

MISSING THE TARGET

Recommendations for Sweden's commitment to women, peace and security in Afghanistan



Kvinna till Kvinna



Svenska Afghanistankommittén

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Despite promises and efforts from Sweden and the international community to protect and strengthen women's rights and participation in Afghanistan, little has changed for Afghan women. In the past few years, a backlash has been seen, and women stand out as those who voice fear over the military exit in 2014. It is urgent that the Swedish government design a new strategy for implementing the United Nations' Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in Afghanistan.

Sweden is currently engaged in Afghanistan in several spheres: military, diplomatic and development assistance. It is Sweden's largest engagement by far in a post-war country, and the government has made a long-term commitment to assist Afghanistan to the tune of 1.2 billion US dollars during the period of 2015-2024. From the start, UN Security Council Resolution 1325, stressing the importance of the protection of women as well as women's participation in peacebuilding, has been a priority for Sweden. The experiences so far provide an excellent case study to see how policies and goals established with bearing on UNSCR 1325 and the Swedish National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 have been implemented. Therefore, the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and Operation 1325 have commissioned such a report by Ann Wilkens. By analyzing the Swedish efforts against the background of Afghanistan's specific context and conditions, we aim to provide important insights and recommendations as to how Sweden can continue to improve its efforts to promote women's participation and protection in Afghanistan.

Values at centre stage

Afghanistan is marred by many problems, such as extensive poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, high infant mortality rates and a lack of security. Women are to a large extent still excluded from public life, and the western concept of gender equality is put into question by many in the country. It could be argued that the conflict in Afghanistan is about values, where women's behaviour and virtue are centre-stage. All of this makes the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Afghanistan particularly difficult: the resolution enshrines values that armed groups are fighting to keep out. Pushing these values in an insensitive way could easily become counterproductive and hurt women's cause more than promote it. At the same

time, implementing UNSCR 1325 is about building a lasting peace that embraces all Afghan people, both women and men. Therefore it is important to seek ways to contribute to women's participation in a way that works given the complex context of Afghanistan. In the past few years, there has been a backlash regarding women's participation and rights, and it is urgent that a new strategy is designed to curb this negative trend and live up to the promises made to Afghan women at the start of this international intervention.

Main findings

The main findings of the report show that there is a gap between the lofty goals of international commitments and the reality on the ground. Although Swedish development policies regarding Afghanistan can broadly be seen as addressing and encompassing many of the crucial building blocks to ensure women's participation and protection, the effects of them have been patchy and the opportunity to have a stronger impact has been lost. This can be traced to the fact that so many departments, institutions and actors have been involved. Coordination has been a challenge, coupled with a high turnover of staff, which has hampered the continuity of efforts. This could have been remedied by having designed a country-specific action plan for Sweden's efforts to support and implement UNSCR 1325 in Afghanistan, with goals and a clear division of roles and labour among the departments involved and with a special rapporteur on 1325 for its follow-up, with a clear and strong mandate, based at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Having said this, it is also clear that Sweden is a small player in Afghanistan and will not be able to have any lasting impact through its efforts alone. It is therefore important for Sweden to line up with like-minded countries to push the agenda in Afghanistan and in the UN, EU and other fora.

Impact of the military presence

In terms of military efforts in Afghanistan, the Swedish ISAF troops generally enjoy a good reputation among military and security actors on gender- and 1325-related issues. Gender Field Advisors are and have been an important feature to improve internal gender quality within the force, and have taken initiatives



to promote women's rights and the objectives of UNSCR 1325. However, the quick turnover of staff has made it impossible to create lasting and trusting relations, and handing over responsibilities and contacts to the next person arriving has been patchy and problematic. Overall, the UNSCR 1325 work has provided valuable lessons learnt for the Swedish armed forces and has been seen as a way to improve operational efficiency on a tactical level. It has not, however, led to any sustainable results for Afghan women. To be clear, this has not been a primary objective for Swedish ISAF.

