

We Witness Violence Every Day:

An Assessment of the Conflict Dynamics and Peace Process in Afghanistan



Prepared by
The Liaison Office (TLO)

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About TLO

The Liaison Office (TLO) is an independent Afghan non-governmental organization established in 2003 and seeking to improve local governance, stability and security through systematic and institutionalized engagement with customary structures, local communities, and civil society groups. TLO's main areas of activity are research/analysis using the do-no harm approach; dialogue facilitation/peacebuilding; access to justice; and livelihood improvement. TLO's funders have included the United States Institute of Peace, the Open Society Institute, GIZ, UNHCR, USAID, and SDC.

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● Glossary

ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
CV	Curriculum vitae
FGD	Focus group discussion
Jirga	An ad hoc dispute resolution body, typically composed of non-state leaders such as tribal elders and/or religious figures.
Malik	In Afghanistan, a local leader responsible for managing relations between the local community and Afghan state. Depending upon the area, a malik may or may not be officially recognized.
Namus	Virtue observable to the community, particularly pertaining to Afghan women.
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
Pashtunwali	The set of values and actions – such as hospitality, equality, and (as appropriate) seeking revenge or forgiveness – that define the ideal Pashtun person.
SFCG	Search for Common Ground
Shura	Equivalent to “committee” or “council.”
TLO	The Liaison Office

● Executive Summary

Search for Common Ground (Search) has recently begun operations in Afghanistan, and commissioned The Liaison Office (TLO), a local NGO, to prepare this conflict assessment with specific focus on gender dimension of the conflict dynamics and peace process..

In addressing these questions, TLO carried out research in six areas: Bagram district (Parwan province), Kalakan district (Kabul province), Matoon (Khost provincial center), Pul-e Khumri (Baghlan provincial center), Shakar Dara district (Kabul province), and Surkh Rod district (Nangarhar province). From these six sites, TLO surveyed a total of 2,335 persons: 1,091 women, and 1,244 men, primarily during the latter part of August 2019. At each site, TLO further conducted eight key informant interviews (KIIs) with local peacebuilders (4f/4m), and four focus group discussions (2f/2m). Due to security challenges, TLO could not conduct qualitative research in Pul-e Khumri. As such, TLO conducted, in total, 40 KIIs (20f/20m), and 20 FGDs (10f/10m).

The Conflict

- Men and women seem to mostly agree that the conflict is getting worse, not better, though men proved perhaps slightly more optimistic. Regionally, significant variation occurred. A majority of respondents in Matoon, and large minority in Surkh Rod viewed the conflict in their area as deescalating, while persons in Pul-e Khumri and Bagram proved far more pessimistic.
- In each target area, persons view warlords and armed groups as main conflict actors, named by about 80% of survey respondents. Many fewer saw Afghan security forces the same way: about 20% (though significantly more in Matoon).
- In turn, respondents reported domestic violence and armed violence as the most common types of conflict. About 40% of persons named domestic violence as a concern, followed by armed conflict, named by about 38%, and street crime, named by about 31%. Armed conflict was not, however, among the top sources of conflict in either Matoon or Surkh Rod. Persons in Matoon particularly worried about kidnapping (56.0%), while persons in Surkh Rod particularly worried about violence against women (55.6%).
- Key informants strongly viewed underlying issues, such as lack of education and employment, as key sources of conflict, implying a certain narrative for each. In this formulation, lack of education leads to lack of proper moral formation, and hence the thoughtless perpetration of violent acts. Similarly, interviewees seemed to view unemployment as inhibiting life progress, and leading people to join armed groups out of desperation.
- According to both key informants and TLO's community survey, women are playing little if any active role in the conflict. 75.4% of survey respondents saw women as taking no part in the conflict, against 23.0% who saw them as playing a role of some kind. That said, a majority of female respondents (but not men) in both Surkh Rod (91.0%) and Pul-e Khumri (59.9%) did report women taking part in the conflict.

Dispute Resolution and Peace

- In each target area, parties generally begin the dispute resolution process by accessing (generally male) local elders or other non-state dispute resolution providers, then might turn to the state. Speaking broadly, non-state dispute resolution institutions appear to enjoy the most prestige in Matoon and Surkh Rod, while key informants in other areas proved more critical. Overall, women appeared to favor dispute resolution via non-state providers more so than did men, perhaps because non-state providers offer more privacy and discretion.
- Outside the state system, dispute resolution is highly decentralized, with unique institutions in each area. For example, in Bagram local elders appear to in some cases act as an intermediary for dispute parties seeking employment – a phenomenon not reported in other areas; while, in Matoon, but not elsewhere, some evidence indicates insurgent groups providing dispute resolution services.
- Most people in target areas would welcome peace, but remain skeptical that the current peace process can lead to a credible settlement. 47.9% of all respondents said they were “confident” or “very confident” in the peace process, while 31.6% stated they were “not confident” or had “no confidence at all.” This research found significant geographical variation in these sentiments. More than 70% of persons in Matoon, but less fewer than 40% of persons in Bagram, expressed confidence in the peace process.
- Most women are marginalized from dispute resolution and peace processes, except for a fairly small number of particularly empowered women’s leaders. Some key informants also reported that, even when women are nominally involved, their role is mostly symbolic, and lacking in decision-making authority. Survey respondents cited confinement in the home (64.8%), a lack of family permission (53.6%), and traditions against women’s leadership (49.9%) as the most common reasons for women’s marginalization in peace programming.

Peace Programming

- A majority of respondents (57.2%) in target areas were not aware of any ongoing peace programming, and only 24.7% reported participating in peace programming themselves. This programming has most prominently included community dialogues, in which 14.4% of respondents reported participating, and trainings and workshops, in which 11.0% of survey respondents reported participating – but with significant regional variation. In Shakar Dara, less than 20% of respondents had participated in peace programming. By contrast, about 40% of women in Surkh Rod, and more than 60% of men, had taken part in peace programming of some kind.
- Key informants most frequently recommended working with local elders and similar figures for peace programming, as well as (less often) youth. That said, few key informants discouraged working with other actors. Work with women, for example, would appear particularly possible in Surkh Rod and Shakar Dara.

- Key informants and survey respondents largely suggested programming to increase education/awareness/capacity, and to relieve unemployment. 72.4% of survey respondents recommended education/awareness raising programming, 60.3% recommended creating employment opportunities, and 56.3% suggested the elimination of gender inequality. Regionally, Surkh Rod varied from this pattern – there, 79.1% of all respondents, and more than 90% of women, recommended gender programming, making it the most frequent suggestion at that site.

Recommendations

- As of mid-November 2019, implementation of peacebuilding programming appears possible in five of six target areas, the exception being Pul-e Khumri. However, security incidents can occur even in areas perceived as enabling. SFCG should take measures to better ensure the security of staff and beneficiaries, such as diligently establishing and maintaining relations with community leaders, and performing regular security drills.
- Elders and other local leaders should probably constitute first peacebuilding partners, to be engaged for both implementation and advice on how to render programming culturally appropriate.
- Over time, programming can expand to other groups such as youth and women. Proceeding on the advice of community elders and similar figures is particularly important for the latter group, to promote community acceptance, as well as the safety of staff and beneficiaries.
- SFCG should consider a basket of programming, which pairs more traditional peace messaging with elements such as literacy promotion and job placement. Capacity building also stands out as a promising program area, particularly if more narrowly targeted at groups such as non-state dispute resolution providers.

“We Witness Violence Every Day”

An Assessment of the Conflict Dynamics and Peace Process in Afghanistan

1 Introduction

The Afghan conflict has proceeded, intermittently, for roughly 40 years. The current peacebuilding intervention in the country has continued for nearly as long: beginning in the mid-1980s among Afghan refugees in Pakistan, its current iteration began in the early 2000s, after the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. This intervention continues even as, by most measures, the Afghan conflict worsens.

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has recently begun operations in Afghanistan, and commissioned The Liaison Office (TLO), a local NGO, to prepare this study on conflict, dispute resolution, and peace programming in the country. Following Chapter 1 (Introduction), it covers:

- Chapter 2: The Conflict (main conflict actors, main conflict issues, women in the conflict);
- Chapter 3: Dispute Resolution and Peace (patterns of dispute resolution; women’s role in dispute resolution; dispute resolution case studies; the peace process); and
- Chapter 4: Peace Programming (past/current peace programming; pathways to peace; involving women in peace work).

Following the presentation of research findings, the report moves on to Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations, providing a summary of main findings, as well as recommendations for SFCG on geographical areas of implementation, programming partners, programming content, and subjects for future research. Box 1, following on page 10 following, summarizes this report’s conclusions and recommendations.

1.1 Methodology

In addressing these questions, TLO carried out research in six areas: Bagram district (Parwan province), Kalakan district (Kabul province), Matoon (Khost provincial center), Pul-e Khumri (Baghlan provincial center), Shakar Dara district (Kabul province), and Surkh Rod district (Nangarhar province). These sites encompass three rural areas (Bagram, Kalakan, and Shakar Dara), two smaller provincial centers (Matoon and Pul-e Khumri), and one site, Surkh Rod, that is itself largely rural, but immediately abutting one of Afghanistan’s largest urban centers, Jalalabad.

From these six sites, TLO interviewed a total of 2,335 persons, 1,091 women, and 1,244 men, primarily during the latter part of August 2019. The breakdown of interviewees at each research site is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Breakdown of Survey Respondents

District	Female Respondents	Survey Male Respondents	Survey Total by District
Bagram	147	253	400
Kalakan	199	188	387
Matoon	187	197	384
Pul-e Khumri	187	197	384
Shakar Dara	215	178	393
Surkh Rod	156	231	387
Total	1091	1224	2335

In addition to its community survey, TLO carried out a total of 48 key informant interviews, and 20 focus group discussions, primarily in September 2019. At five of six provincial research sites, TLO conducted eight key informant interviews (4m/4f per site; total 40), and four focus groups (2m/2f per site; total 20). TLO also conducted an additional eight key informant interviews with leaders of peacebuilding institutions in Kabul. A localized, but sharp, deterioration in security prevented key informant interviews and focus group discussions in Pul-e Khumri, which were to have taken place in early September.

Before and during analysis of field data, TLO further carried out desk research covering relevant academic and gray literature. In formulating report recommendations, the primary report author, an international consultant, also included some material based on his years of experience implementing peace programming in Afghanistan.

Finally, TLO, while including material in this report based upon the perceptions of local respondents, neither necessarily agrees with those perceptions, nor represents SFCG's agreement with those perceptions.

Methodological Limitations

This methodology thus presents a number of limitations. First, and most obviously, the material on Pul-e Khumri presented below does not possess the same level of detail or nuance as in other areas, given the more limited field research there. Second, this report's community survey somewhat over-samples men, and under-samples women. This problem particularly affects data from Bagram and Surkh Rod districts. Third, key informants and focus-group discussants, especially among women, appear more educated and empowered than "average" people in the community. Their insights proved invaluable for this report, but, especially in instances where they diverge from the community survey, may not represent a widespread local point of view. That said, key informants and the community survey, thankfully, usually reinforced one another.

And, fourth and finally, local peacebuilders constituted the main pool of key informants. As such, the views and experiences of those affiliated with insurgent groups, or otherwise actively engaged in armed conflict, would appear to be under-represented.

Box 1: Summary of Findings

The Conflict

- Men and women seem to mostly agree that the conflict is getting worse, not better, though men proved perhaps slightly more optimistic.
- In each target area, persons view warlords and armed groups as main conflict actors.
- In turn, they reported domestic violence and armed violence as the most common types of conflict.
- Key informants strongly viewed underlying issues, such as lack of education and employment, as key sources of conflict.
- According to both key informants and TLO's community survey, women are playing little if any active role in the conflict.

Dispute Resolution and Peace

- In each target area, parties generally begin the dispute resolution process by accessing (male) local elders or other non-state dispute resolution providers, then might turn to the state.
- Outside the state system, dispute resolution is highly decentralized, with unique institutions in each area.
- Most persons in target areas would seem to welcome peace, but remain skeptical that the current peace process can lead to a credible settlement.
- Most women are marginalized in dispute resolution processes, except perhaps for a fairly small number of particularly empowered women's leaders.

Peace Programming

- Key informants most frequently recommended working with local elders and similar figures for peace programming, as well as (less often) youth.
- Persons in most areas have largely not taken part in peace programming to this point, but men were more likely than women to have participated.
- Key informants and survey respondents largely suggested programming to increase education/awareness/capacity, and to relieve unemployment.

Recommendations

- As of mid-November 2019, implementation of peacebuilding programming appears possible in five of six target areas, the exception being Pul-e Khumri.
- Elders and other local leaders should probably constitute first peacebuilding partners, to be engaged for both implementation and advice on how to render programming culturally appropriate.



- Working with women and girls will prove more challenging (even as need is greater), and should only be undertaken in partnership with local leaders, both women and men.
- SFCG should consider a basket of programming, which pairs more traditional peace messaging with elements such as literacy promotion and job placement. Capacity building also stands out as a promising program area, particularly if more narrowly targeted at groups such as non-state dispute resolution providers.

2 The Conflict

A plurality of respondents view the conflict in their area as getting worse. When asked if their community had been able to deescalate conflict in the past 18 months, 27.8% said their community had done so, while 46.5% stated that their community had not (most of the remainder were neutral on the question, while TLO also received a small number (less than 1%) of blank responses). Box 2 provides more information on how these responses broke down along gender and regional lines.

At all research sites, key informants and survey respondents further named armed groups and warlords as main conflict drivers, and, at most sites, domestic violence and armed violence as main conflict issues. They in turn seemed to view the conflict holistically – as a sort of sickness affecting society in general, as opposed to a limited conflict among a discrete set of actors. Or, put another way, many interviewees described widespread social problems (particularly illiteracy and unemployment) as causing conflict, as opposed to specific grievances, local rivalries, or political factors. However, most interviewees for this study viewed women as little involved in the conflict – conflict victims, not perpetrators.

Box 2: The State of the Conflict

Men and Women: The State of the Conflict

At the top level, men and women seem to mostly agree that the conflict is getting worse, though men proved perhaps slightly more optimistic. 25.9% of women reported that their community had deescalated conflict, against 29.6% of men who reported the same thing; 48.5% of women, and 44.7% of men reported that violence in their communities had not deescalated.

Regional Variation: The State of the Conflict

Regional variation in the state of the conflict, however, appears substantial. In Pul-e Khumri, seemingly the worst affected area, only 13.3% reported that their community had been able to deescalate conflict. By contrast, in Matoon, the most optimistic area, 55.2% of respondents said their community had deescalated conflict.

Remaining districts fell in between, with Surkh Rod (37.5% had deescalated conflict) and Shakar Dara (30.0%) appearing relatively optimistic, and Kalakan (17.3%) and Bagram (14.3%) relatively pessimistic.

