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In this essay, the author calls for increased gender awareness in counter-insurgency operations. The main focus is to draw attention to the potential roles of local women in counterinsurgency, especially in Afghanistan. How can local women contribute to the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan? How can ISAF and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan gain terrain by building alliances with local women?

The Taliban movement is harassing, threatening and killing local women who are working as professionals for the Afghan government or as leaders of women's networks in the province of Helmand (teachers, headmasters, police, health workers and leaders of women's groups/centres). Sometimes threats and violence have been imposed on their husbands too.

In recent years, NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in support of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) has been performing counterinsurgency activities in Afghanistan. The southern and eastern provinces in the country are strongly influenced by different insurgent groups, such as the Taliban, drug lords and local war lords. The province of Helmand is currently one of the most dangerous provinces in Afghanistan.

Women are harassed on their way to work or school. The Taliban movement wants to prevent the mobility and freedom of women. Their general aim is to enforce strict Sharia laws on the local population, and to enforce a gender balance with the men ruling the women - and a strict separation of women from men, as well as boys from girls, in public as well as in private life. The Taliban is inspired to apply these rules in society by their radical interpretation of Sunni-Islam.

Killing of key female leaders, and beatings and threats in the form of night-letters and messages to the women and their husbands are used as a method to install fear among the families, especially the women, and persuade the women to stay in their homes and to stay away from work and school attendance. The Taliban actions and threats against women include:

Bombing of schools for girls, assassination of female teachers and police officers, assassination of women who the Taliban suspect are co-operating with ISAF or the government, and threats in the form of written messages or face-to-face communication, targeted at female teachers and female school headmasters. Also, the insurgents spread radio messages against female education and threats leading to closing of schools.

Taliban leaders have told in interviews and dialogue with journalist Ahmed Rashid, that if they give more freedom to women and allow them to attend school, they would lose support from their members. In addition, Taliban leaders claim that their fighters would be weakened by the

possibility of contact with women and therefore not be strong, focused fighters anymore (Rashid, Taliban – Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia, 2000: p.169). Rashid concludes that suppression of women is at the core of the Taliban ideology and a symbol of their wish to "cleanse" the Afghan society and keep up the morale among their troops (Rashid 2000: 169). The logic seems to be: The more strict rules imposed on women and girls, the more correct is the Taliban interpretation of Islam.

Therefore, the Afghan government and ISAF must support education, mobility and freedom of women, in order to show the average Afghan citizen that the Taliban ideology is void. As stated in the Constitution of Afghanistan from 2004, article Twenty-Two: "Any kind of discrimination between citizens shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan, men and women, have equal rights and duties before the law".

Afghan women have a universal human right to education and work, and a constitutional right to equality with the male population. So far, their constitutional right has not been implemented in Taliban dominated areas of the country, but female leaders, including female ISAF personnel, are educating local women in Helmand about their rights. The influence of the Taliban movement will diminish in line with the awareness among local families about the rights of women and the contribution women can give to society working as teachers, health workers and police. The current strategy for ISAF operations in Helmand must be adjusted to support the women in their efforts to reduce the Taliban influence, and more female ISAF personnel must be deployed to the province of Helmand in order to facilitate the implementation of this strategy.

Local women fighting the Taliban

Local women live in fear of Taliban punishment, but some women seem to be even more determined to work against the threats and rules imposed on them by the Taliban and other religious extremists.

The Provincial Council of Helmand consists of 15 members of which 4 are women. Despite the threats from Taliban, women take up leadership roles and try to help in the stabilisation and reconstruction efforts in the province. Women in Helmand organise themselves in female Shuras, and in groups and networks around the women's centres. The women in Helmand discuss development of the province, health issues and women's rights, and they get support from ISAF in their efforts of trying to start up small-scale income generating activities for women.

Afghan women will suffer most if the Taliban and other insurgent groups regain power in Afghanistan. The local women are tired of constant threats against them, and they want their sons and daughters to get a bright future, attending school and getting work to support their families. Therefore, the local women share long term perceptions of the importance of education and good governance with the Afghan government and ISAF. Hence, ISAF should adjust the counterinsurgency strategy for the southern provinces in Afghanistan, and focus more on building relations with Afghan women and supporting local women's networks.

