to dispose of the necessary faculties, resources and support systems/networks.

"It is not difficult for me to take part in debates or discussions. I have had a lot of practice so there are less difficulties for me. As I have studied law and journalism and studied Sharia as well. I am very fluent and take active part in the legislation".⁷²

As was to be expected, few would be openly critical of women parliamentarians coming on gender quotas, using to a certain extent either a religion-based discourse of gender equality and respect for women or tap into the available post-2001 public gender equality rhetoric, pointing towards education received, facilities, trainings and support provided, government appointments and legislative seats occupied, as well as respect proclaimed towards women politicians. Notable for the religious-based discourse on and framework for women's rights, political roles and laws is the line of argumentation of two male MPs, members of Hezb-e-Islami (and one being a former mujahideen and affiliate of Sayyaf), indicative of a number of institutional constraints for women parliamentarians seeking to address women's issues through innovative legislation, such as the contested EVAW Law.

"The respect that has been given by Islam to women and the privilege that has been given by Islam to women, that has not been [given] by anyone [else] to women in the world. Therefore, we have no need to make new laws for women, neither can we interfere. We only try that the rights ensured by God, Quran and Islam to women, those shall be given to them".⁷³

The following citation allows for multiple readings on the impact of political identities in a highly gendered societal setting, perhaps caused by religiously induced gender segregation, but not necessarily, along with ensuing gendered notions of political representation and political roles to perform.

"(...) [A] cultural and religious system is dominant over here and must remain dominant, because this is an Islamic society. (...), the role of women in parliament is very important as a woman is a mother, daughter, sister and lady/housewife, (...). A woman understands the problems of a sister, daughter, mother and husband in a better manner. And those who can quickly reach out to women issues and

69 Interview with MP Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, among others, conducted in Kabul, April 2015. "So when their time comes to act as of women, they are bound by someones else, they have to look in their eyes and vote on something or not. When they decide, it is not based on values or on what they believe, rather on how the game is played and what they get out of it", proposes former MP, civil society activist and member of the Special Electoral Reform Commission Sabrina Saqeb, identifying only few exceptions of women legislators' unity such as in the case of the Shia Family Law (interviewed in Kabul, April 2015).

70 Interview with male MP, Kabul, April 2015.

71 Interview with male MP, Kabul, April 2015.

72 Interview with MP Abdul Sattar Khawasi, Kabul, April 2015.

73 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

problems, those women are MPs. So the coming of women has an important role in the Wolesi Jirga⁷⁴

Most of the following testimonies are in stark contrast to the challenges, threats and contestations highlighted by women parliamentarians, seconded by most civil society activists, which painted a rather androcentric, hostile to uneven level playing field of Afghan electoral and parliamentary politics.⁷⁵

"For women this [the quota provision] is good and they have men also helping, treating [them] good [...] and [the] behaviour is not bad. Behaviour is not bad with them in the Parliament. I don't see any problem. So they should be happy".⁷⁶

"We really work for women issues and law has given them the right to come in the parliament, and we respect their right and respect them. We didn't do anything against them. We respect their position and their task. (...) We always think about equality in Afghanistan".⁷⁷

"These are just boosted things that women rights are not given or they do not have access to their rights. Such stories have no reality in them. (...) The complaints that women do not have access to their rights in the whole of Afghanistan are not right".⁷⁸

An exception appeared to be one male legislator and parliamentary commission chair who initially hinted towards gender differences: "because I was a man, maybe I didn't face many problems, but my women colleagues, they may face problems and resistance that they are in the parliament". However, he later contended otherwise, along similar lines as outlined above, stating that within the lower house and its commissions:

"There is nothing against them, because no-one can do that and I can't see any MP that can say something against them. They participate in the debates and everywhere and there are no challenges for women. And I can say that it's much better than any parliament in the world and the men are working for the right of women in the parliament and there is more equality between men and women in the parliament".⁷⁹

A similar and exemplary assessment of most male MPs interviewed is displaying a very strict understanding of gendered spaces, roles prescriptions and thus segregation while ignoring the heated debates and contentious statements of male politicians on the EVAW Law, the Shia family law, the marriage law, the debates of sexual abuse cases of girls committed by religious clergy and the initial statements surrounding the mob killing of Farkhunda, to name a few that have been referred to by women

parliamentarians and activists during the course of this study. For Barakzai there are no other hindrances imposed on women legislators other than those set by religion, but "[t]hen not only men go against them, but women also go against them"; otherwise he emphasises that:

"In five years I have not seen that one male MP says something bitter to a sister. This has never happened. Sisters even fought among themselves, even physically. And the male have fought with male as well. Although, this has never happened that someone has stood up against the rights and debate of women. God has specified the rights of women. She can compete (...), get education, do business and all these are the rights God has given to women".⁸⁰

Some male MPs don't interact with female constituents and voters. Some male legislators even find it inappropriate or refuse to discuss or comment about their female colleagues with reference to political performance for religious reasons. In the following quote, attitudes are displayed, which explicitly or implicitly appear to reject gender quota politicians through the quota being regarded as imposed by foreign intervention actors, with wordings employed such as "backbiting" or "cruel decision", for example:

"Islam does not allow me as it will be backbiting. My request is that whoever takes the bigger number of votes, that person shall be declared as the MP. The gender quota shall be removed. This was a cruel decision by America, that they did with Afghanistan. In the making of laws in the Loya Jirga, no such things w[ere] mentioned. On the last day, they asked for the gender quota seats - two in each province".⁸¹

This picture changes when asked about electoral reforms and the continuation of gender quotas, with explicit or implicit criticism displayed against positive discrimination tools employed in support of women. In the below cited opinions, widely documented and reported gender imbalances, experiences of gender-based violence and political discrimination, not only by women parliamentarians and civil society activists but also by international organisations and research institutes, are denigrated as not representing actual reality. Furthermore, it transpires that women, albeit being said to be respected, are not granted equal rights of political participation, rendering the political arena effectively a male prerogative, where men can represent women and where gender quotas as a tool of rectifying endemic and systemic institutional imbalances and political marginalisation are not required or at least at a lower numeric level without any reason provided.

