

EDITORIAL

Powered by caring: daily struggles to keep the WPS Agenda alive

Interview with Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini

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Abstract

*This interview originated from the encounter between the guest editors of the Special Issue and Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini during the activities of the project “Enhancing Women’s Participation in Peace and Security (WEPPS)”. The interview was held via Zoom on the afternoon of October 1, 2021. At the time, the international community was dealing with the consequences of the sudden US withdrawal from Afghanistan that occurred on August 31. Sanam Naraghi Anderlini is a British-Iranian activist and researcher who has acquired about twenty-five years of experience in the field of women, peace and security. Having participated as a civil society leader to the drafting of UNSC Resolution 1325, she has worked in several projects and initiatives concerning women’s participation to peacebuilding processes. Founder and Executive Director of the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), she spearheads the Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL). She is the author of *Women Building Peace, What they do, Why it Matters* (Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2007). In 2011, she was appointed as the first Senior Expert on Gender and Inclusion on the UN Mediation Standby Team. She has been working in a number of conflict situations in different regions of the world (e.g. Somalia, Libya, Syria, Nepal). In 2019, she joined the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) as Director of the Centre for Women, Peace and Security. In 2020, she was awarded an MBE for her services to International peacebuilding and Women’s Rights.*

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1. Your academic and professional record on issues related with women and security is remarkable. We would like to focus on your commitment for the drafting and implementation of the WPS Agenda during the last 25 years. Looking back at its developments, do you think that it was worth the effort?

I’ll talk about it considering three different aspects. Am I exhausted? Absolutely. Am I angry? Beyond any vocabulary in any of the four languages that I speak. Do I think that the essence of what we fought for twenty years ago is still valid? Yes. To be clear, I refer to the reasons that drove our actions: the need to rethink peace processes and more in general the way we think about war and peace, or to put it better, the way we think about humanity

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in the midst of war and peace; the need for including alternative voices in international security, especially the voices of women peacebuilders – women who run to the problems, young people who are caught in the problems, basically society. In a nutshell, do I still believe that we need to have peace processes that are by definition inclusive and multi-stakeholders? I think *everything that we said twenty years ago is still valid*.

Twenty years ago, we were dealing with Rwanda, Somalia and Sierra Leone, and other horrific wars. Today we are living with a new set of horrific wars, some ongoing for the two decades and more. So, I do not think that conceptually we were wrong; we were ahead of our time. Twenty years on, world leaders are talking about inclusion and making statements about having women at the negotiation table, saying that “of course women should sit at the table” – but they are still not. Some would say that the Agenda was just window dressing, or putting lipstick on a pig, a way for governments who are perpetuating war to co-opt women and hide behind a peaceful mask. I think that the Agenda - which is radically transformative in many ways - has not been taken seriously enough for it to be co-opted in that way; it is still so marginal to the constantly changing political and diplomatic leadership that we see around the world.

The absolute lack of interest and concern for the lives of Afghan women, twenty years ago and now, is indicative of how little actually women – or the lives of people caught in the midst of war – matters to those who sit in Washington or London and are enabling these wars. For eight years diplomats sat in Doha and negotiated with the Taliban. For eight years, systematically, Afghan women and their international advocates asked why Afghan women were not in Doha, why they did not have a seat at the negotiation table as an independent delegation. We were told that the Taliban do not speak to women, but what effort was genuinely made to change the design of those talks? Just because the Taliban said no, did not mean that Qatar or the US or other countries should have followed suit. I don't think enough was done. What effort was made to bring the issue of civilian protection or the rights of women, or the *lives* of women into the negotiations? Now, when we look at the results of the negotiation process - a humanitarian disaster, women's lives at risk and that healthcare, education, basic services are unavailable for them and the likelihood of war increases every day that goes by. The power brokers present a distorted picture, once again. Now they say: “first we have to do humanitarian work, then we will open the space for a political dialogue”, as if women's lives is just a political matter and not a humanitarian imperative too. They persist in excluding women in the search for solutions. Look at the mess they have created.

The essence of the WPS Agenda is a universal experience and demand: it crosses time and geography. *The WPS Agenda is about human experiences in a time of conflict and crisis*. Every time there is a conflict, women emerge as peace actors; every time there is a conflict, or a crisis, women's rights are violated. There is something about the universality of the experience of war that we captured twenty years ago and that is always valid – even if the Agenda was not there.