2.1 Main Conflict Actors

At each research location, respondents overwhelmingly identified three main conflict actors: “power lords”/warlords, armed groups (both named by about 80% of respondents), and political

parties (named by about 40%). These groups have in common, of course, that they wield force outside of state authority. Many fewer respondents named government security forces as a source of conflict – less than 20%.

The main conflict actors are these Taliban, power holders, war lords, political parties, and those who are working for other countries. (Interview with MN, Female Shura Member, Shakar Dara)

Insecurity doesn't allow you to do any civic activity in the community. Power-holders control everything, both government and civil society organizations. The law is not implemented equally in our society. It is only implemented on poor people; those who are in power or working in high ranking positions are above the law. These inequalities and misbehaviors are the cause of [our] challenges and have negative consequences. (Interview with AA, Male Activist, Surkh Rod)

Unknown armed people want to bring anarchy in society. Security is [bad due to] anti-government groups. The Taliban and others – they pave the grounds for violence. (Interview with H, Female Shura Member, Bagram)

All other choices also received less than 20% support in TLO's community survey. This includes about 12% of respondents who named religious or ethnic leaders as a source of conflict – potentially important to note, as these groups are prime targets for peacebuilding, both as partners and (potentially) as beneficiaries.

Of note, however, interviewees did not habitually draw sharp distinctions between pro- and anti-government armed groups, or the various armed groups operating under a nominally pro- or anti-state aegis. Rather, as in the first quote, they tended to mention various armed groups in the same breath, which could imply a focus more on the violence inflicted, than on the ostensible affiliation of the group inflicting that violence.

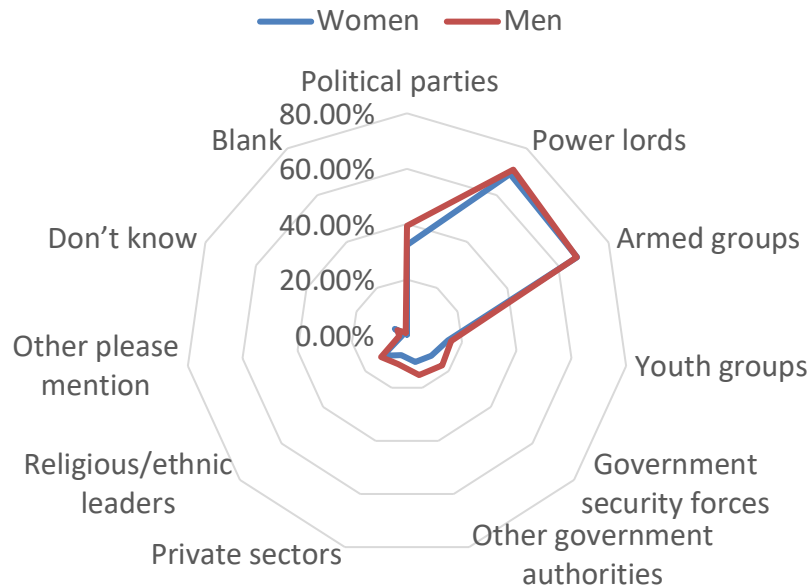
Box 3 provides further information on how research subjects described conflict parties, by gender and by region.

Box 3: Conflict Actors

Men and Women: Conflict Actors

Not much difference emerged in men's and women's identified conflict actors. For many responses, men were slightly more likely than women to identify the named category as a problem. For the most part, this was a difference of 1-2%, except for "government authorities", "government security forces" and "political parties" – where men were 3-5% more likely to identify the named category as a problem. Chart 1, below, provides a visual representation of this information.

Chart 1: Conflict Actors in the Community (n=2355 (1091f, 1244m))



Regional Variation: Conflict Actors

For the most part descriptions of main conflict actors remain consistent across research locations. However, TLO’s research did uncover at least three variations: while respondents at each site, for example, reported “armed groups” as a major problem, the identity of these groups did vary somewhat from place to place.

In Bagram (and perhaps Surkh Rod, where interviewees reported airstrikes of unclear origin), international forces continue to be active, and interviewees alleged these forces are inflicting significant civilian casualties:

US troops are bombing the gardens during the night; last night they bombarded Qalandar Khel and many other areas. They are shooting from Bagram base towards outside. They do this because, sometimes, Taliban are attacking them from these areas; therefore, they bombard our villages. Which I think this a very disturbing act done by foreign troops, because, in some areas, they mistakenly kill innocent people and cause damage to people’s houses. (Meeting Notes, Men’s FGD-1, Bagram, 12 September 2019)

Matoon, for its part, also seems to present a conflict profile somewhat unlike other areas. On the one hand, among all research sites, Matoon survey respondents were the most likely to say that their community had been able to deescalate conflict in the past 18 months, as above.

Matoon respondents also named government entities as a cause of conflict far more than did respondents in other areas: 46.6% of Matoon persons named “government security forces” as a cause of conflict, and 31.3% named “other government forces” (in Surkh Rod, by contrast, fewer than 1% gave these responses). These responses could reflect a view that the conflict in Khost is essentially local, with pro- and anti-government groups sharing the blame for exacerbating the situation. The latter interpretation could also explain why Khost respondents saw the conflict as deescalating – that is, that the community retains some capacity to manage the conflict.

Finally, perceptions of foreign powers exacerbating the Afghan conflict seemed to vary from place to place as well. Although the issue came up in a number of areas, it emerged the most strongly in Bagram (as well as among key informants at the Kabul level). The following quotes come from a focus group of men in Bagram, and a programming partner in Kabul.

1. *[It is] Pakistan that prevents peace in Afghanistan. I don't know which country Pakistan works for.*
[...]
3. *Chechen people also train the Taliban and prevent peace in our country.*
4. *Iran also intervenes in the internal affairs of our country. All our youth living in Iran have become addicted and they are prevented from progressing [in their lives].¹ (Meeting Notes, Men's Focus Group, Bagram)*

External pressure brings them together. I remember that Hazaras, Pashtuns, Tajiks, hated each other but, when the Russians invaded Afghanistan, people come together and fought together for their country, not considering any ethnic issues. But Pakistan and some other countries disunited them again. (Interview with Key Informant ARK, Kabul).

2.2 Main Sources of Conflict

For both women and men, domestic violence was the most frequently expressed concern, and violence related to armed conflict was the second most. As will also be discussed in the next section, on women in the conflict, interviewees did not necessarily see these issues as entirely distinct. Rather, they tended to see causes of conflict as influencing one another. In the first quote below, for example, the key informant implicitly connects unemployment and ongoing violence, while the second also depicts economic deprivation and violence as interrelated, each seeming to reinforce the other. In the third quote, meanwhile, the interviewee depicts illiteracy as leading

¹ Throughout, this report will present material from focus group discussions in italics, and material from key informant interviews without italics. Focus group discussion notes, while appearing reasonably complete, might at certain points combine responses from various FGD participants. As such, TLO has included FGD notes in italics to preserve their distinction from key informant interviews.

to the persistence of harmful traditions, again both influenced by, and influencing, a situation of violence.

Japan and Afghanistan gained their freedom in a single day, but Japan is one of the most advanced countries in the world at the moment and Afghanistan is struggling for its political and economic development. The government [of Japan] prefers peace and security for its people now; people are educated [and] they live peacefully . . .and all contribute to their country's development. But in our country people are afraid of their neighborhoods, and people do not feel the government is capable of bringing peace. There are many unemployed youth, and every day there are explosions and suicide attacks. Every day, people are killed but no one cares to work for peace – so this is why our country is one the undeveloped countries, and does not progress.

“All the [focus group discussion] members agree.” (Meeting Notes, Men's Focus Group Participants, Bagram)

Yes we witness violence every day: violence against women, violence against children, ethnic wars, and sometimes misuse of children for [adults'] own benefit. One day, I remember someone coming into our office [because] her husband was selling her son. So she came to us to prevent her husband from selling her child. That's how people are afflicted with problems. (Interview with MS, Female Activist, Kalakan)

Because such things [violence against women, illiteracy, and discrimination] exist in our society, uneducated and illiterate people are unable to work. Also, following bad traditions, they oppress their wives, and do not allow the women to work: this can have very bad effects on our society and families. When a woman is beaten and abused by her husband, she is harmed and all her children get affected by it too. Eventually they will go into society as dangerous and unhealthy [mentally] individuals. Which can cause chaos in society. (Interview with MS, Female Activist, Shakar Dara)

TLO's community survey largely reinforces these impressions. When asked to name most pressing community problems, respondents most frequently named domestic violence (named by 39.8%), followed by violence related to armed groups (37.9%), street crime (30.8%), and violence against women (29.8%). With that said, while consistent on a number of points, differences did emerge between women and men's perceptions, as well as perceptions in the various research sites. Box 4 further explores these variations in survey data.

As already mentioned, however, interviewees did not really seem to view these sources of conflict in isolation. Rather, they more often tended to situate them against a backdrop of societal ill-health. In this narrative, the conflict has emerged because of underlying problems in Afghan society, which the conflict itself then exacerbates. In this regard, interviewees in particular mentioned “illiteracy” and “unemployment.” Interviewees also seemed to use these terms broadly: “illiteracy” to mean not simply unable to read and write, but also poorly informed,

and lacking proper moral constitution; and “unemployment” to mean not only joblessness, but also inability to meet basic needs, and fulfill basic obligations. Both of these terms, then, seem to depict a life poorly lived with conflict, again, emerging from, and contributing to, these conditions. The first two quotes below come from female key informants in Matoon, the third from a men’s focus group discussion in Surkh Rod, and the fourth from a female shura member in Kalakan.

Illiteracy [and] lack of knowledge about the law regarding women’s rights created many violent conflicts and affected the community/district. (Interview with Z.J., Female Shura Official, Matoon)

The very first cause for the creation of social problems is poverty, because people [who are poor] are capable of doing anything to remove their families’ hunger. (Interview with K., Female Activist, Matoon)

- *Men and women are left out of education. We see that war has prevented most of our young people, boys and girls, from [going to] school and they are left out of their education. Now, these illiterate people are the main cause of problems in the community and because of [these problems] the community can’t improve.*
- *The rise of economic problems and the unemployment level in the country led young people to migrate.*
- *Unemployment led many young people to be eaten by dolphins in the sea and smuggle drugs from other countries. That’s why, currently, most of them are addicted. Some of them have now joined armed groups for the sake of money. If we want to solve this problem, the government must reduce the unemployment rate.*
- *4: The economy of the country has not been strengthened in the last two decades. Therefore, most of our young people are leaving the country, joining armed groups, or begging on the street. (Men’s Focus Group Discussion, Surkh Rod)*

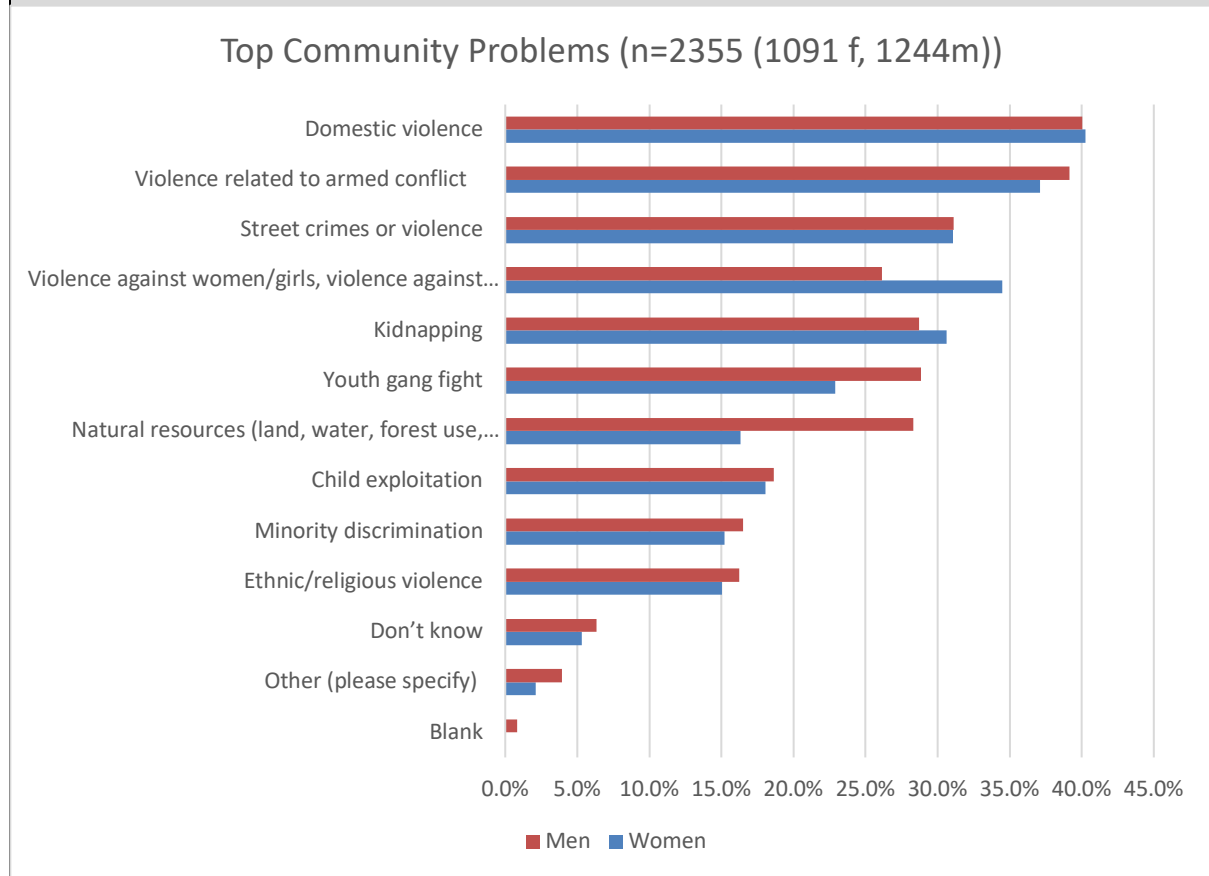
One of the main reasons [for conflict] could be not following up on cases of violence and conflict, because there are not proper judicial organs. Unemployment and poverty, [and] lack of education can also influence [the conflict]. – Interview with R., Female Shura Member, Kalakan.

Box 4 provides further information on how these responses broke down along gender and regional lines.

Box 4: Sources of Conflict

Men and Women: Sources of Conflict

Following armed group violence and domestic violence, women’s and men’s responses diverge slightly. Women noted “violence against women” (included with some other vulnerable groups) as their third greatest concern (named by 34.5% of women but 26.1% of men). Men proved more likely than women to mention natural resource conflicts (28.3% of men vs. 16.3% of women). The response could reflect a situation where men are more likely than women to be directly involved in resource disputes, as the former are primary property owners. Chart 2, below, provides further information on these responses.



Regional Variation: Sources of Conflict

In four out of six districts, respondents selected domestic violence and violence related to armed groups as among their top three responses (see Table 2 below). With that said, TLO’s data also indicate some regional variation.

