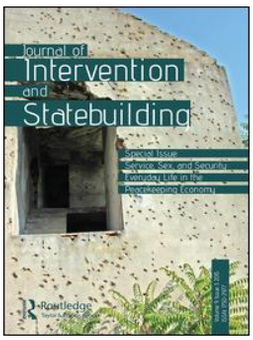

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Not Just at Home or In The Grave: (Mis)Understanding Women's Rights in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an original dataset collected in predominantly rural, Eastern Afghanistan, which finds that girls' access to education and women's professional and economic opportunities are key to understanding the experience of peace. In other words, many Afghan men and women in the areas studied not only want to see girls go to school and women sell goods at the market or treat patients in the hospital, but believe this to be fundamental to their understanding of peace in their communities. We seek to investigate this relationship, arguing that much of the donor-assisted programming in Afghanistan is based on a flawed and fragmentary understanding of gendered power relations and priorities, to the detriment of the goals of both peace and women's rights.

KEYWORDS

Gender; peacebuilding; intervention; everyday peace; education; livelihoods

Introduction

The 2004 Afghan Constitution guarantees women rights and protections that have not yet been legally entrenched in many Western democracies. Notably, Afghan women are guaranteed equal rights under Article Twenty-Two, the equivalent of which has yet to be ratified within the United States Constitution (Rohlinger 2018). Among those codified rights, articles specify women's representation in the House of Elders with a fifty-percent quota, access to military service, and education, freedom of speech, inheritance of land and property, as well as freedom from torture. Not surprisingly, this constitution was largely supported and partially implemented by the international community, principally the United States. Of course, most of these rights are neither fully enacted in reality, nor upheld in courts (Madzarevic and Rao 2014). Women have little access to basic legal protections, let alone full rights. Myriad examples from international media depict instances of Afghan women being abused and killed, from vigilante executions to acts of domestic violence, most of which tend to go unpunished (UNAMA 2018). Yet a recent national survey found that two-thirds of Afghan men believe that women have *too many* rights (Gereš et al. 2018). This leads us to question how these rights are understood and experienced by Afghans, and which women's rights enjoy greater local acceptance.

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Based on an original empirical dataset collected in predominantly rural, Eastern Afghanistan between 2016 and 2017, our findings demonstrate that girls' access to education, and women's access to training and employment were paramount to villagers' everyday understandings of peace in Eastern Afghanistan. In other words, many Afghan men and women in the areas studied not only want to see girls go to school and women sell goods at the market or treat patients in the hospital, but they believe this to be fundamental to their definition and understanding of peace in their communities. An Afghan proverb often repeated by the Taliban states that 'the best place for a woman is in the house or in the grave' (Saigol 2002, 7).[1] The nearly 1500 Afghan participants in this research project did not appear to support the proverb; instead their understanding of peace appears inherently tied to seeing women and girls in public spaces, attending schools and working. Absent in our findings, however, was any mention of women's roles as decision makers, or in positions of political power. This is notable, as many of those political and economic rights are directly linked to local disputes and drivers of conflict and insecurity. For example, the number one source of conflict in Afghanistan is disputes over land, often related to inheritance (Gaston and Dang 2015). Women's right to inherit property is protected by the Afghan legal code, yet denied to most women in practice (UNAMA 2014; World Bank 2015). However, nowhere in our dataset was there mention of this right, or its functional absence in understanding local peace and violence. The rights enshrined in the 2004 constitution are actively supported by international women's rights organizations and the United Nations. They are also the result of a constitutional process that took place under foreign military occupation, and though the process included elements of public consultation, it is also viewed as having been drafted 'in relative secrecy by a commission with foreign advice' (Ginsburg, Elkins, and Blount 2009, 204). There was significant pressure on those drafting the constitution to ensure constitutional outcomes that were in line with international norms and expectations regarding human rights protections (Feldman 2006). We therefore seek to investigate the relationship between women's rights as defined in top-down legal frameworks, and those supported in communities in Eastern Afghanistan as informing local understanding of dynamics of peace and conflict. We aim to highlight the ways in which the approach to gender in Afghanistan has been problematic and our understanding of gender issues flawed.

During 2019 peace talks the Taliban pledged to support girls' education, demonstrating a radical shift from its policies while in government from 1996 to 2001 (Noury and Speciale 2016). It is difficult to know whether this indicates an evolution of the Taliban's aspirational vision of society, or instead, echoes a shift in local attitudes and priorities regarding girls' education and professional opportunities in communities where the Taliban seeks support. Likely these considerations are intertwined, which would confirm research findings that demonstrate the Taliban is actively engaging with local norms and values in rural Afghanistan (Weigand 2017). This change by the Taliban is particularly remarkable because of the stigma associated with women's empowerment programming in Afghanistan as being a tool of the West to promote Western culture or 'colonial feminism' (Abu-Lughod 2002, 784).

