

Peace Road Map for Afghanistan Will Let Taliban Negotiate Women's Rights

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By Lara Jakes

Aug. 16, 2019

WASHINGTON — Roya Rahmani is neither royalty nor from a powerful family, so she was initially surprised when she was appointed as the first woman to be Afghanistan's ambassador to the United States. Now she understands why: to signal Kabul's commitment to women's rights as the Trump administration pushes for a peace deal with the Taliban.

Ms. Rahmani, a longtime women's rights activist, remembers all too well what Afghanistan was like during the 1990s, under the Taliban's rule, when women were beaten for leaving their homes and barred from attending school or holding jobs. "People were drained of hope" and were "living zombies," she said this week in an interview. Today, she noted, women make up 28 percent of the Afghan National Assembly — more than in Congress.

But as the Taliban and the United States move toward a preliminary peace agreement — which could be released in days — there are growing fears that Afghan women will lose the gains they have made over nearly two decades.

The agreement, hashed out over months of talks between the Trump administration and the Taliban, is expected to outline steps for the eventual withdrawal of 14,000 American troops and pave the way for future talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Officials said the preliminary deal is not expected to include specific assurances that women will continue to have equal opportunities in education, employment and government.

Women's rights are supposed to be addressed in the future talks, which could result in a power-sharing arrangement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Although some American and Afghan officials say the Taliban appear to be more receptive to women's rights than in the past, others worry that women will be given lip service in that final accord, or left out entirely.

"Afghan women have made it loud and clear that they want peace without oppression," said Senator Jeanne Shaheen, Democrat of New Hampshire, the only woman on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

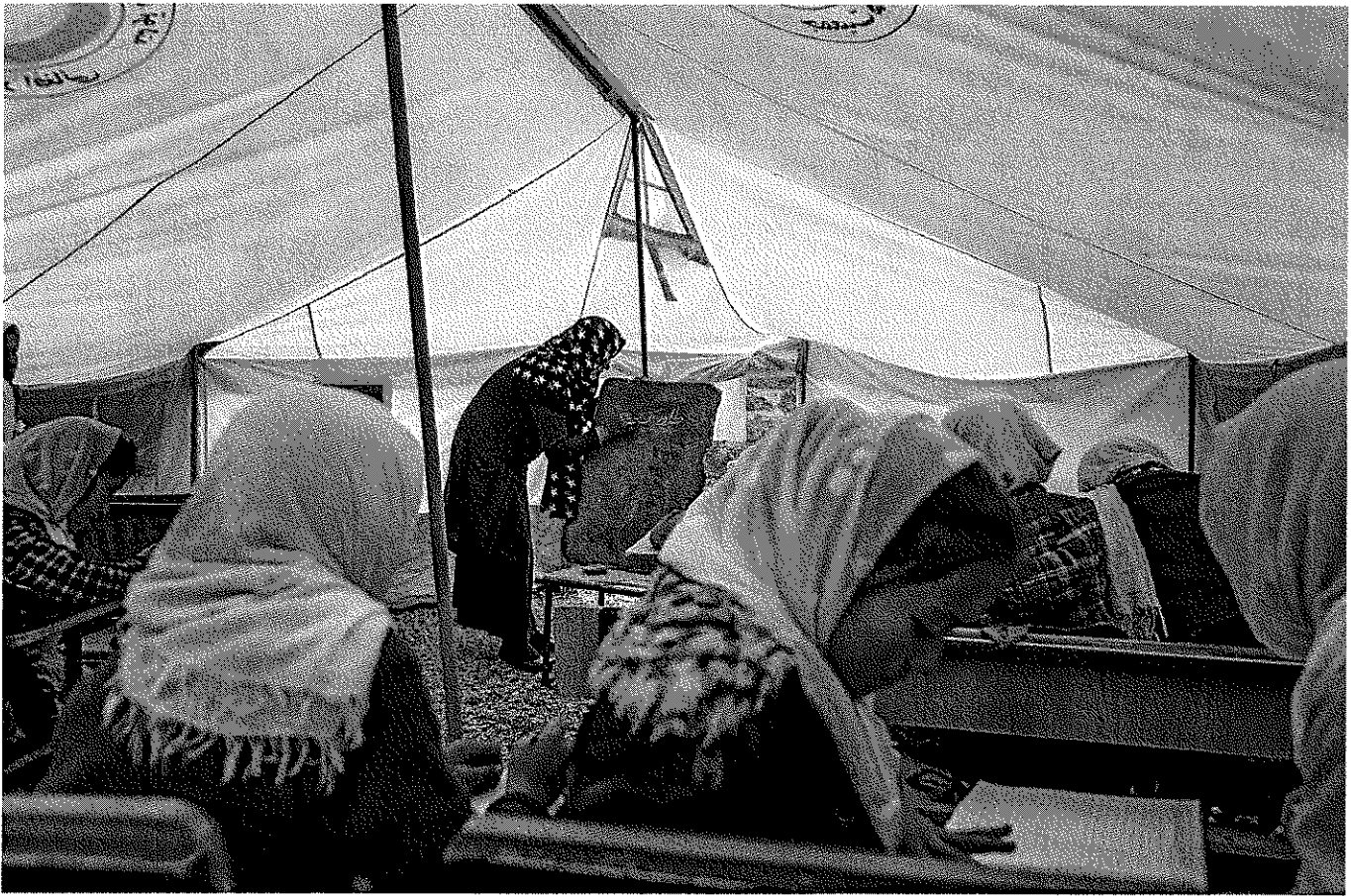
The Trump administration, she said, "needs to fully recognize that Afghan women are our greatest asset to advancing the cause of freedom in this war-torn country."

