



The local level implementation of Afghanistan's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 – Women, peace and security

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PART 1: A PLAN

Introduction

On the front cover of Afghanistan's National Action Plan (NAP) on the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325¹ there appears an image of dozens of doves flying or standing in and above an urban square or park of some description. Some buildings and fences are almost visible in the background and a bucket, possibly once full of feed, sits in the bottom right corner. Presumably this image is meant to convey the themes of peace that are inherent to the ideas the plan is based upon. Unfortunately, just like the truth of the group of doves in a public space, the plan is at risk of being, in part, largely symbolic; all flap and feathers with little substantive change and inevitably leading towards an unpleasant mess to be cleared for the sake of promoting an image that in no way reflects reality.

This paper seeks to explore the history, aims and delivery record of the NAP in order to place in context a model for broadening its implementation. Now is a crucial time to examine the efficacy and impact of the NAP 1325, as we are approaching the mid-way point of the plan's implementation, which was designed to run from 2015 to 2022. The first four years, which expire at the end of 2018, were always envisaged in the formulation of the plan as the first phase, allowing an opportune moment for reflection. However, the purpose of this paper is not to provide a thorough or nuanced analysis of the NAP itself – a good amount of literature exists already to that end, including some referenced throughout this paper. Instead, the paper frames the plan and then proposes another ground-up lens through which to view this implementation and asks how various stakeholders might conceptualise this national plan in order to include more of the nation's citizens.

Main aims of NAP 1325

- Participation of women in the decision-making and executive levels of the civil service;
- Security and Peace and Reintegration;
- Women's active participation in national and provincial elections;
- Women's access to effective, active and accountable justice system;
- Health and psycho-social support for survivors of sexual and domestic violence throughout Afghanistan;
- Protection of women from all types of violence and discrimination;
- Provision of financial resources for activities related to women in emergency;
- Implementation of IDPs policy provisions related to UNSCR 1325;
- Put an end to impunity for violence against women (VAW) and related crimes;
- Engage boys and men in fighting Violence Against Women;
- Support and provide capacity building for civil society (particularly women's on UNSCR 1325 and women, peace, and security);
- Increase economic security for vulnerable women through increased employment opportunities;
- Increase access to education and higher education for girls and women, particularly for the internally displaced persons and returnees.

This paper is based on learning that has emerged from a multiyear engagement with women, peace and security issues in Afghanistan through the EU funded *Strengthening Women's Role in Peace* project delivered by International Alert and Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO). This

¹ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate of Human Rights and Women's International Affairs, Afghanistan's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 – Women, peace and security, Kabul: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2015, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/wps-afghanistan_national_action_plan_1325_0.pdf

learning has been complemented by a series of Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group discussions carried out in September and October 2018 with stakeholders associated with that project and issues surrounding the NAP more generally. All respondents have been anonymised for this publication.

It is also worth noting that this paper takes into account the entire NAP but specifically concentrates on the participation and protection pillars.

What is the NAP?

Afghanistan's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 – Women, peace and security (also referred to as National Action Plan, NAP and NAP 1325) is an official document published by the Afghan National Government in June 2015² detailing the ways in which the country plans to implement the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. This Security Council Resolution was issued in 2000 and has become the benchmark for global women, peace and security considerations.

Since its inception, there have been legitimate criticisms of the NAP with regard to the manner in which it was developed and the actors who were consulted during the drafting process.

*"The Afghan NAP officially claims to have followed a robust consultation process across the country, consulting with many relevant actors and agencies. However, many women's organisations and groups are still critical of the process. They believe only a small group of people were engaged and consulted. The process of consultations evolved around the elite women in Kabul and in major provinces where the security situation allowed for consultations to be held."*³

The accompanying Actions Matrix, too, can be critiqued for failing to offer a robust enough monitoring framework, although the plan is regularly subject to assessment from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) and a number of external evaluations have been published.

The NAP Actions Matrix provides some detail on what is exactly envisaged by the NAP 1325, with specific measurable aims and outcomes spelled out, however, the objectives and indicators contained within it belie the top-level perspective of those that fed into its design. The focus is overwhelmingly on policy reform, legislative initiatives and high-level political involvement. Phrases such as "executive levels", "leadership positions" and "government institutions"⁴ are commonplace throughout the strategic objectives, offering clues as to what kind of change the plan is geared towards. While change targeted at this level is indisputably necessary, it might also be seen as insufficient if it not accompanied by a wider interpretation of the spirit of the UNSCR 1325 to include everyday gendered experiences and problems.