This article presents an original dataset with nearly one thousand community-generated indicators collected from eighteen villages in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. Participants were majority Pashtun men and women, as well as girls and boys above the age of 12.[2] The dataset sought to develop better metrics for how peace was conceived of and

measured at the community level by using Everyday Peace Indicators, a methodology described in the following section, using a participatory, bottom-up approach to the generation of indicators in order to measure difficult-to-measure concepts (Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016). Analysis of the indicators revealed that 25% of the indicators of peace were related to gender; indicators fell into broader categories such as gender roles, gendered mobility, and a rights-centred expression of gendered access to goods and services. In a related project, we collected indicators of violent extremism where we found there to be a much greater emphasis in the gendered indicators on sexual violence and harassment.

Our findings suggest a disconnect between the constitutional and legal protections for women in Afghanistan, and the rights that men and women equate with everyday peace and their lived sense of peace and security. This may be explained by the aspirational nature of legal frameworks (Harvey 2004), however, it also reflects a flawed understanding of gendered power and priorities, obscuring the lived experiences and entanglement of gender, peace and security in Afghanistan. Our research shows that when conceptualizing what contributes to their everyday peace, respondents were less concerned with women's political representation or women's right to inheritance or property ownership, or even women's suffrage. It appears, however, that many Afghans, across gender and age divides, support women's rights to education and employment, and that this is key to understanding dynamics of peace at the local level.

Our findings thus provide insight into a puzzling contradiction. Why do women's access to education and economic opportunities feature so saliently in people's conceptualization of everyday peace, while other social and political rights barely feature at all? Perhaps more notably, how can this insight help bridge the disconnect between top-down priorities for gender equitable statebuilding in Afghanistan, and the lived experiences and priorities of the recipients of these policies? Among other things, our research suggests that the international community should be emphasizing programming on the areas supported by Afghans: the sectors of girls' education and women's professional development. In other words, in order for programmes to work better, to support communities, and lead to longer-term changes, interventions should be in line with community priorities.

Our findings contribute to the feminist literature that advocates for a more inclusive, bottom-up approach to gender related interventions (Abirafeh 2009; Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2014; Berry 2015; Hilhorst, Porter, and Gordon 2018; Lake, Muthaka, and Walker 2016). Recognizing gendered power relations that take into account socio-economic and regional differences is fundamental to effective policy and programming in conflict-affected contexts (Duncanson 2016; Hudson et al. 2012; McLeod 2015). Although local forms of power can often reinforce the patriarchy and perpetuate oppressive systems (Porter 2016), it continues to be critical to find ways to capture local voices and build a rights agenda around local needs and values in order to understand how to support change from the bottom-up, creating a hybrid approach that satisfies the needs and priorities of external actors and locals (Mac Ginty 2010). This act of taking the temperature of a local population allows outside actors, restricted by access or high security forms of intervention (Weigand and Andersson 2019) to circumvent a neoliberal feminist agenda that obscures 'structural causes of inequality behind an essentialist celebration of empowered women' (Prügl and Tickner 2018, 82).

Afghanistan has not only seen the politicization of gender policies, but the gendering of the American justification for war. Laura Bush announced in November 2001 that 'the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women', adding that 'because of our recent military gains, in much of Afghanistan women are no longer imprisoned in their homes' ('Laura Bush on Taliban Oppression of Women,' 2001). Hillary Clinton claimed that 'by empowering women with the freedom to choose their own future, […] America can do more than rid the world of an international terrorist network' (Clinton 2001). Women's rights have been invoked repeatedly as a justification for military invasion and prolonged foreign intervention, yet each time peace negotiations are attempted, women's rights are not prioritized. Women have been systematically excluded from negotiations, and it appears the US is willing to trade 'away the status of Afghan women for an agreement' (Ahmadi 2019).

There are numerous examples of how poorly informed international agendas have generated harmful outcomes for women in Afghanistan, by, for example, excluding men for years from gender programming (Abirafeh 2009). When asked in 2018 why two thirds of girls still have no access to schools, Afghan president Ghani blamed a misguided intervention lacking eyes and ears on the ground, claiming that 'international experts were male-centric. They talked about gender but their pamphlets were glossy and totally lacking content' (Bohn 2018). The international community in turn faults the Afghan government for doing little to defend or uphold the rights of women (Akbar 2016). These examples illustrate the difficulty of implementing sustainable, transformative interventions from the top-down (Abu-Lughod 2002; Berry 2015; Hilhorst, Porter, and Gordon 2018; Lake, Muthaka, and Walker 2016; McLeod 2015; Prügl 2015).

Of course, the 'girling of development' (Hayhurst 2014, 532) or emphasizing girl's education as a panacea has also been shown to obscure or invisibilize 'the historical and political conditions that have produced contemporary social realities' (Khoja-Moolji 2015, 101). In fact, a

> strong body of evidence now exists which demonstrates how education may at best do no harm, or at worst exacerbate or perpetuate existing inequalities, particularly when it does little to transform underlying structural inequalities within society and the education sector. (Shah, Paulson, and Couch 2019, 4)

In other words, educating girls is not the silver bullet – there are many reasons why Afghanistan is last on gender and development indices that have nothing to do with girl's education. Yet, our research findings point to education as a pragmatic focal point for bridging efforts that can simultaneously focus on strengthening women's rights and building peace. A bottom-up approach such as this one emphasizes pragmatism, and allows space for programming that is not co-opted by neoliberal policies or hegemonic ideologies, but rather, attends to feminist emancipatory goals such as girl's education that are integral to a broader rights agenda, but which require time and local support to truly arrive at their goals.