In Matoon and Surkh Rod, respondents did not select armed group violence as a main concern. Rather, Matoon respondents expressed unusually high levels of concern regarding kidnapping and child exploitation, while Surkh Rod respondents worried more about youth gangs and natural resource conflict (as well as violence against women, a category which may of course have significant overlap with domestic violence). Such responses may reflect these communities being

more successful than others in deescalating armed group violence, and so other concerns have become more prominent in people’s minds. At the least, in these communities, ability to deescalate violence loosely correlates with armed conflict not appearing as prominently among main community conflict issues. That said, armed conflict has certainly not disappeared as a concern in these communities. As a focus group discussant put it in Matoon, “Insecurity is an issue here. The situation is getting better with the efforts of district officials, but [it is still] not the best.” (Women’s FGD 2, Matoon).

In Bagram and Kalakan, meanwhile, respondents indicated greater than average concern with street crime. By contrast, in the two provincial centers examined, Matoon and Pul-e Khumri, despite being relatively urban, street crime did not emerge as a main concern (though other sorts of crime, as above, did emerge as a significant concern in Matoon). Table 2 provides additional information on these regional responses.

Table 2: Regional Variation: Sources of Conflict, Top Responses	
Bagram (n=400 (147f))	Violence related to armed groups (51.3%), street crime (42.3%), domestic violence (41.8%)
Kalakan (n=387 (199f))	Domestic violence (41.1%), violence related to armed groups (31.27%), street crime (28.4%)
Matoon (n=384 (187f))	Kidnapping (56.0%), domestic violence (45.1%), child exploitation (44.8%)
Pul-e Khumri (n=384 (187f))	Violence related to armed groups (46.5%), domestic violence (36.7%), violence against women (31.8%)
Shakar Dara (n=393 (215f))	Domestic violence (42.5%), violence related to armed groups (36.64%), violence against women (25.2%)
Surkh Rod (n=387 (156f))	Violence against women (55.6%), natural resource conflicts (36.2%), youth gangs (33.9%)

2.3 Women in the Conflict

Few respondents described women as taking an active part in the Afghan conflict. No key informant provided an example of women acting as combatants, recruiters, or in other violent

roles. 75.4% of respondents, rather, reported women playing no part in the conflict, against 23.0% who reported women playing a role of some kind.

Other literature has described Afghan women as playing a significant role “behind the scenes”² – in recruiting, motivating, indoctrinating, if not necessarily in fighting. However, here, just 2.9% of respondents described women as motivating violence, and only 3.0% stated that women motivate their family members to engage in violence. A few reasons might account for this difference. Most obviously, women could be more involved in the conflict at some research sites than others – a possibility further discussed in the box below on regional variation in the data. It could be that, for the most part, women at these six particular sites, but not others, remain mostly on the conflict’s sidelines. However, the responses TLO received on women’s involvement could also reflect a limitation in this study’s methodology. In particular, in Ahmadi & Lakhani (2016), the authors took pains to access families involved in the insurgency, and these families sometimes depicted women as playing a more active conflict role. . The present study, however, has focused on local peacebuilders and peace activists. Perhaps, if this study had focused more on key informants known to be contributing to armed conflict, it would have found greater women’s involvement not apparent to those outside immediate conflict networks.

With that caveat in mind, interviewees for this study much more strongly described women as conflict victims, not perpetrators. And, on the whole, both survey respondents and key informants seemed to view women, not men, as Afghanistan’s primary victims of violence. 41.5% of respondents reported that violent conflict afflicts women more than men, against 16.5% who said violence affects men more than women (32.9% reported that conflict affects both men and women equally).

Key informants, in turn, described women as subject to violence in at least three interconnected ways. First, women suffer directly from domestic violence. Second, women suffer indirectly – if a male family member is killed in the fighting, his female relatives will also suffer. And, third, a more violent society, in general, may lead to more violence in the home, in particular. Thus, as with many interviewees’ conflict analysis, they did not necessarily draw sharp distinctions between various types of violence, and seemed to instead view them, collectively, as signs of the same underlying societal dysfunction.

- *Women are the real victims of any violence, especially [if] they are deprived of the right to education*
- *Many rights of women are violated, and not provided to them, but provided for men*
- *As mentioned by our friend, women are the real victims of violence and crimes and they always suffer from it*

² See, e.g., Ahmadi & Lakhani, “Afghan Women and Violent Extremism: Colluding, Perpetrating, or Preventing?”, United States Institute of Peace: 2016 (“Women play a diverse range of roles in violent extremism in Afghanistan—as they do around the world—not only as peacebuilders but also as recruiters, sympathizers, perpetrators, and preventers. . . Roles and motivations vary, but what is clear is that the construct of disempowered victims simply does not hold true for all women involved.”)

- The *friends* [fellow FGD members] are right I agree to them
- Both men and women are affected equally by problems and violence, but in some specific cases women are affected more
- Violence against women has affected women more than men. But other problems and issues in the community have affected both equally, or, even, men are affected more than women
- I agree with all participants who say women are affected more. (Meeting Notes, Women’s Focus Group Discussion, Surkh Rod)

There is less effect of the violence on men: they can get rid of problems at any time. . . [Violence] hurts Women the most, while they are suffering different types of violence. (Interview with GH, Male Activist, Shakar Dara)

When [there is] regional and ethnic violence in a place, men are more likely to be affected than women. And unemployment [and] poverty lead to domestic violence. . . Because we are living in [a conflict] which has gone on for 40 years with women and children as the primary victims. (Interview with MA, Female Activist, Shakar Dara)

It is obvious that the effects of violence on society are negative, and it affects both men and women in different ways. When there is violence and conflict in the communities, people are deprived of many of their rights. Men cannot find employment, [and] they don’t have access to education: all these factors leads them to join the terrorist/opposition groups. Women, on the other hand, are affected [also]: they will be the victims of violence at home by their husbands and families. These all are connected with each other, because women and men live in the same society. (Interview with R, Female Shura Member, Kalakan)

Box 5, below, provides additional analysis of report data along gender and regional lines.

Box 5: Women in the Conflict

Men and Women: Views on Women in the Conflict

Across almost all research sites (see next box), significant majorities of both men and women reported women not being active participants in the conflict, though with women proving more likely to assert their active role: among female respondents, 34.2% reported women taking part in the Afghan conflict, while 13.5% of men held this view.

With that said, even as men and women appear to more-or-less agree on women’s role in conflict (or lack thereof), underlying views here nevertheless appear highly gendered. In this implied (and at times explicit) narrative, women exist as the main victims of violence and, to an even greater extent, men as the main perpetrators – emphasizing, perhaps, women’s passivity against men’s agency. The first quote below comes from the same focus group discussion also quoted immediately above, which participants there emphasizing women as victims of violence, while the second comes from a male activist in Kalakan.

- *Men are not affected [by conflict] at all*
- *Men are also affected but they are much less [affected] compared to women*
- *Men are the [perpetrators], so they are not affected by violence. But they can be affected by other incidents like family issues. (Meeting Notes, Women’s Focus Group Discussion, Surkh Rod)*

Men are mostly affected by war because the parties to the conflict are men. . . Women are affected from a psychological perspective by violent conflict. (Interview with K, Male Activist, Kalakan)

Regional Variation: Views on Women in the Conflict

For the most part, key informants and survey respondents returned similar responses at each site – but with some dramatic variation among male and female respondents in a few locations. In particular, respondents in Pul-e Khumri and Surkh Rod proved the most likely to state women are involved in the Afghan conflict: 32.6% and 45.0% did so, respectively. These results, however, again appear highly gendered. For their part, a majority of women in Pul-e Khumri stated affirmatively that women are involved in the conflict. There, 59.9% reported women as being involved – though only 6.6% of men agreed. This difference was even more stark in Surkh Rod: fully 91.0% of Surkh Rod female respondents saw women as involved in the conflict, against 13.9% of men.

By contrast, in Matoon just 5.21% of all respondents stated that women are involved in the conflict, the lowest percentage at any research site. This percentage included precisely 1 woman – or 0.53% of female respondents in Matoon overall.

3 Dispute Resolution and Peace

Dispute resolution appears to follow a similar pattern throughout the target area. In most cases, parties will take their first recourse to (male) local elders or other accessible, non-state dispute resolution providers. If that first attempt at dispute resolution fails, or if the case is perceived as particularly “serious”, parties will then approach state institutions. In “women’s cases”, parties will sometimes, but not always, approach female dispute resolution providers, a small number of which appear present throughout the study area. Both state and non-state dispute resolution providers seem to enjoy broad-based credibility. With that said, outside of the state sector, what particular dispute resolution resources are present does vary from area to area.

And, finally, the peace process seems, on the whole, to enjoy a kind of wary support: most persons appear to favor the peace process in the abstract, while remaining more skeptical of the government to bring that process to a credible inclusion – though, on this issue, local attitudes can vary a great deal.

3.1 Patterns of Dispute Resolution

Key informants described a more or less consistent pattern of dispute resolution. At the broadest level, disputants will bring their issues to the local non-state authorities (e.g. elders) most accessible to them. If those authorities cannot resolve the dispute, then the parties will access other resources, potentially including the Afghan State. With that said, two exceptions broadly apply to this overall pattern: for “bigger” issues, parties might take the matter directly to state authorities. And, if the dispute involves “family” issues (see below for more on how interviewees appeared to define this category), then dispute parties will prefer to avoid state justice if at all possible.

First, we go and see the Village Malik³, and let him know the problem in order to solve it. But, if the issue is bigger, we refer [it] to the district [government] and let them know about it. But, by all means, our first try is with the Village Malik to solve the problem. If this doesn’t work out, the next step is the district and we ask the district officials to solve [the problem]. (Interview with GH, Male Activist, Shakar Dara)

Negotiation and settlement take place as the first stage in every case. And if [the issue] is not solved, they mediate it with a third party or take it to the legal system. Mediation by a third party could be improved if it were given priority by the legal system.

Yes, both formal and informal dispute resolution mechanisms are active, and people refer cases to both. Family issues are usually referred to the informal system, like the Jirga and

³ In Afghanistan, a local leader responsible for managing relations between the local community and Afghan state. Depending upon the area, a Malik may or may not be officially recognized.

Shura. They can be improved if the legal system formalizes them or refers small cases to them.
(Female Focus Group Participants, Surkh Rod)

Council, tribal jirgas, village elders, district and police – these are the other mechanisms used in our area for conflict resolution. The effectiveness of each is different: we use the [forum] which works best for a specific incident or conflict. For instance, if it is family disputes, we mostly solve [the issue] through community elders. If [the issue] is something legal, we contact the district [office] and the police which are helpful to some extent. (Interview with GJ, Shura Official, Matoon)

Box 6 further elaborates on how responses differed (or did not differ) by gender and location.

Box 6: Preferred Dispute Resolution Institutions

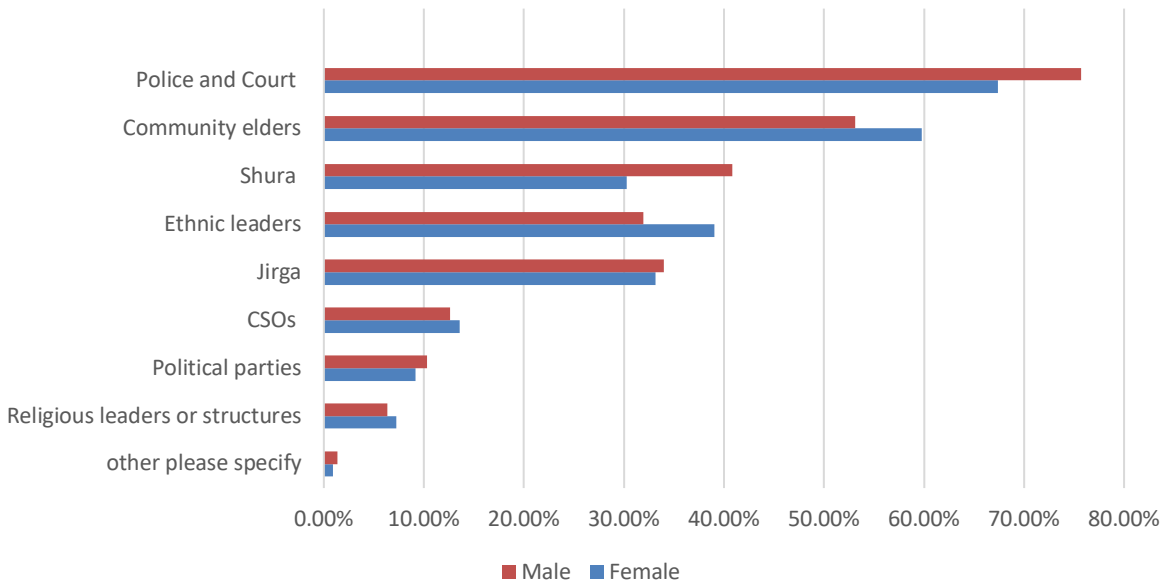
Men and Women: Preferred Dispute Resolution Institutions

Overall, women’s and men’s preference for dispute resolution institution appears similar, if not quite the same. Before further examination of these responses, one should bear in mind that disputes in Afghanistan often cycle through several dispute resolution providers, and the pattern of accessing dispute resolution (e.g. local elders, then perhaps the state) remains descriptive – parties generally enjoy some latitude in deciding which dispute resolution providers to access, in what order. As such, the below chart, providing responses on where dispute parties would seek help, should probably be interpreted to represent where respondents would be willing, in certain circumstances, to seek help, not which dispute resolution resource they would reach out to in the first instance.

With that said, both men and women would be most willing to access the police and courts, followed by community elders. After these options, women would prefer to access ethnic leaders (followed by shuras), while men would prefer to access shuras (followed by ethnic leaders). For other dispute resolution options, women and men’s relative preferences came out as identical.

Overall, then, these results arguably reemphasize that parties can access a number of trusted dispute resolution options, but that, compared to some earlier research findings, the state dispute resolution system may be emerging as a respected option, rather than a last resort. This result is especially notable for women, who would be more likely than men to face censure for taking a dispute outside the confines of the immediate family. Annex 2, on women’s dispute resolution, also discusses this issue, and how women might be willing, and able, to access outside dispute resolution resources in some situations. Chart 3, below, further details these responses.

Chart 3: If you face any dispute, where do you go for help?
(n=2335 (1091f, 1244m))



Regional Variation: Preferred Dispute Resolution Institutions

For the most part, TLO’s data uncovered limited variation in dispute resolution preference among research sites. In five of the six areas examined, survey respondents chose police/courts and community elders as their preferred dispute resolution providers, in that order.

Surkh Rod, however, came out somewhat differently. There, respondents chose community elders as their preferred option, followed by the jirga – police and courts came in third. With that said, key informants did not necessarily describe dispute resolution in their area in significantly different terms than dispute resolution elsewhere.