An uneven delivery?

In the years since the introduction of Afghanistan's NAP on UNSCR 1325 many achievements have been realised for the women of the country, both in terms of representation and participation. These are detailed in the MFA's 2016 progress report.⁵ Progress, too, has occurred through the creation of women-led campaigns and achievement of legal reforms in pursuit of a more protection-focused environment. However, while these advances have happened even at some of the highest levels of

² Ibid.

³ W. Frogh, Afghanistan's National Action Plan: A 'wish list of many dreams', London: London School of Economics Centre for Women, Peace and Security, 2017, p.5, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/women-peace-security/assets/documents/2017/wps10Frogh.pdf>

⁴ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2015, Op. cit., pp.12–26.

⁵ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Progress report on women's status and empowerment and National Action Plan (NAP 1325), Kabul: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2016. It is worth noting that the 2017 report has been released (at <https://www.mfa.gov.af/reports-and-documents/2017-status-report-on-the-afghanistan-national-action-plan-on-unscr-1325-women-peace-and-security.html>), but is currently inaccessible on the MFA website.

Afghanistan's institutions, they have not necessarily been felt at the local level. The experience of Afghan women at the community level has often not recognisably changed at all in this period demonstrating a clear breakdown in the NAP's ambition of driving widespread change to benefit all women.

This unbalanced situation – in which, for example, a woman now serves as a deputy on Afghanistan's High Peace Council but many municipalities have experienced no change in the very low levels of female representation in local institutions – paints a very particular picture. This difference is probably most clearly evidenced when envisioning how women's political representation has occurred under the participation pillar of NAP 1325. In terms of elected representatives, women make up a much larger percentage of political participants at the national and provincial level (as a percentage of elected officials) than they do at the district level. This indicates a push for women's representation that is not only very top-down, but one that is also failing to make the impact it seeks beyond a small sub-section of Afghan women who are able to access and participate in high level political processes. There has been no trickledown effect in the case of Afghanistan's NAP 1325. The concern that follows from this analysis is that there is not enough space for genuine participation beyond a top-level façade.

One of the trends that International Alert identified in 2015 was this disconnect between some of the change and progress on gender equality that was being mandated and carried out at a high political level and in elite circles and the everyday experience of the majority of Afghan women. It is this thinking and evidence that led to the creation of a new model designed to push the impact of NAP 1325 beyond its current narrow boundaries.

To speak of local level implementation and the nationwide experience of women is to introduce an important and perhaps too rarely considered notion of what achievements towards the national plan might look like, but it is not intended to diminish or oppose any of the laudable top-level aims that currently exist. Nor is the aim to pretend that more local level implementations are never considered in the NAP 1325 document. Much of the narrative refers to the issues and experiences of Afghan women. For example, the text speaks of the need to "address the challenges women faced in the aftermath of war and conflict in Afghanistan"⁶ and the intention of "eliminating significant obstacles such as improper traditions, bias, and insecurity".⁷ Some objectives and indicators do show an understanding of a need to move beyond a purely legislative, institutional approach. However, the priorities and understandings of the mechanics of change are clear from the overwhelming majority of these top-level indicators.

The pertinent questions being proposed here are whether the plan is adequately balanced in the things it aims to do and whether it can achieve real change by focusing so heavily on a certain type of reform. Laws and policies can, and should, reflect the crucial priorities on UNSCR 1325, but translating those laws and policies in practice is a different challenge.

