

# **Afghan Women and the Taliban: An Exploratory Assessment**

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Recent years have seen an increase in visible and sometimes even prominent roles for women in terrorist organisations. Both academics and organisations involved in counter-terrorism have paid increasing attention on the role of women not only as supporters of, but also as opponents to political violence. This Policy Brief examines the position of women in Afghanistan vis-à-vis the Taliban. Leiden University researcher Seran de Leede explores if Afghan women have been involved in the armed struggle of the Taliban as either active or passive supporters. She also considers the resilience women have shown towards political violence in Afghanistan and the possible role women can play in countering violent extremism in the country. Ultimately, this Policy Brief aims to contribute to a better understanding of the role of women in (countering) political violence in Afghanistan.

## About the Author

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## 1. Introduction

Women in Afghanistan have undoubtedly suffered in the years their country was subjected to Taliban rule. However, their frequent characterisation as voiceless victims of war, violence and repression, to be liberated only by Western military intervention, is both incomplete and incorrect.<sup>1</sup> The main focus of media attention and the scope of research on women's repression and the Taliban's severe abuse of women's rights has largely overlooked both women's active resistance towards, and their possible involvement with, the Taliban.<sup>2</sup>

While research on women's role(s) in the Taliban years as well as in the current insurgency<sup>3</sup> is extremely limited, recent developments in jihadi terrorism in other contexts show that women play an increasingly important role in terrorist activities. Cultural norms in conservative societies and the stereotype that women are less prone to use violence provide terrorist organisations with a comparative advantage when deploying women. Female suicide bombers have demonstrated they can get closer to their target undetected, which often makes them more effective than their male counterparts.<sup>4</sup> The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and Chechen rebels are notorious for their use of female cannon fodder.<sup>5</sup> However, women can be more than bombs on heels. The LTTE had and the PKK still has large female militant sections where women take up their part of the fighting.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the increasing role of women as recruiters to influence other women and men has become a hallmark of al Qaeda where women use chat rooms to convince men to join the global jihad.<sup>7</sup> The American convert Colleen LaRose, better known as "Jihad Jane", confessed to being involved in the planning of the attack on Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks.<sup>8</sup> The women of the Dutch *Hofstadgroep* were active as organisers and intellectual participants of the group.<sup>9</sup> Some Palestinian mothers raise their sons with the idea that a martyr's death is honourable, sustaining the martyr culture and myth.<sup>10</sup> "White Widow" Samantha Lewthwaite, allegedly involved in the Kenia Mall attack of 2013 as well as in the planning of the 7/7 London bombings in which her husband was one of the suicide bombers, has climbed to the rank of one of the most wanted terrorism suspects in the world.<sup>11</sup> The arrest of a Saudi terrorist fund-raiser and weapons supplier often referred to as "the first lady of al Qaeda" in 2010 further suggests the involvement of women in the higher ranks of terrorist organisations.<sup>12</sup>

In response to this rise in visible and sometimes even prominent roles for women in terrorist organisations, the last two decades show an increase in academic attention for women's involvement with terrorist organisations. Also, more recently, counter-terrorism agencies and several scholars have started emphasising the possible role of women as part of the solution in combatting terrorism.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. Rostami-Povey, "Women in Afghanistan: passive victims of the borga or active social participant?", *Development in Practice* 13, no. 2 & 3 (May 2003), pp. 266-277, <http://www.iav.nl/eazines/web/Farzaneh/1993/Vol1Nr1/farzanehjournl/arti2n11.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> It should be acknowledged that "women" are of course not a coherent group with the same thoughts and ideals, based on the mere commonality that they are all women. Afghan women form no exception. As will be discussed in this paper, there are many different ethnicities and tribes in Afghanistan in which women take different positions. But even within different Afghan families, the position of women can vary significantly. Furthermore, the position of rural women often differs considerably from that of urban women.

<sup>3</sup> The current insurgency refers to the political violence deployed by the various Afghan Taliban fractions from 2001 until the present day.

<sup>4</sup> M. Bloom, *Bombshell, women and terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 21; B. de Graaf, *Gevaarlijke vrouwen, tien militante vrouwen in het vizier* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Boom, 2012), p.9; L. Weinberg, W. Eubank, "Women's involvement in terrorism", *Gender Issues* 28 (2011), p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> B. de Graaf, *Gevaarlijke vrouwen* (2012), p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> J. Gol, "Who are the female fighters of the PKK?", *BBC documentary* (January 5 2014), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25610424>; M. Bloom, *Bombshell, women and terrorism*, (2011), p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> M. Bloom, "Bombshells: women and terror", *Gender Issues* 28, (2011), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> B. de Graaf, *Gevaarlijke vrouwen* (2012), p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> B. de Graaf, *Gevaarlijke vrouwen* (2012), p. 9; J. Groen, A. Kranenberg, *Strijdsters van Allah, radicale moslima's en het hofstadnetwerk*, (Uitgeverij Meulenhoff, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> M. Loadenthal, "Reproducing a culture of martyrdom, the Palestinian mother, discourse and legitimization", *Academia.edu* (2013).

<sup>11</sup> Interpol. *Search Warrant for Samantha Lewthwaite*. (2013). <http://www.interpol.int/notice/search/wanted/2013-52018>.