"Their rights and future must not get lost in these negotiations," she added.

After American troops forced the Taliban from power after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan in pursuit of Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, Afghan women literally came out of their homes. Now, more than 3.5 million are enrolled in primary and secondary schools and 100,000 women attend universities, according to the State Department. American auditors estimate that nearly 85,000 Afghan women work as teachers, lawyers, law enforcement officials and in health care. More than 400 women ran for political office in elections held last fall.

But many of the gains are among women in Kabul, the capital, and in other major cities. In recent years, the Taliban's hold across the country — especially in rural areas — has expanded.

The group controls at least 10 percent of Afghanistan's population — 59 of the country's 407 districts, according to the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. Another 119 districts are considered contested.



Girls at a school in Yakawlang, Afghanistan. The Taliban acknowledged in a statement that women have rights to education and jobs under Islam.
Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

As part of the next phase of peace talks, American and Afghan officials are insisting on a permanent cease-fire. But even that will not assure peace for Afghan women, Ms. Rahmani said.

“When we are talking about peace, and a peaceful environment for all of us, we are not only talking about the absence of guns and bullets and bombs,” she said. “We are talking about an environment where human security is present, where people will live free of all forms of violence — not only physical, but emotional, too.”

“It should be free of fear and abuse,” Ms. Rahmani said.

Ms. Rahmani, 41, grew up in Kabul but fled to Peshawar, in neighboring Pakistan, after civil war broke out in Afghanistan in 1992 and accelerated the Taliban’s rise. On a trip back to Kabul with her family in 1998, she said, she was shocked by what she saw as a ghost city, drained of energy, where people put blankets over every window to keep Taliban religious police from seeing anything, no matter how innocuous, that might merit a beating.

The debate over women’s rights in a final deal is a widely expected to split along each side’s interpretation of the role of women in Islam, Afghanistan’s national religion.

Under the Afghan Constitution, adopted in 2004, men and women have equal legal rights and duties. The Constitution specifically outlaws discrimination and requires a “balanced education for women.” It states that all of its provisions and laws adhere to Islamic rules and faith.

In a statement in February, the Taliban said they recognized that women have certain rights under Islam, including access to education and jobs, property inheritance and the ability to choose a husband.



