

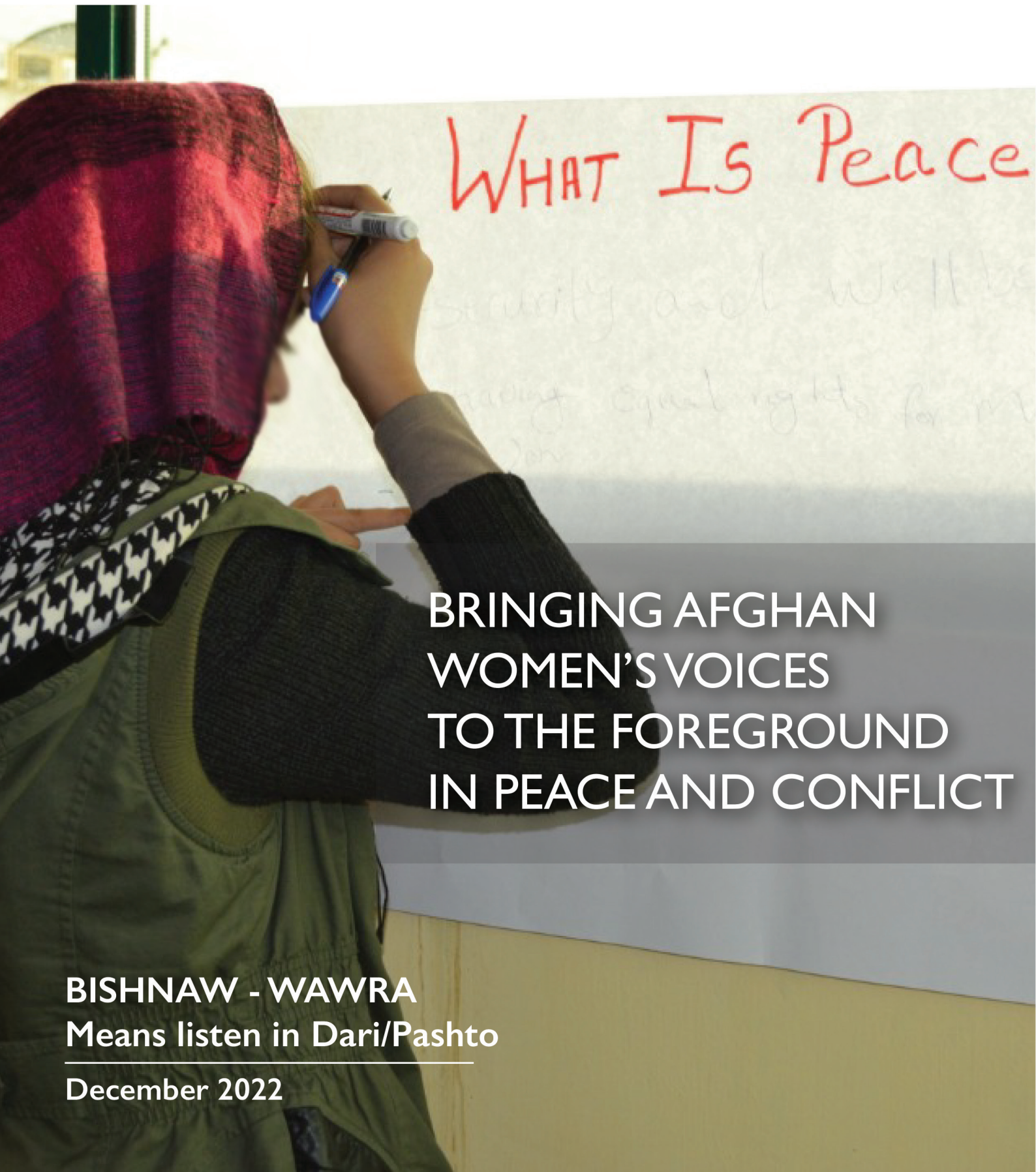


صداهای زنان برای صلح همه‌شمول و پایدار
د ټول شموله او تلپاتې سولې لپاره د بشنو غړونه
Women's Voices for an Inclusive and Sustainable Peace



DROPS

ORGANIZATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH
& DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
نهاد پژوهش و توسعه



BRINGING AFGHAN WOMEN'S VOICES TO THE FOREGROUND IN PEACE AND CONFLICT

BISHNAW - WAWRA
Means listen in Dari/Pashto

December 2022

Bringing Afghan Women's Voices to The Foreground in Peace and Conflict

BISHNAW Project Report December 2022

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When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.

Audre Lorde

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The last forty years in Afghanistan has been marked by conflict, violence, governance stalemates, and uneven development outcomes that have negatively impacted women's rights and freedoms and created obstacles for consistent progress towards more equal gender relations. Despite these challenges, however, the situation of women in Afghanistan has transformed in the last twenty years. While women's rights have received significant international attention and considerable amounts of development aid for programming since 2001, there is little doubt that the gains made are reversible and uneven. In 2021, the stark reality of how tenuous women's rights and freedoms become, was increasingly apparent after the Taliban ousted the Afghan government. Since taking power in August 2021, the Taliban have continued to undermine women's rights in policy and practice. Meanwhile, political uncertainty, and sporadic and limited access to local communities in Afghanistan has created a lack of clarity on how freedoms are being curtailed, and the full extent in which women's lives have changed since August 2021.