[If faced with handling a dispute], I will try my best to solve the mentioned problem through our customs and [in the] traditional way. And if it has any criminal aspect, so we will refer to legal departments. And if it has any civil aspect, so we will try to solve that through a Jirga. (Interview with A., Female Activist, Surkh Rod)

Nevertheless, dispute resolution may follow a similar pattern in the various research areas, but in practice remains highly localized. The various non-state dispute resolution options available will vary from place to place (one shura is not necessarily like another), as will the position of the local judiciary and other government institutions. As such, while overall patterns of dispute resolution appear similar, the particular actors involved, and their capacities, can significantly differ from one site to another.

3.1.1 Credibility of Dispute Resolution Institutions

Most respondents positively assessed the effectiveness of a number of local dispute resolution institutions, while remaining more skeptical of others. In particular, on a four-level scale from “very effective” to “not at all effective”, more than 70% of respondents thought Community Elders, Shuras, and Courts as either “effective” or “very effective” for dispute resolution. On balance, no clear preference here emerges between state and non-state dispute resolution entities. Prior research has however tended to indicate a clearer preference for non-state providers.⁴ While these data require more examination, this preliminary result could thus indicate improved court performance, or, at least, improved public perception of court activities. The following quote represents one of the relatively rare instances of formal justice system criticism that TLO encountered:

I would prefer the informal justice system because Jirgas are very good and, most of the time, they make good decisions regarding our problem. However, they are a bit male dominated – but, still, compared to the formal justice mechanism, they are easy to access, cheap, and less time-consuming. (Interview with K, Female Activist, Matoon)

Respondents expressed strong skepticism, by contrast, with ethnicity-based structures, Civil Society Groups, and Political Parties. For the former two groupings, around 45% of respondents thought these bodies “effective” or “very effective”, while around 15% judged them “not at all effective.” For Political Parties, around 38% thought them effective for dispute resolution, while around 25% judged them as “not at all effective.” One should probably also bear in mind, that – apart from dispute resolution – around 40% of respondents identified political parties as a conflict actor, but did not describe, say, elders or religious leaders in the same way. Table 3 further details these responses, while Annex 1 discusses the broader social role dispute resolution providers are playing in community governance.

Table 3: Effective and Ineffective Dispute Resolution Institutions (n=2355 (1091f, 1244m))

	"Very Effective" or "Effective"	"Not at All Effective"	All Blank
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⁴ See, e.g., Noah Coburn, “Informal Justice and the International Community in Afghanistan”, United States Institute of Peace: 2013, at 3 (“While few Afghans have confidence in the state’s ability to deliver justice through the formal court system, the informal justice sector in Afghanistan provides a pervasive and effective, if sometimes flawed, venue for the majority of the Afghan population to access justice.”)

	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Community Elders	71.9%	72.4%	4.1%	3.9%	4.2%	4.3%
Shura	72.5%	70.4%	3.9%	6.3%	1.9%	1.9%
Courts	71.7%	70.7%	5.3%	6.4%	4.0%	4.4%
Religious platform/structures/leaders	53.5%	53.2%	8.2%	9.9%	6.6%	5.4%
Legal Structures	47.4%	56.6%	11.2%	5.9%	7.9%	6.1%
Community Mediation	50.4%	48.5%	8.0%	7.5%	6.4%	4.7%
Traditional ethnic platform/structures	43.0%	47.7%	15.0%	13.3%	8.2%	5.9%
Civil Society Groups	40.5%	47.4%	15.1%	18.4%	8.2%	5.4%
Political Parties	37.6%	38.0%	21.5%	27.9%	8.5%	6.6%
Other	1.9%	2.7%	4.7%	0.01%	22.2%	21.3%

3.2 The Peace Process

TLO collected quantitative data for this report before the suspension of US-Taliban talks on 7 September. However, some qualitative data⁵ come from after the suspension of these talks – and in most cases do not depart significantly from quantitative findings. It is thus unclear if the suspension of these talks affected Afghan views on the peace process per se. Conceivably, with 40 years of conflict, talks, talks-about-talks etc. Afghan opinion on peace issues is fairly difficult to move one way or the other. Alternatively, persons in Afghanistan may experience the conflict in highly localized terms, with national processes not affecting their opinion to the same extent. For example, all qualitative interviews in Bagram were conducted before the suspension of talks; persons in this area appeared nevertheless skeptical of the peace process. By contrast, all key

⁵ In particular, qualitative data collected before 7 September includes: all key informant interviews in Bagram; four key informant interviews in Kalakan; and three key informant interviews in Shakar Dara. Data collected after 7 September thus includes: all focus group discussions; all key informant interviews in Matoon and Surkh Rod; and three key informant interviews in Kalakan. Please also note that some key informant interview sheets were filled out, but not dated, a particular problem in Shakar Dara.

informant interviews in Matoon took place after the suspension of talks – but persons there appeared optimistic regarding the peace process. Perhaps not coincidentally, persons in Bagram reported conflict in their local area to be accelerating, while persons in Matoon reported the conflict in their area to be decelerating.

That said, the data do indicate – occasionally in the same key informant – a mix of optimism and pessimism. Most interviewees favored peace in the abstract, but often with significant reservations. In particular, a number of respondents expressed apprehension that the peace process, as then formulated, might be somewhat superficial or pretextual. Unlike dialogue at the national level, only a small number of interviewees mentioned potential loss of rights, or losing the gains Afghanistan has made since 2001, though a few did.

Yes, I strongly believe that people are looking forward to stability and prosperity in Afghanistan, because everyone is tired of the war. The whole country, including women, children and men, wants to live in peace. (Interview with SMZ, Male Shura Official, Matoon)

No, because if peace activities had been properly organized by the Afghan government, today the Taliban would have negotiated with them rather than negotiating with the USA and other countries. . . I would ask the government, “Why have you spent 369 million [Afghanis] on a national advisory Jirga, but we don’t have any solid outcome from it. What was the result?” (Interview with AS, Male Activist, Bagram)

As I told you, the people are ready for peace any time, but these activities should not be symbolic. Afghan society has been suffering for the last four decades. People want peace; they don’t want to be killed for achieving nothing. Today most of our youth are killed but with no result. (Interview with WZ, Male Shura Official, Surkh Rod)

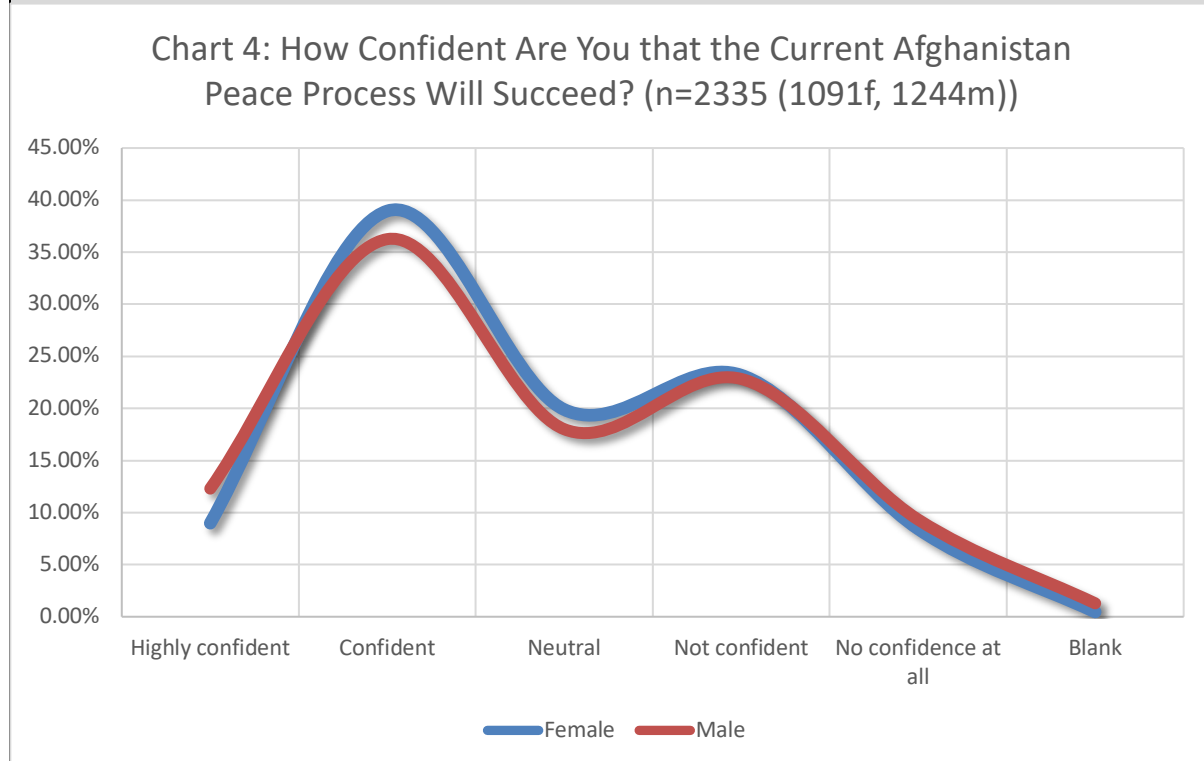
I am personally not that hopeful because the peace talks are [causing women to be deprived of] their rights and this kind of peace will bring nothing good for women. If it protects women's rights, then we will support it, and we should be part of this process. (Interview with R, Female Shura Member, Kalakan)

Quantitative data reinforce these sentiments. On the one hand, 47.9% of respondents said they were “confident” or “highly confident” in the peace process. On the other, 31.6% of respondents said they are “not confident” or have “no confidence at all” (most of the remainder were neutral; fewer than 1% of respondents returned blank responses). Box 7, in turn, lays out gender and regional variation in these responses.

Box 7: Confidence in the Afghan Peace Process

Men and Women: Confidence in the Afghan Peace Process

Overall, men’s and women’s responses came back as nearly identical. 48.0% of women said they were “confident” or “highly confident” in the process, as did 48.6% of men. 31.6% of women said they were “not confident” or had “no confidence at all”, as did 32.2% of men. As such, despite worries over such issues as women’s rights, responses to the peace process at research sites do not at this time appear to depend very much on gender. Chart 4, below, illustrates this pattern of response.



Regional Variation: Confidence in the Afghan Peace Process

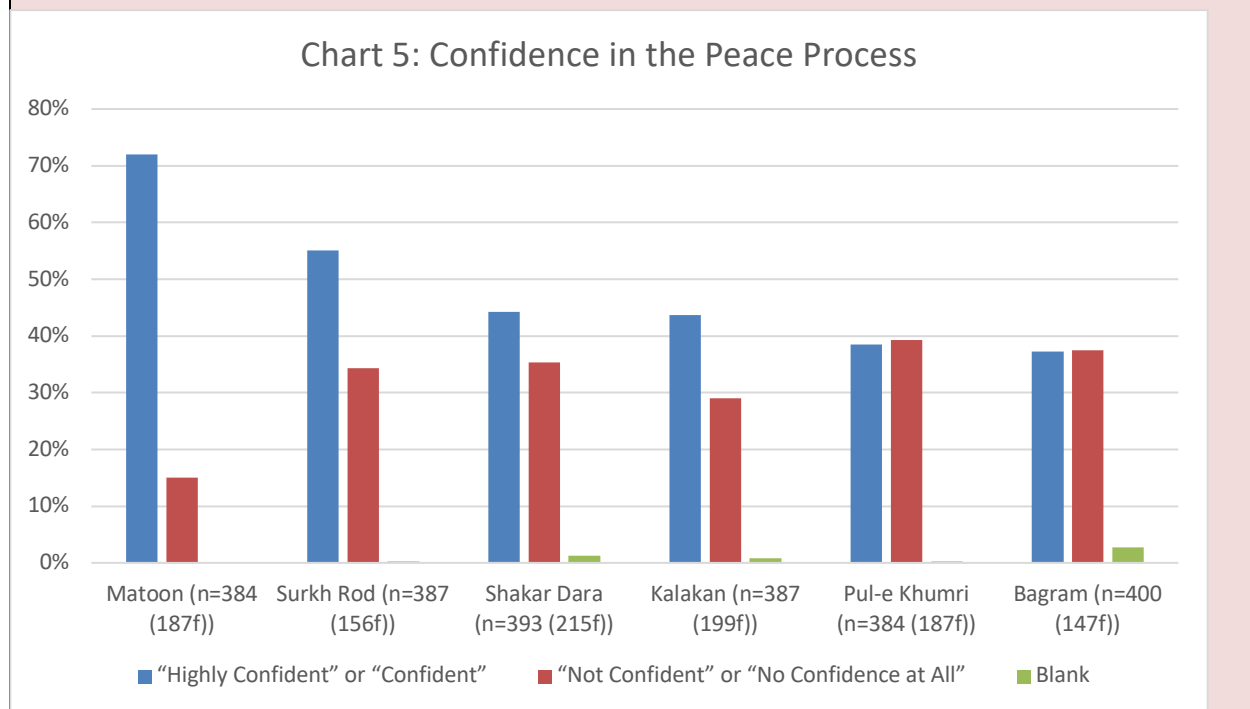
By contrast, people’s confidence in the peace process varies considerably from region to region. In those regions least likely to note armed conflict as a problem – Matoon and Surkh Rod – confidence in the peace process appears highest. More than 70% of Matoon respondents and nearly 55% of Surkh Rod respondents stated they were “confident” or “highly confident” in the peace process. In other regions, around 40% of persons expressed “confidence” or “high confidence” (see Chart 5 below).

Perhaps not coincidentally, Matoon supplied the only instance, at least in this research, of a community successfully intervening with conflict parties to deescalate fighting. That said, even this Matoon focus group did not express unalloyed optimism – even as they described an instance of de-escalation, they also stated that they could do nothing to control the fighting. This

mix of responses could indicate that successful de-escalation remains exceptional in the community, or that, while community members could sometimes convince armed groups to deescalate in the short term, they did not feel confident in influencing the course of the conflict overall.

*There were many casualties among government security forces and irresponsible armed groups but, with mediation and the involvement of people from the village, [the fighting] ended . . . In [this] case, government and opposition forces and villagers were also impartially involved. . . In [this] case [fighting between government security forces and anti-government elements], voluntarily, the people of the village asked the armed groups to stop the fight. . . Everyone was happy they felt good that the [fighting] was solved without any bad consequences. . . [Nevertheless] we see the government and Taliban fighting, but we cannot do anything to solve it, we have a very bad feeling.
(Meeting Notes, Women’s FGD, Matoon)*

By contrast, respondents in Pul-e Khumri and Bagram expressed the least confidence. The former has been nearly surrounded by insurgent forces for months⁶, while the latter witnesses ongoing conflict between not just insurgent and ostensibly pro-government forces, but also, as above, international troops. Chart 5, below, lays out these responses further.



⁶ For further analysis, see, e.g., Ali & Ruttig, “Taliban attacks on Kunduz and Pul-e Khumri: Symbolic operations”, Afghanistan Analysts Network: 11 September 2019 (available at: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/taliban-attacks-on-kunduz-and-pul-e-khumri-symbolic-operations/>).