This article proceeds by giving an overview of the methodology used to collect the empirical data on which our argument is based. It then goes on to provide the details of the findings and a discussion of their relevance for the literature on gender rights policies in Afghanistan and other conflict affected contexts. Finally, we conclude with some reflections on a way forward, taking into consideration the literature and our findings.

Methodology

Defining social concepts such as peace is considered particularly difficult by social scientists and policy-makers (Forst 2016; Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins 2009). Despite many attempts, there is little consensus about what exactly the terms mean and how to identify them in practice (Hoffman 1998; Kuhn and Hacking 2012; Schmid 2011; Sedgwick 2010). This lack of conceptual clarity has contributed to an epistemological crisis, hampering efforts toward developing solid and effective policies in the peacebuilding and countering violent extremism sectors (Jackson 2015; Jose and Medie 2015). Without a concrete understanding of what these concepts look like on the ground to everyday people, it is difficult to design appropriate programming to address local issues in conflict affected contexts and even more difficult to evaluate whether or not interventions have been effective to contain them (Agbiboa 2018; Borum 2011; Crenshaw and LaFree 2017; Szmania and Fincher 2017). This article presents a methodological approach that we argue provides unique insight into local dynamics, and may in fact provide key metrics for measuring the success of gendered policies designed to address conflict contexts.

There is also limited effort to consult with communities regarding their definitions and perceptions of peace, and how they identify prevalence in their own communities (Boutellis and Mahmoud 2017; Schwoebel 2017). Paradoxically, a large push in academic and policy circles has for years emphasized the importance of the 'local' despite this concept remaining problematically conceptualized (Mac Ginty 2015, 840; Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016). Scholars highlight that neither the 'local' nor the 'international' are understood in the complexity they embody; they are therefore instead diminished to essentialist concepts that overstate and misunderstand ontologies of power in both spheres (Paffenholz 2015, 857). Treating them as distinct spheres is a problematic starting assumption, and Paffenholz argues that they are understood as binary opposites, with power and resistance only located in the nodes of each. This obscures myriad dimensions in between, and the practices of power that link them.

This conclusion points to arguments repeatedly articulated in feminist IR literature, that understanding international relations and global political order demands a better understanding of the connection to the lived realities of those who inhabit them (Elias and Roberts 2016; Enloe 1990; Redden 2016). Leaving locals out of the conceptualization process leads to a 'faulty epistemology: based on outsider understandings, which preclude the subjective knowledge of everyday people (Jackson 2015, 34). Local conceptualizations of peace are rarely contextualized in local conflict dynamics, including local gender and social dynamics. Therefore, there is a persistent contradiction between the romanticization of the 'local', and effective engagement to place that concept, and the individuals it encompasses, at the centre of the design of research and programming.

This research attempts to subvert this, using a participatory methodology to collect indicators of how peace was understood, and measured, by villagers. The participatory approach is called Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) (Firchow 2018; Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016), a methodological approach that provides insight into how everyday civilians in conflict zones conceptualize and measure peace and violence in their communities. The Everyday Peace Indicators Project is premised on the assumption that scholars, practitioners and policymakers often rely on a top-down understanding of concepts like peace, defined by academics and measured by evaluators. Rather than rely on

the perceptions of experts, the everyday indicators measurement approach combines the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to gather indicators from the very people who are most affected by conflict processes, thus bringing the emic perspective into a robust and replicable measurement methodology (Firchow 2018).

EPI was used in this study to produce 915 locally-generated indicators of peace collected from villagers in eighteen villages in eighteen districts of Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces of Afghanistan; eight villages were selected in Kunar Province and ten villages were selected in Nangarhar Province. Villagers were selected to be as representative as possible of each village, using a list of criteria based on village demographics and geography given to mobilizers and facilitators in each village. Villages were selected based on criteria following a 'most different' research design (Seawright and Gerring 2008, 298). The 'most different' criterion was chosen in an effort to select cases which are as broadly representative of the population in each province and provide a stronger basis for generalization (Seawright and Gerring 2008, 298). Most different criteria were based on terrain, number of villages within a district, location, local economy, armed groups present, police/army presence, political orientation of the religious leadership (*Ulama)*, presence of civil society, and number of outside interventions. Data on criteria were drawn from existing grey literature and analyses of these districts, as well as extensive consultation with the local research partner. Access was also a significant factor in the case selection since some villages were simply not accessible for data collection due to ongoing clashes at the time of research among government forces, Taliban and ISIS. Within these limitations, we selected villages that represented the most variance on the above list of criteria.

