Discourses of Inclusion:
Reality and Rhetoric of Women’s Political Participation in
Afghanistan

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<tr>
<td>AIHRC</td>
<td>Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission</td>
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<td>DHRWIA</td>
<td>Directorate of Human Rights and Women’s International Affairs</td>
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<td>EVAW</td>
<td>Elimination of Violence Against Women - a 2009 law enacted in Afghanistan that criminalizes VAW and specifies punishment for perpetrators of violence</td>
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<td>HPC</td>
<td>High Peace Council</td>
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<td>HRW</td>
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<td>MoFA</td>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan</td>
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<td>MoWA</td>
<td>Ministry of Women’s Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan</td>
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<td>NAPWA</td>
<td>National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, 2007 - 2017 created by the Karzai administration</td>
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<td>NUG</td>
<td>National Unity Government, a power-sharing deal between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah</td>
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<td>OHCHR</td>
<td>Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights</td>
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<td>Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency</td>
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<td>UNSCR 1325</td>
<td>United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325</td>
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<td>VAW</td>
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1. Introduction: Afghanistan and the NAP

Afghanistan has long been known among Western powers as the “graveyard of empires,” and like so much of the developing world in the last few imperial centuries, it has been the center of tremendous proxy battles between greater powers, many of which lay far beyond its borders. Those powers have used all the classic methods at their disposal, most notably divide and conquer. Factionalism has been the bane of Afghanistan for most of its modern history, as powerful imperial actors sought to turn one group against another and foment discord. In other words, while imperial forces despaired of Afghanistan’s being a graveyard for their ambitions, Afghanistan itself became a literal graveyard, with almost two million deaths just over the last three decades (Ahmadi & Stanikzai 2018; Kitch 2014). More and more, the nature of conflict affects civilians—among them, women. Particularly, women in Afghanistan are often exposed to sexual violence, disappearances, forced marriage, trafficking and abduction (UNAMA 2009). Further, Afghan women face some of the world’s most dramatic limitations, including a literacy rate of only 14% and a 1.6% maternal birth mortality rate for live births (UNICEF 2002; Kuehnast et al, 2012; Kandiyoti 2007). Largely as a result of decades of conflict, Afghanistan has a Gender Inequality Index value of 0.667 as of 2016, which ranks it 169 out of 188 countries (UNDP 2016). This paper will examine the most significant initiative so far taken in the name of helping Afghanistan’s women, Afghanistan’s National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 - Women, Peace and Security (NAP), passed in June 2015. Although the NAP was aggressive and ambitious in its rhetoric, it has not been translated into effective results either on-the-ground or even in legal structures.

This thesis will constitute an attempt at demonstrating how the NAP’s discursive framework has contributed to its ineffectiveness. After sketching a brief contextual picture of Afghanistan’s history and its conditions after 2001, I will show how the NAP fits in to Afghanistan’s contemporary situation. Then, after touching upon a few of the practical initiatives undertaken within the mandate of the NAP, I will turn to a close textual discourse analysis in an attempt to explain why its many objectives have remained stubbornly within the realm of good intentions. I will conclude that by hewing to Western-inflected discursive structures, the NAP’s agenda can
be read as oriented more towards the needs of global hegemonic power structures than those of Afghan women.

2. Theoretical Framework

A discourse analysis of political documents such as I will undertake here finds its roots in the methods of discourse analysis first enumerated by discourse scholars in the mid-20th century. As Michel Foucault wrote in his seminal work, Les Mots et les Choses (often translated into English as The Order of Things) the world can be radically reconceived along discursive lines, and that the written word became “the locus of revelations...and...the area where truth is both manifested and expressed”. This occurred primarily at the birth of the modern era in Europe, when, in the Renaissance, the written word became the fundamental site of all reality, and writers attempted to reconstitute the “primal unbroken field” of words and things. This might not seem particularly revolutionary, but what Foucault points out is how the articulation of the world in a fully verbal, rhetorical—ultimately discursive—field accomplishes the dominance of the written over the “real.” For him, the site of truth is the episteme of a given place or time. An episteme is a set of discursive rules that govern the inner nature of all truths expressed within that discourse—an extension of what Kant called the “conditions of possibility” for knowledge. As he puts it, Foucault intends to determine the “space of knowledge in which order becomes possible”. Further describing this goal, he writes:

What I am attempting to bring to light is the epistemological field, the episteme, in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility (Foucault 2002).