3.3 Women's Role in Dispute Resolution and Peace

On the whole, women appear to be playing a limited role in dispute resolution and peace activities. For most disputes, men (whether outside or inside government) will serve as dispute resolution providers.

As I said people, [I] trust the current practice of jirgas. In some cases their decisions are not fair because the mediators are [unduly] influenced by the conflict parties. Or, sometimes, they don't have the knowledge of [how to make] fair decisions, thus leading to unfair decisions. Overall, people trust this practice and are happy to refer their cases to it. Women are not allowed to participate except in a few cases. If they participate, then they should have a guardian. (Interview with WZ, Male Shura Member, Surkh Rod)

With that said, exceptions to this general observation can be seen. First, interviewees considered some disputes as appropriate for women to address. These disputes involve women as dispute parties, and especially issues that women are more likely than men to experience – such as deprivation of education.

Yes, we solved a few problems. One [was] in the Dulhan village about a girl who had finished the ninth grade and had dropped out of further education due to the lack of a high school in their village. So giving hand in hand with each other, [we rented] a car [so]this girl can come to school. And this tradition turns from one car to three cars, and in this way many other girls go to school. (Interview with MS, Female Shura Member, Shakar Dara)

Women and men both perform different types of peacebuilding roles. Women are gathered to find solution for any conflict or issue related to women and social life. However, men are mostly involved in such [dispute resolution and peace] activities. Men have more power than women. Mostly women are invited for symbolic representation for political or profit purposes. (Interview with S, Male Shura Member, Surkh Rod).

Second, some women at research sites do appear engaged in dispute resolution and peacebuilding. They primarily address the “women's” issues mentioned above, but these individuals seem to be composed of women with an above-average level of education or social standing. In the first two quotes, two women's focus group discussants in Surkh Rod, one educated and the other not, briefly relate their dispute resolution experiences. That said, as the third quote below indicates, male dispute resolution providers may remain somewhat skeptical of the efforts of their female colleagues.

Yes, I have a job in a government school and, when there is a conflict in the school, a committee of teachers including both genders comes together and solves that problem. I have taken part in resolving such cases and I felt very good about [it].

No, I am not educated and [my] family does not allow me to be involved in any activity at the community level [such as peacebuilding]. (Meeting Notes, Female Focus Group, Surkh Rod)

It is very effective if we have both men and women in all our sutures and activities related to the peace process. But, unfortunately, we do not have many women involved in these structures and mechanisms. Even the small number of women who are in some of these mechanisms is symbolic and, those [women] who really fight – they struggle to stay in those mechanisms because men don't really want women to be involved in such activates. So, men are mostly the decision makers and the people who participate in this activity, [but], fortunately, we have many good men that really contribute and I can see their efforts. (Interview with R, Male Activist, Kalakan)

Annex 2, as already mentioned, provides additional information on local dispute resolution institutions with women members.

The community survey reinforced these observations. There, the largest number of respondents (64.8%) cited women's confinement in the home as a factor preventing women from engaging in peace activities, followed by related factors such as a lack of family permission (53.6%), and traditions against women's leadership (49.9%).

Many fewer cite religious reasons (27.3%), lack of awareness (27.6%), or lack of civic education (24.8%) as impediments to women's participation. On the one hand, the first response indicates that most survey participants did not view women's confinement as religiously required, even as it might remain culturally required otherwise – and, of course, categories of "religion" and "culture" can significantly overlap. On the other, the latter two responses, especially, might call into question the effectiveness of some frequently-used NGO strategies – such as awareness raising or civic education – in promoting women's peace involvement as such. Box 8 provides additional information on how these responses varied by gender and region.

Finally, one might observe that both survey respondents and key informants tended to prefer women's confinement within the home or lack of permission from family as reasons for their lack of participation in peace programming – but without necessarily stating why women might remain confined, or families might deny permission. As above, survey respondents also named traditions against women's leadership as a programming barrier. Hamid Khan (2015) has supplied some additional analysis on these practices in Afghanistan, in a paper that focuses on Pashtun populations, but arguably applies more generally:

Another particularly prominent way to maintain a female's namus⁷ is the routine use of purdah, or seclusion. The rationale for such a stringent measure stems from the importance

⁷ Virtue observable in the community.

ascribed within Pashtunwali⁸ to how other Pashtuns evaluate one’s behavior. A woman who is almost invisible to others cannot shame herself. The combination of patrilineage issues with this seclusion—considered a vital means of ensuring namus—often relegates women to lowly and isolated social status.⁹

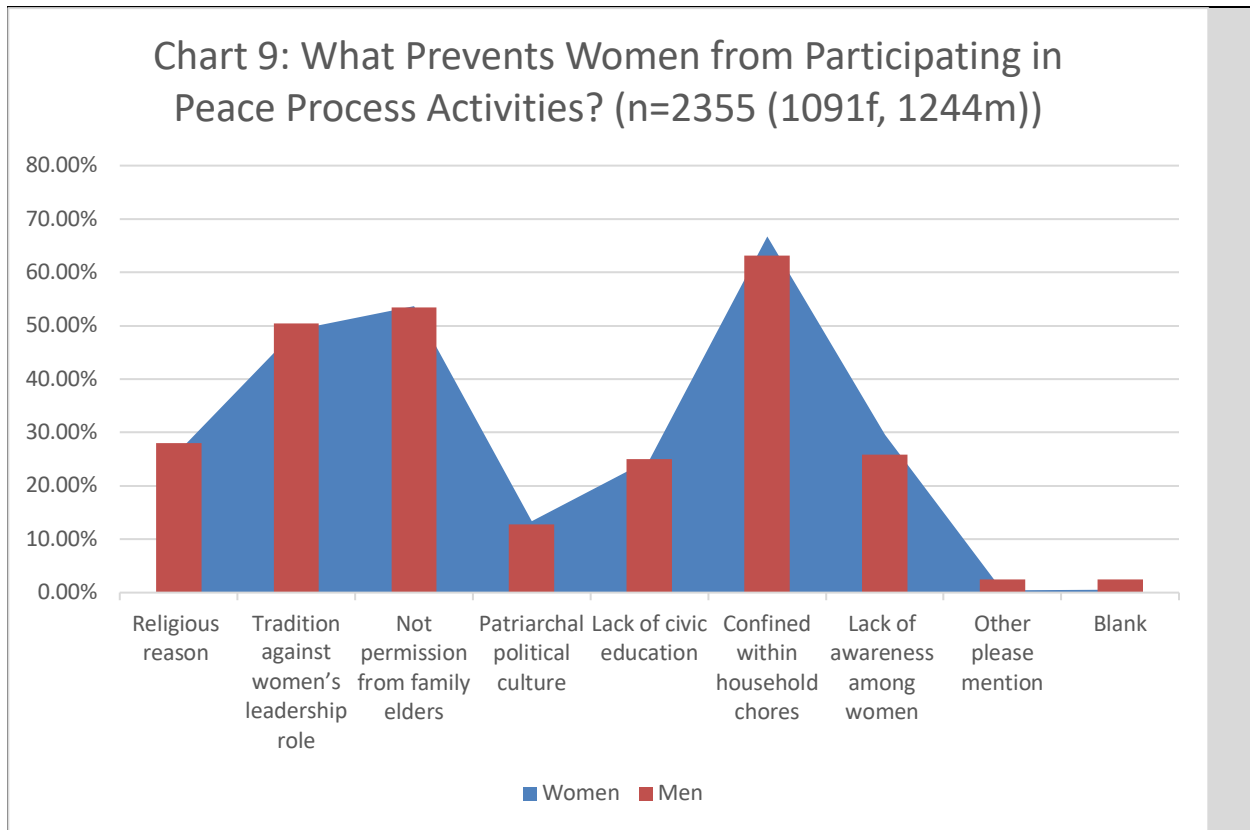
Box 8: Factors Holding Back Women’s Peace Involvement

Women and Men: Barriers to Women’s Participation

In data gathered for this report, women and men almost entirely agreed on the factors limiting the former’s participation in peace activities. Both named seclusion within the home, followed by lack of family permission, and traditions against leadership as main reasons. In the greatest disagreement, however, women proved nearly 4% more likely than men to name lack of awareness as a limiting factor – 29.6% of women, versus 25.8% of men. Chart 9 further illustrates these findings.

⁸ The set of values and actions – such as hospitality, equality, and (as appropriate) seeking revenge or forgiveness – that define the ideal Pashtun person. For additional reflection on Pashtunwali, See Lutz Rzehak, “Doing Pashto: Pashtunwali as the ideal of honourable behaviour and tribal life among the Pashtuns”, Afghanistan Analysts’ Network: 2011 (available at: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/publication/aan-papers/pashtunwali-tribal-life-and-behaviour-among-the-pashtuns/>).

⁹ Hamid Khan, “Islamic Law, Customary Law, and Afghan Informal Justice”, at 3, United States Institute of Peace: 2015 (available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/03/islamic-law-customary-law-and-afghan-informal-justice>).



Regional Variations: Barriers to Women's Participation

For the most part, regional variation in stated barriers to women's participation appears fairly minor. In five of the six areas examined, respondents cited confinement within the home as the main factor holding back women's peace involvement; and, in four of six areas, respondents cited lack of family permission as the next main factor.

Matoon, however, presents a slightly different picture. There, the largest (71.1%) proportion of respondents cited local traditions as the main factor holding back women's involvement in peacebuilding, followed by lack of permission from family (62.2%). As above, given the seeming overlap of these survey choices, differences between Matoon and other areas may reflect local preferences in formulating the situation of women, rather than underlying circumstances that significantly differs from other study areas.

4 Peace Programming

Most persons in target areas (the exception being Surkh Rod) have not taken part in peace programming. Nevertheless, across research sites, key informants and survey respondents suggested working with elders and similar local community leaders, as well as, at some research sites, youth. They further recommended education/awareness raising as effective peacebuilding initiatives, while disfavoring community dialogues.

4.1 Past/Current Peace Programming

A majority of respondents (57.2%) in target areas were not aware of any ongoing peace programming, and only 24.7% reported participating in peace programming themselves. That said, past or current peace programming in target areas can be divided into roughly three categories. First, project- or event-based programming in which a variety of community persons may participate. This programming has most prominently included community dialogue programming (in which 14.4% of survey respondents had participated), followed by trainings and workshops (in which 11.0% of survey respondents had participated).

Second, the present research has also indicated the ongoing operation of a number of organizations working on peace issues. These organizations include local shuras, which might perform a variety of functions, including dispute resolution and peace promotion. Other organizations are, however, present as well.¹⁰

I am a member of the Nangarhar University Peace Center; it has around 400 members. About half of the members are female and [we] have a separate part for their activities. Women are involved in peace activities and other issues related to women's rights. Most of these women are studying at this university. They are very active and play a significant role in [the work of the Peace Center]. . . Training on conflict resolution, public speaking, debates, mutual respect, and many other trainings have been conducted at our university. All of these trainings are very effective and can change the skills of students. (Interview with WZ, Male Shura Member, Surkh Rod)

Third and finally, these shuras and other bodies have been involved in project- or event-based activities, most prominently including capacity building, though interviewees were not always

¹⁰ Though bear in mind that, in addition to the Peace Center, a number of extremist groups are operating in Nangarhar University as well, including the Taliban and IS-K. See Fazli, Johnson, & Cooke "Understanding, and Countering, Violent Extremism in Afghanistan", United States Institute of Peace: 2015 (finding significant indications of extremist support among some Nangarhar University faculty and students; available at: <https://www.usip.org/index.php/publications/2015/09/understanding-and-countering-violent-extremism-afghanistan>). See also Zabihullah Ghazi, "Pro-IS Rally at University Stirs Concern", Voice of America, 10 November 2015 (describing a rally in support of IS-K at Nangarhar University; available at: <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia/pro-rally-afghan-university-stirs-concern>)

clear on the subject matter of this capacity building. Such capacity building may have declined in recent times, though TLO could not independently confirm the impressions of shura officials themselves.

Yes, we have held some educational programs and some other programs for building higher capacity, and they were successful and efficient to an extent. But these kinds of programs have not taken place often due to budget shortages or some other problems. But the people are really interested in participating in in these kinds of programs in order to learn something useful. (Interview with H, Female Shura Member, Bagram)

Box 8, below, offers additional detail on peace programming involvement among men and women, and by region.

Box 8: Involvement in Peace Programming

Men and Women: Involvement in Peace Programming

As above, the typical man or woman in the target districts has not taken part in peace programming. And, overall, women have taken part in this programming less than men. 17.0% of women reported taking part in peace programming, against 31.9% of men. As with other issues, women’s ability to be involved seems to depend, in significant part, on level of education and/or social status.

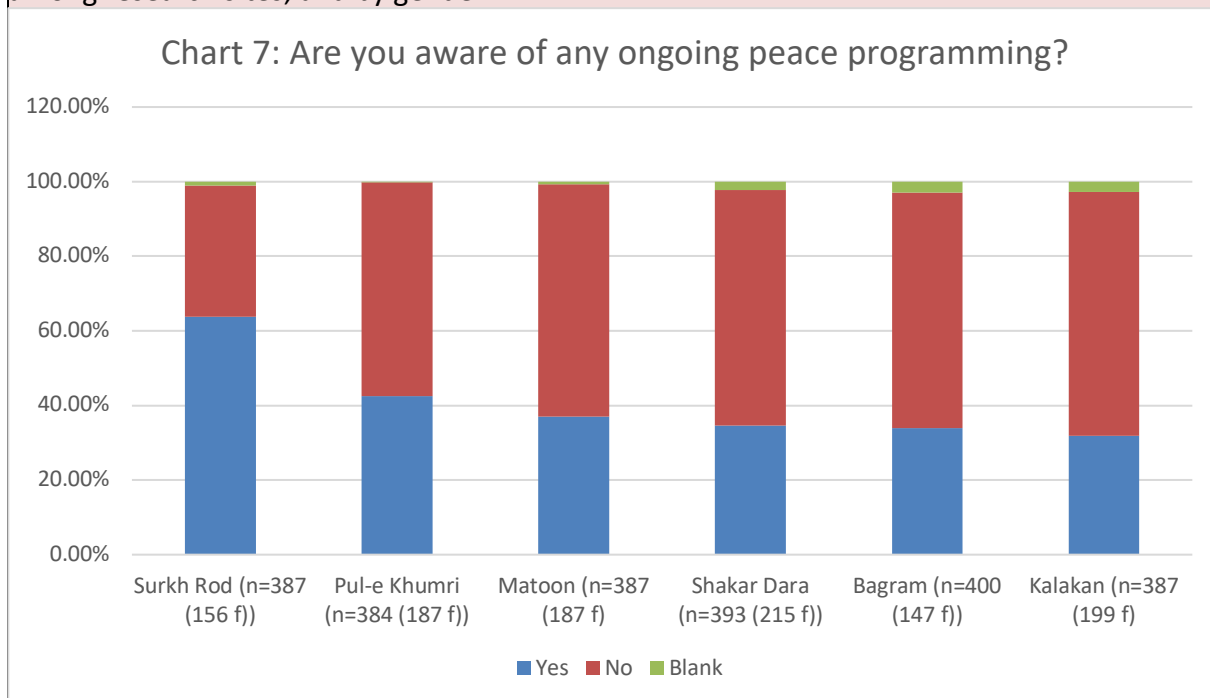
Yes, unacceptable customs and traditions [keep women from participating in peace work . . . Women are less aware compared to men. Our infamous traditions and customs have kept women far from learning knowledge, and [they] cannot defend [their rightful participation] because their level of awareness is lower than men. (Interview with MS, Female Activist, Kalakan)

Based on people’s choice, women can also be chosen to participate in the peace process, based on their level of awareness and education. Women are worthy of their merit and people believe in their values. So there isn’t any prohibition against women taking part in the peace process. (Interview with AS, Male Shura Official, Shakar Dara)

That said, the terms of women’s participation in peace programming appear slightly different than men’s. Among men, the largest number participating in community dialogues – 20.7% - reported having done so. The greatest number of women, however, participated not in community dialogues, but in training and capacity building at 9.4% of all female respondents. This difference may reflect the relatively public nature of a community dialogue, versus the more controlled setting of a training, where community concerns over women’s privacy may be easier to accommodate. This difference could also reflect relatively more capacity building programming that targets women specifically – though additional research would be required to confirm these suppositions.