Implementation as experienced by Afghan women

In discussions around any progress on issues of women's rights, the NAP has received very little acknowledgement by Afghan women in the communities where we carried out research that informed this paper. This effect is less attributable to any critical analysis of the instruments or objectives of the plan than it is to an almost blanket lack of awareness. The research conducted by Alert revealed an almost total absence of familiarity with the plan or its constituent parts among both men and women in provinces across the country. A professor of law from Kandahar revealed that even among the students and faculty with which he works – a sample of people one might assume were more likely to be engaged with issues emerging from the NAP – there was almost zero understanding or recognition of the initiative. In another example, one of the project's researchers working in Laghman and Nangarhar provinces reported that in meetings with civil servants belonging to the Ministry of

⁶ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2015, Op. cit., p.1

⁷ Ibid, p.5

Women's Affairs there were significant gaps in awareness and understanding on the NAP 1325. This lack of knowledge was reflected in almost every interview conducted for this paper, with numerous Inclusive Women's Groups (IWGs) members and Male Champions reporting that the project's activities had introduced them to the concept of NAP 1325 for the first time and that no one they knew outside of the project had encountered it previously either.

A 2018 report from Care⁸ highlights the multiplicity of issues facing most Afghan women, especially outside of urban centres – access to justice, poverty, gender-based violence, lack of education and illiteracy. These issues are both representative of the failure to achieve some of the aims of the NAP and indicative of the reasons why most women remain unaware that those aims exist.

Of course, awareness of the NAP is not necessarily a prerequisite for it to achieve its aims. Most people, every day, feel the positive and negative effects of legislation, policy and processes that they have no idea exists. And there surely has been a strain of discourse, both public and private, around the role of women in society that has been ongoing in Afghanistan for decades. Even with specific training on gender equality issues which included reference to the NAP, however, many informants felt that very little was being delivered in the areas and circles of acquaintance in which they lived and worked to further the aims of the plan.

Security: “The Taliban are not okay”

The implementation of the NAP at the local level is affected by a range of variables, from awareness to resourcing to buy-in. One of the biggest factors affecting the space in which the NAP must be realised and, indeed, the effectiveness of methods such as the approach detailed here, is the overall political and security picture. Afghanistan remains an incredibly unstable country and an active conflict zone. Despite a recent temporary ceasefire agreement, prospects of a longer-term peace are uncertain. The Taliban controls approximately 40% of the country and this obviously affects what is possible in terms of progress on women, peace and security. As one academic paper points out, “security remains the number one challenge for the implementation of the NAP”.¹⁰

One of the interviewees from Takhar province described her 12-hour journey and how she had timed it to travel in daylight hours. When asked whether road safety or insurgents were the bigger risk she replied, “the road is okay, the Taliban are not okay”. One could be forgiven for extracting from this a metaphor for the fate of the NAP. It has not achieved what it aimed to do yet, especially beyond the scope of certain Kabul elite groups. Initiatives such as those described here, however, prove that there is a path for it to deliver more fully in the future. Much like the interviewee’s journey, there is always thought of the obstacles that might block that from happening. The road towards gender equality is okay, the Taliban are not okay.

It is worth noting this absence of understanding for the story it tells in and of itself but perhaps more so because of the way it relates to the Actions Matrix of the NAP. The NAP is judging its own success through a series of objectives and indicators that, as outlined previously, serve a very narrow interpretation of the women, peace and security agenda, and perhaps do not take local level experience or the rights of the majority of Afghan women into adequate consideration. Where that is not true, arguably, are in the small minority of actions that target awareness-raising, for example, in Objective 1.3.3, which talks of “increased awareness of institutions involved in peace and security on UNSCR 1325 (and its NAP)”.¹¹ The actions associated speak only of engaging the security sector and negotiators, therefore eschewing a broader understanding of what is necessary for peace. This a

⁸ ASK Training and Consulting, Implementation of Afghanistan's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 – Women, peace, and security, Assessment Report, Kabul: CARE International, 2018, https://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/NAP-1325-Assessment-Report_24022018.pdf

¹⁰ W. Frogh, 2017, Op. cit., p.9

¹¹ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2015, Op. cit., p.16

missed opportunity for awareness-raising in a context where there is such a minimal understanding of the UNSCR 1325 and its NAP.

Resistance to attitudinal, cultural and behavioural ideas and changes was frequently cited as one of the biggest obstacles to women's protection and participation by respondents from across the country. Women involved in trying to create change would speak about the gradual, generational shifts necessary to achieve their aims but often felt that these shifts were unsupported by any institutional efforts. One interviewee stated that certain parts of Nangarhar had been completely absent from planning and activities on women's rights and empowerment.

