**Women talk peace**

BY B I N A S H A H 2021-08-03

NOWthatUStroopshaveleftAfghanistan after a 20-year occupation and peace talks are taking place between the Afghan government, the Taliban and regional power brokers, the voice that emerges loudest for me is the one that isn`t being heard: that of Afghan women politicians, peace activists, human rights defenders and educationists. The news portrays scene af ter scene of men deciding power-sharing arrangements: the Taliban and the Afghan government, the Pakistanis, the Chinese, even the Americans: only men are visible standing side by side and shaking hands. How can this be considered `progress` or inclusive when it leaves out the representatives of half of Afghanistan`s population? To counter this imbalance, an all-woman press conference was held in Kabul recently.

Attendees included parliamentarian Fawzia Koofi; Mary Akrami, executive director of the Afghan Women`s Network established in 1996 after the Beijing UN World Conference on Women; Palwasha H assan of the Afghan Women`s Educational Centre established in 1991 by a group of educated Afghan women who worked to bring facilities to Afghan refugees in the Islamabad/Rawalpindi area.

The women, who represent the aspirations of all Afghan women and girls, demanded `an immediate, permanent and unconditional ceasefire,` and an end to civilian killings, target killings, sexual slavery of women and the practice of `forcing` women into marriage with Taliban fighters.

I name these women and their organisations there are many more to emphasise the long-standing struggle for women`s development and empowerment and the women leaders that have emerged in Afghanistan.

They should not remain invisible.

Consensus building with male and female civil and political leaders is another of their demands. Afghan women assert that there must be gender equity in peace negotiations, otherwise there could be shocking reversals in freedoms for girls and women, especially if the Taliban are allowed to run rampant across the country. Afghan women warn us that we cannot trust their reassurances. I tend to believe them because they are the ones who stand to lose the most.

The Taliban, according to Palwasha Hassan, `have learned nothing from the past, and are more brutal and defiant than before`.

They are drunk on the belief that they have won the war, even though they have `zero knowledge` of how to run the state, whatis an inclusive Afghanistan, or what is the value of women`s participation in nation-building.

Already in some Taliban-controlled areas, girls are barred from school after they reach puberty, which violates the Afghan constitu-tion. Reports are emerging of Taliban handing down edicts that women should not work, not leave the house without a mahram, not go to school or jobs or university.

Female Afghan civil leaders are fighting a complicated war. First, women bear the brunt of terrorist violence, and Afghan women and children have suf fered the most in the conflict. According to a UNAMA report, they consutute 46 per cent of all civilian casualties and remain extremely vulnerable in the coming days. According to the Afghanistan Security and Defence Department, at least 20 international militant groups are operating in Afghanistan, most of whom will attack many soft targets in order to make territorial gains.

In the last year, there has been a spate of targeted killings of women in the Afghan media, the supreme court, and human rights defenders. Parliamentarian and negotiator Fawzia Koofi was shot in the arm in 2020, but she survived the assassination attempt and went back to the peace talks in Doha as one of the few female participants. Herexample illustrates the courage with which Afghan women have struggled for their rights during this difficult period.

Women are also still fighting their way back into public life and service to their country, after having been excluded for decades bywar and a harsh, conservative culture. But there have been changes in Afghan society, with women refusing to remain silent, passive entities. Palwasha Hassan says, `Women have more experience than what they had in the 1990s, and there`s more awareness in the community about women`s rights. This isn`t limited to the elites;it`s now more widespread at the grassroots level.

While it might be tempting to envision a complete collapse of their freedoms, that would be doing a disservice to brave Afghan women and their refusal to lose everything they`ve gained in self-esteem, confidence and in material terms over these last 20 years. The world must give credence to these clear voices speaking about one of the most complicated situations in the world. I for one would like to see Afghan women in the driving seat at the peace talks,notjust as retribution for all that they`ve suf fered in these years of war, but because they are resolute and courageous leaders in the face ofanuncertainfuture.m The writer is author ofBefore She Sleeps.

Twitter: @binashah