Regional Variation: Involvement in Peace Programming

Broadly speaking, level of engagement in peace programming seems to follow level of access to an urban center. As such, respondents reported the highest level of peace programming in Surkh Rod, not an urban center itself, but part of Jalalabad’s periurban area. Following, respondents reported the next most involvement in peace programming in Pul-e Khumri and Matoon, smaller urban centers, and with the more rural districts of Bagram and Kalakan seeming to have the least peace programming. Chart 7 illustrates how awareness of ongoing peace programming varies among research sites, and by gender.



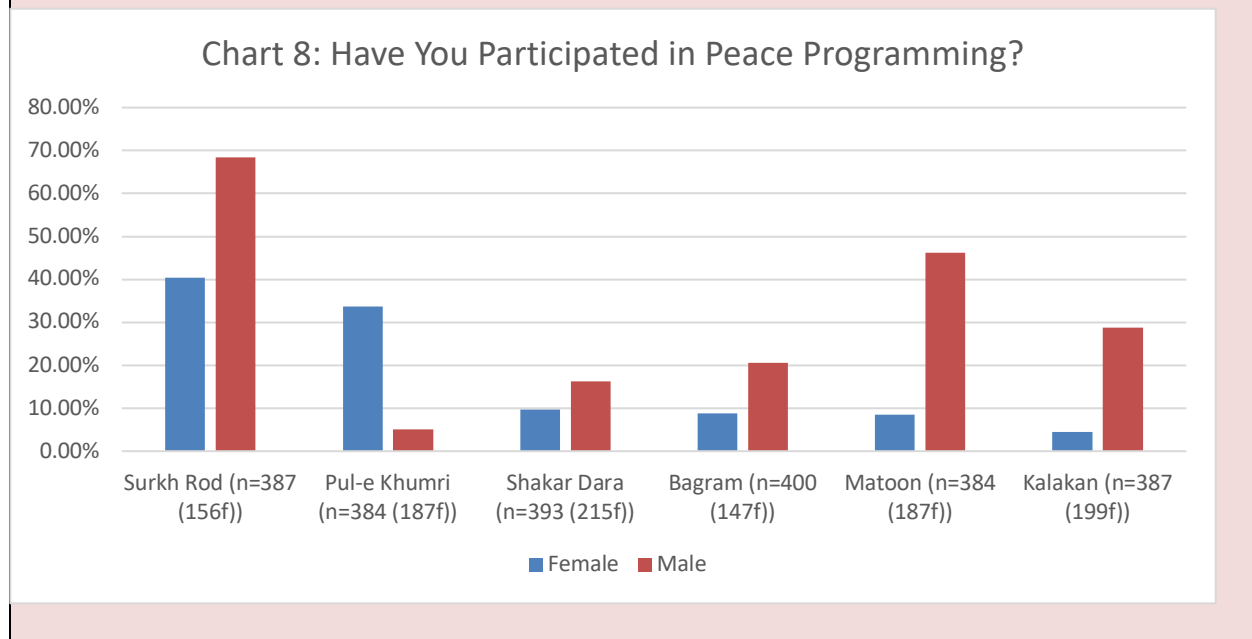
Women’s peace involvement, however, varies on a different pattern. Here, one location, Surkh Rod, displays the highest rate of programming participation for both men and women. And, among women, this research uncovered another variation: whereas 61.5% of educated women had participated in peace programming, less than 20% of preliterate women had done so.¹¹

Two locations, Shakar Dara and Bagram, display relatively low rates of programming participation among both men and women, but with men’s rates higher than women’s. Two other locations, Matoon and Kalakan, display relatively high rates of programming participation among men, but

¹¹ This particular question might have caused some confusion. When asked yes/no whether they had participated in peace programming, 3.5% reported that they had done so. However, 15.8% also reported they had participated in community dialogues.

very low level of participation among women. And, finally, the sixth location, Pul-e Khumri, displays a high rate of programming participation among women, but a low one among men.

The latter of course stands out as exceptional. Data for this study do not reveal precisely why women in Pul-e Khumri would more actively engage in peace programming (or, perhaps, why men would engage less actively). However, prior studies have indicated a relatively active and engaged women’s civil society in Pul-e Khumri¹², which also seems to have been a focus of a number of recent women’s empowerment programs.¹³ Chart 8 illustrates these findings further.



4.2 Pathways to Peace

To build peace, interviewees reflected the conflict analysis laid out in Chapter 2 – that the Afghan conflict stems from broad societal ills such as lack of education and life opportunity, and less so from individual bad actors. In response, research sources recommended working with community elders (primarily) and youth (secondarily), on a diverse program to improve education and the economy, and raise awareness. Although somewhat less prominently, they also recommended gender and rule of law programming.

¹² Khibar Rassul, “Local Conflict Management: an Analysis of Local Conflict Management in Baghlan, Balkh, Helmand, and Nangarhar”, United Nations Development Program: 2013 (describing the local Department of Women’s Affairs as highly involved in dispute resolution (in the paper this body is termed the Women’s Affairs Directorate)). (available at: <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/afghanistan/docs/Other/StudyPapers/UNDP-AF-18022014-Local Conflict Management.pdf>)

¹³ See, e.g., United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, “Women’s Social and Political Empowerment the Focus of Baghlan Symposium”, UNAMA: 27 August 2019. (available at: <https://unama.unmissions.org/women’s-social-and-political-empowerment-focus-baghlan-symposium>)

4.2.1 Suggested Partners and Programming Target Beneficiaries

Most commonly, key informants emphasized the need to work with local elders and other non-state dispute resolution providers. They appeared to make this recommendation for two interrelated reasons. First, such figures remain active in peace work day-to-day, and retain credibility among most people. Second, working with elders will prove a practical necessity in order to abide by local traditions; even interviewees somewhat critical of elders made this point. The third quote below, in particular, offers both praise and criticism of the jirgas, and comes from a youth activist in Surkh Rod.

In addition to viewing elders and similar figures as peacebuilding partners, some key informants also spoke of them as peacebuilding targets – the third quote below is an example of this view. It first speaks of informal justice providers as key allies, then suggests their capacity building.

Khost is a traditional society, and disputes are resolved through traditional methods. Every conflict/challenge that emerges, people refer it to Jirgas using the traditional method. Jirgas, through the customs and traditions of the tribe, provide a solution to the conflict, and then take a decision. (Interview with RM, Male Activist, Matoon)

[In order to promote peaceful conflict resolution, I would work with] relevant outreach agencies that work to solve people's problems. Always keep in touch with the villagers so that every family should be aware of their problems, if they are informed by family elders and tribal elders regarding the problem that they have. . . Yes, people, who are referred to in the neighborhood as tribal elders, contribute [to solving disputes]. (Interview with MS, Female Activist, Kalakan)

To overcome those obstacles [to peace], we need to conduct awareness trainings for the people and make them ready to accept the decisions of the informal justice system in civil cases. We have to train informal justice system members to consider justice and fairness in their decisions. (Interview with A, Female Activist, Surkh Rod)

Following elders and other non-state leaders, a number of key informants also advised working with local youth, in conjunction with other groups. In addition to speaking of youth as peacebuilding partners, interviewees also spoke of them as peacebuilding targets, and a group particularly vulnerable to social ills such as unemployment. One reason for this bifurcation, perhaps hinted at in the second quote below, could be interviewees drawing a distinction between “educated” youth, like “educated” women capable of taking a lead in peace programming, and an implied, more vulnerable, “uneducated” youth cohort. Along the same lines, the third and fourth quotes below both come from Bagram, helping to illustrate this differentiation.

[I would foster peace by involving] youth and have put the ideas up front, and [I would suggest] creating youth councils [in each area]. Creating youth councils, listening to their ideas and plans – all these should be facilitated by the government. (Interview with GHS, Male Activist, Shakar Dara)

We work closely with the elders of the community to resolve some specific conflicts that arise among people. We also have bi-weekly meetings where we discuss the problems of the community and find solutions for them. We also have need-based meetings with elders and educated youths of the area to discuss the conflicts and find the possible solutions for them. (Interview with H., Female Shura Member, Matoon)

There are some Shuras for solving problems and some programs to develop the society. Also there are youths and their sports team that undertake some movements against war, [and] to reach to peace. But security fears lead to fewer activities. (Interview with H., Female Shura Official, Bagram)

- *In Bagram, we see a large number of our youth supporting ANA [Afghan National Army], and ANP [Afghan National Police in turn] support their families. And they [youth] are killed, then there is no one to support their families. On the other hand, a number of youth have immigrated to other countries because there are no job opportunities. The government does not pay attention to our energetic youth, to create job opportunities for them by setting up and establishing a business or factory.*
- *The youth in our area are all educated but they can[not] get a job because they do not know anyone in the government to help them in being recruited.*
- *Opposition groups use our youth for money to fight against the government. The government knows this but they are not doing anything about it. (Bagram Men’s FGD-2)*

Box 9, in turn, further elaborates on these responses by gender and region.

Box 9: Peacebuilding Partners

Men and Women: Peacebuilding Partners

Men and women appear to more or less agree on which partners to engage for peacebuilding. One could surmise that women leaders would be skeptical of figures such as tribal elders, who do not always observe women’s rights. While recognizing violations of women’s rights, female key informants for this study nevertheless endorsed working with figures such as elders, at least in part for pragmatic reasons. In the words of one female key informant in Shakar Dara, “We work with the elders of the community, religious leaders, community activists to solve problems. That may not be the right way, but in some areas, it is the better way to do this.” (Interview with M.A., Female Activist, Shakar Dara)

Regional Variation: Peacebuilding Partners

Preference for peacebuilding partners does not appear to vary hugely between research sites. With that said, key informants at the various research sites tended to emphasize working with some groups more than others.

In Kalakan, Bagram, and Shakar Dara, while recommending work with elders and other community leaders, respondents also tended to emphasize working with a diverse group of partners, including government and, especially, youth.

If a joint problem-solving committee is formed that includes young people, adults and well-educated people, it is a good idea to solve the problem through the mediator. (Interview with M., Male Activist, Shakar Dara)

Actions must be taken by the people themselves, and the role of youth, women, men, and the role of all members of society matters. They should be heard and respected. (Interview with S., Female Activist, Kalakan)

Yes there are youth and [other] groups that make moves for the good of the people. And, also, the youth sports groups – it's well known they want, and look for, peace. But, lately, we have sought to create a shura to have women involved in it only and work for the [benefit of] women. (Interview with SM, Female Shura Official, Bagram)

In Matoon and Surkh Rod, by contrast, interviewees tended to emphasize the role of tribal elders and other community leaders, as such, while perhaps deemphasizing the role of local government and youth – even as interviewees included youth peace activists.

Tribal elders, Maliks and Mullah imams or religious figures are really helpful in dispute resolution and people refer their cases to these types of informal dispute resolution bodies at the local level. (Interview with SB, Female Shura Official, Surkh Rod)

Until now I have not witnessed the government coming forward to solve any major problem. However, most of our problems are being solved by community representatives. Because, they are always there to resolve people's problems. . . I think the Tribal Elders, Community representatives, Shuras, Religious elders, and many other informal justice mechanisms are there to resolve people's problems. (Interview with K, Female Activist, Matoon)

All that being said, most interviewees in Bagram, Kalakan, and Shakar Dara mentioned the advisability of working with elders in some capacity, while a few interviewees in Surkh Rod and Matoon also mentioned working with youth and/or government; so these apparent regional differences should probably be interpreted as gradations, not sharp differences between the various areas examined.

4.2.2 Most-Suggested Programming

Key informants' programming suggestions largely tracked their conflict analysis. If lack of education, proper moral formation, and life opportunities constitute main causes of conflict, then peacebuilders should respond by raising awareness, and promoting employment. As put by a female activist in Kalakan, "Illiteracy has caused many social problems. An illiterate person can do anything [commit any crime], because they don't have the knowledge and understanding of right and wrong, they think what they are doing is the right, and this can cause many social problems." (Female Key Informant, Kalakan)

These, indeed, emerged as top programming recommendations across the cohort of key informants, focus group discussants, and survey respondents. To begin, education and awareness raising was the suggestion most frequently received. Here interviewees would usually not specify a topic, or would specify a variety of topics without obvious interrelation. As such, they tended to present awareness raising or education not as an activity to address a specific subject matter deficiency, but as a corrective measure for an environment characterized by low- or untrustworthy information, more generally.

People should understand that [making a] dispute is not a solution to a problem but inflame it further. Public awareness program should be conducted so that people understand that a dispute or conflict is not a solution. The solution to most of the problems is negotiation and talks. (Interview with A, Male Activist, Surkh Rod)

Lack of education and lack of awareness of parents' rights [creates problems], lack of sympathy. Every human has the right to live freely. Our parents are our responsibility. Lack of education is the main factor causing these issues. . . Raising awareness, promotes/develops the society [so] that people will live safely. (Interview with MA, Female Activist, Shakar Dara)

In addition to awareness-raising, key informants strongly recommended programming aimed at alleviating poverty and unemployment.