It is also worth separating, when we think about the implementation of the NAP 1325 at various levels, how we define successful implementation. Certainly the original NAP document offers somewhat specific goals to work towards and regular evaluation of the progress towards those objectives, both by the MFA that holds responsibility for evaluation (although the responsibility for implementation and associated budget allocation is spread across government) and by external sources. Those measures are important, offering as they do a consistent barometer against which to measure success. Questions about their design, rigour or the performance of the NAP against them are all valid, but they do not make these measures any less central and important to assessment.

A number of external evaluations and research projects have also contributed to this level of assessment. One researcher of NAP's implementation was critical of the lack of funding for implementation activities, but overall reflected positively on the progress where it had been financially possible. It was reported that the research revealed a good amount of buy-in and action from government bodies but that the achievements in the first phase of the plan often represented policy level initiatives and activities that would be within the ordinary functions of the implementing bodies. This assessment could be characterised as describing achievements to date as low hanging fruit.

It is worth considering the success of the NAP in other terms, too – both in terms of success against what might be defined as the 'spirit' of the document or, indeed, the spirit of UNSCR 1325. Another key point of consideration is the perception of success, especially from the communities it is supposed to serve. Many respondents through the course of this research indicated a belief that is reflected in much of the literature on women's rights in Afghanistan that progress was uneven and slow. The NAP – aside from the measurable deliverables – was conceived as a tool to aid equality and in that regard many perceive its efficacy as frustratingly poor.

PART 2: A MODEL

Empowering men and women to create change: Alert's model

International Alert has been working to create change at the local level in line with the ambitions of the NAP 1325. By viewing the context through a gender relational approach – whereby the constructed gendered roles and expectations that impact on men, women, boys and girls are understood differently (and that those groups themselves are not homogenous but rather impacted by intersectional considerations of factors such as age, class, ethnicity, political influence and sexual orientation) – Alert has worked since 2016 to create change through an innovative approach that works with both men and women to identify obstacles in their communities to women's protection and participation. The people involved with the project are engaged through a long series of training workshops in order to build skills and knowledge in areas such as gender equality, advocacy and policy-making, and then to apply that learning to the problems they had identified through a series of micro projects designed to create small interventions towards positive change. In this way, men and women would gain the skills, confidence and experience to work towards important changes in areas targeted by the NAP 1325.

"Focusing exclusively on women at the expense of all else has been described as 'women highlighting', the net result of which is to mention 'women' at every opportunity in written reports and speeches but actually doing very little to systematically address women's many needs...Though acknowledged in theory, the inclusion of men and boys in gender programming remains minimal, or poorly formulated."¹²

Inclusive Women's Groups and Male Champions

As part of this project, Alert and the Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO) worked in partnership to form groups in specific targeted districts across five provinces (Herat, Takhar, Nangarhar, Laghman and Kandahar). The groups consisted of female members, known collectively as IWGs, and male members, known as Male Champions. Originally the project had envisioned engaging the groups separately in order to deliver the initial workshops, offering the same content but delivering it in single gender sessions. Due to the strength of community relations and the willingness of the participants and, often, other stakeholders, it was actually possible for most of these sessions to be combined. In all but one district where the project was implemented, IWGs and Male Champions were able to work together relatively early on to learn together and then collaborate in order to discuss local issues and design micro projects. Participants almost exclusively described this level of cooperation and the decision-making processes it entailed in positive terms. IWG members and Male Champions alike reflected that they found it quite straightforward to reach a consensus when it came to the areas they would like to direct their attention, often because the local issues were so prominent as to become relatively obvious.

In order to build the skills, knowledge and confidence of these groups, the project offered a series of training workshops to the participants on topics such as gender equality, the UNSCR 1325 and the Afghan NAP, advocacy, dialogue, conflict mapping and policy-making skills. These sessions were designed to introduce participants to these concepts but also to equip them with a working knowledge of context and best practice. Almost all participants interviewed reflected favourably on the training as a whole, with IWG members placing more emphasis on the gender equality training and Male

¹² L. Cesaretti, S. Parto and H. Raha, Afghanistan's NAP 1325 (2015–2018): A critical assessment, Kabul: Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization, 2018, pp.12–13, <http://appro.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2018-05-13-Afghanistans-NAP-1325-A-Critical-Assessment.pdf>

Champions highlighting both that aspect and the evidence-based advocacy component. One IWG member from Takhar province remarked that, “our skills improved unbelievably”.