Historically, the international discourse on Afghan women's lives has been insufficiently shaped by input from Afghan women themselves, and the related policy discussions have continuously sidelined their voices. While receiving significant lip service, women's rights are often among the first to be compromised in international political negotiations. This troubling pattern was reflective of the discourse on the fraught peace and reintegration process that took place from 2010 to 2015 in Afghanistan.¹ Today, over twelve months since the Taliban takeover, clear policy directives, going beyond economic sanctions and continued humanitarian aid, have yet to be developed by many international agencies and donor governments. As the international community struggles to decide on future levels of engagement with the Taliban authorities, the uncertainty facing Afghan women has not gone unnoticed. Worryingly, however, since the Taliban takeover, there has been a notable and progressive lowering of the standards the international community use to assess whether the Taliban are upholding human rights. Therefore, it is imperative that the protection of women's rights remain at the forefront of ongoing discussions with the Taliban and that any way forward recognizes the agency of Afghan women and is informed by their voices.

It is in recognition of the importance and urgency of these past and current challenges and in an endeavor to support the voices of Afghan women to reach the forefront of research, policy and political discussions and processes that the BISHNAW platform was developed by the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS). BISHNAW is a digital platform, that aims to create a more comprehensive real-time understanding of the situation of Afghan women and girls. Since its inception in August 2020, BISHNAW has captured the views of 30,058 women² across 17 provinces in Afghanistan. The project conducts both quantitative surveys and group consultations with women at the provincial level on diverse social, economic, humanitarian, and political issues. The results of the research are made available to key stakeholders and policymakers giving them the tools to make more relevant and inclusive policy decisions that are informed by the lived experiences of women and girls.

This report brings together the extensive research data gathered by BISHNAW between 2020 and 2022 and highlights some of the key trends that have emerged over this turbulent and chaotic period in Afghanistan's recent history. The report begins by briefly outlining the development of the BISHNAW initiative and its bottom-up digital methodology. The second section of the report focuses on the project's research findings. This section is organized around the six key messages that have emerged from the research from 2020 - 2022. The messages center on the experiences, challenges, and strategies used by women around the country, shedding light on how the shifting political and economic landscape has impacted living conditions for women and girls. The report ends with a brief conclusion and reflections on the way forward. The findings highlighted in this report create a more connected picture of both the trajectories and changes that have taken place from the midst of a fraught peace negotiation process in 2020, to the current post-Taliban takeover environment.

THE BACKGROUND

DROPS, founded in 2014 in Kabul³, is an interdisciplinary and independent research-oriented non-governmental organization. Committed to strengthening the values of inclusivity in Afghanistan DROPS argues that indigenous research that is bottom-up, locally rooted and representative of all voices in society, particularly women and girls should be at the center of all developmental efforts. In early 2020, DROPS developed the idea for BISHNAW with the goal of increasing the number and diversity of women's voices feeding into the peace process in Afghanistan. The initial project used a community-based approach, led by BISHNAW staff, in collaboration with women leaders from all sectors, to regularly capture the views of women in the provinces using mixed methods research tools, including surveys and focus groups. There was also a strong focus on implementing an inclusive and balanced process.

¹See Rivas and Safi, 2022, Women and the Afghan peace and reintegration process, International Affairs, Volume 98, Issue 1, January 2022, pp 85–104,

²30,058 women participated in surveys and 2500 women participated in focus groups.

³A branch was established in Canada in 2021.

In August 2020, the first BISHNAW study was carried out in Herat, Balkh, and Nangarhar provinces on the potential to commit to a Reduction in Violence by the Taliban before the start of Intra-Afghan talks. Nine rounds of research were carried out from August 2020 to July 2021. The key objective at the time was to ensure that the process of listening to Afghan women was not seen as a one-off event, but an integral part of the peace dialogue and negotiations that were ongoing in Doha, Qatar. By 2021, BISHNAW had developed into a semi tech-based platform that was able to regularly collect, analyze, and disseminate views from Afghan women across 16 provinces on issues that were being discussed in the Afghan peace process.

In August 2021, after the Taliban takeover, DROPS was forced to cease all of its operations in Afghanistan. Attention was diverted to fully digitizing BISHNAW's interface, finding solutions for safe storing of its data, and creating a dedicated website that could present all of its findings. DROPS was able to create software to fully digitalize the BISHNAW research tools by April 2022 and launched the project website in August 2022. The digitalization of BISHNAW facilitated the resumption of activities in spring 2022.

By May 2022, BISHNAW had recommenced field operations in 9 provinces and reoriented its monthly research questions to focus on new issues that were impacting conditions for women due to the changes in the political landscape, namely collapse of the peace process and rise of the Taliban. This first month back served as a pilot, using a smaller sample size of provinces to test field capabilities and local willingness to engage with the project. During July 2022, survey activities expanded to 17 provinces and focus groups resumed in 11 provinces. Subsequent research rounds were carried out in August, October and December 2022.