Afghan women in 1996 at a market in Kabul. The Taliban imposed strict restrictions on women after taking control of the capital. B.K. Bangash/Associated Press

The Taliban's policy, according to the statement, which was released at a forum in Moscow, "is to protect the rights of women in a way that neither their legitimate rights are violated nor their human dignity and Afghan values are threatened."

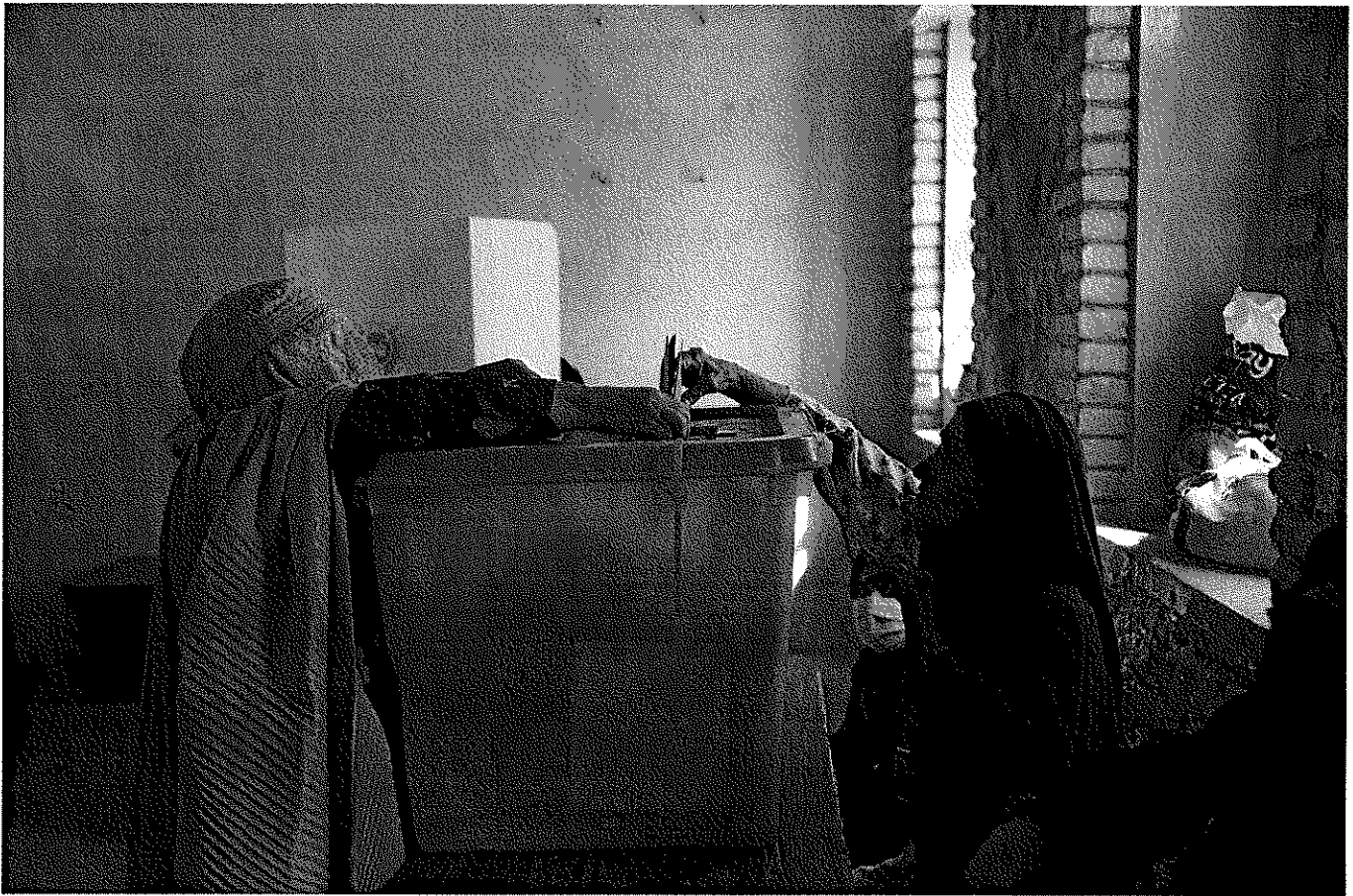
But the statement also described immoral and indecent influences by the West and religions that it said have encouraged women to violate Afghan customs "under the name of women's rights." It cited "dissemination of Western and non-Afghan and non-Islamic drama serials" as evidence of the corruption of Afghan women.