But we must follow Foucault one step further in his analysis—by way of his other great work, Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison, often translated as Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. Foucault’s overarching goal is here to radically deconstruct the notion of mental illness and madness, and to show through a genealogical analysis that it is determined according
to the public safety needs of a given community. Thus, discourse institutes a field of power which exercises itself pervasively upon individuals subject to its control.

Although Foucault devotes some time to explaining how power is constituted by rituals and regulations imposed from above, his most radical arguments turn on the centrality of discourse to power. He demonstrates vividly how dualistic, binary categories of mental health “(mad vs. sane; dangerous vs. harmless; normal vs. abnormal)” applied to plague victims in medieval and Renaissance Europe created an epistemic field into which all individuals were forced, and how those categories were exploited in minute regulations imposed upon individuals’ bodies in order to create a constant regime of control. The key for my work here though is less the set of physical regulations that come out of a set of epistemic constraints, and more how the epistemic constraints represent the interests and a priori needs of power. As Foucault writes, “A corpus of knowledge, techniques, ‘scientific’ discourses, is formed and becomes entangled with the practice of power…” In particular here I will focus on the manifestation of power in the discourse of a legal-political document, the NAP. Among his other proposals, Foucault explains how this phenomenon can occur: “Discourse,” he writes, “will become the vehicle of the law… the constant principle of universal recoding” (1977).

Foucault marks the most theoretically rich figure in the background of discourse analysis, but more recent scholars have taken his conclusions from the fields of madness and discipline, and applied them to the fields of practical politics. Kevin C. Dunn’s view of historical representation draws heavily on the Foucauldian groundwork in a more contemporary political context. A representation, he writes, is merely “how an object of an inquiry (X) has been represented over space and time”. Dunn then describes how representations become elevated to the very status of political reality itself: “Power,” he writes, “is the practice of knowledge as a socially constructed system, within which various actors articulate and circulate their representations of truth” (Dunn 2008). Specifically in the context of women, another scholar, Kara Ellerby, uses these theories to explain why women are often not seen as primary stakeholders of peace. She explains that the existence gendered concepts such as “war and peace” or “active conflict” promote the idea that
only those who have participated in combat deserve to participate in reconciliation (Ellerby 2016).

With this framework of discourse analysis in place, I will proceed to narrow the discursive field of the NAP and deconstruct it along specific political-discursive paradigms. Here is where a closer look at the international development field—whose vocabularies and attitudes dominate the language of international agreements on Afghanistan—will help me precisify my inquiry. Some discourse analysts have made inroads into this field, with della Faille asserting that discourse analysis can aspire to “deconstruct, criticize, and undermine European and North American discourses that make global societal designs possible and effective” by “countering universalistic and ethnocentric discourses active in global attempts to transform societies” (della Faille 2011).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her work on feminist discourses in international development, performs a deep deconstruction of the feminist agenda implicit in modalities of international developmental political discourses. She emphasizes the tendency of Western feminist perspectives to presuppose the victimhood status of women, and to flatten them out into an “already-always” victimized group. As she writes, the “mode of primarily defining women in terms of their object status (the way in which they are affected or not affected by certain institutions or systems) is what characterizes this particular form of the use of ‘women’ as a category of analysis” (Mohanty 1984). Thus, she concludes, international development discourse itself can perform the power-act of recolonizing the very subjects that it intends (or pretends) to liberate. Through Mohanty’s lens, I will observe how this dynamic is affected by the discourse of the NAP—and why Afghan women are particularly vulnerable to its predations.

Finally I will turn to the work of Arturo Escobar. His work situates women at the center of international development as a substantial object which is turned into a “spectacle” by the distancing regime of colonial discourses. The “panoptic gaze” of development discourses becomes itself an instrument of social control (Escobar 1995). Escobar’s perspective will offer one further way of analyzing the latent power that is contained within the NAP.
Overall, these theoretical perspectives will assist me in carrying out a sustained “hermeneutic of suspicion,” to use Paul Ricoeur’s excellent phrase (1970). My suspicion, however, will be specifically adapted to the historical, social, and gendered circumstantial field in which the NAP emerges as an object of discursive reality—with an emphasis on developmental and gender discourses.