<sup>12</sup> R. Spencer, "'First Lady of al-Qaeda' jailed for 15 years", *The Telegraph* (30 October 2011), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudiArabia/8858301/First-Lady-of-al-Qaeda-jailed-for-15-years.html>.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, K. J. Cunningham, "Cross-regional trends in female terrorism", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26, no. 3 (2003); K. Jacques and P.J. Taylor, "Male and female suicide bombers: different sexes different reasons?", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 4 (2008), pp. 304-326; E. MacDonald, *Shoot the women first* (New York: Random House, 1991); M. Gonzalez-Perez, "Guerrilleras in Latin America: Domestic and International roles", *Journal of Peace Research* 43, no. 3 (2006), pp. 313-329; M. Pottinger, H. Jilani, C. Russo, "Half-hearted: trying to win Afghanistan without Afghan women", *Small Wars Journal* (18 February 2010); E. Rostami-Povey, "Women in

This increased attention for women in relation to political violence poses the question how women in Afghanistan have responded to the political violence in their country. Are Afghan women involved in the armed struggle of the Taliban in any way? Can Afghan women play a role in countering violent extremism? By focusing on these questions, this Policy Brief hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the role of women in Afghanistan in (countering) political violence. It will visualise the response of Afghan women towards the Taliban both throughout the time the Taliban ruled large parts of Afghanistan (1996-2001), and during the current insurgency (2001-present).<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that little previous research has been conducted on either the participation of women in, or their active resistance against, political violence in Afghanistan. Hence, there is very limited data to build on. Nevertheless, the objective of this paper is to provide a more detailed picture of female behaviour in relation to political violence in Afghanistan so as to optimise recommendations for both countering the ongoing political violence at present, and to prevent and counter comparable outbursts of political violence in the future.

## 2. Methodology

In attempts to explain why some people join a terrorist organisation, scholars have drawn up numerous radicalisation models that stress how radicalisation is a highly complicated, multi-causal process.<sup>15</sup> Many of these models discern three levels on which radicalisation can take place: the macro, meso and micro level.<sup>16</sup> The analysis in this Policy Brief is informed by these three levels, though the scope is broader than radicalisation alone; it tries to visualise support for as well as opposition against the Taliban. Support for an organisation does not necessarily presupposes a certain level of radicalisation. Often, engagement is motivated out of pragmatic considerations, or driven by other factors such as fear.

Due to current security issues in Afghanistan, on-the-ground research is severely restricted, especially in the southern regions where the Taliban control large areas. In addition, the possibility to select one's own respondents is currently considerably limited and cultural restrictions hamper the possibility for an outsider to interview local women. Hence, this research is based on findings of journalists, researchers and aid-workers that have worked in Afghanistan over the years, as well as on extensive literature research. Findings are combined and put into a historical context so as to provide a broad analysis of the position of women towards the Taliban.

The following section will discuss the relevant historical background of Afghan women and their position towards violent conflicts in the past. The subsequent section will outline if and how women support the Taliban, how they become involved with the organisation and how they have opposed the group. The Policy Brief will conclude with recommendations.

## 3. Historical Background: Women and Political Violence in Afghanistan

Islam was introduced in Afghanistan in the seventh century. Today, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, of which the large majority follows the Sunni teachings. Minorities consist of Shia Muslims and small pockets of Buddhists, Christians and Sikhs. The Afghan society contains several ethnicities and tribes, which are of major importance through all levels of society and politics.

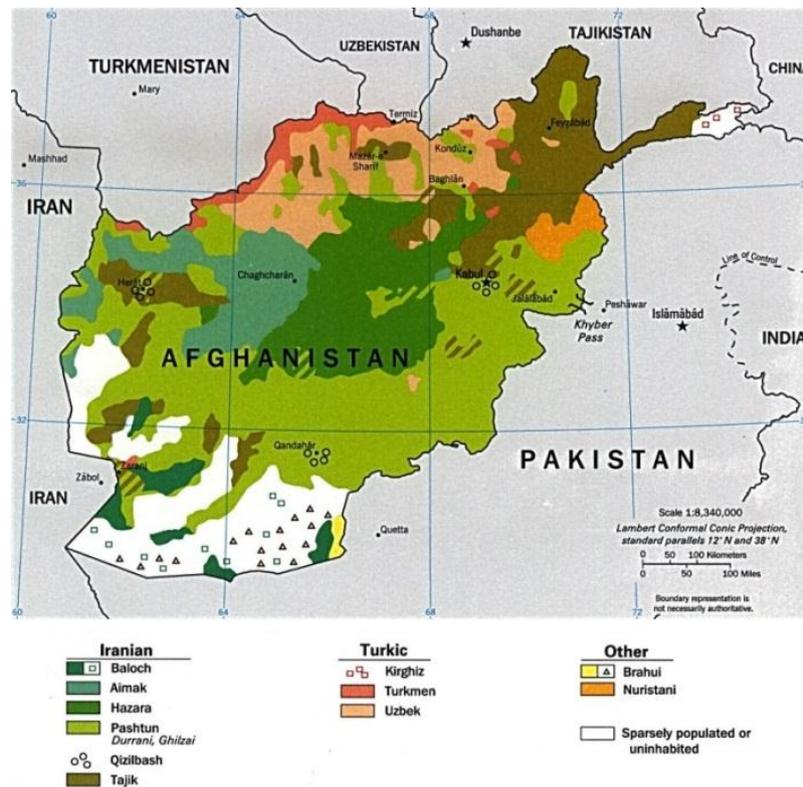
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Afghanistan: passive victims of the *borga* or active social participant?", *Development in practice* 13, no. 2 & 3 (May 2003), pp. 266-277, <http://www.iiav.nl/ezines/web/Farzaneh/1993/Vol1Nr1/farzanehjurnal/arti2n11.pdf/>.

<sup>14</sup> The Taliban are not one homogenous group but is an umbrella organisation of different separate groups that often disagree with each other. Other groups that are active in the current insurgency in Afghanistan are the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), the Haqqani Network, the Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin of Hekmatyar, Lashkar-e-Taiba and al Qaeda. The Afghan Taliban often cooperates with the other groups, making it complex to draw a clear distinction between responsibilities.