Afghan officials and activists who attended the negotiations between the Taliban and the United States said that informal talks with members of the extremist group revealed that the Taliban have changed since 2001 — and may be even more open to women's rights.

"One thing that we noticed is that the Taliban were not like those Taliban that they were 20 or 18 years before," Asila Wardak, a human rights activist who attended the negotiations, which were held in Doha, Qatar, said at a forum in July at the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. She said there were "many chances" for Afghan women to talk to Taliban negotiators, and to share their concerns, at the discussions in Doha.

Research by the London-based Overseas Development Institute indicates that Taliban shadow governments work with local officials in some Afghan districts on health care, education, law enforcement and taxes. That is a contrast to 2001, when the Taliban were consumed with keeping power.

"They've changed profoundly because they've developed an interest in governing, and in providing services," said Rebecca Zimmerman, a researcher at the RAND Corporation, a think tank.



Women voting during last year's election in Kandahar Province. Jawed Tanveer/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Experts on Afghan issues remain skeptical of Taliban claims that they support women's rights — a declaration that, at best, is largely untested. At worst, it is defied by continued attacks, threats and oppression against women by Taliban members in local districts across Afghanistan even as their leaders say they want peace.

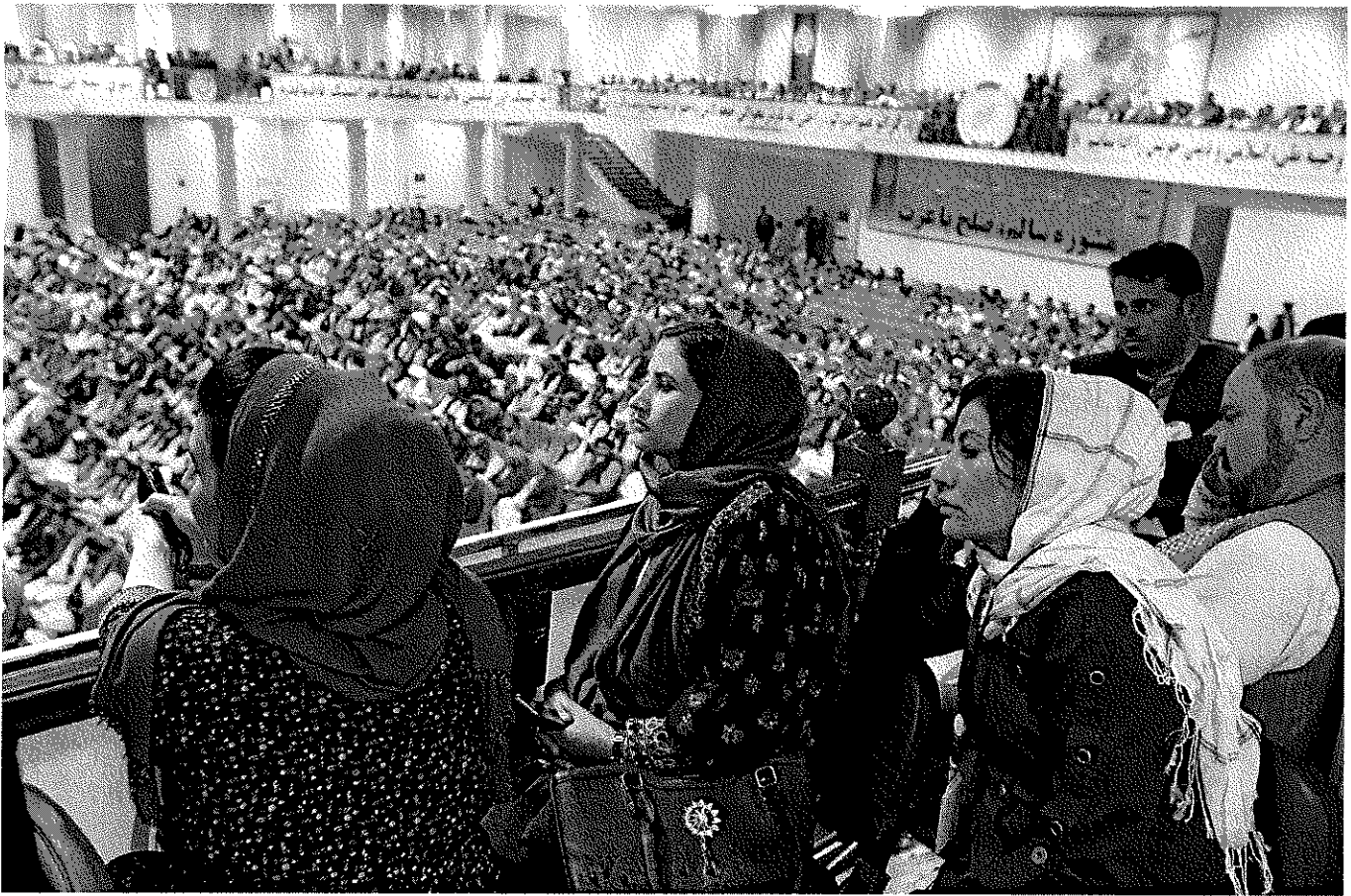
Attacks this year against girls' schools in Taliban territory near the western city of Farah, and the extremists' forced closure of a radio station that employed women in Ghazni Province, in the country's east, indicate otherwise. (Taliban officials have denied responsibility for the attacks outside Farah, although graffiti sprayed on the walls of the schools praised the extremist group.)