"(...) Now women are better than men, because they are getting good support, they are getting good facilities, and they can say what they want to say. Now they don't have that much problems. Now men are having problems. (...) This is not that much [of a] crisis for women in Afghanistan. (...) If these women

74 Interview with MP Obaidullah Barakzai, Kabul, April 2015.

75 Interviews conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

76 Interview with MP Zakaria Sawda, Kabul, April 2015.

77 Interview with MP and parliamentary commission chair Muhammad Abdo, Kabul, April 2015.

78 Interview with MP and parliamentary commission chair Naqebullah Faye, Kabul, April 2015.

79 Interview with MP and parliamentary commission chair Naqebullah Faye, Kabul, April 2015.

80 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

81 Interview with MP Abdul Sattar Khawasi, Kabul, April 2015.

in Afghanistan will get more support, so one day you need to support men in Afghanistan".⁸²

"I have respect for women. Half of our society is [comprised of] women in Afghanistan. In a society like Afghanistan, 68 seats were much for the women in the Wolesi Jirga. There should not have been more than 30 in Afghanistan [s] laws as our basic laws view women with respect. (...) One woman from each province. Sixty nine are too many".⁸³

Criticism of male parliamentarians usually revolve around the notion of and necessity for positive discrimination, regarded as violating constitutional and/or legal principles of equality, curtailing voters' choices or distorting the rules of the game in favour of women, thus disenfranchising and/or discriminating against male candidates.

"I think if there are elections and the elections are respected, and the votes of the people are respected, then no gender quota is necessary. (...) I think it should be decided by the people, (...) and whoever [takes more] votes shall come to parliament. Either male or female, they shall have the votes of the people with them. If not, then [it] is a wrong thing which no law accepts. (...) If the system is political party-based and even 50 percent of seats are accepted by women, then no one will have [an] issue with it, while, on the other hand, the difference of 20,000 and 300 votes is a big difference for representation".⁸⁴

Differences in votes received are not reflective of the quality of elections in terms of inclusiveness, freedom and fairness, along with the gendered nature of the electoral arena, the public space, marked by gender-specific power imbalances and asymmetries regarding accessing rights of political and socioeconomic participation resources, support, mobility and agency. Nor is it upheld with regard to previous misogynist gender regimes and their (conflict) legacies - "it is [a] very, very false time that I am saying, even if you come from a very dark past", contends MP Sawda.⁸⁵

Others link their outright and sweeping criticism with the alleged state of political performance and alleged susceptibility towards corruption of women legislators, finding faults in them and the level of parliamentary work, combined with patronising comments about their appearance and faculties and derogatory language, such as calling them "girls". Or sexist comments as apparent - and probably in no need of further deconstruction - in the following citation from a discussion about inappropriate behaviour of female constituents during an interview conducted with a male parliamentarian, who himself repeatedly demonstrated inappropriate demeanour in the course of the interview, not the first time, given a similar incident during the 2012 field research:

"Well, I am sure it happens to them, too. I have no doubts. [E]specially, there are two types of female MPs, one is the young girls or a bit good looking ones. For the old ones, I don't think, but for the young ones, I have no doubt. You ask Shukria Barakzai, she will [tell] tons of these stories; you ask Naheed Fareed [e]specially or Fawzia Kofi or, in previous session, I had another friend, Sabrina Saqeb. She is a young girl and she is a good friend, too. (...) Like Nilofar Ibrahim from Badakshan and like the other girl, Nadiri girl, Farkhanda".⁸⁶

For certain male MPs, women parliamentarians have not been up to the mark, have not represented women as they should have or are expected to, even in comparison to male legislators, who are not scrutinised in the same manner and extent for their political performance or who are declared to have been the proactive ones, to have mostly participated and mostly managed to deliver, not women.

"In our Wolesi Jirga as well many hands point out [at] women when questions of quality are raised. Meaning that the quality of women in parliament is not good. I am saying that 34 are more than enough for Afghanistan. (...) There are many issues with the quality. (...) Women have less political awareness in Afghanistan in comparison to men. Yes, there are (...) only 15 aware women who have political wisdom. But the majority is not like this. I have seen them in the commissions. This is the reason that the quality of the Wolesi Jirga has decreased".⁸⁷

"The women in the parliament, because they don't have any vision, aim and strategy, that's why they are not good in their work. When women come to parliament, they change their fashion in clothing, they get rich, and (...) they go to foreign countries. I am not against women that don't wear good clothes and that they are not allowed to go to other countries, but they must work on their education and they must work hard on their capacity".⁸⁸

"I never liked it, to be honest. You mean for the women quota, right? (...) The women should establish their own special influential base in the country (...). The first time I agree with them, the second time I agree with them and the third time, let's agree with the third time even, but in the fourth time [it] shouldn't be. (...) So, now we have to confront this reality. Let us see how many women [sic] is naturally upcoming - 5, 10. Eventually it will increase. (...) I am raised in a family which is walking and working bare face. We do not use hijab. So how can I be against women? There is no way. But, the reality is reality. These women are not representing Afghanistan people. Yes there [are] a few women. Maybe few of them here but not all of them. (...) The quota system creates big problems. One of the biggest problems, Andrea, now is corruption in parliament. I'm not saying that men are not taking [bribes]. Hundred percent men are

82 Interview with MP Zakeria Sawda, Kabul, April 2015.

83 Interview with MP and parliamentary commission chair Kamal Naseer Ousuli, Kabul, April 2015.

84 Interview with MP Abdul Sattar Khawasi, Kabul, April 2015.

85 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

86 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

87 Interview with MP and parliamentary commission chair Kamal Naseer Ousuli, Kabul, April 2015.

88 The here cited MP Arif Rahmani, interviewed in Kabul in April 2015, further criticises outstanding women parliamentarians like Shukria Barakzai and Fawzia Kofi, as for him, they "just know English".

taking the bribe, true. But, the initial start was given by the women in the previous session. Yesterday, I wish you had seen it that how active those women were. Some women never show up in the Parliament and the day before yesterday all of them would [be] present. And women who are involved in such kind of wrong doing activity, you could have clearly seen them. (...) And we know that girl [i.e. MP] from the beginning of this term, till now, this has been a source of income for her".⁸⁹

