

Women's voices in regional dialogues

A case study of South Asia

July 2021

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Acknowledgements

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This research forms part of wider work carried out by Saferworld focusing on examining and addressing gender-related issues in conflict settings, including peace processes, to enhance gender equality in peacebuilding efforts. It also draws from, and intends to contribute to, Saferworld's South Asia regional programme.

Cover photo: Members of Pakistan's parliament applaud President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan's speech by hitting their tables during a joint session of the National Assembly and Senate in Islamabad, Pakistan on 13 February 2020.

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MNA Shandana Gulzar expressing her views on Gender Equality at the 3rd Pakistan–Afghan Youth Summit in Islamabad held by CRSS on 25 February 2021.
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Introduction: women's participation in Track II diplomacy

Since 2017, Saferworld has been leading a consortium of organisations in South Asia to implement a series of regional dialogues. Saferworld provides overall management and coordination within this consortium – including monitoring and evaluation – while national partners run bilateral Track II dialogues between Pakistan and Afghanistan and between Pakistan and India. Across the Afghanistan and Pakistan strand, the consortium includes the Islamabad-based Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), the Kabul-based Organization for Economic Studies and Peace (OESP), and the Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PAJCCI) with chapters in Karachi and Kabul. Together, CRSS and OESP have been convening the ‘Beyond Boundaries’ process, with PAJCCI collaborating on economic discussions. Across India and Pakistan, the consortium includes the Jinnah Institute in Islamabad and the Council for Strategic and Defense Research (CSDR) in New Delhi. These organisations have been leading the ‘Chao Track’ process, hosted in Bangkok.

This report explores women's participation in the South Asia regional programme. The consortium has been pursuing strategies to increase the number of women in activities with mixed success. It is unclear to what extent strategies used to ensure women's participation translate into women's meaningful engagement in, and influence over, foreign policy debates across the three countries.

The analysis presented here draws on broader literature and practices of Track II regional dialogues, to reflect on the range of activities that Track II includes and how they are understood to contribute to conflict transformation and provide space for women's representation. The report then considers how women's active participation can be strengthened in such a programme – identifying the level of participation women have had so far and the methods the consortium has used to increase women's representation, while exploring the constraints imposed by the policy context and social and gender norms. The report also explores how the inclusion or exclusion of women's voices from Track II processes impacts on the overall objectives and outcomes of this kind of work, and identifies options and recommendations to increase women's meaningful participation based on participant suggestions and documented good practices.

Research was conducted over four months from November 2020–February 2021. As well as a desk review of available programme documentation and literature on inclusion in Track II processes, Saferworld engaged three consultants – one in each country – to conduct interviews with the following groups: consortium partners, participants in the different regional activities, women-led networks, government officials, political analysts and academics with expertise on women, peace and security, and journalists. Over 50 interviews were conducted – with most taking place virtually due to travel constraints related to the COVID-19 pandemic – including 18 in Afghanistan, 20 in Pakistan and 17 in India. A remote cross-context sharing and analysis workshop took place in January 2021, where the three consultants shared findings and recommendations for discussion and validation with nine consortium partners from CRSS, OESP, PAJCCI, CSDR and the Jinnah Institute, along with six Saferworld staff. The consultants worked together to produce reports on the two strands: Afghanistan–Pakistan and India–Pakistan. The data from these was then aggregated by Saferworld and compiled into this analysis.

Track II diplomacy in South Asia

While Track I diplomacy refers to official governmental peace processes, Track II is the ‘variety of nongovernmental and unofficial forms of conflict resolution activities between the representatives of adversarial groups that aim at de-escalating conflict, improving communication and understanding between the parties, and developing new ideas to be used in the official peace processes’.¹ Track II can refer to a wide range of initiatives and activities and include intergroup dialogues, training, interactive conflict resolution, problem-solving workshops and

public peace education.² Track II activities can prepare the ground for Track I negotiations and then support them in different ways; for example, by feeding in ideas or enlarging the peace constituency.³

The range of activities often associated with Track II processes is reflected in the breadth of the South Asia regional programme activities. The hybrid nature of activities under the programme also points to the challenges of terminology around ‘tracked’ processes – prompting references to ‘Track 1.5 and II’ dialogues. Two bilateral dialogues – the Chao Track operating across India and Pakistan, and Beyond Boundaries across Afghanistan and Pakistan – bring together current and former government officials, parliamentarians, civil society activists, journalists and academics –

all acting in a private capacity. A number of support activities, including focus group discussions, policy roundtables, policy events, and one-to-one side meetings, take place to support the uptake of recommendations by policymakers.