THE APPROACH

BISHNAW is a digital initiative that operates in 17 provinces in Afghanistan. The project combines a community-based approach with digital survey tools to capture the experiences and opinions of women at the sub-national level in Afghanistan in 'real-time.' The methodology takes into consideration the Afghan context and was designed to allow for a more diverse range of women to participate in the research than in traditional research undertaken in Afghanistan. Women who are not able to travel or face mobility restrictions tend to be left out of community feedback processes. As a result, their experiences are often not considered in the policy discussions. BISHNAW's digital research tools were created to facilitate the participation of excluded and vulnerable women and to bring these voices to the forefront of policy processes. The findings from the data collected are made available in a timely, systematic, and standardized manner to a range of official stakeholders and the public in an endeavor to ensure women's views can inform international policy processes and decisions.

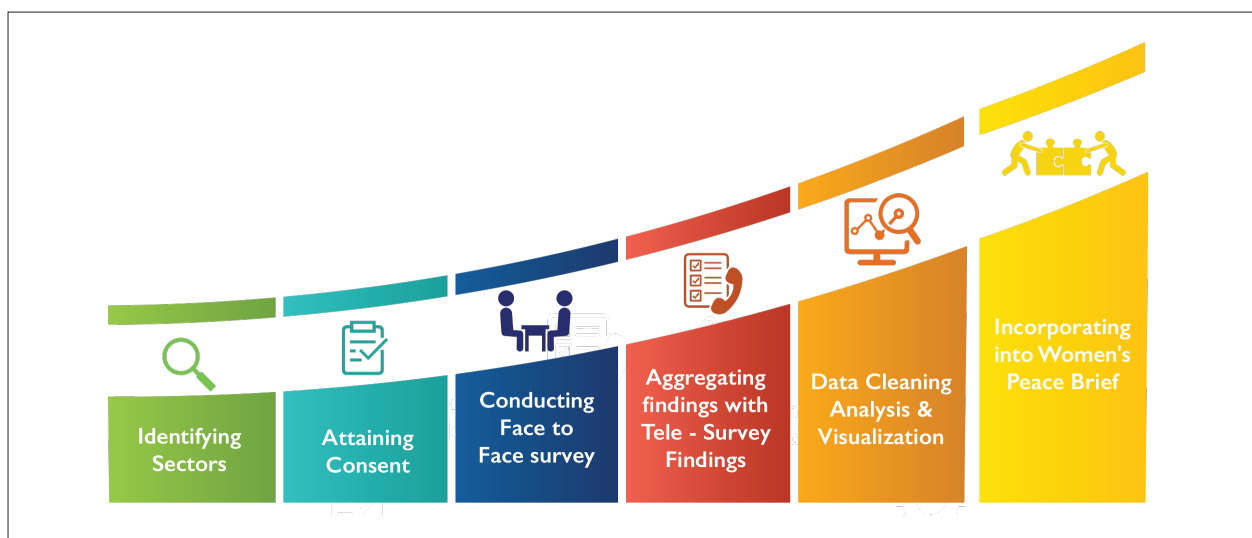
The project employs three research tools: a tele-survey system, face-to-face shorthand surveys and focus groups. Telesurveys are carried out by community-based Tele-Communicators trained by BISHNAW. The short-hand face-to-face surveys are conducted in the provinces by locally recruited BISHNAW staff referred to as Peace Facilitators. Both survey tools provide information on general trends and opinions among the women in each province.

Figure 1: Tele-Survey Process



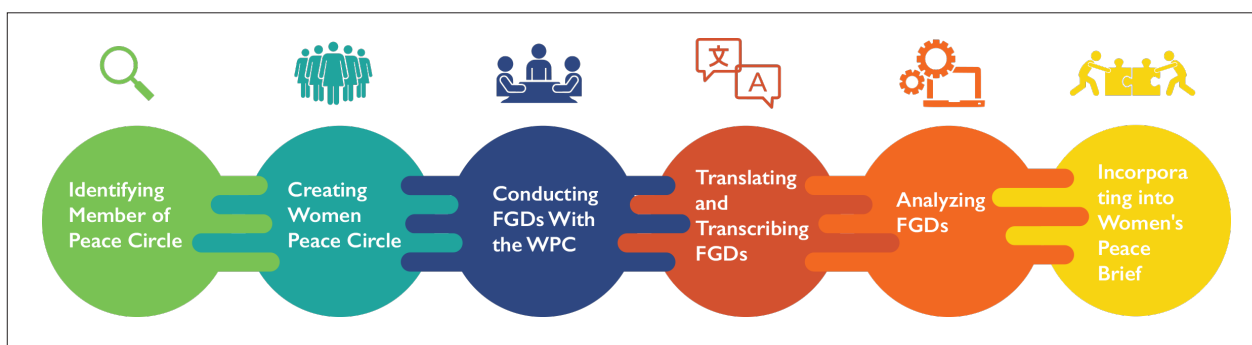
BISHNAW survey questions are developed each month by their team of researchers. The researchers create four closed-ended questions using a Likert scale approach and one open-ended question which the Tele-Communicators use in their surveys after having attained the consent of the participants. Peace Facilitators conduct short-hand face-to-face surveys in the provinces using the same questions. Findings collected from the tele-surveys and short-hand face-to-face surveys are then collated and the key themes that emerge are used to inform the focus group discussions.