This evidence points rather in another direction as also highlighted by the chair of the Wolesi Jirga's commission on justice and the judicial, Muhammad Abdo, who mentions a gendered distortion of competition in electoral politics. He is one of the few who didn't call for the abolishment of gender quota provisions, wishing to see a female president of Afghanistan in the future, while at the same time pointing towards potential gender conflicts, given women's political empowerment:

"(...) I think that women must not be worried because they are not the competitors of men, they must compete with men. And I don't think women can compete, but if a woman gets lots of votes and high number of vote[s], they are coming from their own side and otherwise they have the quota system. (...) But now that women have this much power and participation in the society, no one can bring changes to this law. If someone wants to bring changes, all women stand against and protect (...) their rights and they kick out all men from home (...)".⁹⁰

Consequently, MP Arif Rahmani concludes this section of the paper with a plea for the quota system, because of Afghanistan's predominant traditional political and societal setup, shaped by negative societal mindsets and opinions, such as of mullahs contesting women's political participation. Time is needed, he argues, to work for women's rights being considered simply as human rights, because "[i]f we had a normal society, so we wouldn't need the quota system and this positive discrimination is good for women and we need that in this time".⁹¹

Debating Electoral Reforms and the Quota - "We have a very big problem with the system"⁹² and "We need to play politics like men"⁹³

Gender policies, their achievements and failures are often marked by high levels of international interventionism, orientalist sensationalism and periodic international media hypes, with very short attention spans and narrow foci, albeit much needed continued international support for the furthering of a democratic space and institution-building in Afghanistan during the second transition decade.

"Like women in politics: if there is no international community, do you think others will believe in engaging women in real politics? The politics [is] of a kind of traditional or tribal politics in Afghanistan and unfortunately women are not there at the tribal or traditional political activities. The only politics that women can engage in is the democratic one, I think, and the democratic governments. If there is no international community, it is difficult for women to go for the provincial councils even".⁹⁴

Examples are the Shia Family Law, the EAW Law, the debate about women's shelters or the mob killing of Farkhunda Malikzada. Women's activist and presidential advisor Nargis Nehan, therefore, criticises the lack of support for women's rights defenders by the National Unity Government and international partners, despite the visible overall "rapid decline in terms of women's role", be it with perceived weak female cabinet members selected, a limited role of women in the peace negotiation process and its institutions, such as, the High Peace Council along with its provincial branches or, potentially, quotas being up for revision.⁹⁵ In line with this assessment, it doesn't seem to come as a surprise that little or less attention was given to the decrease of provincial council reserved seats provisions from 25 to 20 percent under the Karzai administration, which, in response, however, resulted in an interesting subsequent discursive tactic by women activists and politicians alike. "We have to change the system" was a call uttered by a number of politicians, activists and analysts interviewed.

89 Interview with MP Khaled Pashtoon, Kabul, April 2015, who alleges that fifty-eight out of sixty-nine women MPs are corrupt, were corrupted by the system when becoming involved with politics.

90 Interview with MP and parliamentary commission chair Muhammad Abdo, Kabul, April 2015.

91 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015. Having said that, Rahmani himself is highly critical of the present women parliamentarians: "And also ninety percent of women parliamentarians have a lack of education, they come from the low [strata] of society (...); they are just coming in the parliament and don't have an agenda for others, for women; even these women are against each other in the parliament and they didn't do anything that I point out and that is important".

92 Interview with MP Shireen Mohseni, Kabul, April 2015.

93 Interview with MP Raihana Azad, Kabul, April 2015.

94 Interview with Naeem Ayoubzada, electoral watchdog activist and director of TEFA, conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

95 Interview with women's activist and currently presidential advisor Nargis Nehan, Kabul, April 2015.

Women's activists, human rights activists and a significant number of women parliamentarians engage in a rights-based discourse when it comes to the necessity and retention period of gender quotas in Afghan (sub-) national politics.⁹⁶ The key argument here is that although a number of female legislators are confident of having built their constituency and are adamant about wanting to compete with men directly in the elections, one cannot do without the quota system due to the already mentioned fraudulent, uneven level playing field of electoral politics within the wider context of a male-dominated, traditional (read: conservative gender roles prescriptions) society and the increasing levels of insecurity which provide powerful veto actors, as well as violent, armed power brokers with the upper hand. Quotas are thus an emergency response of sorts, for many the only one available that has to work, that one has to make work.

"So our opportunities are not equal, our challenges are not equal. We face a lot of challenges with fewer opportunities. [Until] the time we go to equal competition, we need [the] quota for Afghanistan's women".⁹⁷

"(...) So I am scared that we are going to lose our whole [quota] percentage in the parliament and provincial councils, because in every province we lost one seat for women and men [took] it. (...) until we don't bring changes for women, so [that] every woman can come to parliament, [but] we need time until that and until we don't make our political party law, we need this quota system, until we don't receive the belief of the people, we need this system".⁹⁸

"You are basically making women to fight among each other rather than challenging the men on the other side as [a] human being. So that is why we made quota, basically, in one way, to give more opportunity [to] women, but the way our politicians, who are very smart in their actions, did it, they made [a] quota against women. (...) They will not take you after quota to go as a human being. They will bring you back to the quota".⁹⁹

Interesting is the proposition that one needs to ask for more, that one needs to proclaim and reach for parity to secure the granted ground and number of women's political presence while avoiding to end up with less or nothing - a big fear of many women with regard to the

post-2014 transition and power negotiations.¹⁰⁰

Related to this is a critique of the specific gender quota provision - is it defined as the minimum level (as most would read the 2004 Constitution - at least 68 women from 34 provinces) or as a glass ceiling, as some might want to interpret it. Some women's activists animadvert that the quota is used for all female candidates regardless of their electoral potential - those who can compete on their own in direct elections, as well as those who cannot compete in direct elections, given the social, political and economic institutional constraints and the endemic corruption of electoral politics, facing immense difficulties to negotiate with. "Quotas help those women who they can't compete, but what about those who can compete", asked two activists in our discussion round at AWN, and how to ensure that women ultimately come on their own vote bank, to counter those stakeholders who use the quota system to ensure that women elected are not change agents, but rather malleable legislators, tokens and/or proxies. How to ensure that quotas become a spring board for acquiring a seat of power and not one of charity or manipulation, because certain stakeholders "want us [women] to be weak and stay in our bad situation?".¹⁰¹