The groups were then invited to use their own knowledge and experience to analyse their local area and identify problems or blockages to progress on issues of women, peace and security. Project staff used an innovative participatory methodology in order to elicit and discuss these issues, aggregating the shared experiences of all the participants and feeding into the design of a series of micro projects that reflected this thinking and proposed interventions to address the issues that emerged. Once the micro project ideas had been fully developed, a small amount of funding was awarded to each group in order to deliver the idea, which trended towards very satisfactory outcomes.

It is important to note that these micro projects were not envisaged with any significant impact in mind. The resources available to the groups were large enough to allow for some flexibility and innovation in their approach. The desired outcome was not about the micro project *per se* but about delivering a real world experience of designing and delivering a targeted intervention in collaboration with colleagues. Despite this, many of the groups were able to utilise the limited resources provided to create genuine sustainable change and produce progress on the issues they had collectively decided to work on.

Opening up space

This model of cooperation between IWGs and Male Champions also allowed for tailored approaches to problem solving and relationship building. Many participants reported that men and women were able to access different people and places in pursuit of their common goals. In particular, this raised the potential for Male Champions to create the space for IWG members to operate in areas or meet with actors they would ordinarily not be able to. One Male Champion from Herat spoke of the way this worked to the group’s advantage in that women could access spaces that men could not in the community and men could access spaces that women could not, especially when it came to meeting officials. By recognising these dynamics and working together, the groups were able to not only collectively gain access but also to begin to open it up, for example by a Male Champion introducing an IWG member to an official who would not have otherwise met with her. This situation was described by one IWG member from Takhar: “In rural areas they (Male Champions) support us because alone women cannot talk to influential people.” Given the learning emerging from this work and the achievements that have been created by adopting a gender relational approach, the experience and understanding of both men and women might be considered important for organisations seeking to implement gender-related programming in the future.

Building links

Mechanisms were built into this work to connect these groups of IWG members and Male Champions with each other and with provincial and national level discussions on the women, peace and security agenda. Regional Coordination Committees (RCCs) were created at the provincial level in order to oversee each group’s progress and to understand the issues they were facing and working on. These RCCs served another role, too, in linking the local level activities with a national level forum designed to collect data and advocate on behalf of the participants. The project envisaged these linkages as creating a two-way conversation in which information, recommendations and feedback could feed into an influential national level body in Kabul and back to the participants on the ground. An example of this happening took place in Herat, where learning was emerging during the micro projects of the potential for this kind of work to be replicated effectively in even more remote locations. This was fed through the RCC to the national level forum in an effort to influence actors in Kabul who are sometimes quite removed from the situations being discussed. This model could potentially connect the institutions accountable for the NAP implementation with local level initiatives, possibly even utilising existing initiatives such as Provincial Peace Councils or Community Development Councils.

Sensitivity: “The peel of an almond”

Any work on gender issues in Afghanistan, and especially work that seeks to engage men and women directly at a local level, necessarily needs to consider the sensitivities of the cultural context it is operating in, as well as the particular local conflict dynamics it will interact with. Throughout this project, this was done through a number of methods.

Firstly the project staff conducted analyses of the contexts they were working in and built every aspect of the community-based work on strong relationships with local stakeholders and a trust born of constant communication and transparency. Importantly, the approach must reflect these concerns of sensitivity. Highlighting the boldest changes first or adopting adversarial stances can result in increased conflict. Instead this project worked slowly and carefully in promoting a gender-sensitive position. This approach was described by one RCC member as “putting the peel of an almond around a pistachio”, a phrase intended to represent the adaption of Alert’s work to the context and gradual introduction rather than any explicit deception.

Even with these considerations, issues were not entirely absent. One group described a local religious leader becoming agitated because he had interpreted the project as trying to “create distance between spouses”. The potential conflict was identified early, however, and resolved through dialogue. This example highlights the crucial need for regularly updated analysis and identification of potential areas of conflict.