How has the Agenda been kept alive? It has been kept alive by civil society and activists who have been working hard for its survival, and by a new generation of people who are coming into institutions such as the diplomatic services. There, a handful of people are continuing to keep it alive, focusing on addressing specific needs of women in conflict. In conflict settings we see two sides of the story: those who care for power and those who are powered by caring. This Agenda has been brought to life because people care. Should it be

at a higher political level? Yes, it should be at the core of anything that has to do with diplomacy now, but it is not. One reason is that within our bureaucracies, the same people are appointed and reappointed. So, why should we expect the same guys that showed no interest in women's participation or rights in Yemen, to suddenly become gender-sensitive once they get a position in humanitarian affairs? I think this reveals the lack of learning and accountability in our systems. People in key positions are unable to learn from experience and people who fail still move upwards to new job and reproduce the same mistakes in different contexts.

From a very bureaucratic/administrative standpoint, the experience or practical commitment to bring inclusion in the design of mediation processes or of humanitarian aid programmes has not been a criterion for professional advancement or for leadership, it has not been a criterion on which you are held accountable if you do not apply it. That comes back to *political will*: people lose their jobs if they are perceived to be corrupt – at least, we hope this is the norm – but they do not lose anything if they disregard the principle of inclusion or gender responsiveness. Actually, we often see that the opposite happens. The ones who do push for an inclusive Agenda get thrown out of development and aid agencies, because they are going against the vested political interests of member states, they are questioning the way things are done and creating problems. For instance, if you look at the Yemen peace process, the Yemen national dialogue was designed to be as inclusive as it could be. There was representation of women's groups, youth groups, tribes, political parties, within each entity there were meant to be 30% women. As a designed process and as a process for engagement it was quite unique. But the envoy who worked on and fostered the inclusivity in the national dialogue was sidelined; somebody else was appointed and the original work was erased.

2. The current Afghan situation is a (fatal) test bench for the WPS Agenda and more in general for the UN conceptions of peacebuilding and conflict management that have been developed during the last fifty years or so. At the moment, you are working for guaranteeing the protection of women and human rights' activists/peacebuilders who are in the country. Could you please explain to us which are the main risks at stake for the achievement of peace in the country and how could the international community reclaim an active role for envisaging and realising a viable peace process?

In Afghanistan as well as in other contexts we have seen a huge increase in threats against women peacebuilders during the last three or four years. In order to respond to this situation, by the end of 2020 ICAN produced three reports within the framework of the global campaign *She Builds Peace*.¹ The first, *Recognizing Women Peacebuilders: Critical Actors in Effective Peacemaking*, aimed at acknowledging women peacebuilders as a distinct category of activists. There is overlap with human rights and with other types of practices, but there is a specificity of being a peacebuilder. They have unique approaches and play an important role as interlocutors and connectors between parties, within any conflict situation. They are the ones who mediate with armed groups, engage with governments, represent the voices of the community, try to find solutions. In the last few years, there has been a double sided

¹ The three reports are available online: <https://icanpeacework.org/shebuildspeace/>

rise in threat levels against peacebuilders. On the one hand, identity-based violent extremism has increased with the suppression and control of women as a central ideology. On the other hand, state authoritarianism has increased and with it space for civil society and has diminished. Peacebuilders were caught in the middle: with societies very polarised, they are targeted by both sides. So, in addition to calling for recognition, we also researched and published the *Protecting Women Peacebuilders. The frontline of sustainable peace* report and operational guidance. We focused on providing context-specific information, envisaging ways that governments could ensure protection on the ground through the daily work of embassies and agencies and considering the possibility that activists might be evacuated and extracted in exceptional cases. Lots of countries – including my own, the United Kingdom – endorsed that framework with enthusiasm. But Afghan crisis has shown that their enthusiasm was not accompanied by serious commitment. When it came to the evacuation of Afghan women peacebuilders or those in the security sector that were directly at risk from the Taliban, very few states offered visas or assistance. Nobody thought about the reasons why these people are at risk. There are multiple reasons that should be taken into account: in Afghanistan, women in the public space are especially vulnerable; women peacebuilders are performing activities that are outside of their traditional gender roles – they are doing peace and security work, contributing to violence prevention, justice, deradicalization – and they work in programs and projects that are funded, directly or indirectly, by the international community. They had links to the previous Ministry of Interior, they worked with the government or they had interlocutors in the government, even if they were independent. Now, these connections with the international community and with the previous government put them at risk. Moreover, some of these peacebuilders are very young women, unmarried, and many of them belong to minority groups such as the Hazara or Tajik: they are easily stigmatised for their unconventional activities and they now face threats of forced marriage. So many woman peacebuilder had multiple targets on their back – as women, as public figures or security actors, as members of a minority community and as unmarried women. Our governments talk at length about women's rights, but they did not act.

The majority of those waving the WPS flag failed the litmus test of Afghanistan. Some of them were enthusiastic at the beginning and they showed intentions of helping with the resettlement, but they have not given the visas, others behind the scenes tell us “we will take a few people here and a few there”, but this is not enough. We do not have a few people who need help: we have a list of over 2000 people who are currently facing threats – activists, their families, journalists, judges. Families are important in this case: at times, children were kidnapped to get at the mothers. Activists are targeted in specific ways, but their families share the risk.

