



**Peace Through Grassroots Change: The
Incorporation of Gender Equality in Long-Term
Conflict Resolution**

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"Peace Through Grassroots Change: The Incorporation of Gender Equality in Long-Term Conflict Resolution"

During Taliban rule, Afghan women denied their basic human rights formed the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan and worked, with little foreign assistance and facing great danger, for gender equality and peace.¹ The ideas of this organization did not disappear with the end of Taliban rule, and continue to guide leaders like Habiba Sarabi as they work to create peace in war-torn Afghanistan.^{2, 3} The issue of gender cannot be approached as an isolated issue, nor can gender equality be imposed by a foreign actor: to contribute to lasting peace, changes in traditional gender roles must come from within the community itself. Sarabi has been massively successful in this, as peace in Bamyán province attests, but Internationally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in eastern Chad have failed. The reasons for the different outcomes comes down to how the issue of gender was handled within each larger communal framework.

Recent upheavals in Chad and Bamyán, Afghanistan have brought peacebuilding efforts to a head, this time with a new emphasis on gender equality. MINURCAT forces attempt to promote peace in Chad by running Internationally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Eastern Chad for refugees of the ongoing proxy war between Chad and the country of Sudan.^{4, 5, 6} In Afghanistan, the NATO/US mission is to fight the Taliban, train Afghan police, and help the development of the Afghan government with a focus on women's equality.⁷ However, Chadian women face high rates of maternal mortality and sexual abuse and low rates of secondary education; Afghan women have substandard health, education, and political opportunities.^{8, 9, 10, 11, 12} One of the only provinces in Afghanistan in which women approach social, educational, and political equality is Bamyán, which is also the most peaceful province in Afghanistan.^{13, 14} Here, unlike in Chad, community building has gone hand in hand with economic stabilization and changing of gender stereotypes, creating an environment of peace.

In Chad and Bamyán, large numbers of people caught in conflict situations have been displaced. In Chad, many end up in IDP camps. The negative effects displacement can have on families and individuals are clear, but IDP camps also have the potential to encourage a mindset of peace.¹⁵ In Chad, the MINURCAT and UNICEF personnel who ran the IDP camps concentrated their gender policy on limiting outright violence.^{16, 17} Meanwhile, camp children did not get even an elementary education.¹⁸ After the most recent peace treaty between Chad and Syria, MINURCAT forces have begun a withdrawal and some IDPs have started to return home.^{19, 20} However, even after spending years in IDP camps in tight quarters with other civilians who could have built a network of peace activists or at least fostered a culture of mutual respect, many Chadians still lack the skills needed to carry peaceful change home. What was lacking throughout the MINURCAT mission is clear: a failure to promote discussion within IDP camps, a failure to educate Chadians and give them hope for the future, and a failure to promote a change in

thinking from violence as a solution to inclusive community building, including women as well as men, as a solution. Given the continuing instability in Chad, there is no guarantee that this treaty will last, and without these fundamental societal shifts, there will be no change on the ground.²¹ Protection of women alone is not enough to promote gender equality and the peace that grows naturally from an inclusive social conversation.

In contrast, Bamyan is an example of how foreign aid can create peace by supporting grassroots community change in gender perceptions. The strong US/NATO stance on gender equality during the development of Afghanistan's constitution was an attempt to force this change.^{22, 23} However, the founding documents of a country cannot be effective without grassroots implementation, which is what Sarabi has done in Bamyan.²⁴ Under her leadership, Bamyan achieved high education rates for girls and inclusion of women in the workforce, even in male dominated careers like the police.^{25, 26} Gender equality and the end of violence have formed a positive feedback loop: with just a small opening of peace, Sarabi was able to come in, make grassroots reforms, and engage women in conversation about the future of the province.^{27, 28} Signs point to a possible transition by Sarabi from her governorship to a position in Karzai's government.²⁹ She would be leaving Bamyan at a precarious time, with Taliban violence on the rise.³⁰ Even so, she has the potential to bring citizen engagement into Afghan's national democratic process, something increasingly needed in a government whose president has recently faced serious questions about democracy and gender equality in the country as a whole.^{31, 32} The only way for real change in harmful gender stereotypes is at the community level, through leaders like Sarabi.

Unlike attempts to force immediate change in the legal or social status of women, economic development that includes all genders at the community level can help gender equality grow naturally. The increasingly global economy has made economic investments possible in every corner of the globe. These have the potential to further gender equality and a mindset of peace through economic stabilization. The ever increasing demand for fuel has made Chad's oil reserves increasingly attractive to foreign investors. Both China and the World Bank invested in Chad after the opening of production in 2003, with mixed results for both the investors and Chad's peace.^{33, 34, 35} China followed its "non-interference" policy, by which it attempted to remain entirely neutral on Chadian social issues. Thus, the Chinese investment had little impact on gender equality and the other social structures which form the foundations for lasting peace. In a war-torn situation like Chad's, the benefits of channeling economic investment to both make a profit and improve conditions on the ground make a non-interference policy irresponsible. A few simple changes, such as employing Chadian men and women instead of Chinese workers, could have helped peacebuilding in Chad.³⁶ With economic independence, female employees would have gained a voice in their communities. The World Bank, which also invested in Chadian oil, required that the government spend profits from the World Bank's investments on development and education in an attempt to support peace. However, the money was rerouted to military spending, resulting in the World Bank's withdrawal.³⁷ This reveals another problem with economic investment in conflict areas: knowing whom to trust is not always

simple. The solution is not to ignore the benefits of peacebuilding, but instead to try to work through smaller, community level organizations and promote economic equality, self sufficiency, and a spirit of entrepreneurship. By investing in community projects, the growth of peace can be strengthened without risking the large scale corruption of many war-torn governments.

Bamyan is an example of the positive effect that foreign investment can have on gender equality and peace within communities. One of Sarabi's main focuses as governor has been protecting and marketing Bamyan's beautiful landscape.³⁸ This has prompted some tourists, including serious skiers, to travel to Bamyan.³⁹ With programs such as the Women's Role in Environment campaign, Sarabi has encouraged men and women to work together on projects benefiting Bamyan's economy and landscape.⁴⁰ Citizens can see real-world benefits in Sarabi's work to promote tourism, helping her gain credibility despite gender discrimination.^{41, 42}

Recently, the US/NATO withdrawal in Afghanistan has strained local economies, making the growth of self-sustaining local economies even more important.⁴³ Foreign private investment, therefore, should focus on building industries while allowing responsible local leaders, especially women and those who will respect and facilitate the incorporation of women into the workforce, to remain in control. The lessons learned comparing Chad and Bamyan are ripe for implementation in conflicts around the world. The central premise of democracy, the idea that humans have an innate right to self-determination, is no less true for women than it is for men and is no less relevant in war zones than it is in peaceful areas. Even in violent conflicts like Syria's, international involvement should focus on supporting citizens and fostering a culture of dialogue. The same ideas extend to non-traditional conflict situations drawing international attention, such as the ongoing North Korean crisis. Trade sanctions at a national level are not enough to topple a government or impart lasting change; true change can only come from the ground up. The idea of a gendered approach to peacebuilding is slightly misleading because gender issues are not isolated, instead, they reflect the educational, economic, and political structures of a community. A community which discovers, through education and conversation, the value of women is a community that will be able to build peace and economic stability long into the future.

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