In the case of electoral reforms towards a proportional representation or mixed system, Mir Amad Joyenda, a political analyst based at the influential think tank AREU and a former MP with the Third Line parliamentary group, therefore proposes a double quota of 25 percent for women candidates on political party lists, combined with the same quota for individually contested general seats, to allow for competition.¹⁰²

There seems to be a clear gap between male and female parliamentarians' stance on gender quotas as enshrined in the Afghan Constitution, outlining a minimum level of positive discrimination of at least 68 women legislators, which some regard as a glass ceiling, others not, as analysed in detail in the previous section. Top level bureaucrat, Murtaza Rahimi, argued that political parties are more important than a gender quota, which he regards

96 In both focus group discussions, a consensus emerged about the necessity of gender quotas, despite all criticism raised, such as focussing on quantity / critical mass rather than quality / critical acts. A widespread feeling reiterated across the board was that there is nothing else than the quota system to avoid that women are kicked out of politics, that there is no other option available, that one must work for the quota system to work, to increase the numbers and at the same time ensure the quality in terms of capacity-building of elected women, to ensure they are politically knowledgeable, educated, experienced, have resources (and are thus not in need of male support for political survival and meeting constituents' demands). (FGDs conducted at AWN and at HBS, Kabul, April 2015).

97 Interview with MP Shah Gul Rezaie, Brussels, November 2015.

98 Interview with MP Zakia Sangin, Kabul, April 2015.

99 Interview with MP Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, Kabul, April 2015.

100 Interviews with former MPs, for example, Sabrina Saqeb and Mina Khashei along with MPs such as Shireen Mohseni, Shukria Barakzai, Humaira Ayoubi or journalist Danish Karokhail, conducted in Kabul, April 2015. Mohseni proclaimed twice that the given quota provisions are "not enough in every way. We have women, but it's less, we want more" - be it in terms of parliamentary presence, leadership positions in other public institutions such as the government, ministries or courts.

101 Opinions raised in the focus group discussion conducted at AWN with similar views shared in the second one conducted at HBS, Kabul, April 2015.

102 He also argues that most women parliamentarians still lack the political maturity and autonomy to address women's rights due to them being quota politicians and due to being dependent on external political support by powerbroker such as landlords, jihadi leaders or wealthy community members. Furthermore, he contends that many were elected on lesser votes than their male colleagues, albeit attesting women MPs a comparatively better performance (interviewed in Kabul, April 2015). However, he doesn't elaborate if this is a women-specific phenomenon or if male parliamentarians also might be dependent on the same support networks within and outside parliament and thus also might lack autonomy.

as a problematic tool to advance women's substantive representation:

"Just for show that women exist in parliament, but the reality is that this positive discrimination is not good for women, because those women who can work for women can't come. The women who can come have good connections and have money".¹⁰³

Women parliamentarians - alongside civil society representatives from different walks of life and work areas - are convinced that the existing reserved seat provisions are necessary not only for now but for a number of years to come and have to be fully supported, regardless of the extent and scale of achievements so far.¹⁰⁴

"I am very, very strongly in favour of it. I think not only in ten years, but in the coming ten to thirty to fifty years, we need the quotas, because that is, I think, one of the very concrete and strong and visible support for women. (...) So what is the reason that today women show up in the parliament? What is the reason that today women show up in the cabinet? These are the opportunities. How did these opportunities come? This opportunity basically came on the basis of the quota which was written in Afghanistan's Constitution (...). So I am in favour of that. (...), we can see that today, when we have quotas, women are facing these challenges [of security and lack of resources/funds]. If we do not have quotas, what will happen to the women?".¹⁰⁵

"(...) Nobody can challenge, because if they challenge the 30 percent quota for women, then the question that I have is, ok, what's the big impact the 70 percent males have made. Have they been able to fight corruption? Have they been able to serve their constituencies? Have they been able to monitor government performance? I don't think so. (...) why we keep on criticising ourselves so much, being on ourselves so hard that actually it gives, from time to time, like more chance for men (...) to criticise us".¹⁰⁶

"(...) We must increase this quota and it needs support, every kind of support, like economic support, cultural support, society support, and, very important, legal support, because we want to make it legal, this process and also build their capacity. This helps us to have active and good women, not just in parliament,

in judiciary and government".¹⁰⁷

Some regard it as "the only way to push for [...] women's inclusion in the process"¹⁰⁸, as creating the necessary electoral incentives, opportunities and a momentum for those gendered notions which are part and parcel of Afghanistan's political culture to alter at the community level:

"They have seen that some of the women MPs are more vocal and active in the national scene than their male counterparts. So that also changed the thinking about women leadership in a community which has not experienced in the past the role of women as a leader".¹⁰⁹

A key argument is that despite all efforts of constituency-building, the sociopolitical realities are such that women cannot compete on an equal footing with male contenders, and that an historic jump is needed to change the rules of the game, to allow for space and a psychological boost for change to happen, as well as to serve as a pressure tool vis-a-vis policy-makers.