Figure 2: Shorthand Survey Process



The focus group discussions, referred to as Women Peace Circles (WPCs), are led by the Peace Facilitators in 11 provinces.⁴ The WPCs bring together 10 - 15 women, who are community leaders, in each province to discuss specific issues and also to give feedback on trends that appear in the survey data. The WPCs give an in-depth picture of what is happening on the ground.

Figure 3: WPC Process



From August 2020 to July 2021 the main research tools were telesurveys and WPCs. The technology for the face-to-face surveys was not developed until later in 2021 and implemented in the field research in 2022. Since May 2022, all three tools have been employed in the field to collect data. All three activities are now carried out on a regular, usually bi-monthly basis. The mixed methods approach facilitates a triangulation of the data as the feedback from the WPCs allows the research team to measure the accuracy of the quantitative survey data and gives texture to the survey findings, painting a more comprehensive picture of everyday reality. The BISHNAW briefings incorporate the qualitative data from the WPCs in addition to the quantitative data gathered through the other two research tools.

All data collected is then synthesized into the *Afghan Women's Peace Briefs*, which are shared with multiple stakeholders, multilateral institutions and policymakers. BISHNAW also disseminates its findings to the public through its website⁵ and social media. This allows researchers, academics, NGOs, and decision-makers to use BISHNAW's database to identify and monitor trends and changes in community life, political dynamics, and gender relations across the country. BISHNAW not only transfers the research publications to stakeholders and the public but also, through a feedback loop, to the respondents surveyed so that they may gain an understanding of the opinions of women across the country.⁶

⁴WPCs have been carried out in 11 provinces over the lifetime of BISHNAW. At times, however, WPCs could not be held in certain provinces due to political or logistical challenges.

⁵www.bishnaw.com

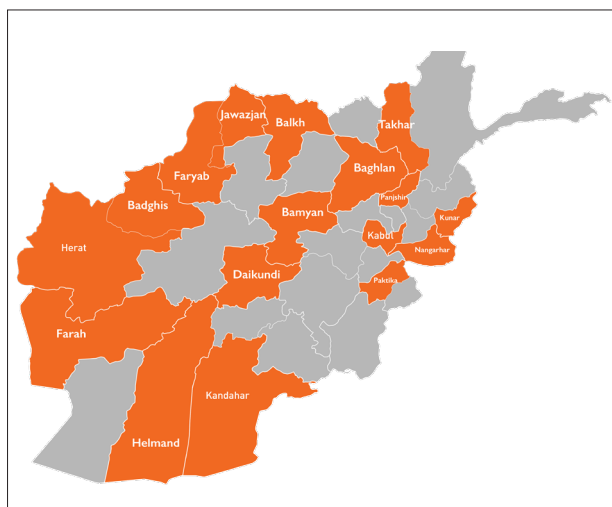
⁶Due to security concerns post August 2021, the feedback loop has been closed temporarily.

COVERAGE AND SCOPE

At its inception, BISHNAW was active in three provinces but, despite a number of political and logistical challenges, that number has now expanded to 17 provinces including, Farah, Faryab, Badghis, Baghlan, Kunar, Paktia, Herat, Takhar, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Balkh, Bamiyan, Helmand, Panjsher, Daikundi, Jawzjan, Kabul⁷ (see Figure 1). Telesurveys are conducted in all provinces and Peace Facilitators are physically present in 10 provinces where they conduct face-to-face surveys and facilitate Women Peace Circles including, Herat, Paktia, Balkh, Jawzjan, Bamiyan, Daikundi, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Faryab, Baghlan, and Farah. The project has collected responses from over 30,058 women using the three research tools (see Table 1). Participants range in age from 18 – 65, working in a number of sectors including representing six important sectors: civil society, teachers, health care workers, civil servants, religious scholars, and entrepreneurs. Care is also taken to ensure ethnic, class and religious balance.

BISHNAW draws respondents from its database which contains approximately 10,000 names from across 17 provinces where the project is implemented. The database was created at the outset of the project using a unique referral process and has continued to expand as BISHNAW has moved into new provinces. The referral system was designed to ensure that a degree of trust could be established between BISHNAW and potential respondents and was key in facilitating the re-start of activities in May 2022 when BISHNAW staff reached out to potential participants. In the first stage of the process, DROPS contacts local NGOs and their partners located in specific provinces. The BISHNAW project is explained to them, and they are asked to refer women in the area to the project. The women are then contacted by DROPS, informed who they were referred by, briefed about the BISHNAW project and asked for their consent to be added to the database and potentially contacted in the future to participate in a survey. Once consent is given, they are added to the database. The 10,000 names, however, are not static. Each month contacts are lost and changed. Participant can withdraw their consent at any time and sometimes no longer want to participate in the project. In these cases, their names are removed from the database. This process causes a depletion in respondents for the surveys, therefore, during each round of research new referrals are also collected.