Working with a local research organization well-trained on the EPI methodology, two moderators visited each village, gathering a group of roughly 15 individuals for each focus group.[3] In each village, four focus groups took place during the initial round of data collection, one each with men, women, boys and girls (aged 12-20), for a total of roughly 60 participants in each village, representing, as best as possible, a cross-section of village demographics. Groups were segregated by gender and age, and female moderators ran the women and girls' groups. Moderators were tasked with leading a conversation that centred on a single question when generating peace indicators: what are the everyday signs you look for to understand whether your village is more or less at peace? The process seeks to elicit indicators that are usually part of an unconscious thought process, the signs and symbols we look to, to understand different magnitudes of concepts like peace and security.

The entire process was oral in order to accommodate all participants, however moderators created lists of the final indicators chosen by each group. Several days after each initial focus group, the moderator would return to the village and meet with the same people and read out the entire list of indicators. With time for contemplation, villagers were asked to remove the ones that seemed irrelevant, add any that had occurred to them since, and finally, vote, using stickers, on the ones that appeared most significant in their daily lives. In total, 144 focus groups were carried out across the eighteen villages over a six-month period of data collection with approximately 1500 unique participants. Certain focus groups were audio recorded, and certain men's groups were video recorded to capture the entire process from conversation to culled list of indicators. The resulting 915 indicators, along with how many votes they had each received (henceforth referred to as their ranking) were cleaned, and a codebook was developed. Indicators were

subsequently coded into twenty-two inductive categories and sub-categories ranging from security to health. From this analysis, the prevalence of gendered indicators emerged and prompted us to probe further into that direction, leading us to conduct a kind of 'gender impact analysis' of peacebuilding policies in Afghanistan (Enloe 2016, 27). Indicators were analysed using NVivo software to code everyday indicators into categories related to gender in order to delve deeper into these specific indicators and develop an understanding of the gendered trends that emerged from the villages.

What we found was a rich account and thick description of how villagers' gendered values and rights inform understandings of peace in their everyday lives, which is further reflected in this article. The peace indicators collected in these villages as a whole illustrated the multi-dimensional nature of peace and represented everything from issues related to government oversight to religion and culture, going far beyond just conceptualizing peace as an absence of conflict related danger.[4] In fact, the indicators challenge many of the binaries found in conflict literature, between state and non-state, war and peace (Debos and Brown 2016). Instead, power, violence, conflict and gender appeared understood through the actions of different actors within each community, and through perceptions of relative freedom. For example, many of the indicators related to the freedom of different symbolic expressions of statehood. Indicators such as 'Observing the Afghan Flag embroidered on clothes worn by boys' (Behsud) or 'seeing the Afghan Flag on the graves in the cemetery in our village' (Dangaam). While we call them indicators, much of what was being collected were micro-narratives. These one-line stories illustrated what made people feel that things were improving, and that they were peaceful or secure, by describing situations and interactions in their everyday lives.

> We see Taliban distributing medicines to the villagers in our village. The government sends medicines to the clinic in our village. The doctors used to sell the medicines, which were to be distributed freely. Taliban now distribute the medicine to avoid the doctors from selling the medicine

or 'Taliban don't allow men to beat women. Taliban have told the villagers to treat women well' (Bati Kot district). These two examples illustrated that not even the actors are understood as static or binary; both the Taliban and the Afghan government featured prominently in the indicators of peace. Indicators represented everyday priorities related to both positive and negative conceptualizations of everyday peace in Eastern Afghanistan.

Many of the gendered indicators related to mobility. Mobility was often interpreted as times of day or night when moving around was directly relevant for daily security. Attacks on girls' schools, in particular, were well documented under the former Taliban regime and throughout the Taliban insurgency. Therefore, it could be argued that the indicator 'girls go to school' is more representative of security, a dimension of peace, than a multidimensional peace that includes girls' education. However, our coding of the indicators as a whole revealed that there were many ways in which security, as a dimension of peace, was being weighed and evaluated in each community on a daily basis. Other indicators demonstrated attacks on checkpoints, gunfire at wedding celebrations, and disruptions to funerals. Yet, the central focus was not the roads, nor the checkpoints or marketplaces, it was not the government offices or Taliban courts, peacefulness was most salient in the articulation of girls' access to education. This was evidenced when participants were asked

to vote on the most important indicators, and all 18 villages chose 'we see girls going to school' as one of their top five indicators of peace. This article utilizes these locally-generated indicators of peace in order to shed light on the nuances of gender and peacebuilding policy in Afghanistan. We argue that the popularity of the girls' education indicator represents more than just security for villagers. Although security was undoubtedly part of their motivation for selecting this indicator as a top priority in the ranking process, they could have chosen many others that might be more representative of security, such as walking alone at night, or a combination of different security indicators in each village. Yet, all of them chose to prioritize girls' education, which reflects that there is an inherent value for villagers that girls are able to access education.

One of the limitations of this research design is that, as its intended purpose was to map local understandings and indicators of peace, it did not involve any specific investigation of gender. The purpose was to understand how villagers measured peace in their community, and an overwhelming response was linked to women's rights. The following analysis investigates this link.