3. The Long Road to the NAP

Afghanistan’s recent history makes it easy to see how the legacy of conflict and oppression have led to the current crisis situation in which its women live. In the 1970s, during the years of Soviet intervention, large-scale aerial bombing resulted in the constant movement of populations. Displacement and instability had its usual effects, and the traditional structures that kept society stable were devastated. After that, when the Mujahidin took over, Afghan women faced almost total deprivation of justice and freedom (Frogh 2017).

And even later, when the Taliban took control, conditions managed to worsen. Under the guise of an extremist and uncompromising reading of the Islamic faith, women were marginalized further. Women in urban centers were particularly subject to oppression: Afghan females were largely confined to their homes and disallowed virtually any life outside the shadow of their male family members (UNAMA 2009). Among other impositions, the Taliban disallowed all women’s education and required women to wear the burqah (Kuehnast et al. 2012; Benard et al. 2008).

But to describe the Afghan Taliban as a standard-issue organ of Wahabi-style oppression would be to deny the real force of the puritanical hold that it instituted on the lives of its country’s women. Its oppression was not of the traditional variety that at least would have had the benefit of preserving local customs: It’s dictates were often enforced by marauding bands of vigilante armed young men whose influence degraded and disrespected traditional local hierarchies. The result was nothing less than a total social breakdown, with the Taliban’s extreme policies as the only element of stability (Kandiyoti 2007).

The challenge that women face in Afghanistan is thus different from that faced by women in the many developing countries of the world. For a useful comparison we might focus upon India: As
industrialism takes hold and political liberalism extends its influence, the traditional Indian power structures have been forced to modify to accommodate the demands of women—increased economic autonomy, more influence within the family structure, and liberalized legal structures (Nielsen and Waldrop 2014). But in the case of India, we notice that all those structures were pre-existing even after India’s experiences with colonialism. Afghanistan, by contrast, was in a state of total disarray after successive interventions by the British, Soviets, Americans, and finally the chaotic depredations of the Taliban.

In 2001, American intervention accompanied the fall of the Taliban. Suddenly change seemed possible. Now, at least in official circles, the discourse of women’s rights came to prominence. As the contemporaneous UN secretary general Kofi Annan stated, “there cannot be true peace and recovery in Afghanistan without a restoration of the rights of women” (UNAMA 2009). The Bonn Conference, at which the international community agreed on a path for the reconstruction of Afghanistan in the post-Taliban era resulted in an agreement by the same name. It mostly ignored the UNSCR 1325 and made for an ineffective instrument for change. With only four female representatives from Afghanistan present out of a total of thirty-two, the Bonn Conference started the new unified country out on the wrong foot for women’s empowerment. Despite this misstep, the event decreed a quota of 25 percent for the 2003 Constitutional Loya Jirga to be women (Kitch 2014; Charlesworth and Chinkin 2002; Abirafeh 2017). In addition, the provisional government structures that were created at Bonn included the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA), whose new leader was Sima Samar (Benard et al. 2008). Her office was the first major attempt at approaching women’s issues in Afghanistan, promoting gender equality through human rights, but at the same time her efforts were funded out of pocket, without any staff or a proper office. The office’s ambitious mandate included helping women achieve equal legal, social, economic and political status, but the Bonn Agreement failed to maintain its goals and requirements past the initial implementation phase (Kitch 2014).

More recently, the Bonn Conference’s goals were furthered in the landmark Constitutional Loya Jirga created in late 2003 to revise and approve Afghanistan’s new constitution and to arrange the legislative systems. Of the 500 delegates, elected by the populace and appointed by president
Hamid Karzai, 166 or 20 percent were women (Benard et al. 2008). Many women present as delegates and in women’s groups criticized the low representation of women, citing the United Nations Security Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), that demands representation for women (Frogh 2017; Brunet & Helal 2003). Instead, a disproportionately lower percentage of women were present compared to Afghanistan’s population. Security for women was also an issue, as former warlords with long-standing tribal and family bonds became delegates. This culminated in the removal and assassination attempt of Delegate Malalai Joya, who gave a three-minute speech criticizing the inclusion of warlords and the low number of women representatives in the Constitutional Loya Jirga. Despite these difficulties, the constitution was endorsed by the Loya Jirga on January 4, 2004 (Benard et al. 2008). The new constitution situated progress for Afghan women firmly under the guiding rhetoric of the United Nations, stating that:

Article 7 of the Constitution requires that the state of Afghanistan ‘abide by the UN Charter, international treaties, international conventions that Afghanistan has signed, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ (The Constitution of Afghanistan 2004).