<sup>15</sup> A. P. Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review", *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2013); T. Veldhuis & J. Staun, *Islamist radicalisation, a root cause model* (The Hague: Clingendael, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> M. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); T. Veldhuis & J. Staun, *Islamist radicalisation, a root cause model* (The Hague: Clingendael, 2009).



**Map 1:** Ethnolinguistic Groups of Afghanistan<sup>17</sup>

Tribal codes are important structures that provide security and order within the tribal community. They are important in shaping and defining behaviour among men and women. Honour is one of the most desired status symbols in tribal Afghan society, and an important element of the cultural code of the ethnic majority of the Pashtuns. It is considered the duty of the men to uphold the respectability of their women. *Purdah* (prevention of men seeing women, both through physical segregation and by covering women's bodies so as to hide their form and skin) is a key element in the protection of the family's pride and honour and an essential component of the honour code.<sup>18</sup> The strict segregation related to *Purdah* is not practiced in all parts of Afghanistan. Nomadic Kuchi women, for instance, are usually not segregated from men, neither are the Shiite Hazara women required to seclude themselves. *Purdah* is also less practiced among the Tajik people of Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout modern Afghan history, tribal linkages and religious authority have often been stronger than central authority. Especially when Kabul enforced reforms that contradicted with tribal or religious customs, opposition was fierce. In the 1920s, Amanullah Shah tried to alleviate the position of women by advocating against the veil, opening schools for girls and allowing the government to regulate various family problems formerly dealt with by the local mullah. In the 1950s Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud (1953-1963) officially ended seclusion for women and abolished veiling.<sup>20</sup> In urban areas, these reforms and the later following communist era (1978-1992) led to more independence for women.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, many young women of Kabul

<sup>17</sup> The University of Texas at Austin, "Ethnolinguistic Groups of Afghanistan in 1997", *Wiki Commons* (13 July 2010), [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Afghanistan\\_Ethnolinguistic\\_Groups\\_1997.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Afghanistan_Ethnolinguistic_Groups_1997.jpg).

<sup>18</sup> D. Cortright, and K. Wall, "Afghan women speak: enhancing security and human rights in Afghanistan", *Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies* (University of Notre Dame, August, 2012), p. 8, [http://kroc.nd.edu/sites/default/files/Afghan\\_Women\\_Speak\\_Report.pdf](http://kroc.nd.edu/sites/default/files/Afghan_Women_Speak_Report.pdf). It is interesting to note is that in accordance with the Pashtun tribal code, when no male family member is able or alive to reclaim the honour of the family, it is obligatory for women to carry out vengeance. See: M. P. Dearing, "Agency and structure as determinants of female suicide: a comparative study of three conflict regions", *Naval Postgraduate School* (Dec. 2009), p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> M. P. Dearing, "Agency and structure as determinants of female suicide: a comparative study of three conflict regions", *Naval Postgraduate School* (Dec. 2009),", p. 84 footnote 270; M. Larson, L. Hazelton, "Hazara People". *National Geographic* ver. 6 (17 June 2008), [http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/geopedia/Hazara\\_People](http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/geopedia/Hazara_People). This site also lists further reading; D. Cortright, and K. Wall, "Afghan women speak" (August 2012).

<sup>20</sup> V. M. Moghadam, *Modernizing women. Gender and social change in the Middle East* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1993), pp. 217-221.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 217-221; D. Cortright, and K. Wall, "Afghan women speak" (August 2012), p. 7.

never wore the *chadari* (head-to-toe cover) prior to Taliban rule; this was a garment worn only by their grandmothers or women in the rural areas in the south.<sup>22</sup> Most women in Kabul in the 1990s did not even own such clothing. They were allowed to work, study and move around freely without being accompanied by a *mahram* (a male family member).<sup>23</sup> The situation in the rural settings, despite the reforms of Kabul, remained, on the other hand, very traditional and stayed far removed from the urban way of life. To the rural people (especially in the south), Kabul represented a different world that called their tribal values into question and reforms were often met with fierce resistance.

In the 1950s and -60s, violence erupted between those who opposed the reforms - tribes, Mullahs and religious students - and the representatives from Kabul who were charged with implementing them. Ultimately, the Soviet Union interfered in 1979 and the resistance groups, so-called Mujahedeen fighters who were backed by the United States (US) and Pakistan, waged an anti-Soviet jihad against the Soviet forces. Some women played a supportive role to the Mujahedeen in this endeavour. They sheltered and hid them, cleaned, oiled and repaired weapons and served as couriers. Other women, although unmistakably the exception, played a more active role. Bibi Ayesha, a female warlord, dismissed the idea that women could not fight in battle and commanded a band of 150 men in the Nahrin district of Baghlan, northern Afghanistan. She did so while conforming to Pashtun culture, and insisted a male relative accompany her into battle.

Some Mujahedeen commanders subjugated local populations with their military might and conquests.<sup>24</sup> Upon the collapse of the Soviet-backed government in 1992, fighting soon broke out between the different factions, engulfing the country in a civil war.<sup>25</sup> The already fragile state-infrastructure was destroyed and (sexual and gender-based) violence was widespread. As a response to the political vacuum, the chaos and the lawlessness, some of the Mujahedeen who had formerly fought as *talib* Mujahedeen (*talib* means student and here refers to the religious students who fought during the military resistance of the 1980s), regrouped in the early 1990s, to form the Taliban movement. They operated from Kandahar in the south of Afghanistan and positioned themselves as cleansers and purifiers of the “wrecked” Afghan society. The Taliban established some form of a popular support base by fighting off the local bandits and criminals, who robbed locals and harassed their women.<sup>26</sup> Often, the strict rules of the Taliban were regarded as a solution to the violence and insecurity that dominated the region. Gradually, the Taliban controlled larger parts of Afghanistan, increasingly using force, and finally took over Kabul in 1996. This had large consequences for the position of women in Afghan society, especially in the cities. The Taliban closed schools for girls and enforced a strict interpretation of *sharia* law and Pashtun customary law; women were banned from working outside the home or leaving the house without a *chadari* and a *mahram*. The Taliban’s religious police meted out severe punishment for any infractions of the moral order.<sup>27</sup> In the south, the Taliban regime was deeply ingrained in Pashtun society. In other parts of Afghanistan, especially the parts dominated by other ethnicities, the Taliban were never able to establish complete control.<sup>28</sup> Women from ethnic minorities such as the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara were systematically targeted and abducted.<sup>29</sup> Resistance groups in the north would later form the United Front (Northern Alliance) and play an important role in pushing back the Taliban groups.