Findings

The indicators elicited two broad findings in relation to women's rights. The first is the great extent to which girls' access to education, and women's access to training and employment were paramount to villager's everyday understandings of peace. These findings appeared across geographical and rural/urban divides, which did not demonstrate any substantive difference on villager's identification of women's access to education and professional opportunities as important indicators of everyday peace. The second is the notable absence of any mentions of public and political rights in the community-generated indicators of peace. This includes women's political representation or women's right to inheritance or property ownership; even women's right to vote seems only marginally related to any local concept of peace. Public and political rights have been strongly advocated for by proponents of Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, which affirms as one of its key provisions the increased participation and representation of women at all levels of decision-making (UN 2000).[5]

Villagers expressed a variation of 'girls go to school' in their top five indicators of everyday peace in all eighteen villages studied (see Table 1). This was without probing, nor leading villagers through examples of possible indicators. In other words, villagers in each location formulated this indicator on their own, and then through a participatory deliberative process, chose it as the most important indicator of everyday peace in their villages. In addition, all villages, except for one, selected multiple indicators related to access to school in their final indicator lists (see Table 2). Indicators such as 'We know women who attended literacy training classes' or 'We know some girls who study at teacher training college' or 'We see girls going to Madrasa in our village' were frequently mentioned as indicators of peace across several of the villages. Our findings demonstrate that the vast majority of the nearly 1500 men and women who participated in this research project value female education when asked what contributes most to their sense of everyday peace in their communities.

In addition to the high rankings that these indicators received, there were also high levels of qualitative variation. When cleaning the indicators, coders combined those

Table 1. Top Gendered Peace Indicators by village: rank (out of 30–60 indicators in each village) is listed to the left of the indicator, votes received is in brackets

Village[a]	Indicator & Rank (Vote Count)
Asad Abad	5. Boys study at the same classroom with us at University (27)
	6. We hear from the schoolgirls that they play volleyball at school (26)
Khogyani	1. Our neighbours (Female) studies nursing at an institute in Kaga (42)
	2. We see more female doctors at the hospital in Kaga than before (41)
	3. We know some girls who study at teacher training college in Kaga (35)
Asmar	4. We see girls going to school in our village (38)
	6. Taliban don't forbid girls from going to school (32)
Naray	1. We see girls going to school in our village (39)
	2. We see girls going to Madrasa in our village (34)
	3. We see girls going to the teacher training college in our district (34)
Kot	2. We see girls going to school (43)
Noor Gal	2. We see girls going to school in our village (46)
	3. Women ride on motorcycles with their husbands (37)
	5. We see female teachers walking to school (37)
Pachir Agam	1. We see girls going to school in Upper and Lower Pachir (18)
	4. We see boys going to school in Upper and Lower Pachir (16)
Khewa	5. We see girls going to the madrasa in our village (35)
Kama	2. We see girls going to school in our village (32)
	4. We see girls going to teacher training college (30)
Khas Kunar	2. We see girls going to schools in our village (34)
	1. We see girls going the teacher training college (31)
Bati Kot	1. We see girls going to school in our village (41)
	2. Taliban don't forbid girls from going to school (38)
	3. We know boys of our village study at Universities in Jalalabad city (36)
Behsud	1. Some girls of our village go to university in Jalalabad (48)
	2. Girls go to school in our village (42)
	3. Women go to Kalastoon Park with their children sometimes (33)
Chaprehar	1. We see girls going to school (39)
	2. Taliban don't forbid us (girls) from going to schools (38)
Dangaam	2. Girls go to school in our village (46)
	3. We see girls going to Madrasa (Approximately 300 girls study at the madrasa in our village) (39)
Ghazi Abad	1. 1. We see girls going to school in our village: Bar Gam village (38)
	2. We see girls going to the Madrasa in our village (32)
	3. We see female teachers going to school in our village (28)
Rodat	1. We see girls going to school in our village (36)
	3. We see girls going to Madrasa in our village (34)
	5. Taliban don't forbid girls from going to school in our village (32)
Sawkay	**1.** Girls go to school in our village (51)
	5. We see both male and female NGO employees come here together from Jalalabad (31)
Surkhrod	1. Our daughters received tailoring training by an NGO in our village (39)
	2. We know some women of our village working for NGOs (34)
	4. We see girls going to school (The school is located at a distant of two kilo metres from our village) (29)

[a]Names here are the names of districts; the village names themselves have been rendered anonymous for the protection of research participants. A single village within each of these districts was selected.

that were deemed identical in substance. Nevertheless, as many as seven unique and substantively different indicators emerged from a single district regarding girls' access to education. As seen in Table 2, on average, eight percent of total peace indicators related to this particular metric, varying from 2% in Asad Abad to 14% in Rodat. Relatedly, child marriage emerged as an indicator of a decreased level of perceived peacefulness among rural men and women. In other words, participants were less likely to feel at peace if they observed high levels of child marriages in their communities.

The second category of women's access to professional opportunities elicited even greater qualitative variation (see Table 3). This is perhaps unsurprising as specific careers and training opportunities are more extensive than educational opportunities.