Development assistance and women, peace and security

In a broad sense, a large portion of Swedish development assistance could be seen as supporting UNSCR 1325. Priority areas of the development strategy for Afghanistan include support for democracy, human rights, gender equality and education. Looking at it more narrowly, three priorities stand out as relevant: women's participation and influence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and measures to prevent gender-based violence. The development strategy for Afghanistan 2012-14 states UNSCR 1325 as a priority issue, but the right resources are not in place to push this agenda effectively. Broader issues relating to empowering women and girls are needed, for example through education efforts. However, it is important – for the sake of clarity and follow-up on UNSCR 1325 interventions – to make a distinction between measures geared specifically towards implementation of UNSCR 1325 and broader women's empowerment measures.

There are a number of specific conditions and challenges facing women in Afghanistan when it comes to participation and protection from violence, including sexual violence and threats of violence. The conclusions are that in Afghanistan there are no quick fixes or easy solutions. The report finds that there is a need and scope for Sweden and the international community to push for more conditionality on aid. Political dialogue should be used to exert pressure on the Afghan government to implement gender policies and passed legislation. As international development assistance overall is likely to diminish post-2014, in Sweden's case the power of the purse might become more effective.

The need for diplomatic pressure

Without pressure, the Afghan government will probably do little to live up to its commitments in this area. Measures could include pushing for participation of women at international conferences, awareness-raising measures in relevant institutions in Afghanistan such as the High Peace Council and clarifying the benefits of holistic participation in societal development. However, it is urgent that interventions and supportive measures take cultural awareness and understanding of the situation in the country into account. Pushing gender equality issues and UNSCR 1325 in Afghanistan has been particularly difficult, as some of the warring parties are openly opposed to the concept of gender equality as interpreted in the West. In terms of designing strategies facing this reality, it will be even more crucial to take care and listen to what the women in Afghanistan themselves call for and recommend in terms of international support.

It is encouraging that women in Afghanistan are increasingly becoming organised and participating in society and politics. However, they do this at a high price, with threats to their person and family. This needs to be recognised by Sweden and other actors in the international community, and ways to increase women's protection and to ensure refuge when needed must be ensured.

Conditionality will not work on its own, unless it is coupled with measures cautiously targeting women, such as ensuring their security, skilfully negotiating with power-brokers and building community trust. Measures that could be labelled as secondary in this context (in terms of relevance for implementation of UNSCR 1325) such as education, preventing child marriages and improving access to justice systems for women will continue to be necessary. These constitute basic empowerment measures, without which implementation of UNSCR 1325 will not be possible.

Women's rights must get back on the agenda

It is clear that the security situation in Afghanistan is linked to the climate and interests of its neighbouring countries. Faced with the task of maintaining stability in the country and the region, women's rights have been allowed to slip

down the list of priorities, despite all the rhetoric and commitments made by the international community and the government in Kabul. It is the responsibility of Sweden and other governments in the international community to make sure this is not allowed to continue to happen.

Although it is true that Sweden is a small player in Afghanistan, it could nevertheless be more strategic with regards to the interventions it can make. A country-specific action plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Afghanistan could be instrumental in this. The current Swedish NAP is global in nature and in order to be relevant a specific plan needs to be created for Afghanistan. It needs to be designed to fit the particular context and, given the limited resources Sweden can assign, it should focus on added value and areas where Sweden can make an impact. In order for its implementation to be effective in the country, this plan should have clear goals and more pressure should be exerted from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Stockholm. The experience so far has shown that this has not been the case.

A new strategy

A Swedish action plan on 1325 specifically designed for Afghanistan could include measures such as training to enable Afghan women to be more active on the political scene, more aid to higher education for women alongside primary education, support to more democratic parties and electoral reform, support to Afghan women's organizations and taking their recommendations into account. It should also include meetings with Afghan women in official visits; put pressure on the Afghan government to implement laws in place such as the Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women and measures to strengthen the justice sector and anti-corruption measures within it. Sweden should also consider aligning its action plan to the Afghan National Action Plan on 1325 when this is in place.