The programme has also operated on the understanding that the main roadblock to increased economic connectivity is political will. As a result, the programme’s main activities include creating opportunities to bring together business leaders and strategic decision makers to build a strong case for the mutual benefits available to all countries through increased economic cooperation. This includes economic dialogues, which are supported by dissemination activities such as policy roundtables, strategic side meetings and the development of policy briefs to further inform decision makers. Beyond this, policy papers are developed and business-to-business engagements, taskforces, youth-focused dialogue events, women-to-women delegations and media engagements are carried out in order to enhance information and exchange ideas, channel expertise to develop policy options that reflect a range of perspectives, and support uptake by governments and shifts in public perceptions of peace.⁴

There remains, however, one key difference between broadly held definitions of Track II processes and the dialogues in this programme: the dialogues in South Asia are bilateral processes run entirely by national organisations, rather than by an impartial third-party facilitator. These are also regular meetings – part of a structured, regular and sustained process – as opposed to ad hoc engagements that might occur as one-offs, for example following a particular crisis.⁵

Regional dialogues and Track II diplomacy

Like security dialogues, Track II dialogues have varying objectives and outcomes making them difficult to define as well as assess; this is compounded by a relative lack of systematic analysis of regional dialogues. A comparative study between South Asian and Middle Eastern regional security dialogues with Track II elements suggests that Track II dialogues may focus less on producing diplomatic breakthroughs than socialising an influential group of elite participants – such as government officials – to think in cooperative ways.⁶ A major objective therefore can be to alter people’s views about the value of cooperation with other regional actors, even if attitudes towards those actors remain generally negative. Such dialogues can serve as a ‘conditioning process in which regional actors are exposed to new concepts, adapt them to their own contexts, and shape policy debates over time’.⁷ Track

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1.5 diplomacy has also been referred to as 'hybrid diplomacy' – as a 'cross-fertilisation of Track I and Track II that gives parties the diplomatic agility to flip from Track I to Track II conflict resolution techniques in accordance with the situation'.⁸

One of the main challenges of multitrack processes and hybrid dialogues is how they link with and impact on other initiatives and approaches. There is a strong focus on connecting different levels of society 'upwards' towards high-level peace negotiations, with Track II processes evaluated primarily according to their ability to impact on high-level peace negotiations.⁹ Some individuals who are open-minded to new relationships and frameworks – and who can provide valuable insights – may have limited influence with official policymakers or difficulty influencing well-established thinking in official government circles. As a result, initiatives that are not related to high-level policy may not be given attention, pointing to a narrow understanding of how to build sustainable peace. Often there is only limited consideration of other theories of change – involving initiatives at different levels of society, and different horizontal and vertical linkages – as an essential complement to formal processes.¹⁰

The RAND Corporation points to three benefits that regional security dialogues can have. One is socialisation – encouraging a small group of influential elites to think differently about regional security and the value of cooperation, as well as limiting misperceptions about regional neighbours; the second is 'widening the constituency favouring regional cooperation beyond policy elites involved, through the media, parliament, NGOs, education systems, and citizen interest groups; third is the transmission of ideas fostered in dialogues to tangible shifts in security policy, such as altered military and security doctrines or political agreements'.¹¹

Assessing the impacts of regional security dialogues in the Middle East and South Asia, the RAND Corporation points to a number of successes in directly informing policy – including the official implementation of confidence-building measures and ideas initially discussed in Track II forums. They also point to broader successes around socialisation that are overlooked. In particular, South Asian regional security dialogues have succeeded in shifting participants' mindsets towards being more open to cooperation, and building a constituency supportive of cooperation in challenging areas. South Asia regional dialogues have also engaged many elite actors in cooperative security and helped develop a constituency that previously did not exist across the region (for example, expertise in arms control).¹² Saferworld's own experience of assessing

the outcomes generated by some of the work outlined above has demonstrated similar achievements in instituting confidence-building measures, supporting narrative and attitudinal shifts, and securing access to formal regional mechanisms.

Women's participation in Track II processes

Two intersecting issues are important for understanding women's participation in the South Asia regional dialogues: the security focus of the dialogues, and how gender norms function in each of the countries.