Table 2. Number of indicators related to Access to School by village.

Village	# indicators	% of indicators
Asad Abad	1	2%
Asmar	5	9%
Bati Kot	3	7%
Behsud	4	8%
Chaprehar	6	10%
Dangaam	5	9%
Ghazi Abad	3	6%
Kama	4	9%
Khas Kunar	6	11%
Khewa	4	7%
Khogyiani	5	11%
Kot	2	4%
Naray	6	10%
Noor Gal	4	9%
Pachir Agam	2	7%
Rodat	7	14%
Sawkay	3	7%
Surkhrod	5	7%
Average	**4.17**	**8%**

The majority of the gendered indicators of peace dealt with women professionals in different lines of work – from doctors to vaccinators to tailors and market vendors. Indicators to do with women professionals such as 'We visit the female doctor in our village' or 'Our female neighbours take tailoring lessons' or 'We see female NGO workers come to our houses.' were mentioned frequently throughout the final lists of indicators. Strikingly, people felt more at peace in their daily lives when they saw women go to university or work in the hospital.

Yet, there was no mention of women in political office, owning properties or being equal to men or other indicators directly related to women's equality or equity and enshrined in the latest Afghan constitution. For example, only four villages (in Asmar, Khewa, Naray and Surkhrod) selected indicators related to voting or something related to 'We saw women in the polling station in elections.' Analysis of the disaggregated

Table 3. Number of indicators related to Women Professionals by village.

Village	# indicators	% of total
Asad Abad	8	16%
Asmar	5	9%
Bati Kot	5	11%
Behsud	9	17%
Chaprehar	4	6%
Dangaam	5	9%
Ghazi Abad	3	6%
Kama	4	9%
Khas Kunar	8	15%
Khewa	7	12%
Khogyiani	6	13%
Kot	3	7%
Naray	9	15%
Noor Gal	7	16%
Pachir Agam	3	10%
Rodat	8	16%
Sawkay	7	16%
Surkhrod	5	7%
Average	**5.89**	**12%**

women's and girl's focus group transcripts and indicators did not result in any further indicators related to political or economic rights. The finding that these rural Afghans do not see these rights as integral to their everyday peace is particularly perplexing considering how prominent land conflicts are in Afghanistan. For example, there was no suggestion in our indicators that a reversal of customary inheritance laws to allow for female inheritance of lands would help improve village peacefulness. Our findings demonstrate that although respondents prioritized a role for women outside of the home, they do not also see rights related to inheritance laws or civil and emancipatory rights as being priorities when conceptualizing their everyday peace.

Discussion

Women's rights

Afghanistan has been the subject of extensive focus from scholars of gender, conflict and international interventions. The US role in Afghanistan invited contributions from feminism, postcolonialism, materialism and post-structuralism, seeking to investigate, and challenge, the US claim to the liberation of Afghan women that underpinned the intervention (Fluri 2011, 2017; Kearns 2017). International involvement in Afghanistan was decidedly imperious with little opportunity for social change from the bottom-up or space for real grassroots civil resistance movements to form (Abu-Lughod 2002.; Gilmore 2009). The imposition of norms and laws related, in particular, to gender and women's rights in Afghanistan put those Afghans in opposition to the US occupation immediately on the offensive, allowing little space for fledgling women's movements to grow outside of Kabul.

With hundreds of millions of dollars invested in programming for women's empowerment, there has also been an extensive, and largely critical literature evaluating approaches and outcomes of this work (Abirafeh 2009; Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2009). A lot of the programming has been based on flawed assumptions that underpin much gender programming: either the underestimation or overstatement of women's agency (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2014). Much programming assumed at the outset that women in Afghanistan were too disempowered to engage, or else, overestimated the agency and sway that women held over their houses and extended families. This binary of rights/no rights, painted women as either the secret matriarchs dominating home-life, or as helpless and nameless victims, inert and imprisoned by the regulations of husbands and sons. As with all false binaries, this oversimplification distorts reality and has led to the failure of many initiatives aimed at improving gender equity in Afghanistan.

For example, a large-scale field experiment funded by the World Bank sought to measure whether development aid with gender quotas contributed positively to gender outcomes. The implementation of gender quotas has been critiqued extensively. The 2004 constitution reserved a quota of seats for women in both upper and lower houses of parliament, reinforcing a perception that these positions were unmerited, particularly when a seat went to a woman who had received fewer votes than a male counterpart (Wordsworth 2007). Further critiques found that, while this had ensured female representation at senior levels, women continued to be systematically excluded from district and village level politics. Thus, a two-year programme was designed to place women on village development councils and mandate their participation in various political

spheres (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013). Evaluation of the programme was positive regarding the improvement of women's mobility and access to income generation, but confirmed that no change was apparent in general attitudes toward women's role in society. Two years is a short timespan to change what is described by the authors as 'long-standing cultural traditions that sustain discrimination against women in all sectors of life' (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013, 540). Perhaps more problematically, the programme emphasized the *quantity* of women involved rather than the quality of gender-inclusive participation, a trend that is seen repeatedly in Afghanistan (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2014). Local community norms and needs must be considered when trying to address issues such as women's rights, which require local social mobilization and community activism from the bottom-up.