As part of the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom after the attacks on 11 September 2001, the Northern Alliance started reclaiming territory from the Taliban and affiliated groups from the north towards Kabul. At the same time, other opposition groups including Karzai’s men engaged in similar efforts from the south. During this struggle, alliances easily shifted back and forth. Only when Karzai’s men were visibly becoming successful in

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<sup>22</sup> G. Tzemach Lemmon, *The dressmaker of Khair Khana : Five Sisters, One Remarkable Family, and the Woman Who Risked Everything to Keep Them Safe* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> P.D. Thruelson, “The Taliban in southern Afghanistan a localized insurgency with a local objective”, *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 21, no. 2 (2010), p. 263.

<sup>25</sup> D. Cortright, and K. Wall, “Afghan women speak” (August 2012), p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> A. Strick van Linschoten, and F. Kuehn, *An enemy we created, the myth of the Taliban – Al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford Press, 2012), pp. 113-115; B. Dam, *Expeditie Uruzgan, de weg van Hamid Karzai naar het paleis* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij de arbeiderspers, 2009), p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> D. Cortright, and K. Wall, “Afghan women speak” (August 2012), p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Personal correspondence with the director of *Stichting SAN: Samenwerking Afghanistan – Nederland*, Dr. Ghalil Wedad (2014); B. Dam, *Expeditie Uruzgan, de weg van Hamid Karzai naar het paleis* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij de arbeiderspers, 2009), p. 148.

<sup>29</sup> T. McGirk and H. Bloch suggest that more than 600 women vanished from the Shomali vineyards during the 1999 Taliban offensive; see T. McGirk, H. Bloch, “Lifting the veil on sexual slavery”, *Time Magazine* 159, no. 7 (18 February 2002), p. 8, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,201892,00.html>.

defeating Taliban groups did large groups and old allies openly declare their support. After the Taliban were formally defeated in 2001, Karzai was assigned as interim president and later elected president. Tribal alliances, kinship ties and personal debts often proved to dictate loyalties and the assigning of positions as Karzai's followers were rewarded for their support in the form of important posts in the new government.<sup>30</sup> Several of the warlords who had been ousted by the Taliban in the 1990s returned to power.<sup>31</sup>

The Taliban defeat in 2001 created new opportunities for women, especially since the mistreatment of women by the Taliban became an important point on the agenda of several Western lobbyists, human rights organisations and other actors. Partially because of this international attention for women's rights in Afghanistan, women today appear to be politically well represented. The *Wolesi Jirga*, the Afghan Parliament's Lower House, has a higher rate of female participation than most of the world's legislatures, including US Congress.<sup>32</sup> While this sounds impressive, observers note female MPs lack real decision-making power.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, in a patriarchal, patrilineal society, women still face deep Islamic conservatism and family and community disapproval for challenging traditional gender roles. Opponents of the Karzai government and Western influences often depict the focus on women's rights as countercultural and an intrusion of the West. Supporters of women's rights are often targets of threats and attacks because of their perceived association with Western interests.<sup>34</sup> The Taliban website *The Voice of Jihad* illustrates and enhances this sentiment. It refers to the aid the West sends to educate women in Afghanistan as the "debauchery of women". Furthermore it states that "American support for women are in reality a premeditated plan for derailing and disturbing their tranquillity. The invading forces are trying to focus that part of society which is vulnerable and can easily be exploited for the wretchedness of our society".<sup>35</sup>

Since 2005, the strength of the Taliban has increased and violence has been on the rise. Growing insecurity in the regions particularly in the south, and violence caused by local warlords and bandits directed towards civilians are again factors in explaining the resurgence of the Taliban today. The groups' resurgence also affects the position of women in society and their political and economic opportunities. Women who are politically active and who resist traditional gender roles are often intimidated and threatened by conservatives and the Taliban.

## 4. Women and the Taliban

The following section will elaborate on the position of women in regard to the Taliban. The first part will focus on whether and how women play a supportive, enabling position by first zooming in on what roles women play and second by how they are recruited. The second part will focus on how women have resisted the Taliban.

### 4.1 Women in supporting positions

The scope of research on women and the Taliban has predominately focussed on women as victims of Taliban rule and on human rights abuses. Little is known of women who play an enabling role towards the Taliban. Dr. Rostami Povey from SOAS University of London<sup>36</sup> is one of the few researchers who has published on women as supporters of the Taliban. She has conducted several field studies on Afghan women in Iran and the UK as well as a field research in Kabul in 2002. In 2007, she published a book on Afghan women in which she challenges stereotypes and presents a diverse picture of Afghan women.<sup>37</sup> According to her research, there was a small minority of women who supported the Taliban. Based on research of Ahmed Rashid,<sup>38</sup> Povey claims that the Taliban had a secret service that employed between 15,000 to 30,000 official spies and over 100,000 paid

<sup>30</sup> B. Dam, *Expeditie Uruzgan, de weg van Hamid Karzai naar het paleis* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij de arbeiderspers, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> T. Farrell and A. Giustozzi, "The Taliban at war, inside the Helmand insurgency, 2004-2012", *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013), p. 847.