Figure 4 – BISHNAW Provincial Reach



A unique element of the BISHNAW approach stems from its ability to remain fluid and be responsive to the realities on the ground. Research in Afghanistan is often shaped by international policy objectives in a top-down process instead of the needs of local communities. Rather than a carrying out a pre-determined set of surveys, BISHNAW research is led by the local context. Each month, the BISHNAW team identifies key research topics in consultation with local stakeholders through a bottom-up approach that prioritizes local realities and concerns.

⁷ Kabul was not a part of the initial BISHNAW surveys in 2020. It was added as a province after BISHNAW restarted operations in 2022 to accommodate the respondents who were displaced to Kabul during the period following the takeover.

Table 1 – BISHNAW Research Topics and Coverage 2020-2022

Date	Topic	No. of Provinces	No. of Participants
August 2020	Reduction in Violence	3	539
September 2020	Exchange of Prisoners Between the Afghan government and the Taliban	7	1059
November 2020	Hanafi Jurisprudence Acting as the Basis for Settling Disagreements During Negotiations	7	1700
January 2021	Disputes over Guiding Principles in Intra-Afghan Talks	7	2101
March 2021	Comprehensive Ceasefire in Afghanistan	10	2212
April 2021	Transitional Government	16	2500
May 2021	The Unconditional Withdrawal of the US and NATO Forces	16	2845
June 2021	Taliban Preconditions for Participation in the Turkey Conference on Afghanistan Peace	16	3600
July 2021	Taliban's Treatment of Women in the Areas Under Their Control	16	3480
May 2022	Humanitarian Access and Economic Situation	9	525
July 2022	Security Situation Post-Aug 2021	17	2082
August 2022	Women's Priorities Post-Aug 2021	17	2559
October 2022	Women's Political Participation in Taliban Controlled Afghanistan	17	2674
December 2022	Afghan Women's Confidence in UN's Ability to Ensure an Improved Humanitarian Situation Based on New Exemptions	17	2182

2.0 RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS 2020-22

KEY MESSAGE 1: Women across the country, despite their level of education and social class, are politically aware and engaged in local discussions on the appropriate pathway to peace for Afghanistan.

In 2020, at its inception, BISHNAW focused on soliciting women's perspectives on the peace dialogue that was happening at the time. Over 2000 women were surveyed on a bi-monthly basis between August 2020 and July 2021 on the issues that were being debated by the different sides of the conflict as a precursor to peace talks and what acceptable conditions for a sustainable peace in Afghanistan should be. Topics ranged from the terms of the ceasefire to the composition of a potential transitional government. The results of the research showed a politically engaged population, and debunked the myth that women in the provinces, are unaware and disengaged from larger political issues in the country. In fact, despite their level of education and social class, women participants closely followed the events in Kabul and had clear opinions on the terms upon which they would accept a dialogue and the pathway to peace.

99% of the respondents agreed that women and civil society should be involved in the monitoring of a ceasefire

BISHNAW research has shown that women across the country had diverse and informed political views that represented their experiences and the broader contexts in which they live. Rather than speaking in one voice, the women surveyed in the early days of the project had a variety of views on the different topics, such as the terms for the usage of Hanafi jurisprudence, the composition of the transitional government, and decentralization.

While international actors had broad agreement that women's voices should be included in the peace talks, in practice this objective was often not met. In addition, they struggled to grasp the diversity of women's voices, instead looking for a single policy line or set of preferences. An engagement with the diversity of views, however, provided a more realistic view of not only women's perspectives but the political climate of the country during the peace dialogues. The one area where women in all provinces consistently agreed was the importance of women's involvement in all stages of the process to ensure not only inclusivity but a sustainable peace.

76.4% of the respondents said that 40-50% of the members of Transitional Government should be women for it to be considered inclusive

KEY MESSAGE 2: The unprecedented violence that took hold of many provinces during the first half of 2021 shifted the terms upon which women were willing to accept a peace process, and led to hardening resolve towards the Taliban and the international actors involved.

The survey results from the months preceding the Taliban takeover show a growing distrust of the peace process and the actors involved, including the international forces, and the Taliban themselves. The unparalleled violence during the first half of 2021 did not create a desire for further compromise with the Taliban. Instead, BISHNAW survey results showed a growing determination among the women in the provinces to adopt an uncompromising position toward the Taliban, growing distrust of international actors and an acute awareness and of the likelihood that women's rights would be jeopardized.

Throughout 2020, participants maintained their concern about the process but expressed hope about the potential for a ceasefire. In September 2020, the absolute majority (97%) of the respondents said that they were concerned about Taliban fighters returning to the battlefield after they were released, but 34% of women maintained that the prisoner release could potentially lead to a reduction in violence. As 2021 progressed, however, and in the midst of growing violence, perceptions shifted, and hope began to wane. While participants maintained that any discussions on future governance structures should be dependent upon a ceasefire, the limited willingness to consider some of the Taliban conditions in exchange for a ceasefire, shown in earlier surveys, had largely disappeared.