"And I always believed that quota is the best for empowering women. (...) Because if you don't give opportunity for women to come and sit around the table, and the time will come that they would be qualified to come. It will take few more centuries. (...) In that case if you want to really fight against injustice, that's why we talk about positive discrimination. (...) To really undermine negative discrimination".¹¹⁰

"(...) It was giving a message to the women that we are there. So even young girls were looking to a future that 'I am going to be there', (...). This is a sort of dream for all girls, particularly the young generation that 'I can be there', (...). That is psychologically very positive. I think it's also psychologically for men who are against women, was also something to show that they have the capacity, that they are there, they can speak, they can work, they can judge, they can analyse, they can reason for this".¹¹¹

"It's a good tool in the current situation of Afghanistan, otherwise you can't see women in the parliament. I do pay attention: uneducated women, they get those seats but at least those can represent women. They might be able to do something, raise their voice for support of women. Especially we are going to change the mentality and sort of culture and [at] that time we don't [need] the quota, but now we need this quota".¹¹²

103 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

104 Interviews with civil society activists Soraya Parlika, Nargis Nehan and Hasina Safi, top bureaucrats Syed Abdul Latin Dadshani and Maliha Hassan, among others, Kabul, April 2015. Referring to the 2004 Constitution and a supporting Loya Jirga resolution guiding peace talks with insurgents in terms of red lines to be kept, Dadshani does "not believe that anybody will rise against it, to reduce that. No. It is going to be exactly the same. (...) I do not believe that anybody is in the mood of changing that. And I don't believe that it will be eliminated", he stresses. In the focus group discussions conducted at AWN and at HBS, the difficulty of female political mainstreaming was stressed given the overall androcentric and patriarchal cultural setup and the need for large scale education of many women to change mindsets and interest a larger number of women to participate politically.

105 Interview with civil society activist and director of AWN, Hasina Safi, Kabul, April 2015.

106 Interview with civil society activist and presidential advisor Nargis Nehan, Kabul, April 2015.

107 Interview with civil society activist and former female candidate in 2010 parliamentary elections Mina Khashei, Kabul, April 2015.

108 Among them is former MP, civil society activist and member of the Special Electoral Reform Commission Sabrina Saeed, interviewed in Kabul, April 2015.

109 Interview with political analyst and director of the influential think tank Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREAU), Nader Naderi, interviewed in Islamabad, June 2015.

110 Interview with MP Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, Kabul, April 2015.

111 Interview with civil society activist and director of ACSF, Aziz Rafiee, Kabul, April 2015.

112 Interview with female top bureaucrat Maliha Hassan, Kabul, April 2015. Hassan points time and again to the

Reasons are conservative gender roles prescriptions in terms of leadership quality, mobility, voice and agency, along with disparities in resources and the deteriorating security situation.

"(...) A very limited group of men who believe in equality. But, in majority, even the ones who [are] wearing the suit and tie inside the Parliament, they really don't believe that. (...) We even realised that we cannot even trust sometimes the one[s] who tell us that they are Afghan democrats. They can easily change the concept".¹¹³

"My aim, first, that a woman can do politics in parliament. And I appreciate our laws that give us, or women, the right to come to Parliament (...). And I believe that a woman can do good like a man. (...) I want to tell you something: We have a traditional and [a] male-dominated society and if we don't fight for our rights, we cannot achieve it".¹¹⁴

Such concerns and observations are mostly done without disaggregating and reflecting the heterogeneity of women in Afghanistan in general, and potential women candidates and voters in particular. Beyond the urban spaces of Afghanistan's politics in which many parliamentarians operate most of the time, mostly due to security and subsequent mobility restrictions, one needs to be reminded that Afghanistan's population predominantly resides in rural areas, with very different everyday politics and realities, including the interaction with state institutions or insurgents, access to basic service delivery and infrastructure, to name a few. Gender quotas provisions thus need to cater for women from different socioeconomic backgrounds, experience levels, including a provenience

specific political and cultural circumstances that entail the continuation of the quota system for public institutions, which are a pressuring tool so that stakeholders have to pay attention to women and the fact that many active women - be it in politics or the ministerial bureaucracy - don't receive sufficient support, do face abuse and harassment by male colleagues who more than often consider them to be lacking talent and the necessary education / abilities to assume leadership positions or being promoted. Such circumstances also lead to a very limited pool of female candidates, she argues, as women themselves are put aback or are discouraged by cultural values and subsequent socialisation demeaning women's skills, potential discrimination or harassment due to, among others, gossip of unfair procedures and improper treatment at work or by the simple fact that in many government offices a washroom for women is missing.

113 Interview with MP Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, Kabul, April 2015, who refers in particular to her experience with the debate surrounding the EVAW Law - "the most beautiful law that the women can get in the country. The most merciful law they can get" - and in-house processes of its introduction into the plenary and discussions in other committees than the women's affairs one in 2013. For her, it was "a learning under the process of learning women politics. (...) one of the toughest experience[s] that we had. (...) and all of a sudden we are coming to a point they are telling us 'compromise those things'. How can we compromise it? You are talking about two strong opposing views".

114 Interview with MP Shireen Mohseni, Kabul, April 2015, in which she further argues: "No one can say this to us that we are coming from quota, because we have this system in the law and none can say this. No one can dare to say it to us, this point that they don't want that. Yes, if you hear from men, they don't like our existence in parliament".

from non-urban or peri-urban spaces, for which different capacity-building, awareness raising campaigns, as well as support mechanisms will be required.¹¹⁵

While symbolic, discursive cracks are considered to have been achieved at the walls of political patriarchy, many of the interviewees are also concerned that Afghanistan needs to move from considerations of descriptive representation, i.e. quantity, towards substantive representation, i.e. quality, to ensure the proper functioning of the quota system. One concern is the question of representation, or in other words, if gender quota parliamentarians are first and foremost bound to represent women as their prime constituency or not.¹¹⁶ Outspoken women parliamentarians like Shinkai Karokhail, with a clear women-specific political agenda, strongly emphasise the need to bring in the right kind of quota politicians:

"Especially those women who really think as women and women who have [their] own political agenda, not to carry on or take forward the men's or the warlord's agenda. (...) This is the concern [as to] which type of women we are going to have in the next parliament. That's very much important. Maybe we have women physically or biologically, they are women, but mentally, we need a strong woman, a woman who really [has] a national agenda for the entire country. And secondly, specifically how she should be allowed for protection of women's rights and really advocate how to empower women of Afghanistan. That's very much important".¹¹⁷

Not everyone would agree though on a gender-specific prime representation task of gender quota politicians:

"Women who are in the parliament, they are politicians. Their first priority is to politically engage. Now for me, I never expect them to be a women's

115 Interview partners were mostly concerned with women and youth as marginalised groups or social groups of special concern. Only former MP, civil society activist and member of the Special Electoral Reform Commission Sabrina Saeed and civil society activist Mina Khashei stressed the importance of considering rural areas, which both portray as very backward and misogynist in terms of women's rights and socioeconomic as well as political status ascriptions - "till know they didn't think of women as a human. They don't know that women and men are equal (...)", as claimed by Khashei (both interviewed in Kabul, April 2015).