[To promote peace I would] create job opportunities for youth in their area and environment, [and] create vocational schools to educate and train youth in various professions without any gender, language and ethnic discrimination. (Interview with MS, Female Activist, Shakar Dara)

[For peacebuilding, I would focus on:] [First,] creating more work and jobs. Why: if we could hire those jobless youths from their village and make them busy, they would not have time to think about the bad things, for example robbery. If they are jobless they don't have money, [and] they always think about how to have some money. [Second, I would] give

them free seeds for cultivation. Why: if they get free seeds for cultivation, they would get busy and stick to their farming, not having time to think about violence or conflicts. [Third, I would focus on] making radio and TV stations. [Why:] In order to preach and broadcast peace programs and [promote] values . . . based on Islam since the society is an Islamic society (Interview with AR, Male Activist, Bagram)

[To promote peace, I would, first,] Increase employment opportunities. Why: Because it helps improve the economic situation [both] of a family specifically and of the country in general. [Increased employment] helps eliminate internal problems and disputes within the family. [Second,] provide education facilities and motivation for seeking education. Why: Because educated communities can understand the value of peace and will try to bring and maintain peace in their communities. [Third, I would] establish social committees and [their] members shall be ordinary people. Why: these committees can help resolve disputes at the community; level members shall be ordinary people, which means not politicians or affiliated with any political party. (Interview with SB, Female Shura Official, Surkh Rod)

As these quotes imply, interviewees did not seem to view awareness-raising and employment promotion as necessarily separate activities. Rather, a number explicitly paired them together as part of a holistic peacebuilding program, which would seem to have as its goal a fairly broad conception of social development.

[To promote peace,] first I would promote public awareness. It's the most important [activity]. [Second, I would] create jobs. When someone has a job and is busy, [and] earns a decent income, he won't wish to join the insurgency to risk his family, business or property. [Third, I would] unite the people across all ethnicities to sit together, discuss their issues, find solutions and stay as one. (Interview with S, Female Activist, Kalakan)

The survey data further underline these sentiments. When presented with nine peace programming options, 72.4% of survey respondents recommended education/awareness-raising, making this the most popular option. A further 60.3% recommended creating employment opportunities, and 56.3% suggested the elimination of gender inequality. Besides the category of "other", which attracted less than 1% of respondents, conducting community dialogue stands out as the least popular programming choice – recommended by just 9.2% of respondents. Box 10 further elaborates on these findings.

Box 10: Peace Programming

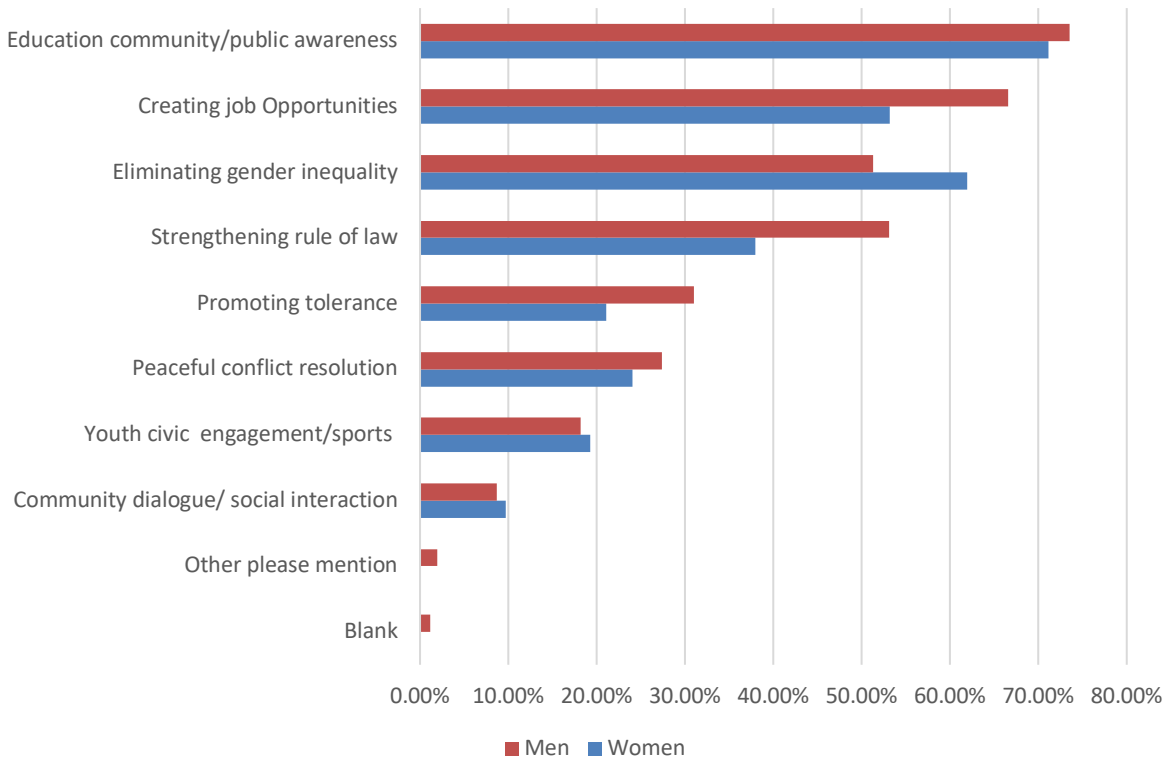
Women and Men: Peace Programming

Men's and women's programming suggestions appear similar – for the most part. For both sets of respondents, education/awareness came back as most-recommended programming, with creating job opportunities, eliminating gender inequality, and promoting the rule of law rounding out the top four. With that said, eliminating gender inequality came back as women's second

most frequent programming suggestion, but was men’s fourth most suggested. By contrast, strengthening the rule of law came back as men’s third most frequent programming suggestion, but was fourth-most for women.

The priority of eliminating gender inequality thus stands out as the greatest difference between the sexes, even as a significant number of men also endorsed this course of programming. Chart 10 provides additional information on survey responses received from women and men.

Chart 10: What Types of Activities Will Contribute to Peace?
(n=2355 (1091f, 1244m))



Regional Variation: Peace Programming

For the most part, programming suggestions appear consistent across research sites. Education/awareness raising emerged as the most-recommended programming choice at five of six research sites, and creating job opportunities as the second most popular choice, again, in five of six research sites. Surkh Rod seems the most notable exception here. Unlike elsewhere, the largest number of respondents recommended programming to eliminate gender inequality.

In turn, among programming options, suggestions for rule of law programming varied the most across target sites, from 28.7% of persons recommending this programming in Pul-e Khumri, to

76.0% of persons recommending this programming in Matoon. In Surkh Rod, suggestions for rule of law programming also came across strongly: although the fourth most recommended programming overall (49.1% of all respondents), it was the second most common suggestion among Surkh Rod women (56.2%), and also a prominent suggestion among interviewees. In both Surkh Rod and Matoon, interviewees focused mainly on rule of law work among non-state dispute resolution providers.

They [jirgas] are effective but there is a need to build the capacity of those making decisions in the jirgas or shuras. Most of them do not know about Afghan law, human rights, and other enacted laws of the country. They should not make a decision against Afghan law. Therefore, for promoting fair decisions in the jirgas, decision-makers should be trained, to build their capacity. (Men's FGD-1, Surkh Rod)

Violence is primarily due to weak government and non-enforcement of the law. If there was rule of law and a strong government, the situation would be much better; people would obey the law. Now that there is no proper implementation of law on those who commit crimes, the number of [law violators] and criminals is growing. (Interview with GJ, Male Shura Member, Matoon)

Table 4 below provides further information on most- and least-suggested programming at each research site.

Table 4: Most and Least Suggested Programming

Location	Most Suggested Programming (% recommending)	Least Suggested Programming (% recommending)
Bagram (n=400 (147f))	Education/public awareness (60.8%), creating job opportunities (57.5%), strengthening the rule of law (44.5%)	Community dialogue (2.5%), youth civic engagement (12.8%)
Kalakan (n=387 (199f))	Education/public awareness (63.1%), creating job opportunities (51.2%), eliminating gender inequality (49.6%)	Community dialogue (5.9%), promoting tolerance (16.8%)
Matoon (n=384 (187f))	Education/public awareness (85.2%), strengthening the rule of law (76.0%), creating job opportunities (70.8%), eliminating gender inequality (68.5%)	Community dialogue (15.4%), promoting tolerance (19.5%)
Pul-e Khumri (n=384 (187f))	Education/public awareness (79.7%), eliminating gender inequality (53.4%), creating job opportunities (50.8%)	Community dialogue (11.2%), peaceful conflict resolution (19.3%)
Shakar Dara (n=393 (215f))	Education/public awareness (76.3%), creating job opportunities (56.2%), eliminating gender inequality (46.3%)	Community dialogue (4.6%), youth civic engagement (12.7%)



<p>Surkh Rod (n=156 (156f))</p>	<p>Eliminating gender inequality (79.1%), creating job opportunities (75.5%), education/public awareness (70.0%), strengthening rule of law (49.1%)</p>	<p>Youth civic engagement (14.0%), community dialogue (15.8%)</p>
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5 Conclusions and Recommendations

This report has sought to provide an overview of peace and conflict in six locations where Search for Common Ground is implementing its ‘Peace by Piece’ Project: Bagram district (Parwan province), Kalakan district (Kabul province), Matoon (Khost provincial center), Pul-e Khumri (Baghlan provincial center), Shakar Dara district (Kabul province), and Surkh Rod district (Nangarhar province). To build the necessary information, TLO carried out a community survey at the six target sites, eventually covering 2335 persons, including 1091 women. It also carried out key informant interviews in Kabul at all provincial sites except Pul-e Khumri, where security deteriorated sharply around the time the key informant interviews would have taken place. Based on the findings, the following conclusions and recommendations are drawn.

5.1 Conclusions

TLO’s conclusions cover three principal subjects: the ongoing conflict, dispute resolution, and peace programming in the target areas.

The Conflict Dynamics

- In each target area, persons view warlords and armed groups as main conflict actors. Respondents seemed to include both nominally pro- and anti-government militia forces in these categories, but did appear to draw a distinction with government security forces. They criticized militia groups both for violence inflicted, and power-holders for the monopolization of available resources.
- In turn, respondents reported domestic violence and armed violence as the most common types of conflict. In this regard, respondents often seemed to see sources of violence as interrelated. In a narrow sense, domestic violence and armed violence can reinforce each other in a destructive cycle. In a more general sense, both stem from societal ills such as illiteracy and unemployment.
- Interviewees viewed the Afghan conflict as a mixture between international, national, and local factors – depending partly on location. In some areas, such as Bagram, respondents viewed the conflict as in significant part an outside intervention, with the identity of anti-government elements essentially unknown. In other areas, such as Matoon and Surkh Rod, interviewees viewed the conflict in more local terms, with indications of social ties between pro- and anti-government elements. That said, these categories are not black and white: for example, some persons in Bagram depicted local youth as taking part in the conflict, while some persons in Surkh Rod alleged foreign interference.
- The research shows that women are playing little, if any, active role in the conflict. Rather, many persons regarded women as primary conflict victims, and men even more so primary conflict perpetrators. This finding, however, appears inconsistent with some prior research, and might require further investigation.

Dispute Resolution and the Peace Process

- In each target area, parties generally begin the dispute resolution process by accessing (male) local elders or other non-state dispute resolution providers. If these efforts fail, or if the case is perceived as more “serious” ab initio, then disputants take recourse to the state justice system.
- A number of local dispute resolution providers receive broad public support, particularly including community elders, shuras, police and courts. The particular level of support however varies by area. In Kabul province (Kalakan and Shakar Dara), government institutions receive a particularly high level of support. In Surkh Rod and Matoon, non-state dispute resolution providers receive a relatively greater level of support.
- Most women are marginalized from the dispute resolution process, and active female elders a rarity compared to their male counterparts. That said, throughout the target areas an empowered minority of women do provide dispute resolution services for “women’s” cases (roughly defined as involving a female dispute party, and taking place over family issues).
- That said, outside the state system, the qualities and idiosyncrasies of non-state dispute resolution providers vary area to area. For example, Bagram elders appear to have a particular preoccupation with local unemployment, and sometimes act as a kind of job placement service, while Shakar Dara appears to have a particularly active women’s shura.
- Persons at target sites seemed to regard the Afghan peace process warily. Or, rather, while most would welcome peace, they remain somewhat skeptical that the current process can lead to a credible settlement of the conflict. Here Matoon and, to an extent, Surkh Rod respondents proved an exception – these areas seem more optimistic regarding the current peace process.

Peace Programming

- As of mid-November 2019, implementation of peacebuilding programming appears possible in five of six target areas, the exception being Pul-e Khumri. However, research target areas do show some variation. Surkh Rod and Matoon have witnessed greater than average peace programming to this point (Surkh Rod much greater), and the conflict in these areas may be abating. As such, they present an opportunity for SFCG to build on some all-too-rare positive trends, and might present a relatively forgiving environment for piloting new programming. Bagram, Kalakan, and Shakar Dara present a situation of greater need and less donor attention, but also a more challenging context.
- Working with women and girls poses additional challenges. These beneficiaries are more difficult to access, and working with them poses greater likelihood of inflaming cultural sensitivities, which could even threaten the safety of SFCG’s intended beneficiaries.

However, need here also appears greater, given the problems of domestic and related conflict violence this report has identified.

- Key informants most frequently recommended working with local elders and similar figures for peace programming. Even while sometimes critical of these figures, key informants regarded working with them as necessarily for program effectiveness and cultural sensitivity. Following elders, key informants tended to recommend working with “youth”, here seemingly conceived of as well-educated and socially aware young people, not necessarily young people as such.
- Persons in most areas have not taken part in peace programming to this point. Within the overall cohort, men have more frequently engaged with programming than have women. Two exceptions however emerged: in Surkh Rod, a majority of men and large minority of women had taken part in peace programming; and in Pul-e Khumri a large minority of women, but significantly smaller number of men, had done so.
- In line with their analysis of the conflict, key informants and survey respondents most frequently recommended that programming focus on providing education/awareness and alleviating unemployment. Key informants did not however seem to draw sharp distinctions between programs in these areas – rather seeming to prefer a broad-based set of programs to counter broad-based social ills.
- Capacity building also stands out as a promising program area. Here, the overlap with awareness raising is potentially significant, as awareness necessarily precedes capacity. With that said, capacity building can take place on a more targeted basis, especially among non-state dispute resolution providers, male and female. Numerous shura officials spoke of benefitting from capacity building in the past, but programming of this sort might have declined. TLO also encountered, with reasonable frequency, observations that many non-state dispute resolution providers lack familiarity with Afghan law, including women’s rights.
- At least two further observations apply to programming involving local women. First, at the activity level, suggestions for men’s and women’s programming did not differ greatly – a mixture of awareness-raising, education, and employment promotion. However, the suggested subject matter of this programming did differ somewhat. Men proved relatively more likely to suggest rule of law programming, while women proved more likely to suggest gender-focused programming as such.

5.2 Recommendations

Based upon the above conclusions, the research offers the following recommendations covering: geographic target areas; implementing partners and target groups; suggested programming; and questions for further research.