As 2014 will mean the exit of the bulk of international troops from Afghanistan, uncertainty as to what will happen in the country is rife. The past few years have seen a deterioration of the security situation in the country, and many Afghans attribute this to the presence of international forces. At the same time, there are wide-spread fears as to what will happen in the future if the Taliban are allowed more power as part

of a peace deal. Presidential elections will be held in 2014, and it is important that these are free, fair and transparent and that Sweden and the international community include measures to strengthen democratic institutions and create the necessary space for women to play their part in society.

Sweden has committed itself long-term to Afghanistan. The Swedish NAP could be an important instrument, but it needs to be improved to become relevant for the women in Afghanistan.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE SWEDISH GOVERNMENT ON SWEDEN'S IMPLEMENTATION OF UNSCR 1325 IN AFGHANISTAN

Recommendations to the Swedish government concerning the Swedish National Action Plan for 1325:

- 1 Conflict contexts vary and in order for the Swedish National Action Plan for 1325 to become relevant and strategic, it should be complemented with a specific plan for each country in which Sweden is engaged. A specific plan for Afghanistan should take the socio-cultural context into account and the full extent of the problems confronting Afghan women as well as include an outlook on the regional situation.
- 2 UNSCR 1325 aims at strengthening women's human rights, increasing women's participation in the peace process and protecting women from threats and violence. When implementing the Swedish NAP, however, more energy needs to be put into qualitative effects on the ground. The indicators for the Swedish NAP need to mirror the whole NAP, not just the quantitative part of it.
- 3 The Swedish government should report to the parliament on its implementation of the NAP for 1325 on an annual basis in order to be held accountable and increase the visibility of its work. A special rapporteur on 1325 should be appointed within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible for coordinating the implementation of the NAP.

Recommendations to the Swedish government regarding future engagement in Afghanistan:

- 4 In order to have an impact in Afghanistan, Sweden must continue to enhance its cooperation with like-minded countries. In particular, Nordic cooperation can be further strengthened. As the country holding the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2013, Sweden should take the initiative and lead the process. Sweden should support Afghan efforts to develop a national action plan on UNSCR 1325 and monitor and support the implementation process.
- 5 Meetings with women, including women from civil society, should always be included in the programme during high-level visits from Sweden to Afghanistan. Sweden should also request the participation of women in incoming high-level visits to Sweden. The results of these meetings should be included in reporting as well as be reported back to the women.

- 6 Sweden should, through the EU and international community, promote the elaboration of an international Gender Code of Conduct that stipulates the presence of and input from Afghan women at international conferences concerning their country.
- 7 Sweden should lead by example. Swedish missions and high-level visits to Afghanistan should be gender-equal and include women proportionately at all levels. This would send an important signal to the actors involved in conflict resolution at national and international levels in Afghanistan.
- 8 Within the EU, Sweden should push for a programme to protect threatened women human rights defenders in order to comply with the commitments made in the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders. This should be applied for Afghan women human rights defenders when needed.

Recommendations to the Swedish government regarding continued support to women's development in Afghanistan:

- 9 Political and diplomatic efforts to promote the women, peace and security agenda should be coupled with support to local-level peace-building and development initiatives. The Afghan women's movement needs to be supported in several different ways and on a long-term basis. Sweden can, for example, provide core support to relevant organizations so that they can focus on organizational development and not only the implementation of specific time-bound projects, which tend to be donor-driven.
- 10 Sweden should maintain a clear distinction between gender issues and gender mainstreaming on one hand, and action related to the implementation of UNSCR 1325 on the other. A specified and significant proportion of Swedish development assistance to Afghanistan should continue to be geared toward strengthening the position of women with regard to participation and protection. This requires long-term efforts and will not produce spectacular short-term results, and involves action to prevent child marriages, provide women and girls with education, access to maternal health care and improve their access to justice.



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