The specifics of the political situation in Afghanistan have changed since that time, but the basic elements are still in force since the aftermath of American intervention: Kabul is in the hands of a liberal democratic government with strong western support and nominal electoral legitimacy, which evinces strong rhetorical support for women’s empowerment.

It is in this context that the NAP has emerged. In the London Conference of January 31, 2006, the Afghanistan Compact reinforced the Karzai government’s commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, which included the National Action Plan for Women—to be implemented by 2010. It’s main objective was to bring Afghanistan into line with international standards with respect to the rights of women (Kandiyoti 2007). The international community encouraged Afghanistan’s commitment to implement the National Action Plan (UNAMA 2010) and just a year later, the MoWA developed the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), a comprehensive plan for furthering women’s empowerment from the years 2008-2018 (MoFA & DHRWIA 2015; Pain, Rothman and Lundin 2015). However, the NAPWA was never implemented fully (Frogh 2017).
Then in 2011, the Afghan government began the process of creating another plan, this one called the Afghanistan’s National Action Plan On UNSCR 1325 - Women, Peace, And Security (NAP), that emphasizes Afghanistan’s commitment to UNSCR 1325. Drafting of the NAP underwent two phases: consultation and adoption. Consultation was done in conjunction with the Directorate of Human Rights and Women’s International Affairs (DHRWIA) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) as well as ministries and agencies related to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda (Frogh 2017).

In 2014, further discussion of women’s rights in Afghanistan took place at another London conference intending to further solidify plans for implementing the new constitution. Among its goals was also bridging the gap between the outgoing Karzai administration and the incoming one—a power-sharing agreement between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah (Jalali 2015). Abdullah, for his part, committed to progress, and promised to include a minimum of four women in his cabinet—up from three in the previous administrations (The Guardian 2014; Adams 2014). Meanwhile, women’s rights advocates noted that stepped-up enforcement regimes would be needed in order to put promised women’s empowerment measures into full force (Nijat & Murtazashvili 2015).

The National Unity Government adopted the NAP in June 2015 (MoFA & DHRWIA 2015; Pain, Rothman and Lundin 2015; Frogh 2017; Jalal 2014). The NAP, like UNSCR 1325, has four pillars: participation, protection, prevention and relief and recovery and focuses on “protection and prevention against ‘everyday violence,’ whether perpetrated in the domestic or the public arena” (Strand, Borchgrevink, and Harpviken 2017). The NAP goes through the background to women’s situation in Afghanistan and outlines existing legal and structural provisions relating to the WPS Agenda as well as listing provisions that are expected to come out of the implementation process. That implementation process will be based on the series of matrices with objectives, indicators and implementing agencies that is attached at the end of the document. No such implementation strategy nor monitoring and evaluation plans have yet been presented, which were to be set during the first phase of the NAP (2015 - 2018) (Frogh 2017).
In 2016, the government released a progress report about women’s status and empowerment, specifically focusing on the promises of the NAP. Its claims were bold, stating that “the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in collaboration with UN Women Afghanistan Country Office and Afghan Women’s Network held numerous programs for launching the National Action Plan, as well as awareness and advisory programs for the implementing agencies in Kabul and six zones (27 provinces).” Indeed, progress had been made (36 percent of voters in the recent presidential elections were women), but whether this triumphalist rhetoric is merited remains to be seen, and is addressed below (MoFA 2016b). Here it will suffice to state that the Afghan government is confident in the direction it has taken with respect to women’s rights and empowerment, with the NAP as the guiding light of its initiatives.

4. Implementation and its Discontents

In June, it will have been three years since the full adoption of the NAP. Although understandably that is not enough time for deep-rooted societal change, it nevertheless is worth examining to what extent the NAP has been implemented in actual laws—as well as what, if any, substantial results it has produced.