Historic examples from Afghanistan show that counterinsurgency can be carried out by women:

Afghan women have been in the forefront of calls to disarm private militias and have played a direct role in the disarmament and re-integration of combatants.

According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), more than 20,000 women and children in Afghanistan are related to the ex-combatant community from the different wars in Afghanistan during the last decades. While some Afghan women became activists and party cadres in the communist party in Afghanistan in the 1980's, other Afghan women joined both secular and religious resistance movements to fight the Soviet occupation. Women play multiple roles during and after conflict – as combatants, cooks, dependents, supporters of armed groups, community peace advocates, spies and informers.

Women in Afghanistan have not previously been scared to fight with weapons in their hands for what they believe in. An increased effort to recruit women into e.g. the Afghan National Police (ANP) forces can be a step in the right direction to make Afghan women participate more actively as a resource against the insurgents and local warlords.

In the province of Helmand, experience from Danish female officers working with local Afghan women shows:

- Local women build strong networks and conduct daily activities separated from the local men.
- Local women raise future generations and exercise strong influence in the family, including on their husbands. Local women with positive attitudes towards the Afghan government and ISAF will influence the perceptions of their sons and daughters.
- Local men support income-generating projects for women when they can see that income generating opportunities for women benefit the entire family.
- Local women provide ISAF soldiers with important information about the local environment, including information about the Taliban, weapon stocks, IEDs etc.
- Female soldiers in patrols give credibility to ISAF, and gives access to the local women. When a female soldier is patrolling areas in Helmand, often the local men will allow the local women to listen and take part in the conversations with the ISAF personnel.
- Women in Helmand come forward to ISAF by their own initiative to suggest projects and provide information about insurgents, preferably to female ISAF personnel.
- Local women would like to take part in the counterinsurgency effort. In Helmand, local women have signed up for training to become police officers, but local authorities are resisting that women become active part of the police force

Women as actors in achieving stability and security

Local women in Helmand and Kandahar might hold different information and have different agendas than men. When daily life is full of gender-specific activities, women also develop their

own networks and own opinions about the events in the local neighbourhood.

"From my experience in Helmand, it is clear to me that a Pashto woman is not allowed to disagree with her husband in public. However, this does not imply that local women obey or agree to everything their husband will say and do. Instead, they develop subtle ways of influencing local men – through other male relatives or through quiet talks in the home behind closed doors" (former female Danish Stabilisation Adviser in Helmand, personal communication).

When Afghan women can influence their husbands and male relatives behind closed doors in the families, they are influencers in their own networks, and will be able to influence the perceptions of their male relatives. In addition, why not ask the local women their suggestions on how to limit the influence of Taliban insurgents and local warlords? The local women might bring forward new solutions and suggestions which ISAF can be inspired by and support. Local Afghan women are a strong pillar in the counterinsurgency effort in the country. They know the insurgency groups and their methods better than any soldier, because they have been victim to their threats, killings and information activities for more than a decade.

On 31st October 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1325 (S/RES/1325 (2000)). The resolution urges member states to focus on the role of women in prevention and resolution of conflicts. In the preamble of the resolution, the Security Council, "reaffirming the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and stressing the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution".

Instead of a tendency among international actors to view local women as victims, there is a need for incorporating local women in the stabilisation and counterinsurgency efforts. During the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, women drew maps to help each other locate community services, ran secret schools for girls, provided health care and set up home-based work to support their families. The women's resistance to Taliban rules is a learning lesson for the international community. The women, who conducted secret activities during Taliban rule, can inspire Afghan women of today and contribute to the counterinsurgency and stabilisation strategy.

Conflicts are physical and have physical consequences, such as destruction of buildings and killing of people, but they origin in the world of ideas. In the counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan, ISAF needs to pay more attention to the battle over the role of women in Afghan society, since suppression of girls and women are one of the cornerstones in the ideology of the insurgents. So far, ISAF has not fully explored the potential among key female leaders in the fight against the Taliban.

Afghan women have been killed for starting a female Shura, or harassed because they are attending training courses. Some women in Helmand report that if their husbands find out that they attend training courses, the husbands will beat them when returning to their homes. The local women in Helmand are willing to take that risk, because they want peace, education and

literacy. It is about time for ISAF to establish stronger links with these courageous women.