Geographic Target Areas

- As SFCG rolls out Afghan programming, it should probably begin with Surkh Rod and Matoon. These areas provide the most promising conflict profile, and most forgiving implementing environment. Beginning work in such areas will allow SFCG to develop local staff capabilities and programming methodologies with relatively less risk to organizational staff and beneficiaries. That said, SFCG can also include Shakar Dara, Kalakan, and Bagram in its medium- to long-term plans. These areas present greater need for peacebuilding than Matoon or Surkh Rod, but also a more difficult and dangerous programming environment. They represent both a greater challenge, and a greater opportunity. As such, SFCG might still attempt programming in these locations, but should remain aware of diminished possibilities of success, and consider piloting elsewhere first.

Implementing Partners and Target Groups

- Elders and other local leaders should probably constitute SFCG's first peacebuilding partners, to be engaged for both implementation and advice on how to render programming culturally appropriate. These leaders also remain relatively easy to access, though, as implied by this report's conflict analysis, SFCG will need to take care to not inflame local rivalries. As such, at this time working with local leaders via existing arrangements, such as working shuras, might pose less of a risk than seeking to foster new institutions, or conducting more one-on-one outreach. That said, once SFCG becomes well-acquainted with the target areas, and builds relationships with individual elders and local leaders, it should gain more flexibility in how it engages with these persons.
- Working with women poses additional challenges. If SFCG does target these beneficiaries, it should initially do so on the advice both of local women's leaders/institutions, and of male community elders. As such, SFCG should probably proceed with women's programming once SFCG has established itself in a given area and developed networks of trusted intermediaries. In turn, as a general proposition, if SFCG wishes to engage in women's programming, it should consider first rolling out that programming to cohorts of area men who, if they approve of the program, can then introduce their female relatives. This suggestion probably applies more forcefully in rural areas than in a periurban area like Surkh Rod that has already witnessed a large amount of peace programming. That said, targeting women and girls exclusively increases the risk of backlash in any area, even as this approach does provide men in the community with an effective programming veto.
- Although not as strongly indicated as work with elders and other local leaders, a number of key informants also suggested working with youth. On the one hand, youth are less empowered than local leaders, and less well positioned to bring community change. On the other hand, youth can prove easier to access, and more open to new programming ideas (though the need to work in coordination with community leaders still applies). Working with well-educated young people, such as university students, can also ease some of the difficulty in accessing female beneficiaries: here, recall the Nangarhar

University Peace Center, where young women are already engaged in peace programming.

- However, SFCG should keep in mind that extremist elements, with ties to the Taliban and IS-K, also operate at Nangarhar University, and Afghan universities themselves are highly politicized and contested spaces. Hence, as with work with women, work with universities, while potentially highly beneficial, should probably only proceed once SFCG has established itself in the community, and developed a deeper network of contacts.

Suggested Programming

- SFCG should consider a basket of programming, which pairs more traditional peace messaging with elements such as literacy promotion and job placement. In areas beyond SFCG’s usual scope of work, it should consider partnering with other organizations possessing relevant technical expertise. This combination of programming brings several benefits, in addition to the benefits inherent in literacy or employment programming. To begin, programming on literacy or employment, in addition to peace, can help build community relations, by providing services of relatively obvious benefit (in this regard, given the precarious state of the Afghan economy, addressing illiteracy might be more feasible than addressing unemployment). In turn, this programming can provide a platform for further awareness raising on peace or other relevant social issues – a variant on peace education, a programming type with decades of history in Afghanistan. Box 11, finally, explores a slightly different option – combining rule of law, gender, and education.

Box 11: Rule of Law, Gender, and Education

As above, rule of law stood out as a prominent programming suggestion in some areas, such as Surkh Rod and Matoon, and less so at others, such as Shakar Dara and Pul-e Khumri. A recommendation for gender programming, in turn, emerged at essentially all research sites. As such, educational or awareness-raising programming on rule of law or gender topics would seem to meet many aspects of suggested programming (keeping in mind the potentially significant overlap between gender and rule of law topics).

That said, at least two caveats apply. First, gender programming can prove particularly likely to provoke a negative reaction. For example, capacity building and awareness raising on Afghanistan’s Elimination of Violence against Women law has been ongoing since 2009. However, this law remains rarely applied and, seemingly, widely opposed. As such, SFCG programming should probably begin on less contentious topics, such as application of Sharia, and then tackle gender-focused programming once SFCG has compiled a more extensive track record of programming in Afghanistan, as well as relationships with local community leaders.

Second, as already discussed, many key informants seemed to view community problems, and potential solutions to them, in quite broad terms. A relatively narrow focus on rule of law and gender programming, then, would not necessarily meet this suggestion.

Further Research

- Research for this report has uncovered some signs of increasing respect for the state justice sector. At each research site, respondents expressed a broad-based willingness to approach the formal justice system, whereas prior research has tended to depict state justice as distrusted and usually avoided. As such, findings here could indicate a state justice sector gaining in capacity and public trust. If substantiated, this development could be highly relevant for future programming in areas such as rule of law, access to justice, and, not least, peacebuilding.
- Research for this report has also indicated women taking little part in the Afghan conflict. As already noted, prior studies have found women playing a more active role than that indicated here. That said, despite persistent interest in the topic, dedicated studies of women's role in the Afghan conflict are actually rather few in number. Further research on this topic could do much to relieve ongoing ambiguity, understand less-visible aspects of the conflict, and so better shape peace interventions.

● Annex 1: Dispute Resolution as Service Provision and Community Governance

Non-state dispute resolution providers of course provide a discrete service, but they also maintain a broader role in the community at large. As such, in order to promote resolution of a dispute, they will not necessarily limit themselves to mediation between the parties, or, in some cases, legal application. Rather, they will construe their services more broadly (as also seen in 3.2.2 above), and help parties access services or benefits not otherwise available to them. In the first example below, a local shura helped an impoverished family alleviate their financial situation and access Kabul-based health services. This intervention might have also helped avoid a forced marriage, although the interviewee did not provide as much information on this aspect of the resolution of the dispute.

There was a very sad case. A family was forcing their daughter, aged 18, to get married to a 50-year-old man rich man. They were compelled to do it because their younger son was sick; you know, for families, a son is more valued than their daughters. So, they were doing this to help their son. So, one of the persons from the village informed the shura. One female and [one] male colleague and I went to her parents in her house and convinced the father to come to the shura meetings. And then we (shura members) decided to help this man and donate some money to the family. We also contacted the hospital in Kabul to help this person. Our efforts gave us a positive outcome and we were able to solve this case. (Interview with R, Female Shura Member, Kalakan)

In the next example, activists and elders in Bagram appear to have developed a practice of dispute intervention to alleviate unemployment. In general, Bagram key informants proved more likely than others to view the conflict in their area through an economic lens. Along the same line, they (but not necessarily similarly situated persons in other areas) described a local practice of economic distress as leading to family conflict, and dispute resolution providers thus seeking to provide, essentially, employment services.

A young man came to our office seeking help. Apparently, his family kicked him out of the house because he was unemployed. So, a meeting was set with his father by the chief executive board. All the problems and the issues were discussed with him. And to solve the issue we found a job for his son in a very short time, and today he has a job. The chief executive board intervened and, based on the young man's CV, he was able to find a Job in a governmental office. People thought the right person was recruited for the right job and that it was a fair deal. So, it created trust between the people and government. (Interview with AMM, Male Activist, Bagram)

One can also view this narrative of events as a counterpoint to accusations against power-holders – that they unfairly benefit their contacts with jobs, as well as by other means. Here, the interviewee takes some pains to depict the employment process, involving CV submission, and



the “right person” getting the “right job.” This example thus helps to highlight the role of dispute resolution providers in community governance more generally, and that their role in the amelioration of governance problems can be broader than dispute resolution as such.

● Annex 2: Women in Dispute Resolution

Women-focused dispute resolution bodies exist in at least five of six research sites (the exception being Pul-e Khumri, where these bodies might very well exist, but could not be accessed). This annex provides three case studies regarding women-led or women-focused dispute resolution.

The first two case studies concern local women engaged in dispute resolution. Such women play a potentially important role, but also face distinct limitations. In the first case study, the Shakar Dara Women’s Council appears highly active, and connected to national-level peace leaders – but faces restrictions on its actually meeting in person. In the second example, a local women’s leader helps a woman suffering from domestic violence. However, at the time of the interview, such help appeared limited to medical treatment and personal advice to the woman, and did not involve the legal system, despite the woman’s husband possibly committing a crime against her.

Finally, the third dispute highlights the occasional ambiguity of women in dispute resolution. In this dispute, a disagreement between two sisters over family property comes to the attention of the local community. However, despite the gender of the dispute parties, dispute resolution providers seem to have treated it as a “normal” property dispute – without clearly involving women dispute resolution providers, or taking additional steps to preserve the anonymity of dispute parties, otherwise expected steps for a case involving female parties, or disputes between family members.

Overall, then, the first two case studies indicate that “women’s” dispute resolution providers probably remain less capacitated than their male counterparts. The third example, by contrast, indicates that women and men’s dispute resolution issues do not remain entirely separate, and norms surrounding the resolution of cases involving female parties either can be ambiguous, or may be changing, if slowly.

▪ Case Study 1: Women-Led Dispute Resolution Institutions

Women’s dispute resolution institutions in Shakar Dara appear particularly active. During the research in Shakar Dara, the interviewers focused on members of the Shakar Dara Women’s Council. This first quote helps demonstrate some positive deviation in women’s representation in this district

There are several types of councils, but I would like to talk about the Women’s Council. The Shakar Dara Women’s Council has 15 members and two key individuals are the council chair and deputy chairs and 13 council members who are attending the council’s meetings and they give their opinions and suggestions. . . Fortunately, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, with the chairmanship of Mohammad Omar Daudzai, organized a Peace Consultative Jirga. Representing the Women’s Council, I was a member of the Jirga elected by the people of Shakar Dara district as their

representative. Meanwhile, to be the voice of the people on the council. . . I was part of the loya irga for a few days. [However, we] currently have no contact with the High Peace Council. At the beginning they invited us once or twice for some meetings but later they didn't contact us. (Interview with MN, Female Activist, Shakar Dara)

The second and third quotes below involve some local, positive change, and also come from a member of the Women's Council. Note, however, that the second paragraph also describes a potentially significant limitation on these activities – the Women's Council not being able to meet in person. This method of operating, of course, raises questions on whether the Council has actually induced its members to act in ways they would not otherwise, or if it has only put a new administrative structure over activities that would have taken place anyway. That said, this interviewee does identify “we”, presumably the Council, as having resolved conflicts, not just the interviewee as an individual. This formulation, enunciated in the third paragraph below, could indicate that the Council itself is bringing about some positive change.

I was invited by the First Lady in the plan to set up provincial and district level peace committees, and part of that was to create a council at the district level and send reports by email and I had no email address. On the other hand, problems at the district level were not giving women time, especially when Mr. Pattang was the former governor of Sakhar-e Shekhera. But our current council structure is a district-level council of women who solve problems to the extent that they are competent and have 15 members . . .

Due to problems in the community, we could not create and operate a council in person. But [we] worked individually with families and in school with students to ask mothers to be attentive in educating their children. We have always emphasized literacy [and] that, if these problems were corrected, the level of disagreement [in the community] would decrease.

It [violence] has had a greater impact on youth, especially on women. So, they are affected by the violence. For example, a boy had previously harassed a schoolgirl and we complained about him to the police. Her parents were very embarrassed and we also took the commitment of the [boy] and he apologized. That's how we prevented further violence between the families. Otherwise, it would have created a very bad scene in the community, which would have resulted in not letting girls go to school in the community. (Interview with MS, Female Shura Member, Shakar Dara)

▪ Case Study 2: The Limits of Intervention

This study has already noted that “family cases” seem, often, particularly unlikely to come to the attention of state authorities. What is more, as more fully described in the next case study, what constitutes a “women's case” might depend as much on the subject matter of the dispute as on the gender identity of the dispute parties. Taken together, these circumstances can mean that

women suffering from crimes such as domestic violence encounter heightened difficulty in obtaining effective redress. The following example, taken from Bagram, offers further shading on what counts as a “women’s case”, as opposed to a criminal case, the limits of dispute resolution institutions in these circumstances, and, perhaps, how such disputes might nevertheless sometimes come to the attention of state authorities. In this case, a woman was beaten badly enough to require medical treatment. Local female dispute resolution providers did arrange for her medical care, but did not refer the matter to state authorities or, apparently, seek to resolve the matter themselves (though the interviewee did imply she might take further action if the dispute persisted).

There was a family violence case where a woman was beaten. We helped the woman through this traumatic period. In a family dispute case a woman was wounded. We sent her to a nearby clinic and [they] did her treatment. In addition to that, we also had some consulting sessions with her. She meets us once a week. . . First of all I would talk to the person [who has been abused], take her to the hospital or clinic. If I am unable to solve the issue, I would refer her to the other responsible and capable institutions. (Interview with Y, Female Activist, Bagram)

▪ Case Study 3: What Is a Women’s Dispute?

Dispute resolution categories, as used in this report – such as “family case” or “criminal case” – are descriptive, not prescriptive. In practice, dispute parties can prove subtle in their distinctions, and flexible in the means used to pursue dispute resolution. The following case study, recounted in a Surkh Rod focus group, can help illustrate these points.

*These two sisters were not having a [good] relationship for a while
They were not respecting each other, to the extent that this conflict was close to creating enmity between them.
Based on elders’ intervention, this conflict has ended and the land [at issue] was equally distributed.
The uncle, the two sisters and their mother, the husbands of the two sisters, tribal elders, the Malik, and other neighbors were involved in this case.
Also, those who had prior experience in resolving such conflicts were involved in this case too.
They, together with two judges of the primary court, set and tried their best to resolve the conflict. That’s how they distributed the land between the two sisters and mother.
So, people, especially those who are elders, got the point that they should distribute their patrimony based on the principles of Islam prior to their death. Because, later, it [otherwise] might create conflict between the offspring. (Meeting Notes, Men’s Focus Group Discussion, Surkh Rod)*

Several aspects of this dispute stand out. To begin, the case primarily involves two women, but community men are narrating the proceedings. In theory, a dispute within a family, involving two women, should not come to community attention – but here it did, and the men in the focus group relating this dispute do not express any particular discomfort at this situation. Along the same lines, mediation of a dispute involving two women seems to have taken place primarily by men (the mother of the dispute parties being the only other woman named). And, what is more, this group included state judges working alongside non-state dispute resolution providers.

These circumstances could thus indicate that local categorization of what is a “woman’s dispute” or “family dispute” depends more on subject matter than parties involved – domestic violence counts as a “family dispute”, such as in the previous case study. In that case, despite violence, parties sought the services of female dispute resolution providers, and avoided state intervention. By contrast, an inheritance dispute between two female family members is something else. As such, the parties did not seek recourse with female dispute resolution providers, as such, but a mixed group including state officials.

At the same time, no male family members appear to have attempted to acquire these sisters’ inherited property. Along with the application of Islamic law, and the involvement of state judges, these circumstances could indicate dispute resolution practice becoming more rooted in law as such, and less in social norms that usually preclude women from property inheritance, or making disputes public.