Examples

As part of the research for this paper, Alert recorded two case studies (see Appendices 1 and 2) highlighting the real successes that this model can achieve. In Herat, IWG members and Male Champions were able to bring what was largely an invisibilised problem of substance abuse further into the open, discussing evidence-based and humane interventions with a variety of actors and highlighting the issue of women’s addiction in a way that rarely occurs. In Nangarhar, a motivated group tackled the issue of female access to education through an innovative public campaign that saw them advocate for specific changes through the media and also to influential local actors, including government officials.

These case studies illustrate some of the particular strengths of this model. In the first example, it is demonstrable how working with local level actors can help to identify important barriers to women’s protection, with men and women from the area understanding the contextual issues and social nuances better than could be achieved by outside actors. The second example highlights the impact that these groups can achieve, even with limited resources, and the ability to create genuine change that accompanies the coupling of an investment in training and accompaniment with participants’ genuine buy-in and enthusiasm.

Results

The model presented here is not complete or perfect. There were challenges faced throughout the process in identifying the right participants, managing expectations and ensuring clear lines of communication between the local, provincial and national level. We must analyse what impact, if any, our national level advocacy had. And, vitally, we must question if we reached far enough away from the centre to achieve inclusivity. Learning that has emerged from this research speaks to this issue, as the concept of project locations as ‘hubs’ that do not connect satisfactorily with women who live and work in more rural or remote geographic areas. This lesson combined with the participants’ sincere and oft repeated desire to “go further” have informed thinking around future evolutions of this model in which IWG members and Male Champions become trainers themselves and work in more remote locations.

However, while this critical analysis and iterative thinking is crucial, the strengths and achievements of the model as relevant to the NAP are often clear and well evidenced. Women and men report better understandings of gender issues, display the skills and confidence to work together on them, and often

appear now confident and experienced in not only doing so but in feeding their experiences into wider networks in order to amplify their voices. Viewing the architecture of this project as a framework through which to achieve the aims of both the UNSCR 1325 and the NAP at the local level is to create a new tool in the pursuit of those aims.

A diagnosis model

This micro project model offers something else to stakeholders interested in creating a truly holistic implementation of programming designed to achieve the aims of NAP 1325. Beyond the ground-level peacebuilders it seeks to empower, and the skills and experience the process offers them, it also creates a tool to pinpoint the precise issues serving as obstacles to the realisation of those aims. By engaging groups in a collaborative and participatory process to identify and agree upon the focal points for their micro project, this model is also eliciting insightful data concerning the local dynamics of an area with regards to women's participation and protection and also, in aggregate, a nuanced understanding of the most common and immediate issues.

Of course, this is not to pretend that the model serves as a thorough or complete diagnostic tool. There are often multiple issues impacting negatively on the women, peace and security agenda, and this model does not speak well to the 'second most important' layer. In addition, it assumes a level of accuracy and breadth of the participant's technical and contextual knowledge, which is often, but not always, present. Finally it produces results based on what the groups believe is possible with the resources they have. To take a practical example – many of the groups in this project selected access to education as the theme of their micro project. This does not mean that this is the sole – or even necessarily the biggest – barrier to gender equality, but it does mean that one can state with a reasonable level of assurance that by working on that issue any agency will be responding to a clearly evidenced need and contributing meaningfully to a local level issue in a manner that, if designed and measured appropriately, could serve to demonstrably promote equality.

Going a step further, it might even be possible to imagine these micro projects as specific objectives and indicators that complement the official ones listed in the NAP, but provide a barometer for the plan's success from a different perspective.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Very few voices are opposed to Afghanistan's NAP, and there are a great many actors dedicated to its successful implementation despite the critiques and issues of resourcing and security detailed in this paper. To succeed, however, it must be a plan for all Afghan women and one that is capable of influencing change at all levels. This paper has explored one model that attempts to bring some of the aims and ideals of the plan further away from a limited sphere of influence at the centre of national life. This model is not presented as a silver bullet or easily replicable template, but it is hoped that it will inspire further discussion on the methods that can be used to pursue the plan's goals for the largest amount of Afghan citizens.

The approach described here has created real advances in the pursuit of the goals of the NAP. Afghan men and women in five provinces are significantly better equipped to create change and have experience of working together to do so. The results demonstrate empowerment and genuine progress towards participation, in terms of building the capacity of women and increasing their access to spaces in collaboration with Male Champions, and protection through the issues the IWG groups focused on in their micro projects and the areas they identified for intervention.