<sup>32</sup> D. Cortright, and K. Wall, "Afghan women speak" (August 2012), p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Editors contribution, "Creating plights for women in the name of relief!!", *Voice of Jihad* (1 July 2013),

<http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/comments/34612-creating-plights-for-women-in-the-name-of-relief>.

<sup>36</sup> Dr. Elaheh Rostami-Povey is a writer and researcher at SOAS University of London. Her research focuses on Iran, Afghanistan and the Middle East, in particular gender issues in Iran.

<sup>37</sup> E. Rostami-Povey, *Afghan women: Identity and invasion* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2007).

<sup>38</sup> A. Rashid, *Taliban, militant Islam, Oil and fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). Rashid is one of the foremost Afghanistan experts.

informers, some of which were women.<sup>39</sup> The motivations of these women remain unknown, but Povey does not exclude the possibility of women who supported the ideological mission. Interviews she conducted suggest Taliban women claimed women should remain at home and perform domestic duties. Based on her interviews, she alleges that Taliban women would enter women's compounds to check whether Taliban rules were followed. These women would report to their male commanders what they had found.<sup>40</sup> There are no official statistics and little academic findings on the existence of these women, let alone on their numbers or their roles. However, a personal source of the author<sup>41</sup> recalls rumours of Taliban women who played a supportive, informing role. This is also supported by other sources, including Gayle Lemmon in her book about a young Afghani entrepreneur.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the existence of Taliban women is plausible because Taliban men were not allowed to touch women they were not related to, including female prisoners. It was women who were charged with dealing with female prisoners. The existence of Taliban police women is alleged in the horrific footage of the public execution of Zarmeena in 1999 in which it is shown how two women (while it is not certain who these women are, they are most likely Taliban policewomen) accompany her to the execution stand.<sup>43</sup>

The findings of journalist Terese Christiansson suggest the existence of Taliban women in the current insurgency. She spoke with some Taliban women from Ghazni and Kunduz, who argued Afghanistan would be safer once the Taliban reclaim power. Christiansson states: "As Taleban wives they play a supporting but important role in the insurgency. Not only do they believe in the cause, but they also assist their husbands by smuggling weapons under their clothes, carrying messages and taking care of wounded fighters".<sup>44</sup> According to Christiansson, these women also showed they knew their way around a gun; however, they claimed they would only use it to protect their house and family while their husbands were away. The women themselves explain they do not actively fight on the frontlines. Christiansson suggests that it is not uncommon for female relatives of the Taliban to support the insurgency in this way.<sup>45</sup> Beside these supporting roles, it appears there are no women in the higher echelons of the Taliban.

In addition, although the Afghan Taliban have embraced the tactic of suicide attacks, there seems to be almost no room for women to engage in suicide attacks. During the insurgency so far, there are only a few cases known of suicide missions performed by women in Afghanistan. Who these women were and where they came from (whether they were for instance Uzbek, Pashtun, Arab or Pakistani) remains unclear.<sup>46</sup> Also, it is not clear whether these women were associated with the Afghan Taliban, or with other insurgency groups active in the region. Given the strikingly low number of incidents with female suicide bombers in the region, it appears that the Afghan Taliban are reluctant to employ women in their suicide attacks and they do not seem to take advantage of the perceived value of women as suicide bombers in the same way other political insurgents do.<sup>47</sup>

## 4.2 Recruitment

To explain why people join political violent groups or terrorist organisations, scholars often refer to the influence of social surroundings on potential members as well as to recruitment policies of organisations.<sup>48</sup> This section will zoom in on the recruitment policies of the Taliban towards women, distinguishing between a top-down, a horizontal and a bottom-up approach.

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<sup>39</sup> E. Rostami-Povey, *Afghan women: Identity and Invasion* (2007), p. 60.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pp. 60-62.

<sup>41</sup> Who fled the Taliban fifteen years ago and who currently lives in the Netherlands.

<sup>42</sup> G. Tzemach Lemmon, *The dressmaker of Khair Khana* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011). Gayle Lemmon suggests the existence of female Taliban informers when she tells how the Kamila's sister urges her not to talk to anybody they do not know, not even women, because they might report them to the Taliban.

<sup>43</sup> Editor's contribution. "Zarmina's story", *The Mirror* (20 June 2002), <http://www.rawa.org/murder-w.htm>.

Zarmeena had confessed to killing her husband and was therefore sentenced to death in a stadium in Kabul in 1999.

<sup>44</sup> T. Christiansson, "Burka brigade: wives take up arms for the Taleban", *The Times* (3 March, 2012),

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/asia/afghanistan/article3338797.ece>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid; T. Christiansson, "Jag levde hemma hos talebanerna", *Expressen.se*, <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/terese-cristiansson-jag-levde-hemma-hos-talibanerna/>.

<sup>46</sup> B. Roggio, "Female suicide bomber from Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin strikes in Kabul", *The Long War Journal* (9 September 2012).

<sup>47</sup> For further reading on the absence of female suicide bombers in Afghanistan, see: M. Dearing, "Like red tulips at springtime: understanding the absence of female martyrs in Afghanistan", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 12, pp. 1079-1033.

<sup>48</sup> M. Sageman, *Understanding terror networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2004); M. Taarnby, "Recruitment of Islamist terrorists in Europe: trends and perspectives", *Centre for Cultural Research*, Aarhus University (2005).