116 Dr. Soraya Sobhrang from Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission criticises the lack of transformative potential of many women MPs who do not act and think as women but rather as men in their policy-making decisions, for lacking gender solidarity and for being power driven in their voting behaviour for parliamentary leadership positions, supporting rather power- and resourceful male candidates (interviewed in Kabul, April 2015).

117 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015. Civil society activist Nargis Nehan further argues that there is a need "to work on professionalisation of women", to ensure that there are sufficient qualified candidates to submit candidacy lists to the government to fill political leadership positions; an argument seconded by top bureaucrat Murtaza Rahimi who time and again highlighted the importance of public policy-cum-legislative expertise of professional legislators, who don't overestimate their position and powers and refrain from furthering their own personal businesses (both interviewed in Kabul, April 2015).

rights activist or advocate (...). (...) at the end of the day, we can't blame women parliamentarians because [...] they are women, they must fight for the right[s] of women in the parliament. She is [a] politician (...). Yes, they are women, but at the end of the day they are politicians".¹¹⁸

However, this appears to be a minority view as more counter-argue that "[t]hey came from the quota system" and are thus bound to represent women as their foremost constituency.¹¹⁹ Along with ensuring electoral procedures - be it free and fair elections, security provisions for female candidates, more female staff at various steps of the electoral process, a holistic support approach was highlighted by a number of interview partners, including parameters of campaign funding and gender-specific disparities accessing financial and economic resources, effective combatting of electoral fraud and corruption practices or an education clause for candidates to ensure a certain level of proficiency in public affairs.¹²⁰

Is symbolic participation an important sign and an achievement in itself? Has there been an impact on the societal level, i.e. creating a space for and motivation among women to participate in politics through a norm diffusion process? Some would argue in favour, in particular when looking at the younger generation, comprising the majority of Afghanistan's female populace, and the lessons drawn from the 2010 elections, in terms of constituency-building.

"They see that in order to become a parliamentarian, you don't have to belong to a political family, you don't have to have resources, you don't have to be like these groups. You (...) actually can run [by] yourself. All actually you have to do is, like, to make sure that [you] identify your constituencies and then begin to work on your constituencies".¹²¹

There were also some critical voices among civil society activists who problematised the perception and dynamics of gender quotas and questioned their potential for women's political mainstreaming. One reason was that gender quotas - and thus ultimately the right to politically participate as a citizen - are considered by some stakeholders not as a tool to ensure access to equal rights, but as an act of charity or mercy, given to women out of pity, coupled with the perception that many women parliamentarians are not politically aware and skilled enough to compete on an equal footing, hence are not there on their own right, but only due to their specific background (read: gender) and/or male or political party support. This

concern is linked with a negative image painted repeatedly in the interviews and conversations about a significant number of women MPs who are allegedly manipulated and misused for the machinations of male politicians, leading to the idea that the current quota system, albeit termed indispensable, is "not good for women", because it does not generate a change in mindsets and male voting behaviours, if women politicians are perceived as not being able to deliver on their own and are manipulated by male parliamentarians with whom they cannot compete.

Referring to unequal rights and opportunities being created under the current political system and environment with regard to security, resources and access to/mobility within constituencies, political analyst Mir Amad Joyenda problematises that women MPs "could not do anything for the people. (...) Even in the defence of women's rights they were not very efficient. They did not have [an] impact on that one. So, for that, sometimes [...] men were better than the women MPs to defend women's rights".¹²²

Thus, the quota can, potentially, undermine the credibility of women politicians in the eyes of the wider public and/or send wrong signals to a number of women politicians themselves, because it might "make them passive and lazy" or "because women think that when they are [coming] from the quota, they must stay quiet".¹²³ It also might not enable them to become well versed in political competition and the rules of the game, resting their mandate on the existence of a long-term gender quota, as problematised by civil society activist Mina Khashei, who herself was unsuccessful in her parliamentary election bid in 2010: "They must be active because we must shut the mouth of men when they say you are coming from gender quota for [a] short time".¹²⁴ A supporter of the quota introduction and the psychological impact created, civil society activist and director of ACSF, Aziz Rafiee, nevertheless contends, too, that the current quota design didn't allow for quality representation to take place, which made quota women reluctant about electoral competition. As a consequence, it might create a backlash against women, which must be avoided - not only because of the overall gender-based injustices, insecurity and an untrustworthy political system impeding fair electoral competition, but also that it may leave women in a state of systemic and endemic political precariousness.

"I am 100 percent sure that if this quota wouldn't have been existing, we would have no women in the parliament. Men do not vote for women and the women are not politically united to vote for women. There is a huge dilemma. (...) I don't trust the current system particularly, with the growing conservatism in Afghanistan, [that] the women would be able to

118 Opinion raised in the focus group discussion conducted at AWN, Kabul 2015.

119 Opinion raised in the focus group discussion conducted at AWN as well as in some interviews, for example with former MP, civil society activist and member of the Special Electoral Reform Commission Sabrina Saqeb, Kabul, April 2015.

120 As outlined, for example, by MP Shinkai Karokhail, Senator Farida Kochi, women's activist Soraya Parlika, electoral watchdog member Naeem Asghari or civil society activists interviewed in the focus group discussions conducted at AWN and HBS, Kabul, April 2015.

121 Interview with Nargis Nehan, Kabul, April 2015.

122 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

123 Opinions raised in the focus group discussion conducted at HBS, with similar views expressed in the FGD held at AWN, Kabul, April 2015. For many it has to become a quality issue, meaning to move away from quantity or concerns of symbolic and descriptive representation towards substantive one.