In addition there were about 3797 women police officers. They are all at risk as well. They were trained by Turkish and Japanese institutions in programmes led by UNDP. But no one went to save them. From my perspective of feminist peacebuilder, I was always wary of the emphasis on ‘women in the security’ side of the WPS Agenda, because it diminishes the emphasis on peace and the Agenda becomes one of ‘women in the army, women in the police’. In Afghanistan the US and other put much emphasis on women in the security sector. These women always had a tough time, since they were being attacked by the Taliban and they were targets within their own communities. Some joined the police because they were

at risk of being forced into marriages they did not want. Their choice was between sexual slavery or public service. Now, they are stuck. My question is: is it my responsibility as a civil society representative to protect them, or is the UN's job? The protection and livelihoods of women who served in the police, women who are community workers and others should be integral to the negotiations on humanitarian aid. But they are absent from the sphere and locked out of the politics too.

3. As is often the case with several ongoing conflicts (beside Afghanistan, we would mention at least Syria, Lybia, Yemen, Ethiopia, Myanmar as examples) and with their implications (international displacements and international migrations), the accounts offered by politicians and media risk to present women mainly as victims, defenseless sufferer of violence. However, the situation is much more complex and nuanced. Could you please highlight the different roles and contributions that women have been performing in Afghanistan during the last twenty years? What risks are they facing, and who might be helpful allies for them?

In the twenty years of the US and NATO presence in the Afghanistan, the media and policy narrative was typically negative. The impression given was that nothing positive was occurring. There was never reporting on the social transformations that were taking place. In the aftermath of the withdrawal, we suddenly saw the numerous women judges, journalists, musicians, teachers, doctors, entrepreneurs there. We saw that women were working in many sectors: civil society, public health, education, and academia. The women and girls were participating in many spheres that are integral to peace - as being able to go to school, to work, to be present in the arts or sports, etc. Not all women have been able to do so, of course: the situation has been especially difficult for women in the rural areas of the country and it is undeniable that twenty years of war and military occupation have had a terrible impact on people's opportunities. But there were many encouraging signs including in the vibrant civil society.

Advocates of women peacebuilders have always maintained that, in order to find sustainable solutions to the conflict, the political and diplomatic processes ought to rely on effective and continuous dialogue, which could be attained only through an inclusive process. Even now, Afghan women should be involved in the ongoing talks on security and humanitarian issues, but they are being locked out by Western men, Afghan men, Arab men - *it is men talking to men, over and over*. The tragedy is that the US used women's rights as a excuse for their initial invasion and occupation, even though the real reason was to get Osama bin Laden. Now the Taliban is punishing women and girls for that reason.

In effect, both sides are trafficking in women and girls, but the truth is that neither side really cares about women's and girls' lives. The issue of women's rights is just a bargaining chip that the international actors and the Taliban seem to use. It is sometimes hard to distinguish the West's and the Taliban's behaviours vis-à-vis women: even when they state that women are important, their actions reveal misogynistic and racist attitudes.

4. In a piece published by Le Monde at the beginning of the Summer, you have highlighted the impressive work conducted by Hassina Neekzad and her Afghan Women's Organisation for Equality. One of their initiatives included male decision-makers and opinion leaders in a number of activities aimed at fostering dialogue and resolving conflicts nonviolently. As far as you know, in the current situation, is the initiative still ongoing? Has the work done for weaving a network of alliances within the Afghan civil society proven to be successful?

Many men who were part of the network are at risk now, because there has been no real attempt at engaging the Taliban in a constructive discussion about the peacebuilders' rights and safeguards. The men were also working to prevent violence in their home, preventing early marriages of little girls, peacefully resolve disputes. Of course, the dialogue alone would have not solved all the problems, but the lack of inclusive dialogue with the Taliban has been a striking feature of the last twenty years; the international community missed the opportunity to widen the space for reimagining social relationships in Afghanistan. The international community that was involved in the Doha talks never facilitated or enabled space for Afghan peacebuilders to engage with the Taliban and to propose possible alternatives to the fundamentalist interpretations the movement espoused.