"You don't have to look at 2001 to see what the Taliban has done in areas that it has held — you can look at 2017, 2018, 2019," said Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations' women and foreign policy program.

"It's certainly much harder for women who are living in Taliban-influenced areas to go to work, to hold jobs, for girls to go to school and for women to be in any kind of public sphere," she said.

Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, the American envoy who will continue to shepherd a final agreement in upcoming peace talks, pledged last month that women would "have a seat, or several seats, at the negotiating table" alongside the Taliban.

Alice G. Wells, the acting assistant secretary of state who oversees Afghan diplomacy, also has said that a final accord must respect — and protect — women's rights or risk losing international support and aid. The United States alone has promised \$2 billion in aid since 2002 for programs for women and issues focused on gender equality.



Female delegates during the opening ceremony of Afghanistan's grand assembly in April. Jawad Jalali/EPA, via Shutterstock

Preventing widespread terrorism from resurfacing, in part by helping stabilize Afghanistan, “cannot occur if half the country’s population is deprived of opportunity,” Ms. Wells said last month at the Georgetown Institute event.

In interviews with *The New York Times*, Ms. Rahmani did not rule out working in a government that shared power with the Taliban, saying only that she would defer to the leadership selected by her country’s citizens. First and foremost, she said, Afghans want peace.

But as a mother of a young daughter and as a former advocate of women’s rights — at nongovernmental organizations and as a consultant to the United Nations, to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and to the government of Canada — she insisted that women must not be forced to give up progress they have made.

“If the Taliban says, ‘We can find a way to address each other’s concerns,’ that is fine,” Ms. Rahmani said. “But given the past experiences, it’s extremely alarming for the women of Afghanistan.”

Mujib Mashal contributed reporting from Kabul, Afghanistan.

Lara Jakes is a diplomatic correspondent based in the Washington bureau of *The New York Times*. Over the past two decades, Ms. Jakes has reported and edited from more than 40 countries and covered war and sectarian fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, the West Bank and Northern Ireland.

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