This paper concludes with just one strong recommendation for the actors working on issues of women, peace and security in Afghanistan. Progress in this area should affect people as widely as possible. Therefore, it is hoped that Afghan government institutions, civil society, the donor community and the international community all consider more carefully the impact of the NAP at the local and district level and – using the models discussed here as a basis – commit to ways to make the process more inclusive and connected for all Afghan women.

APPENDICES

As part of a three-year project focused on women, peace and security issues delivered by International Alert and PTRO in five provinces in Afghanistan, a number of Inclusive Women's Groups (IWGs) were formed. These groups were made up of women from the areas and were partnered with local Male Champions who sought to work with the women to identify barriers to women's protection and participation in society.

Each group was given a small grant and the support of a professional team to design a micro project aimed at tackling some of these barriers. The projects aimed to build on the training the participants had undertaken on topics such as gender equality, advocacy skills and policy-making to enable the groups to develop skills and experience in creating real change in their communities. The following case studies represent examples of such micro projects.

Case study 1: Sultan Agha, Herat

Working to reduce women's substance abuse issues

Background

Reflecting the context-specific nature of the micro projects, this group identified an issue that was unique among all the women's groups involved in the project across the country.

In Herat, in the west of the country, a mixture of poverty, access to drugs and patterns of migration with parts of nearby Iran where addiction rates are also high, has created a situation where substance abuse issues are rising, especially among women. Treatment centres are under-resourced and social attitudes to addiction are often regressive. The IWG based in Sultan Agha selected this issue as the focus for its micro project.

"Our research suggested that 18,000 women may be suffering from addiction in the local area." Male Champion

Process

The IWGs and Male Champions worked together to identify the issue which they believed represented the single biggest barrier to women's protection and participation and thus to the implementation of the Afghan NAP on UNSCR 1325 – Women, peace and security. The team initially identified a shortlist of areas it was interested in working on including women's electoral participation, economic rights

"Addiction is not a crime, it is an illness." Local activist

and access to justice, but given the parameters of the project's resources and the relevance of the theme – which is hugely topical in Herat at the moment – group members collectively decided to focus on an issue that was affecting

more and more women, and where they felt they could have some impact. The IWG members and Male Champions all reflected that the decision-making process was cooperative and supportive, and they found it easy to work together.

The project team also found that as its members worked to deliver the activities and to achieve their objectives, attitudes in the community changed not just around the issues themselves but about the project more generally. Where originally their work had provoked some sceptical reactions and a lack of cooperation, the IWG members and Male Champions were able to build relationships with key individuals in the community, present their ideas transparently and slowly build support for the work they were proposing to do. This process offered valuable and replicable experience to members in how to engage with a community to create change.

"When a woman is sick, the whole family is sick." Male Champion

Project description

The group worked to deliver both awareness on the issue of addiction and also direct support to addicts and their families. The group began by conducting a piece of small-scale research in order to better understand the reach and causes of the problem. This highlighted a number of pathways to addiction and potential triggers including poverty, unemployment, lack of awareness around the dangers of drugs and the prevalence of narcotics in the area.

"My sister has been addicted for three years. Now, thanks to this training, I learned the basics of how to treat her." Workshop attendee

The team then delivered a narcotics awareness workshop three times on consecutive days to a varied audience of local actors. In these workshops, issues of addiction were raised and participants were encouraged to think and speak about the concerns that were becoming more prominent in the community. Some of the services and

treatments that were available were also explained.

Finally, the micro project initiated a number of local consultation committees including prominent local figures who could act to intervene in cases of addiction, referring people to the correct facilities and advising on care issues. Through this mechanism, the group has already been able to help two women and a young girl access treatment.

Throughout the process the team engaged a variety of local stakeholders including religious scholars, government authorities, local activists and elders. The Male Champions and IWG members have worked collaboratively and cooperatively, and the partnership has helped them speak to a wider audience.