Many terrorist organisations actively recruit women. The PKK for instance actively approaches Kurdish women and promises them freedom and protection with slogans such as “liberating women, liberating Kurdistan”.<sup>49</sup> Religious terrorists in Pakistan deliberately target young girls through *Madrassas* (religious schools), assuming that they will ultimately control the entire family through these radicalised women.<sup>50</sup> Parts of the al Qaeda network increasingly actively approach women, for instance by distributing women’s magazines like *Al Shamikah* (the majestic), which contains articles about how to be a good jihadi wife as well as articles with beauty tips.<sup>51</sup> When looking at Afghanistan, research shows the Taliban do actively target men, persuading or forcing them to join the fighting. They also distribute so-called night-letters, through which they warn both men and women that international forces will not be around forever and the Taliban will take their revenge on those who oppose them.<sup>52</sup> However, there seems to be no evidence that the Taliban actively approach women to support them in one way or another. The narrative proposed by the Taliban appears to be directed solely at men. In this rhetoric, women seem to remain completely absent.

Beside this top-down approach, experts refer to the so-called horizontal approach, the influence of social networks on radicalisation. In many cases, a friend or acquaintance in the group recruited the subject. Often, terrorists have pre-existing familial bonds to members already involved in terrorist organisations.<sup>53</sup> Such kinship ties have also been identified in the recruitment of women and in explaining their involvement.<sup>54</sup> In the Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah, sisters and daughters of one cell are married off to the leaders of other cells to strengthen the internal bond.<sup>55</sup> Although it seems plausible this strategy could also be applied in Afghanistan, especially considering the country’s strong tribal culture, a lack of necessary data complicates any confirmation. The findings of Terese Christiansson do suggest that women who play a supportive role within the struggle of the Taliban were related to Taliban fighters. However, the data are too meagre to draw any substantiated conclusions.

The role of mothers sustaining the martyr myth is often underscored as an important factor in ensuring continuity in the influx of potential insurgents and can be categorised under the so-called horizontal approach. Some reporters claim this also takes place in Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup> In an article in *The Guardian*, O’Hagan tells the story of child suicide bombers, where mothers (allegedly) play a role in encouraging their sons to become martyrs.<sup>57</sup> Although the empirical evidence displayed in the article is certainly not enough to conclude Afghan women play a prominent role in sustaining the martyr myth to the same extent as some Palestinian women are believed to do,<sup>58</sup> the findings at least suggest some involvement by mothers in supporting Taliban activity and ideology.<sup>59</sup>

A third method of recruitment is the bottom-up approach, in which prospective members actively approach terrorist organisations.<sup>60</sup> An article in *Newsweek* describes how a Pakistani woman desperately tried to join the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) to avenge the death of her cousins.<sup>61</sup> An anonymous source refers to a case of five women in the Helmand province who wanted to start a Taliban female fighting unit to join their male

<sup>49</sup> Zekai Özçınar, and Bayram Kaya, “Women join terrorist PKK for many reasons, mainly seeking freedom”, *Today’s Zaman* (29 January 2012),

[http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action;jsessionid=116F9ECB7435D31A5C42BF7596C9F52D?newsId=269867](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action;jsessionid=116F9ECB7435D31A5C42BF7596C9F52D?newsId=269867).

<sup>50</sup> M. Bloom, “Bombshells: women and terror”, *Gender Issues* 28 (2011), p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> E. Solis Al-Tabaa, “Targeting a female audience, American Muslim women’s perception of Al Qaeda propaganda”, *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 5 (2013), p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> T. H. Johnson, “The Taliban insurgency and an analysis of Shabnamah (Night Letters)”, *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18, no. 3 (2007), p. 321.

<sup>53</sup> M. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2004).

<sup>54</sup> In a study in the 1980s of the Egyptian militant group Repentance and Holy Flight, analyses revealed that female terrorists were mostly relatives or wives of the male members. See E. S. Ibrahim, “Anatomy of Egypt’s militant Islamic groups – methodological note and preliminary findings”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12 (1980), pp. 423-453.

<sup>55</sup> M. Bloom, “Bombshells: women and terror”, *Gender Issues* 28 (2011), p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> A. O’Hagan, “From classroom to suicide bombs: children’s lives in Afghanistan”, *The Guardian* (3 August 2013),

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/03/afghanistan-child-suicide-bombers>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> M. Loadenthal, “Reproducing a culture of martyrdom, the Palestinian mother, discourse and legitimization”, *Academia.edu* (2013).

<sup>59</sup> Further research needs to be carried out to establish whether this actually happens on a larger scale.

<sup>60</sup> M. Sageman, *Understanding terror networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2004); R. Coolsaet, “Between al-Andalus and a failing integration. Europe’s pursuit of a long-term counterterrorism strategy in the post al-Qaeda era”, *Royal Institute for International Relations*, Brussels (2005).

<sup>61</sup> B. Shah, N. Ul Islam, and S. Taseer, “Lady parts”, *Newsweek* (23 September 2013), pp. 30-33.

counterparts in the fighting. The Quetta *Shura*<sup>62</sup> however rejected this request.<sup>63</sup> Without excluding the possibility that similar cases exist, there are no known comparable reports on Afghan women who want to contribute to the fight in this manner.

In summary, there is very little evidence of women supporting or enabling the Taliban. If there is some form of support, this appears to be limited to a very basic, supportive role. What motivates women to support the Taliban is very difficult to establish based on the available data – more (field) research is clearly needed. There is some anecdotal evidence that points to women having supported the Taliban out of ideological motivations, much in the same way as women have done in other countries. However, it seems more plausible that pragmatic considerations have the overhand. Povey argues that poverty, fear and coercion are reasons why women become involved with the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, it seems plausible that kinship ties play a role in the involvement of women with the Taliban. However, because the existing data is so limited, this suggestion is speculative at best. With somewhat more certainty it can be argued that it appears the Taliban do not actively approach or target women to involve them in the struggle in either a supportive or a more pro-active manner.

### 4.3 Resistance

Afghan women are often regarded as victims of the political turmoil and related violence that has torn their country in the past and present. However, there is increasing attention for the role of woman as active social participants.