The implementation challenges related to gender programming seen in Afghanistan are a reflection of wider issues related to the timelines, assumptions and oversights of Western implementers of gender related interventions. Feminist scholars have recognized the limitations of international frameworks working toward inclusion and empowerment from the top-down, arguing that these often do not transform gendered power relations and institutions (Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Kabeer 2005; Paarlberg-Kvam 2019; Prügl and Tickner 2018) and, in some cases, exacerbate existing socio-economic, ethnic or religious cleavages (Ahmed 2012; Berry 2015; Farris 2017). In fact, scholars have demonstrated that many of these efforts have provided mere lip service in order to fulfil gender related requirements or to prevent more transformative reforms (Burnet 2008; Hilhorst, Porter, and Gordon 2018; Lake, Muthaka, and Walker 2016). Therefore, there continues to be the risk that a top-down approach to women's empowerment in Afghanistan, or what Abu-Lughod early on in the US occupation coined 'colonial feminism', sabotages internationally funded programming in contexts like Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2002, 784).

Beyond these challenges to implementation and measurement, it is necessary to discuss the repercussions of fragmented insight into the entanglement of peace and rights. The indicators found support for girls' education and professional opportunities while not supporting women's political participation as important to understanding local peace. Numerous explanations for this could be speculated; it may be the result of siloed international funding and intervention programming that heavily prioritized and incentivized girls' education. Perhaps political rights are felt to be moot in a country whose political system is largely deemed a failure – education is comparatively more tangible. Or perhaps yet, shifting land inheritance laws and norms to include women creates too great a perceived threat to local power dynamics, and by extension security. In any scenario, the finding lends valuable insight into the intricate complexity with which rights, peace and security are entwined. Both peace and conflict are experienced, understood and conceptualized differently across time and space, and between actors, and these 'contrasting conceptualisations of war shape the problematisation of the post-conflict context.' (McLeod 2015, 49) Bottom-up as a research approach thus means finding ways to capture the many complex relationships between actors and issues, and placing value on the lived experiences of local communities.

In order to address power differentials and still attend to Western funding accountability requirements, a better understanding of local experiences with and perceptions of gender behaviours and norms is necessary. Recent research highlights that what is considered appropriate behaviour for men and women continues to be predominantly

marked by local and Islamic customs, framed by piety, chastity, and monogamy (Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2017, 12). This research is part of a new wave examining masculinities in Afghanistan, expanding gender research to address the genders recognized in Afghanistan. This exploration of Afghan masculinities contributes to existing scholarship, which argues that gender roles are more complex than how they are being treated (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2009; Schulz 2019). In reflecting on her programme work, Rebecca Winthrop, highlights how important it is to incorporate local gender perspectives into development efforts, claiming that 'the contrast between local and international frameworks is stark, and nowhere is this more obvious than with gender relations.' (Winthrop 2003, 248). Fluri echoes these remarks, stating that 'post 9/11 international interventions in Afghanistan focused on women (not gender) and their public and political participation; and yet these did not address, or did not understand the complexities of Afghan gender roles and relations' (Fluri 2011, 521). Critically, without a profound understanding of, and engagement with, local gender dynamics, and the patriarchal and colonial structures that produce and maintain them, it is impossible for international actors to support bottom-up women's empowerment efforts. In order for a gendered shift in perceptions to take root, international and domestic actors need to work closely with local communities over a sustained period of time; this was, perhaps ironically, recognized and published by the World Bank prior to the two-year programme described above (World Bank 2010). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the Afghans in our study emphasized the relevance of girl's education and women's professional opportunities since these have been areas of significant engaged support by the international community since near the beginning of the US occupation, and areas of intervention by the international community and NGOs long before that (Baitenmann 1990).

Girls education and professional opportunities

Girls education is an area that has experienced developmental successes. In fact, in response to broader critiques of the American-led intervention, percentages of girls accessing education is often the first cited example of productive impact.[6] Under the Taliban government of the 1990s, girls were systematically denied education, women were systematically removed from teaching positions, and the majority of girl's schools were closed. Estimated figures of enrolled girls at this time is approximately 5000.[7] After the 'Back to School' campaign was launched in 2002, this figure rose to 2.4 million in 2011 (Jackson 2011, 4), with 'schools and universities employing more than 68,000 women instructors including 800 university professors in both private and public institutions' (Ahmadi 2019). Until 2018, the Global Partnership for Education also worked to increase and sustain equitable access to education in some rural provinces of Afghanistan (UNICEF 2019). All of these efforts have had an effect on rural Afghan perceptions of the value of education for girls, as well as female performance in schools (Burde and Linden 2013; Li et al. 2018).