The most significant forward thrust of the NAP has been in the area of representation. It is widely known that representation is important. And indeed if that is the case, then the NAP has significant results to show for its efforts. The High Peace Council (HPC) represents the highest-level government aspect of the peace process in Afghanistan. It has been the center of NAP-related attempts at women’s inclusion, and although initially heavily dominated by men, it now includes 9 women out of 70 total members (Erzurum & Eren 2014). Furthermore, one of its female deputy chairs is a woman, and two female advisors assist the leadership in providing strategic guidance on how best to orient the peace process towards women’s needs and empowerment. (Afghan Women’s Network 2016; MoFA 2016b). Meanwhile in the parliament, the NAP’s strategic objectives have similarly found limited success. Alongside numerous electoral reforms undertaken by the federal government and various provincial governments, 69 female members of the lower house of parliament (the Wolesi Jirga) have been elected, as well as 27 in the upper house. Female representation stands at about 25% overall. A quarter does not
sound particularly impressive, but nevertheless, it stands higher than the corresponding statistic in most developed countries. In fact, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union database, Afghanistan ranks 42nd out of 143 countries with respect to the percentage of women in the National Assembly. In ministerial positions, it ranks 70th out of 94 (UN Women 2015). The electoral reforms have at the same time included safeguards for the safety of women candidates, which appear to have been effective in encouraging some female political participation. Similarly, an anti-corruption campaign that results in the firing of many judicial officials, was exploited as an opportunity for women’s advancement, and saw the appointment of 16 women to high-ranking judicial offices. Simultaneously, the attorney general’s office was expanded into all 34 provinces of the country, with women in charge of seven such outposts (MoFA 2016b).

Outside the bounds of high level decision-making, legislative initiatives are thin. One of the most publicized was an attempt at promoting the enforcement of the EVAW—the Elimination of Violence against Women initiative. This initiative tried to open the justice system to better receive women’s claims of abuse and potentially clear the way towards prosecution of their abusers—a major advance in a patriarchal society like Afghanistan. High level legal reforms were taken, in addition to the enactment of some support services for abused women seeking justice (UNAMA & OHCHR 2015).

5. Outcomes

The overall picture of the NAP’s implementation leaves an underwhelming impression. Few if any of its initiatives have been turned into reality, and major structural, practical, and indeed some theoretical struggles remain in the way of their actualization. The intended process of the NAP was two-phased. First came the commencement, to be completed from 2015-2018, which included in the planning phase. Second was intended an implementation phase, scheduled for 2019-2022 (Frogh 2017). The NAP itself acknowledges that a separate implementation plan will be necessary for its effectiveness (MoFA & DHRWIA 2015). However, despite President Ghani’s 2015 promise of such a plan by the first half of 2016, no implementation plan has been released as of yet (MoFA 2016a). The government openly admits that “implementation has not
yet started officially because of funding challenges” (HRW 2015; HRW 2016b; Frogh 2017; Barr 2016).

To stay on the general level, Afghanistan still suffers from the problem of chronic underdevelopment with 70-80% of Afghans living in rural areas with almost no contact with state institutions (Frogh 2017). As a result they lack access to even basic services including health care and education. At the same time, what local administrative units do exist are often discredited and disrespected within communities, and unable to make significant progress in modernization or deploy the meager resources that are available to them. Corruption of course remains at a crisis level in Afghanistan, a country that has long functioned along patronage lines. Since 2001, 57 billion dollars have been infused from the top-down into the country, but little has made its way to women and the most vulnerable at the bottom of the chain (Strand, Borchgrevink, and Harpviken 2017).

Literacy, intended to be a central aspect of Afghan women’s empowerment, is still incredibly low. Literacy was central to the plan precisely because Afghanistan’s women are largely unaware of their rights, and increased literacy would have significantly increased their agency as participants in the implementation of this plan—allowing them to meet government initiatives in the middle and take an active role. Nevertheless, literacy rates for women remain at only 15.8%, and almost 9 out of 10 women in rural areas are functionally illiterate (Pain, Rothman and Lundin 2015). At the same time, continued threats of violence make it difficult for them to traverse the streets and make it to school or work, thus furthering the vicious cycle of illiteracy, and keeping many in the dark about their rights (Kuehnast et al, 2012).