124 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

appear with their own power (...), particularly with the provincial councils, we have lost a lot and the fundamentalist groups and also the conservative groups have won. (...) But men are involved in the economy [sic] mafia, in the drug mafia and the land confiscation. So they have a gun and they have to have the bodyguards, because they are part of the economic mafia and current mafia structure of the government".¹²⁵

A controversial issue related to electoral reforms is the role of political parties and their impact on women's political participation. While many interviewed are in favour of changing towards a political party-based PR system or a mixed system to ensure a more organised parliament in terms of interest aggregation and parliamentary coalition-building, concerns are raised about their ideological outlook, potential identity politics (i.e. ethnic parties instead of national ones) and their gender policies/outlook.¹²⁶ If male parliamentarians resist women's presence in political institutions, having political parties might not necessarily change that, as MP Humaira Ayoubi argues: "this is not a good time to have political parties, because men always decide on a political party, and when men decide, they don't want women to represent them".¹²⁷ Others believe that the strengthening of a democratic parliamentary system cannot be achieved without political parties in a PR or mixed system, with reserved seat provisions for women or party-based quota provisions for candidacy lists.¹²⁸ But there are also those who see the induction of political parties within the framework of a PR or mixed electoral system as the only remedy needed, i.e. "instead of [a] quota system".¹²⁹

Having said all that (and not so much as a side or concluding note), women parliamentarians' expressions like "it takes a long time to act like a man" or "playing politics like a man", "competing with men", "showing men[s] strength" seem to cast a shadow on attempts to break androcentric politics, their models and patterns - be it in terms of mindsets, discursive practices or other manifestations.

Beyond Vulnerabilities and Volatilities Towards Women's Substantive Political Representation - Some Tentative Conclusions with Regard to Afghanistan

Writing at the time of the Beijing+20 process review, quotas are accepted and employed worldwide as a tool for women's political mainstreaming, which lead to conduct this research on gender quota track records and experiences in Afghanistan and to investigate dynamics and factors behind the acknowledged gap between descriptive (quantitative) representation through quotas and the paucity of diffusion in addressing women's interests and achieving substantive (qualitative) representation and political mainstreaming of gender quota politicians. Shifting from a focus on women politicians' agency and performance alone, quotas are not a sufficient mode of intervention to allow for a quantitative and qualitative decrease in the gender democracy deficit and, for subsequently dismantling the encompassing political patriarchy, alive and kicking in most sociopolitical institutions.

Afghanistan's post-2001 trajectory is primarily marked by the experience of a continued international intervention with ambivalent implications for state- and institution-building. Afghanistan's democracy in the making is characterised by:

- fragmented elites, absence of political parties and consolidated political institutions;
- overshadowing insurgency and security challenges;
- high levels of corruption along with powerful, violent and often misogynist power brokers inside and outside political institutions;
- nascent and precarious, widely donor-dependent civil society and women's movement with limited societal outreach;
- endangered post-2001 gender achievements which might become once again a bargaining chip of political transition, be it via peace negotiations and/or power sharing agreements.

Quota provisions in place are a result of that very international intervention and generated the following key experiences:

- Gender quotas are generally accepted by civil society and many key political stakeholders

¹²⁵ Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

¹²⁶ There were mixed assessments in both focus group discussions on that matter with no consensus emerging, similarly there are different takes in the other interviews conducted with civil society activists - be they from women's organisations or electoral watchdogs. The role of political parties in electoral politics remains a controversial and polarising issue.

¹²⁷ Interview with MP Humaira Ayoubi as well as on similar lines with MP Shinkai Karokhail, Kabul, April 2015.

¹²⁸ Interviews with MPs Zakia Sangin and Raihana Azad, Kabul, April 2015.

¹²⁹ Opinion presented, among others, by electoral watchdog activist Naem Asghari from FEFA.

albeit continued resistance from a significant number of male MPs and government members.

- Women aspire for political leadership roles and participation at various levels of the polity.
- Women's political performance so far is of a mixed track record in terms of legislative work, government oversight and constituents' representation, but generally more acknowledged than that of male colleagues.
- The nature of electoral politics and political culture only allowed a very limited number of women parliamentarians to build a sustainable constituency and become part of the political mainstream.
- Electoral politics and institutional proceedings are marked by a high level of volatility and hybrid political institutions, leading to ambiguity and constant renegotiation of legislative agency and performance.
- Inroads in terms of space and agency carved out by women MPs remain precarious, contested and in need of outside solidarity and support.

Key challenges identified are, among others, the:

- high conflict intensity and insecurity along with a misogynist culture of key institutions and power brokers, negatively impacting on pro-women representation and interaction with constituencies.
- failure in achieving strategic essentialism due to intra-gender divisions, polarisation and heterogeneity on prioritising 'women' as quota-based constituency within a wider context of sustained political conflict and insurgency.

In the light of the above findings, it is fair to argue, first, that *gender quotas do work*, but that their impact can and should be increased substantially, to further democratisation processes and governance concerns, to address the disconnect between women's descriptive representation, promoting and safeguarding women's citizenship rights, issues and interests. Inroads have been made with the existing quota provisions in terms of (i) role models created, (ii) higher levels of cultural acceptance of women as politicians and leaders, (iii) higher levels of public recognition of women's political capacities and participatory rights within key political institutions (e.g. political parties, ministerial bureaucracies), along with public discourses in place. In addition, an increased and distinct gender consciousness of women politicians could be identified that more than often developed out of their experiences of marginalisation, rejection and attempts of relegation to a weaker political status and mandate - be it by fellow male MPs, ministerial bureaucrats and government members. This is paired with a desire to

problematised and potentially change androcentric political structures and practices, be they within parliament and/or political alliances/networks by a significant number of women MPs in Afghanistan.