In spring 2021, 69% of women and girls surveyed in the 16 provinces said a ceasefire should precede agreement on the Transitional Government

In April, approximately 67% of respondents said they no longer saw further prisoner release as a viable option. The release of 5,000 Taliban fighters in late 2020 was seen as a contributing factor to the rising levels of violence and increasing rate of civilian casualties. According to the UN, the number of civilian casualties in May-June 2021 was almost on a par with those recorded for the entire year and the highest for those months since the UN began recording casualties in 2009.⁸ More women, boys and girls were killed and injured in the first half of 2021, than in any calendar year since UNAMA started recording data, making up approximately 50% of all civilian casualties. By June 2021, according to participants, the level of violence in all 13 provinces where WPCs were held was unprecedentedly high.

"We are losing more lives to violence both among the civilians and the security forces" – Takhar "Previously, they had asked for the release of 5000 prisoners in exchange for ceasefire, but violence increased...We can no longer trust the Taliban." - Jowzjan

The rise in violence associated with the prisoner release had shattered the limited and fragile hope shown in the preceding months among some participants in the Taliban's promises and in the intentions of other belligerents in

⁸UNAMA, 26 July 2021. "Civilian casualties set to hit unprecedented highs in 2021 unless urgent action to stem violence – UN report". <https://unama.unmissions.org/civilian-casualties-set-hit-unprecedented-highs-2021-unless-urgent-action-stem-violence-%E2%80%93-un-report>

the conflict. The May 2021 survey results on the impact of an unconditional withdrawal of the US and NATO from Afghanistan showed concern among the participants that neither a post-withdrawal strengthened Taliban, nor the international actors would uphold their promises of supporting women's rights and promoting democracy.

70% of the respondents said they were concerned that accepting the US-Taliban agreement as a guiding document could jeopardize 20 years of gains for Afghan women

The Southern and Eastern provinces of Afghanistan are often depicted as areas where international forces have traditionally received less support from the population (ADD reference). In the summer of 2021, however, women in the focus group discussions in Helmand, Kandahar, Balkh and Takhar, representing several regions of the country displayed distrust in the US and NATO's promises to protect women's rights and democratic institutions. Moreover, in the absence of international pressure, women respondents felt there would be no reason for the Taliban to engage in peace talks with the Afghan government.

"[International actors] have come with the goal of eradicating terrorism and drying up their roots, but they have not fulfilled their responsibility, but insecurity has reached its peak." - Daikundi

KEY MESSAGE 3: Feedback from women on the ground in 2021 provided important clues to international actors regarding the Taliban's approach to women's rights and security.

The Taliban takeover in August 2021 was accompanied by a slew of promises that they would protect women's rights, freedom of movement and access to services such as education, and health in line with Islamic principles. International actors and media floated the possibility that this was a new, more modern, Taliban that might uphold their commitments to preserve women's rights. Weeks before the takeover, as it became increasingly apparent that the Taliban would occupy a position of strength in any new governance arrangement formed after the international withdrawal the BISHNAW survey focused on understanding the conditions facing women in areas already controlled by the Taliban. 3,600 women in 16 provinces were surveyed or participated in focus groups. The BISHNAW data, collected prior to August, gave a troubling picture of what life was like in Taliban controlled areas.

86% of women surveyed described the quality of life for women in areas under Taliban control pre-takeover as poor or very poor. No women described life as excellent and less than 1% said life was good in these areas.

Throughout the peace process, women consistently expressed fear that women's rights would be seen as negotiable by parties to the peace talks, and fear about the possibility that the situation of women in Afghanistan would worsen if compromises were made with the Taliban. In the January 2021 survey, a deep distrust of the Taliban and a growing concern for women's rights, mobility and security was expressed by over 85% of the respondents. Participants stressed that any sustainable peace would need to be accompanied by the establishment of human rights monitoring mechanisms and the inclusive participation of women was deemed as an essential component to the peace process to prevent the erosion of women's position in Afghan society. These concerns were not only based on the memory of the Taliban of the 1990s, but the experiences women were having in districts of the country that were already under Taliban rule prior to August 2021.

“Women have suffered a lot. A lot of women have become widowers. A lot of women have lost their children; they have lost their family. Can they promise women that they will not return to the battle ground? While these women are saying they will forgive blood of their children for peace?” - Nangarhar

The results from the July 2021 research provide an overview of the multiple ways that the lives of women living under Taliban rule had changed. According to survey participants, by July girls' schools had been closed in 64% of areas under Taliban-control. A majority of respondents (90%) said one or all of the following measures were being imposed in Taliban-run areas: mandatory wearing of the Burka, forced marriage of girls to Taliban members, bans on travelling alone or working and restrictions on access to health care for women. The experiences shared by the women in pre-takeover Afghanistan provided a mirror to the closures of girl's universities, bans on women's right to work, their access to public buildings and increasing encroachment on women's freedoms dictated by current Taliban policies. These clear signals, however, have been sidelined by international actors in the months after the takeover as they pondered and analyzed the possibilities of the new Taliban administration.

88% of the respondents disagreed on some level that the Taliban have changed their repressive pre-2001 positions on women's rights and freedoms

Similar to international actors, a group of participants also considered the possibility that the Taliban members had transformed over the last twenty years. A small minority of women (7%) voiced some level of agreement that the post-2001 Taliban had adopted a less repressive stance in relation to women's rights and freedoms. However, the majority of these women (54%) still described conditions for women in Taliban controlled areas as poor or very poor. Ultimately, the women were clear that changed Taliban organization was not tantamount to a progressive entity that would uphold women's rights.