Both the 2009 EVAW law and the 2015 NAP reinforce Afghanistan’s objective to eliminate all forms of violence against women. However, despite the government’s attempt to prevent violence through legislature, the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) depicted that violence is “an everyday occurrence in the lives of a huge proportion of Afghan women” (Ahmadi & Stanikzai 2018). The security situation has only gotten worse since international combat troops pulled out starting in 2014, exemplified by the fact that the Taliban now holds around 40 percent of Afghanistan (Strand, Borchgrevink, and Harpviken 2017;
Landler 2014, Frogh 2017). Insecurity is often the main justification used to keep women home from school and work (Nijat & Murtazashvili 2015). In cases where violence has occurred, women face stigma from their families to seek out justice because they represent their family’s honor. Oftentimes, rape victims are threatened with social alienation to keep quiet. And still common are ‘honor killings’ in which a relative kills the victim to preserve a family’s honor (Erzurum & Eren 2014). Implementation of the EVAW and NAP has been slow in preventing violence against women. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) reported in late 2016 that most cases against women remain unreported (HRW 2017; Schneider 2017). Even more recently, the government failed to pass a law that promised an end to “virginity examinations” of women in custody (HRW 2016a; HRW 2018). In addition, women themselves are not significant stakeholders in increasing security: just 0.7 percent of the Afghan National Army are women and equally low numbers of women are enlisted in the Afghan National Police (Strand, Borchgrevink, and Harpviken 2017).

One of the NAP’s goals is to increase representation of women in peace processes. However, even within the peace negotiations under its own aegis, women are still not included. Women only hold five to seven percent of positions in three of the ministries that are most involved in human rights besides the MoWA: the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and the Ministry of Justice (Strand, Borchgrevink, and Harpviken 2017; Pain, Rothman and Lundin 2015). Meanwhile, the Kabul Process, Afghanistan’s internal attempt to come to a peace agreement with the Taliban (held in June 2017) involved forty-seven government and international dignitaries but only two were women (Barr 2017; MoFA 2017; HRW 2017).

The few women that are involved in negotiations are often portrayed as symbols (Strand, Borchgrevink, and Harpviken 2017). As stated earlier, quotas put in place by the NAP and other legislation have increased the number of women in government institutions to a commendable level compared to what they were even a decade ago. But as the evidence is surveyed, a clear trend emerges favoring the symbolic so heavily that the substantial is nearly eclipsed. Even on peace councils where women participated, patron-age rather than merit determined who received
quota appointments, thus making their participation look more like a token involvement than a legitimate role in the peace process. Oftentimes, female candidates are sponsored by political elites in turn for loyalty, limiting any collective action by women delegates towards furthering women’s rights (Nijat and Murtazashvili 2015; USIP 2016). Other times women self-censor for fear of repercussion, physical or otherwise (UNAMA 2009). Serious criticism has been leveled at President Karzai for using top-level women’s involvement in government posts as cover to maintain his progressive image abroad, while little has occurred at the lower levels (Strand, Borchgrevink, Harpviken 2017). As one observer wrote, apparently in seriousness, “every ministry has its own gender unit, although it is not clear which tasks they perform” (Pain, Rothman and Lundin 2015). Meanwhile, holdovers from the Mujahidin continue to seriously inhibit the ability of even those highly-placed women from full participation in their posts’ duties (Strand, Borchgrevink, and Harpviken 2017). Former warlords still occupy major posts alongside women, and along with other conservative stakeholders, are a serious hindrance to their fulfilling their roles in the peace process. At the same time, a perverse incentive structure encourages progress to remain on the relatively superficial of filling quotas: “Donors are obsessed,” said one expert, again unwittingly highlighting a serious problem, “with putting more women in senior positions” (Nijat and Murtazashvili 2015).

6. Discourses of Inclusion: The Construction of Women

The fundamental fact that a scholar of Afghanistan’s peace process encounters — and as I sought to detail above — is that women are not being reached. They are not being reached by resources, by government programs, and even by the mere information that they are the subject of so much concern on the elite institutional level. What, the scholar is driven to ask, is causing the missed connection between the muscular language of the NAP and the women it is intended to address?

Inevitably, standard Western answers arrive to fill the void — from corruption, to cultural challenges, to narratives about the development process and its inevitable course. But this paper proposes that an answer should be sought within the NAP itself, and within its discursive structure. How, it will ask, is the NAP discursively constructing the subjects that it is intended to
ameliorate, and how might its discursive commitments be a roadblock to its own implementation?