Secondly, *quota modalities matter, as do electoral systems*, hence the rules of the game need to be right and subsequently reformed to allow for women's sustainable political mainstreaming. Most politicians, civil society activists, bureaucrats and experts interviewed in Afghanistan endorse the necessity of quotas. This goes along with a call by some for an equal growth in women's share in sociopolitical leadership positions in other areas and sectors of public affairs, such as the judiciary, ministerial bureaucracy, political parties etc. In addition, there is a need to address the elite capture of parliamentary politics and thus for intersectional concerns, i.e. more socioeconomic diversity among gender quota politicians, in particular in terms of class and rural-urban divide, among others. There was a call by some to increase gender quota provisions even to parity levels. Women parliamentarians would benefit from a provision of research and technical support for policy-making and legislation by either a functioning, qualified research service or personally assigned, proficient research assistants. While Afghanistan has gender quota provisions for government institutions in place, the implementation seems to be the problem. Highlighting the nexus of women's political effectiveness with other support mechanisms and institutional setups - including a greater linkage with supportive social movements and civil society organisations, this commitment to implement gender quota provisions across state institutions is key to develop a conducive environment and opportunity structure. Therefore, the frequent call by interview partners needs to be reiterated here for not only implementing existing gender quota provisions, but also for appointing/electing more women to leadership positions, be it in parliament (e.g. to chair commissions/committees), in government (e.g. to cabinet positions) or in ministerial bureaucracies' senior management.

Third, a paradigmatic shift is needed - moving beyond numeric concerns along with issues of presence and visibility towards (i) critically reviewing quota provisions and gender policy interventions and their impact on women's political empowerment and mainstreaming in addition to (ii) moving from a focus on individual women's agency and capacities towards structural and institutional constraints.

Fourth, as argued elsewhere (Fleschenberg and Bari 2015; Fleschenberg 2009) *strategic essentialism* is an important way forward. Women politicians, be they on gender quota or not, have to move beyond difference and competition within political parties/alliances/networks and state institutions. Transforming androcentrism and subsequent gender biases in terms of values, discourses and practices in key state institutions, like the parliament or the ministerial bureaucracy, can only come through collective voice and agency power of marginalised communities

(be they diverse as they may). Gender quota politicians could lead the way by fracturing, and ultimately breaking apart, patriarchal political institutional structures to deliver on women's substantive representation and political mainstreaming with diffusion effects for women's empowerment across society.

Having said all that, an important disclaimer is indispensable here. In Afghanistan's Second Transformation Decade, any further efforts and gains in women's substantive representation and political mainstreaming are inextricably linked and dependent on a continued commitment of national and international stakeholders towards women's rights and gender mainstreaming as recorded in numerous (inter-)national summits and policy compacts for Afghanistan post-2001. Post-2001 achievements in the field of women's rights and moves towards gender equality cannot once again become a bargaining chip in a power-sharing or peace deal with insurgent groups. Lasting peace cannot be based on the deliberate exclusion of and perpetuated injustices committed on half of the population. The current events in Kunduz and the deliberate campaign of destroying women's activist spaces, as well as harming women engaged in public affairs is indicative of the insurgents' potential commitments towards the Constitution and women's rights gains carved out so far. And peace negotiations, in the very sense of the word, cannot be undertaken if representatives and interests of half the population are excluded or up for negotiation. Compromise is dangerous, pinpoints High Peace Council member and MP Dr. Gulalai Noor Safi, arguing: "But it is important, that women are involved and know what is being discussed, how they negotiate and how much this [means] our rights will be lost. This is the thing. With this one needs to watch out".¹³⁰

Furthermore, a wavering attitude and communication by key stakeholders, be they national government or members of the international community, are dangerous signals towards those segments of the conflict configuration that were and are involved in gender based violence, inequality structures, discourses and practices. And this might ultimately lead to a further increase of violence against women active in public affairs.

"Ms. [Mustafawi] [then Acting Minister of Women Affairs] asked me to make commitments for women here, the first word I say here is that we have fulfilled as much as we could of our commitments and second, that we will stand on our commitments. Our first commitment is that we will protect and further consolidate the gains we have made under the wise leadership of H.E Hamid Karzai. This is our first commitment to you. Our main commitment to you is that we will bring a fundamental sustainable change in women's role in our society. This sustainable change requires a balance between transformation and continuity. The transformation will be based on the highest Islamic and national values. Our society does not stand against international values. If our women always stress on international values for women, they will face opposition in our society. (...) We need to fundamentally solidify women's role from within our culture and civilization. Our Constitution is clear and specific on women and thank God, it

is absolutely Islamic. So, our commitment is to implement the Constitution. By its implementation, God willing, the values and demands of our women will be realized".¹³¹

Therefore, one hopes that President Ghani and CEO Abdullah stick to their election commitment and are able to remind the international community to do the same, to not only stick, but also to safeguard post-2001 achievements, defend the red lines identified and foster the space available, thus proactively stemming against the tide of an ever shrinking space for women's political activism. There should be no question mark after the word women's rights in peace negotiations with insurgents, as argued and lobbied for by many women's activists and politicians.¹³² Gender quotas can only deliver in a conducive socioeconomic and political environment. Women's inroads into mainstream politics are far too volatile, precarious and limited, and, thus, continue to need gender quotas as a support mechanism to women's substantive representation and political mainstreaming. Quotas and commitments to furthering women's socioeconomic and political status made post-2001 cannot and should not become the bargaining chip for peace negotiations as peace cannot be built at the expense of half of the population.

131 In a 2014 lecture at Chatham House on *Fixing Failed States*. From Theory and Practice, President Ghani outlines that the status and concerns of women are "absolutely central" - be it in terms of establishing legal rights of women, rule of law and thus enabling the legal empowerment of women. Or be it in terms of women's economic empowerment and a subsequent decrease of poverty-induced gender based violence along with a necessary cultural change. For Ghani, this cultural change is not only related to male members of society, but also to women who might opt - or are forced - to perpetuate patriarchy to secure their own survival and basic needs given their disadvantageous socioeconomic status. (Ghani 2014).

132 As argued for by High Peace Council member and MP Dr. Gulalai Noor Safi, interviewed in Kabul, April 2015. For a detailed view on that issue with further empirical data please see the 2012 study on *Afghanistan's Transition in the Making* (accessible online: <https://www.boell.de/en/content/afghanistans-transition-making-perceptions-and-policy-strategies-women-parliamentarians>, as of 27.10.2015).

130 Interview conducted in Kabul, April 2015.

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