Throughout my career, I have been combining advocacy, research and practice, always trying to practice what I was preaching and assessing the results of any choice I made. I know that dealing with complex actors such as states and international organisations can be challenging, even daunting. One day you can get a great agreement on paper – as we did in Somalia in 2012, when we facilitated an agreement on the representation of women in the parliament and in the government – and the next day those same signatories, including the international community, ignore their own commitments and revert to business as usual. I have seen how intransigence, inertia and vested interests ruin negotiations. When we formed ICAN and the network Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL), we relied on the hypothesis that if we worked with independent local women's organisations, helping them to be rooted and relevant in their communities while connecting them globally, these organisations and their work would be sustainable and safer. We assumed that if organisations are independent and rooted in their local community, activists can work safely, because they are trusted. But the Afghanistan case raised many issues. We saw that Afghan organizations or journalists affiliated with Western entities received help and were rescued. While people working for local civil society organisations are stuck. Since they live in the provinces and they are well-known in their small communities, they run higher risks and they deserved to be protected by the international community. So, if I think now at the academic debates on contemporary peacebuilding, I find the idea of decolonising post-conflict and peacebuilding laudable in theory but it seems that the colonising model is the one that saves your life. If anything goes wrong, some 'white saviours' will come and fight for you, give you a visa and get you out of the country. It is even true in my own case. We have been able to help some families because of their organizational affiliation with ICAN or the LSE research work. Thousands of others do not have such connections.

If I look beyond Afghanistan, we are working with partners – local women-led peace organizations in forty countries – such as Cameroon and Syria. On the one hand, I think this is great; on the other hand, this petrifies me: who is going to be there and to support them if their lives are at risk because some local thug or some government does not like what they are doing and what they are saying? Where is the international community when local

peacebuilders are at risk? We need international institutions and governments that champion WPS to acknowledge, value and offer protection to these people if needed.

5. During the last three years, you have been Director of the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security. What are, according to you, the difficulties and the potentiality that ongoing academic research on the WPS Agenda and more in general on issues concerning women and security is facing? Would you have any suggestions for young researchers who are entering the field?

I have been giving this some thought and I see three main challenges ahead. First, I think one of the difficulties is that this field of study has become everything and anything: it has become a bucket for gender diversity, gender identity, and gender theory. Although these issues all matter in different ways, there is a risk of the theoretical gender work diverting the attention from the original core of the project, which was the creation of a space to allow women to be engaged in international or global peace and security issues. There is a risk of this Agenda being siloed into ‘gender or women’s studies’ only. Whereas in reality it is an interdisciplinary field of practice and research. We need dialogue and collaboration with people in international relations, security studies and peace studies, environmental studies etc – those who have little understanding or have not been particularly welcoming towards the WPS Agenda. There is also a risk of too many labels. Referencing feminism can be very stimulating within academic spaces, but it can hinder our actions on the field and create misunderstandings or even danger, especially when it is applied to the cultural and political contexts in which women peacebuilders are working. I often practice my feminism implicitly instead of presenting myself as a ‘feminist’. I think that it is important to acknowledge the labelling and performative forms of feminism versus the substantive, value based feminist approaches that can be integral to our work. Many people profess feminism aloud while acting against equality and equity.

Second, I am firmly convinced that research is needed to ground advocacy and practice. I have always researched and analyzed issues before engaging in advocacy. That said, I believe there is still insufficient research on how women choose to engage. It is important to know what strategies women use, how they use cultural and traditional norms to further their own ideas of change and transformation. For instance, in a place where motherhood conveys authority, women peacebuilders use their maternal identities to demand accountability and pursue justice and peace. This is not essentialist. It is recognition of their sources of power and influence. In my own experience, I have drawn on my various identities – as a mother, as a Muslim woman, as an Iranian – etc as a means of connecting and enabling my mediation work. It is important to respect and understand how women draw on their identity and reframe their agency.

Thirdly, in terms of research, I would like to see analysis and case study work to explain the limitations to the Agenda’s implementation within governments and institutions. There is a mountain of evidence that we have been collecting throughout twenty years concerning the benefits of inclusive processes, but still, practices do not change. Why is that so? I call it the triple-A syndrome of *apathy, ad hocery, and amnesia*. We need to understand whether this syndrome is caused by individual, institutional or systemic factors, allowing people who fail to go on repeating the same mistakes. We also need to examine academia. I have seen

many people with degrees in International Relations, Security or Development Studies who came to work in development agencies or diplomacy without any gender perspective. They were never taught anything about the WPS Agenda or the possibility of adopting a gender perspective when dealing with security issues. Some now play key roles in conflict management and peacebuilding, but they were not trained in gender analysis or taught these international policy frameworks during their formative years. This is also related to the disconnect between academia and the practitioners in this realm. If we adopt a *self-reflexive stance vis-à-vis* our community, we might reflect on some crucial questions. How many scholars have co-authored any piece of research with local experts or activists? How many scholars have acknowledged the value and the pioneering character of publications from NGOs or non-western organizations? It would also be helpful to research all the struggles and compromises that have characterised the development of the Agenda during the last twenty years, to explain the origin of each resolution and allow fair assessments of its limitations as well as achievements.

These may be uncomfortable conversations, but they would and could be transformative in their impact.

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