Although there was already some attention from the West for the position of women in Afghanistan prior to Taliban defeat in 2001, it only took its present form after that year. Within Afghanistan, women's rights organisations were founded as early as the 1970s. In 1977, the Revolutionary Afghan Women Association (RAWA) was founded in Kabul to give voice to oppressed women in Afghanistan. RAWA encouraged others to resist oppression and to advocate for peace, democracy and women's rights. They were active both in Afghanistan as in refugee camps in Pakistan, where many Afghans resided during the Soviet war.

During the fragmentation and civil war that followed the communist defeat, violence was widespread and often directed towards women to dishonour the opposing tribe or community. Women were frequently targets of local warlords and bandits and victims of rape and intimidation. Consequently, girls and women were kept at home in an attempt to keep them safe and protect their honour. In order to ensure education for girls, small networks came into existence through which women taught their daughters and the daughters of their relatives.

When the Taliban rose to power in the political vacuum that followed the defeat of the Soviets, Afghan men were often forced or persuaded to join the Taliban in the fight. Women who dared to go outside without a *mahram* or a *chadari* were punished. Many Afghans decided to flee to neighbouring countries. While undertaking this hazardous journey, women played a vital role in keeping their families safe. Dr. Fariyal Ross-Sheriff describes in her research how Afghan women contributed to the survival of their families. Women not only had to fend for themselves, they also feared for their husbands and sons who were under the constant risk of being forcefully deployed by the Taliban as fighters. Women played an important role in hiding their male relatives from Taliban soldiers and many worked all kinds of jobs in their place of exile to support their (extended) families. Women also contributed on a decision-making level and maintained contact with other family members and friends of the family to optimise survival efforts. Ross-Sheriff's research demonstrates women were not solely victims of Taliban rule but often played key-roles in the survival of their families.<sup>65</sup>

The civil war and the struggle against the Taliban also had its toll on the male population and many households were left without adult male members. Women often had to be resourceful in finding ways for themselves and their families to survive. Author Gayle Lemmon illustrates how women tried to provide a living under Taliban rules. Prevented from working in the public domain, one woman, Kamila Sidiqqi, started a dressmaking business from within her home, that grew out into a business that employed over a hundred local

<sup>62</sup> There are four Taliban *Shura*'s or councils. The Quetta *Shura* is more conservative and clerical educated and comprised of the Taliban leaders who formerly ruled Afghanistan prior to the international intervention in 2001. Currently there is a power struggle going on between the Quetta *Shura* and Peshawar. The latter controls most of the financial resources at the moment. For further reading see A. Giustozzi, "Turmoil within the Taliban: a crisis of growth?", *Central Asia Policy Brief, Elliott School of International Affairs*, no. 7, (2013).

<sup>63</sup> Personal interview with anonymous source in January 2014, The Hague.

<sup>64</sup> E. Rostami-Povey, "Women in Afghanistan: passive victims of the borga or active social participants?", *Development in Practice* 13, no. 2-3 (2003), p. 267; E. Rostami-Povey, *Afghan women: Identity and Invasion* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2007), pp. 50, 61.

<sup>65</sup> F. Ross-Sheriff, "Afghan women in exile and repatriation, passive victims or social actors?", *Journal of Women and Social Work* 21, no. 2 (2006), pp. 206-19.

women from the neighbourhood.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, many female Afghan professionals such as doctors decided to stay in Afghanistan and help other women.<sup>67</sup> Women's rights organisations were founded, also prior to the rise of the Taliban, to help and empower Afghan women. The Women's Vocational Training Centre, for instance, has been active for over twenty years and offers courses in English, German and computer skills. In rural areas, they focus on crafts such as bee-keeping and animal husbandry.<sup>68</sup> Their activities enabled women to make clothes and other necessities for themselves and their families, and sometimes they exchanged their products with other women.<sup>69</sup> During Taliban rule, these organisations were officially closed down, but they continued their activities underground, from their homes. Often the leaders of such organisations as well as female teachers were threatened with imprisonment and torture, but they continued their actions. Hasina Safi, the current director of the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), which was founded in 1995, tells in a personal interview with the author the many threats she still receives every day from the Taliban and other conservative members of the Afghan society. The AWN has focused in the past, and continues to do so in the present, to connect women's rights organisations that operate throughout Afghanistan and focuses strongly on education as the key in improving the situation of women.

So throughout modern Afghan history, women have played a large role in protecting themselves and their families while surviving economic hardship, political instability and violence. In many cases, women were left to fend for themselves because men were away from home, fighting against the Soviets, during the civil war or later with or against the Taliban, or they had passed while doing so. The risk these women took in order to endure the hardship that was imposed on them demonstrates an unquestionable willingness and ability to survive. Many women did not remain at their homes, voiceless and frightened; they battled the strains the Taliban had laid on their lives and opposed their exclusion from society and the work force.

Since the defeat of the Taliban, the number of women's rights organisations active in Afghanistan has increased significantly. These groups actively try to reach out to women to protect them from abusive spouses and oppose their political silencing and repression by conservative members of their society. Also, influential individuals actively commit themselves to combat social structures that are restrictive towards women. Mozhdah Jamalzadah<sup>70</sup> tries to alter Afghan conservative attitudes towards women and improve women's rights through her music and her own Talk Show (that largely resembles The Oprah Winfrey Show). Ms. Jamalzadah indirectly approaches controversial topics and tries to start a dialogue, rather than openly opposing and condemning conservative attitudes or traditions. On one show, for example, she discussed the practice of forced marriages. She did not condemn it, rather she exposed potential pitfalls and problems, and opened the floor to questions and comments from the audience.<sup>71</sup> Malalai Joya is another clear example of individual commitment to changing conservative attitudes towards women. Malalai was the youngest elected member of the Afghan parliament and received support from both men as women. In 2007, Malalai Joya was expelled from the government for her denunciation of incumbent corrupt warlords. She speaks out for women's rights and publicly denounces the local warlords that are represented in the Lower House. She also speaks out against the Karzai government, the Taliban and the foreign intervention. She has received many death threats and already survived seven assassination attempts. However, she continues her struggle.<sup>72</sup>

Building on the above outlined increased awareness of women's resilience during hardship, more and more organisations draw attention on the possible value of women and mothers in countering political violence. According to the human rights organisation SAVE (Sisters Against Violent Extremism), the role of women is of high value in resistance efforts. SAVE is pioneering their "Mothers Schools" model to empower women to recognise and react to the early warning signals of radicalisation in their families and communities and provides the tools

<sup>66</sup> G. Tzemach Lemmon, *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011).