What is the feminine subject? As part of a discourse analysis, as discussed in the methodology section above, it is important to ask how the conditions of possibility are constructed by a text—how the basic categories of the episteme are implied in its discursive field. And since women are the supposed subject of the NAP, we must ask how its discourse constitutes the subject of the woman. From the very beginning, an explicitly religious discourse is used and the subject of women is put in the context of Islam. In his opening message, President Ashraf Ghani refers explicitly to question of women’s empowerment having its origin in “the dawn of Islam.” He draws a long historical arc stretching from the beginning of Islam to the April coup of 1978, to the present, and connects women’s empowerment with “Islamic civilization.” And indeed, the document’s epigraph—a statement in large Arabic letters which is below translated as “In the Name of Allah, the most merciful and compassionate” (MoFA & DHRWIA 2015). Thus from the beginning the document discursively establishes women and their rights as the teleological aspect of Islam, and frames the entire document within that context.

From that point on, however, the discursive emphasis shifts. A multi-aspect discursive matrix is established that sees women as a mix of economic actors, political participants, and victims of violence. It is this last point that we will begin with, because such extreme emphasis is laid upon the notion of women as victims. At the beginning of every major list of initiatives in the document, we see women painted in explicit terms of victimhood. “The protection of women from all forms of violence…” reads section two. Then section three begins: ”Prevention of violence…” Section four’s proposals start with “Provisions of relief for women affected by conflict…” The weight of rhetorical emphasis is unavoidable as one reads the document through, and it is impossible not to see the discursive limit rise like an epistemic wall: whatever else women are, they are victims.

Here we can turn to Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s seminal work on this subject, Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. In it, she identifies a disturbing trend in the discursive construction of women, and we find its trends present in the NAP. As she observes, in
discourses of Western development, women are “socially constituted as a homogeneous group identifiable prior to the process of analysis.” The homogeneity of the women, she writes, “is based not on the basis of biological essentials, but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals” (Mohanty 1984).

In the NAP, amidst its shifting fields of discourse, such secondary traits play an extremely important role. With no stable underlying definition, the violence committed against Afghan women is called forth to perform a tremendous amount of definitionalizing action, as in the quotes above. And here we arrive at another of Mohanty’s key aspects of feminine construction: “Although it is true,” she concedes, “that the potential of male violence against women circumscribes….Their social position, defining women as archetypal victims freezes them into ‘objects-who-defend-themselves’, men into ‘subjects-who-perpetrate-violence’ and every society into a simple opposition between the powerless (read: women), and the powerful (read: men) groups of people” (Mohanty 1984). Mohanty’s example doesn’t apply perfectly to the NAP, since violence against women is not framed as a men’s problem, but rather as an undefined rhetorical implication. The NAP says it seeks to increase the “participation of men (particularly young men and religious leaders) of Afghanistan in combating VAW in the country” (MoFA & DHRWIA 2015). However, combating the VAW problem cannot happen by discussing only the women, while not equally bringing in a discussion on who the perpetrators are. Nevertheless, seen in this light, we might begin to ask why it is so surprising that a document whose discursive commitments frame women so definitively as victims is unable to motivate significant action for their empowerment.

The following table offers a broader statistical look at the discursive trend across important documents that frame the Afghanistan peace process and women’s role within it. Here we see that across the NAP, the NAPWA, and the EVAW, “protection” saturates the documents much more than “participation.” This is in keeping with the largely passive role that women are dragooned into playing in these documents’ discursive systems.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Protection</th>
<th>Protection: Participation Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NAP</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAPWA</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EVAW</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNAMA 2015</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAP Progress Report 2016</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan Compact</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table - Number of times words related to participation (assistance, cooperation) and protection (security, safety) appear in each document and the ratio of the two.

It is also important to turn to Arturo Escobar’s theory of representation in order to understand the emphasis laid upon violence against women. It is impossible to evade the aggressive discursive nature of these emphases. Before more prosaic aspects of women’s lives are mentioned—economic, familial, for instance we find the most visually dramatic aspects highlighted: those in which women are subject to shattering external violence against their bodies. Inevitably, “visuality” is here at work. Escobar quotes Deleuze, explaining that “the apparatus… is an abstract machine that links statements and visibilities, the visible and the expressible” (Escobar 1995). He goes on to explain that in the modern period, and in particular ours in which “development” plays such a starring role, “New client categories were brought into the field of vision through a process of enframing that turned them into spectacles.” Later, Escobar quotes Ray Chow:

One of the chief sources of women lies in the way they have been consigned to visuality. This consignment is the result of an epistemological mechanism which produces social difference by a formal distribution of positions… The production of the West’s ‘others’ depends on a logic of visuality that bifurcates ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ into the incompatible positions of intellectuality and specularity (Escobar 1995).
Now, Escobar explains how this functions: “Constructions that are beyond the individual’s grasp turn her into a spectacle whose “aesthetic value increases with its/her increasing helplessness.” Here perhaps we observe the key. Just as the victim/victimizer dualism pervades the paper and enforces its own dualistic specularity on its discursive framework, so does the specticalization of women through an emphasis on violence turn them into passive objections of “spectation” (Escobar 1995).