Our findings support results from an extensive study of young people's educational and social aspirations as compared to their parent's experiences in rural Afghanistan. The study was conducted in 2016 in six Afghan provinces, selected according to high levels of relative deprivation.[8] The study found that for both fathers and mothers, education for their sons and daughters is highly valued and approximately half believed

marriage should happen after the completion of secondary school (Li et al. 2018, 374). Adolescents also valued education and believed that their parents would resist community pressure were it to limit their school matriculation (Li et al. 2018, 374), indicating a significant shift in local attitudes toward education since the early 2000s. Similarly, Burde and Linden found that placing formal schools into villages in Afghanistan has a significantly positive effect on female truancy and performance, increasing the number of girls in school and their educational outcomes (Burde and Linden 2013). This demonstrates that sustained engagement may shift attitudes and open spaces for exploring gender equity through education in rural Afghanistan.

Although girl's education is an obvious entry point for women's empowerment programmes, it continues to be sorely underfunded. There are not enough schools and many schools operate without buildings in rural areas. In addition, most schools lack enough teachers, in particular female teachers (Jackson 2011, 4–6) and international support for rural education in Afghanistan has recently decreased significantly (UNICEF 2018). Between 2002 and 2014, the US government alone spent 759 million dollars on developing education in Afghanistan (SIGAR 2016). The withdrawal of troops was accompanied by decreased development spending, and specifically, problematically lower funding to education (Høvring 2019). According to the Afghan Ministry of Education, only 21% of girls complete primary school (Ministry of Education 2015). Disturbingly, an investigative report later identified that the figures of enrolment were 'overcounted in official records by about 40%' (Khan 2015).

Yet, girl's education appears to be receiving high levels of local support from rural Afghans, enough for the Taliban to provide public statements supporting a continuation of educational programmes for girls (Firchow and Urwin 2019). Our findings link the Taliban's vocal support to increasing levels of community support. These findings are particularly important, as they align with the goals of international donors, researchers and government officials, as well as (ostensibly) the Taliban, with those of rural Afghans in Nangahar and Kunar provinces.

During peace talks in 2018, and again in 2019, the Taliban pledged to support girls' education, a radical shift from its policies while in government from 1996 to 2001 (Noury and Speciale 2016). This change may be reflective of a shift in local attitudes and priorities regarding girls' education and professional opportunities and may indicate that the Taliban is actively engaging with local norms and values in rural Afghanistan. Supporting the momentum of this local wave of support for girls' education and women's professional opportunities is important because of the stigma associated with women's empowerment programming in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The complexity of gender politics in Afghanistan is intricately wrapped up in the perception that women's rights and gender equality is a norm imposed upon Afghans from the West in order to colonize Afghanistan. This perspective has been ironclad since the US occupation and has contributed to misogyny and violence against women in many areas of Afghanistan. Supporting women's rights in the form of girl's education in rural areas of Eastern Afghanistan, however, is something that is evidently supported by locals, as is promoting certain professional opportunities for these girls once they finish school.

We continue to poorly understand gendered relations and priorities in Afghanistan, and the complex entanglement of gender, rights and peace. It seems, however, that greater and more extensive community level analyses are critical to unpack the individual and community experiences with peace and conflict, and related impacts on actors and institutions. If the 'margins, silences and bottom rungs' (Enloe 1996, 186) are neither acknowledged nor included, we risk underestimating, and thus overlooking, the dynamics that both enable and explain positive change.

Finally, the findings supporting education and economic mobility could demonstrate an opening toward a toleration and acceptance of assistance from outsiders within the educational sector. Suspicions of interference by Afghan elites from Kabul and foreign interventions have been prevalent for at least a century with deep-seated fears that government schools might indoctrinate children and make them secular, as was believed to have been the case during the Soviet invasion (Burde 2015). Focusing on a bottom-up strategy for women's empowerment through education would provide a welcome opportunity for advancing both local and international goals for progress and emancipation towards women's rights, according to standards valued by everyone involved – the international community, Afghan elites, and rural Afghan men and women, girls and boys.

Notes

1. ActionAid Report from 2011 cites the Taliban announcing this over the loudspeakers at girls' schools, see https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/house-or-grave.
2. Brandeis University Institutional Review Board Protocol #20033R.
3. Saba Stori Research is a Jalalabad-based research organization that has been carrying out fieldwork in Eastern Afghanistan since 2011.
4. See codebook at everydaypeaceindicators.org.
5. https://undocs.org/S/RES/1325(2000).
6. USAID in particular uses a set of figures to highlight this: https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/education.
7. The existence of a number of underground and secret schools for girls is documented (Lamble and Pakzad 2018), and we know that, like today, the Taliban was not able or willing to enforce these regulations systematically across the country, leading to variation in access to girls schooling "The system of shadow Taliban governance and the experiences of civilians subject to it are well documented. The policies that guide this governance and the factors that contribute to them, however, are not. This report examines how the Taliban make and implement policy. Based on more than a hundred interviews and previously unreleased Taliban documents, this report offers rare insight into Taliban decision-making processes and the factors that influence them (Jackson and Amiri 2019).
8. The study did not include Nangarhar and Kunar provinces.

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