KEY MESSAGE 4: Security has not improved, rather conflict-related violence has decreased in recent months, but other forms of violence have worsened, and new dangers have emerged.

Even before the Taliban takeover, the withdrawal of international forces and the exit of the majority of international aid actors, it was difficult to get a clear understanding of the security situation in Afghanistan. This was partly due to the lack of access to areas and the sometimes quickly changing dynamics on the ground to the ongoing conflict. In all of BISHNAW's research since its inception, security is mentioned as a major concern by participants. This was unsurprising since the project began in the midst of a tumultuous peace process and growing levels of violence and displacement in Afghanistan. In May 2021, BISHNAW asked women in the provinces what they thought a post-withdrawal Afghanistan would look like (see Chart 1). The most likely scenario was thought to be an increase in Taliban attacks (54%) and a decrease in security (48%). This was predicated on the assumption that the Afghan government would stay in power. A little more than one year after the Taliban takeover, a different picture emerged according to recent research findings. The July 2022 BISHNAW survey focused specifically on security in an attempt to understand the post-takeover landscape. The results provided insight into the different challenges provinces are facing, the linkages between the pre- and post – August 2021 security landscape and the multiple types of insecurity women in the provinces are experiencing.

In the July 2022 survey on the security situation the majority of women in Daikundi and Panjshir said security had worsened in their areas in the last four months.⁹ In all 15 other provinces, however, the majority of respondents stated that security in the area had improved to some extent. Women in Kandahar, Herat and Faryab felt the safest, while women in Daikundi, Kabul and Panjshir felt the most unsafe. These latter provinces also had the highest number of women who said they did not leave the house. A closer look at the data revealed that while certain types of security had improved in the recent months, others had worsened, and new dangers had emerged.

⁹The survey was conducted in July 2021. Questions 1 asked participants: In the last four months, to what extent has security improved in your community? The time period referred to was March – June 2021.

“Security has relatively improved, we have seen it in last four months. But since the Taliban got control of Afghanistan there were attacks but we have witnessed that there were attacks and explosions during previous governments in provinces and in the capital, but in last four and five months there were no attacks and explosions in Kandahar.” – Kandahar

One seemingly contradictory finding that emerged from the July survey results was that explosions and theft were selected by respondents in the majority of the provinces as having both improved the most and improved the least. Upon dissecting the provincial responses, a unique situation unfolds that sheds light on this paradox. For example, while explosions were said to have decreased in areas like Nangahar, Helmand, and Kunar, alternatively theft noted by respondents to have been on the rise. These provinces, mainly in the east and south of the country, were hotspots for armed conflict and military operations during the international intervention. It can be assessed, that as large-scale armed conflict falls in these areas since the Taliban seizure of power, bombing incidents have become less common while communal, and personal violence like theft have either increased or continued to be a problem. Conversely, while theft was selected as having reduced in provinces like Panjshir and Paktia, armed conflict has worsened in Panjshir, and explosions have become a growing concern in Paktia. In several cases where armed conflict was reported, the fighting tends to involve Taliban members and other armed groups, such as ISIS, or in some instances local ethnic clashes.

62% of women said security had either improved or somewhat improved in their area in the last four months

In addition, despite the reduction in bombing in some of the provinces, the BISHNAW findings highlight the multiple levels of insecurity in the country. Local conflicts, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, public beatings, and murders were issues of concern for women in all of the provinces. The impunity of perpetrators with money or links to the interim administration, the absence of a free press and access to information have created fear and distrust within communities.

“During previous governments there were suicide attacks and explosions by the Taliban group and now it’s ISIS, and the Taliban are killing people in Khost and Baghlan provinces. But the Taliban doesn’t let media publish the news, the only thing that can improve the current situation is good governance, but Afghanistan is like a pot without a lid and there is nothing that could improve the situation.” - Baghlan

Discussions about security are often focused on armed conflict and crime, whereas public, social, and personal acts of violence are considered a matter of rights and freedoms. In the focus group discussions, however, many of the women provided a very detailed analysis of these various levels of violence and insecurity. They expressed frustration at the increasing loss of their personal freedom, increasing domestic violence and mental and psychological stress and insecurity. These multiple types of (in)security are often left out of surveys that focus solely on the armed tools of inter-state or civil conflict. The gendered analysis provided by the participants, however, created a mosaic of conflict-related violence, that included everyday, human insecurity.

“We do not have economic security, job security, mental or psychological security. A nation that is facing poverty and unemployment, our people are led to armed robberies so that even we lost our physical security.” – Faryab

KEY MESSAGE 5: Humanitarian aid is reaching parts of the population, but it will not be able to address several of the needs and concerns of the population, which are akin to development challenges.