Why would such a discourse be useful to the NAP? Here its discourse drives us to remember for whom it was written. Due to insurgency and war’s impinging mobility, consultation on the NAP’s drafting mostly occurred within the provincial capitals and urban areas. For this reason, many women’s groups and organizations within Afghanistan remain critical of it. They argue that women who come from communities that faced security challenges were not included—namely local villages and districts under the Taliban’s influence. The NAP, it is claimed, is therefore unconnected to rural women. Other critics point out that the small group of people consulted were mostly elite women in Kabul and in other major provinces. (Frogh 2017; Strand, Borchgrevink, Harpviken 2017). It is important to remember what the government’s stated goal of this document was:

The NAP implementation plan presents a unique opportunity for the Afghan government to develop and articulate its vision for a full role for women in peace building. It is also an opportunity to engage donors and seek funding for components of the plan that will require resources (HRW 2015).

Again, the donors—those ultimate spectators in our age of politically motivated Western philanthropy—and one wonders if Afghanistan’s women themselves would have chosen to so centrally emphasize victimhood had they rather than the donors been its intended audience.

The next major field in the NAP’s discursive construction of women is economic. Although occupying a less significant place than the previously-discussed category, it takes center-stage in
the “Relief and Recovery” section, or section four. “Lack of adequate economic resources for women in conflict and post-conflict situations is a major challenge for providing access to education and healthcare services” (MoFA & DHRWIA 2015). It goes on to specify that “increasing rural women’s economic security” is a priority, along with “relief and recovery services.”

Worth noting is the extremely generalized quality of the economic discourse. General language pervades the NAP but it is especially important in the section related to economics. Important for explaining this is the emphasis on “economic development opportunities” and “increased employment opportunities.” The presumption seems to be that the development process will follow a predictable line, and that increased economic development is something that will pretty much take care of itself and proceed along standard tracks. Turning to della Faille, we here can see that Modernization theory is implied. As della Faille notes, assumptions about tidy narratives of modernization attend all development-oriented theories put forth under the hegemonic aegis of the post-World War II world order (della Faille 2011). Inherent in this theory is the implication that as economies modernize, cultures must of necessity come with them, and move from sand and stone to brick and mortar, and so forth. Whether the cultural changes proposed in the NAP are compatible with immediate economic growth is certainly an untested presumption, and only taken for granted under the American-dominated theories of International Development in the Cold War era.

Finally, in the NAP we observe the often dominant discourse of rights. Women, according to the NAP, are agents who possess rights. The fact is stressed over and over. The epigraph mentions “The citizens of Afghanistan shall have equal rights…” Human rights are then discussed in the very first section, and recur throughout the document both in “protection” and “participation” contexts. Simply put, human rights are central to the NAP. And that stands to reason: The NAP was originally designed to satisfy UNSCR 1325, passed in 2000, which demanded the integration of women’s rights into the UN’s already-dominant discourse on human rights (UNSCR 1325). But this connection can be seen as a weakness just as soon as a strength. The universality of the UN-promoted human rights regime has been called into question before, most
notably by Strand, who noted that normative ideals like human and women’s rights are often mere tools of power, imposed from above and insufficiently adapted to local circumstance to be of use to communities and women (Strand, Borchgrevink, & and Harpviken 2017).

7. Conclusion

In summary, the long passion of the NAP and its emergence from the ashes of Afghanistan’s violent past poses a confounding question: why have its good intentions been so difficult to translate from international-development document into actual policy, and indeed into benefits for on-the-ground women? Various answers propose themselves and indeed are proposed by the international community, including corruption. However, a discourse analysis, by taking a “hermeneutics of suspicion” to the NAP itself, offers a more compelling explanation for its shortcomings: By casting women in the roles of victims and “spectacles,” as well as by relying on implicit but clear hegemonic conceptions of development and rights, the NAP evinces a greater concern for the interests of its powerful creators than it does for the needs of the Afghan women it was ostensibly intended to serve.
8. Bibliography