<sup>67</sup> E. Rostami-Povey, "Women in Afghanistan: Passive victims of the borge or active social participants?", *Development in Practice* 13, no. 2-3 (2003), p. 270.

<sup>68</sup> These organisations were all founded prior to or during Taliban rule.

<sup>69</sup> E. Rostami-Povey, "Women in Afghanistan" (2003), pp. 269-270.

<sup>70</sup> Born in Afghanistan but raised in Canada. She only recently returned to Afghanistan to host a talk show. For further reading see: N. Macdonald, "Mozhdah: The Oprah of Afghanistan, Vancouver-raised Mozhdah is revolutionizing her society one fearless talk show at a time", *Macleans*, (17 December 2010), <http://www.macleans.ca/culture/the-oprah-of-afghanistan/>.

<sup>71</sup> A. Baker, "Introducing the Oprah of Afghanistan: Mozdah!", *Time* (28 July 2010), <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2005504,00.html>.

<sup>72</sup> S. Persard, "A woman among warlords, an interview with Malalai Joya", *The World Post* (25 October 2013), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/suzanne-persard/malalai-joya\\_b\\_4160220.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/suzanne-persard/malalai-joya_b_4160220.html).

for prevention and intervention.<sup>73</sup> This role of female relatives intervening is also suggested in a 2012 article in the *Global Mail*, in which the author claims a former Taliban commander of the province Kunduz, Noorul Aziz, was convinced by his three wives, mother and aunt to lay down his weapons and pledge support for the Karzai government. The author claims the peace process could be accelerated if there could be better ways identified to involve women.<sup>74</sup>

Recapitulating, women were undoubtedly victims of the violence and political turmoil in recent decades, but this has not inherently made them voiceless victims or powerless, as the above demonstrates. As early as the 1970s, women independently organised themselves to fight for women's rights and when they were banned from the public domain, they organised themselves informally to ensure the survival of civil society. Today, many women individually attempt to alter conservative social structures and to start a public dialogue regarding the position of women.

## 5. Recommendations

Women (as well as men and children) have suffered greatly under Taliban rule and continue to do so due to the ongoing violence in Afghanistan. At the same time, they have played more active roles in both supporting and resisting the Taliban. Lack of data complicates any strong conclusions on women as possible constituents of political insurgents in Afghanistan and further research is necessary to disclose women's possible influence in sustaining political violence. Similarly, it is predominantly anecdotal evidence that demonstrates that some women have shown resilience to and actively or passively worked against the Taliban. Nevertheless, based on the results of this exploratory research, several recommendations can be made in regard to combatting political violence.

First, in order to optimise current policies as well as future strategies towards combatting political violence, it would be recommendable to reassess the victimisation of women in conflict situations and instead consider focussing on women as possible allies in countering violent extremism.

Second, the women-led underground networks that came into existence during the civil war and that further expanded during Taliban rule could be utilised in the process of including more women in counter-terrorism efforts. These networks ensured the survival of civil society under repressive rule and could be an asset in reaching out to women throughout the region. Furthermore, it would be advisable to increase support for already existing women's organisations; although caution is advised in doing so, since practice shows that this can spark a counter-narrative of violent extremists who regard Western support as counter-cultural and anti-Islamic. This puts women's movements and their members at great risk.

Third, female relatives and mothers can play an important role in a preventative approach to combatting violent extremism. The value and role of women in patriarchal societies, especially of mothers, should be capitalised on in future policies. Therefore stimulation of incentives that support mothers as bulwarks against extremism, both in their immediate family and broader community, is recommendable.

Fourth, as this Policy Brief has argued, support for an extremist group in the Afghan context is a broad concept that does not necessarily entail radicalisation. Instead, fear, coercion and pragmatic considerations can be core motivators for an individual providing passive or active support for the Taliban. In combatting political violence, this aspect of support should be taken into account.

To conclude, while there has been a renewed focus on the possible value of women in combatting political violence, there is also an alarming lack of data on women in conflict zones as possible supporters or opponents of violent extremist groups. Including women in policies preventing and countering political violence necessitates including a gender perspective in the analysis, research, policy, implementation and evaluation of counter-terrorism.

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<sup>73</sup> E. Schlaffer, director of Sister Against Violent Extremism (SAVE), *Mission Statement, Women Without Borders, SAVE – Include, Involve, Invest* (Vienna, 2010), <http://www.women-without-borders.org/aboutus/>.

<sup>74</sup> L. Gutcher, "How Women are Leading Taliban Sons and Fathers to Peace", *The Global Mail* (15 August 2013), <http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/how-women-are-leading-taliban-sons-and-fathers-to-peace/340/>.

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## Interviews

Interview with Hasina Safi, director of *Afghan Women’s Networks*, 24 October 2013, The Hague.

Skype call with Edith Schläffer, director of *Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE)*, 5 November 2013, The Hague.

Skype call with David Cortright, 10 December 2013, The Hague.

Interview with Ghalil Wedad, director of *Stichting Samenwerking Afghanistan Nederland (SAN)*, 6 January 2014, The Hague.

Interview with anonymous source, 7 January 2014, The Hague.