Over the last twenty years, Afghanistan has been the recipient of some of the highest amounts of development aid in the world, yet in July 2021 over 70% of the population was living below the poverty level and the country was in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. Decades of conflict, forced displacement, and natural disasters had left the majority of the population struggling to meet their basic needs. The combination of political turmoil, the withdrawal of international aid and economic sanctions that have taken place since the August 2021 threaten to push the country towards greater levels of poverty. Estimates by international agencies, in September 2021 suggested that unless action was taken, up to 97% of the Afghan population would be living in poverty within months of the Taliban takeover.¹⁰ The BISHNAW survey in May 2022 focused on humanitarian access and the economic situation in Afghanistan. The participants highlighted the declining economic status of their families and the quagmire of humanitarian and development challenges.

Unlike previous BISHNAW surveys, where differences among the women often appeared according to their demographic markers, in the May 2022 survey there was a striking similarity in the responses of the participants, which emphasized persistent chronic poverty and economic instability. Regardless, of location, age, or income level the majority of survey participants said that their economic situation had deteriorated between September 2021 and April 2022. In all 9 provinces surveyed, at least 85% of the women respondents were worse off economically than a few months before. Approximately 90% of families who had low or zero-income before the Taliban takeover were continuing to struggle and 86% of women that considered themselves to have a high or middle income stated their situation had worsened. The widespread poverty of the last two decades, combined with the financial challenges of the current administration and the cessation of non-humanitarian aid, have left the population with a lack of access to jobs, resources, savings, access to credit and money. Only humanitarian aid has been allowed into the country since August 2021, however, unemployment was the primary or second most pressing issue of concern in seven of the provinces surveyed, which is unlikely to be addressed through emergency aid.

73% of participants said food was their greatest basic need

Humanitarian aid, meanwhile, has continued to be delivered in Afghanistan. Approximately 60% of the women surveyed in May 2022 said aid was reaching women in their community. Food and hygiene products were the items participants were most in need of. Food stuffs are traditionally part of humanitarian aid packages, however, food insecurity along with clean drinking water, which was the third most common cited need, are also development challenges. While humanitarian aid is reaching parts of the population, it will not be able to address several of the needs and concerns identified as priorities by the participants.

KEY MESSAGE 6: The international community can play an important role by supporting direct talks between Afghan women and the Taliban.

Women's rights remain of utmost importance to women across Afghanistan and the protection of those rights are fundamental to the creation of sustainable development and peace in the country. This message was clear throughout the two years of BISHNAW research. Surveys in May and August 2022 focused on priorities for women and women's organizations and recommendations to international actors involved. The results confirmed that the protection of women's rights was among the greatest concerns for the women in the provinces. In fact, in over two years of BISHNAW research, women's rights were consistently identified as the greatest concern for participants, except for one survey, where unemployment ranked higher. In the December 2022 survey 43% women said improving women's rights should be as important for the UN as improving access to public services.

¹⁰ See UNDP News Centre, 97 percent of Afghans could plunge into poverty by mid 2022, says UNDP September 12, 2021. <https://www.undp.org/press-releases/97-percent-afghans-could-plunge-poverty-mid-2022-says-undp>

39% of women indicated women's rights was the highest priority for Afghan women and girls

In the August 2022 research, participants suggested that the international community can play an important facilitating role in protecting women's rights and organizations. Conditional aid dependent on the improvement of women's rights was viewed as a useful strategy for international agencies to pursue in their discussion with the Taliban. Direct engagement of women, however, was the most preferred option.

The restrictions on women or the closure of girl's schools was the issue of most concern to 51% of women surveyed

The hesitation to engage with the Taliban communicated by survey participants towards the end of the peace dialogue has dissipated with the realities of the new interim administration and perhaps the disappointment with international and national actors has had an emboldening affect. One year after the takeover, in August 2022, over a quarter of the women surveyed suggested that the best way for the international community to assist in improving conditions for women is to facilitate talks between the Taliban and Afghan women. The United Nations was chosen by over half the women surveyed in October 2022 as the preferred facilitator for dialogue between the women and the Taliban.

27% of women want the international community to facilitate direct dialogue between women and the Taliban

3.0 CONCLUSION

The future of Afghanistan is in the hands of its people. This report presented the key messages that have emerged from two years of BISHNAW research and activities. The views and experiences shared by women across 17 provinces of Afghanistan provided unique insight into some of the most pressing social and political issues facing Afghanistan since 2020. The data outlined trends, similarities and differences between regions and provinces. It also demonstrates the complexity of the political discourse among women and the desire at the provincial level to be directly involved in shaping the future of the country. An important takeaway, over the two years of research, for international policymakers and practitioners is the need to make decisions that engage with the realities and the agency of the Afghan women. From the first BISHNAW surveys in 2020 until the most recent round in 2022, however, the clearest message from women in all provinces is the importance of women's involvement in all stages of any process that has the potential to bring transformation and peace to Afghanistan.

The report also provided an overview of DROPS incentive for the creation of BISHNAW, and the unique approach to research and advocacy that the project uses. While maintaining its community-based foundations BISHNAW continues to evolve in response to the political dynamics and real-time events on the ground in Afghanistan. In 2023, BISHNAW hopes to expand its capabilities to 25 provinces and efforts are being made to extend the reach of the project and the dissemination of the data to wider audience.