Results

This micro project delivered results on two levels. Firstly, it achieved some real success on its own terms by tackling the issue of addiction in the community it focused on. Although the limitations upon the level of impact that could be reasonably expected of a single micro project were clear, the results were impressive nonetheless with participants creating new knowledge, reaching hundreds of people with their advocacy and messaging, and establishing sustainable community-led bodies to continue to work with addicts and their families.

While these results are commendable, equally important was the amount of experience and practical application of skills that emerged from the project for both IWG members and Male Champions. Participants were able to gain real world experience of organising and advocating for change, building key relationships (for example with local elders who were vital to the success of this project) and managing activities in order to achieve objectives. It is hoped that this real world experience will allow participants to work together in the future in order to identify and work on issues affecting women's protection and participation in their community.

Case study 2: Jalalabad, Nangarhar

Women's empowerment in intermediate and upper intermediate education

Background

Reflecting a commonly identified issue across our IWGs and Male Champions nationwide, this group focused its work on the issue of girls' and women's access to education in order to reflect the significant obstacle at the root of much of the absence of progress towards gender equality. Much like in many other locations, females trying to access education in Jalalabad, in the east of the country, are often subject to a number of security concerns, including constant harassment as they make their way to and from classes. The group identified a number of contributory factors that played into this issue, all facilitating the blocking of access to educational participation. These included a lack of reliable transport to get girls and women safely from their homes to the educational institutions, economic factors that kept education out of reach and, importantly, the pervading cultural norms that offered a kind of social permission for harassment that so often served to keep women off the street.

Process

IWG members and Male Champions, as in other areas where this project was implemented, worked closely together to design and implement this project. The group discussed different ideas upon which to base the micro project in the initial stages, eventually preparing two options, both of which were based on very similar ideas around this issue of harassment. There was unanimous agreement among the group members that this was the project they felt was the best use of their resources, and that unanimity and togetherness was reported to continue throughout the project, with decision-making described as straightforward and collaborative by a number of participants.

"Our advocacy through media wasn't part of our original plan but emerged through our hard work."

Male Champion

Project description

The project benefited from a genuine and remarkable sense of pride, duty and dedication displayed by the IWG members and Male Champions. Activities were varied and numerous as the group attempted to engage a number of actors and utilise a multifaceted strategy to achieve change for girls and women seeking to access education. The group targeted a variety of individuals and institutions with the aim of spotlighting the issues at the heart of this project. The group worked with elders, a key constituency in enacting any kind of social change, and with scholars, a group with an existing appreciation of the importance of education. Later, the group was able to organise a meeting at the Ministry of Education in order to represent the problems it had identified to local officials and to advocate for meaningful change in order to address them. The group received assurances from the deputy director of education for Nangarhar that he would support its aims.

Beyond this, the group designed and delivered a two-day workshop for a group of parents, influential local leaders and religious opinion makers, representing three important groups to work with in order to achieve its objectives. The workshop was a success, especially in creating consensus

"People in the communities where we worked were mostly supportive."

IWG member

among attendees on the compatibility of women's rights and education with religious teachings and texts.

From here the project was able, through the dedication of its members, to exceed expectations and launch an advocacy campaign that began to take on a greater public impact through engagement with the media. The participants invited media actors to a roundtable where they again spoke about the

barriers to female education and also about the work they had been doing to tackle these obstacles. This created significant media interest, with group members appearing on radio and television, including an appearance on a live broadcast, 4 o'clock and a programme on One TV.

"The most interesting thing we learned from workshops in the lead up to the project was how to conduct evidence-based advocacy and we used these methods in the project." Male Champion

These media appearances led to even more high-profile meetings, including with the governor of Nangarhar and the

commander of the police force, both of whom pledged their support, especially with regards to the issue of harassment which they promised to take steps to address.

Results

The group members involved in this project reflected positively on their experience and on the changes they witnessed as a result of the project. Importantly, shifts were recorded in the overall perception of female education: in the permissibility of it from a religious standpoint thanks to the actions of the religious scholars who were engaged, but also a new emphasis on its importance from a variety of actors, including government stakeholders.

The real success of the project, however, was the way in which the IWG members and Male Champions worked together to create, deliver and amplify a message that was designed to create real change for women and girls in their community. Using the skills of advocacy built prior to the micro project, they were able to go beyond what was planned or expected to create a campaign that effectively spoke to influential government officials and influenced public opinion.



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