The regional dialogues aim to support bilateral relationships in order to advance regional stability, recognising how national and regional insecurities and conflict have overlapped in South Asia. Regional insecurity has historically been shaped by the securitised foreign policy concerns of the three countries towards each other – focused primarily on nuclear weapons, counter-terrorism and strategic militarism. Such concerns tend to be ambivalent towards gender issues. Recently, women's networks in India and Pakistan have recognised how their country's complicity in Afghanistan's conflicts has impacted the rights and lives of women. The Women's Action Forum pointed out Pakistan's major role in regional dynamics and urged that 'peace talks overseen by US and supported by Pakistan' ensure Afghan women's meaningful inclusion.¹³ In each of the countries, women's identities and concerns have been subsumed within the nationalist and post-colonial state-building narratives that shape foreign policy towards its neighbours.¹⁴

Across India, Afghanistan and Pakistan, gender inequality remains high. Cultural norms such as patrilineality (inheritance through descendants who are men or boys) and parental preference for sons – emanating from their importance as caregivers for parents in old age – play a central role in perpetuating gender inequality and ideas about gender-appropriate behaviour. They are also linked to poorer consequences for daughters.¹⁵ South Asia ranked lowest on the 2017 Global Gender Gap Index, and in 2020 women's average official labour force participation was 40 per cent and parliamentary representation ranged from 5.8–30 per cent.¹⁶ Analysis by the Netri Foundation points to three major common barriers – 'money, muscle, and misogyny' – to women's political participation and

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Saferworld's own experience of assessing the outcomes generated by some of the work outlined above has demonstrated similar achievements in instituting confidence-building measures, supporting narrative and attitudinal shifts, and securing access to formal regional mechanisms.

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representation in South Asia. This includes the prevalence of violence against women in private and public spaces; gender stereotyping that constrains the public and political roles women are expected to play; and the prohibitive costs of entering the political arena, which intensify socio-economic divides and generally mean that only women from existing affluent political families can participate.¹⁷

Track II processes are often seen as spaces that not only support and complement – directly or indirectly – Track I peace negotiations, but which also include groups that are otherwise excluded from the negotiation table.^{18,19} As pointed out in the course of this research, ‘Track I decision-making is overwhelmingly male and is often under-informed about the challenges faced by women, who make up the group disproportionately affected by conflict’.²⁰

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National and international normative frameworks affirm the need for women to be represented in political decision-making, including the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325 which emphasises the crucial role that women should, and already do, play in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

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Afghanistan’s National Action Plan for 1325 commits the government to ensuring women’s representation at all levels of decision-making, with a particular focus on women’s role in the peace process. The UK’s International Development (Gender Equality) Act, which came into force in 2014, sets a legal requirement to meaningfully consider gender equality in development or humanitarian assistance.

A survey of US foreign policymaking points to differences in women’s and men’s opinions of how policies affect genders differently and whether they take women’s experiences seriously. For example, only 28 per cent of men national security experts considered gender equality an important foreign policy goal – compared to 45 per cent of women. Women experts were also much more likely to highlight the need to understand how security issues – including conflict resolution, terrorism and countering violent extremism – affect men and women differently. The survey authors noted that the findings underscore not only the importance of women’s participation in national security debates, but also the need for greater attention to gender among men policymakers.²²

The global increase in formal commitments to women’s political participation through quotas, reserved seats, and other design and process measures has led practitioners and scholars to develop frameworks for assessing such efforts. Broadly, evaluation criteria are divided into two categories: how many, and how meaningful (the number and percentage of women participants, and their ability to push for their preferences before, during and after a negotiation process).²³ In his 2018 annual report on Women, Peace and Security to the UN Security Council, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres differentiated between gender parity, gender mainstreaming, and meaningful participation and women’s influence throughout the report, questioning the usefulness of a generic call for women’s inclusion. Analysts point to the need to be clear about the outcomes sought as each of these goals – women’s representation, gender mainstreaming and women’s influence – require different strategies and evaluation criteria.²⁴

There are several design factors that affect the ability of women to participate in and influence peace negotiation processes, including: selection criteria and procedures; decision-making procedures that allow women to make use of their presence; coalitions and joint positions among participating women that enhance their influence; transfer strategies that allow women’s positions and inputs to reach the negotiation table; early involvement of women in the process; and funding.²⁵ In evaluating women’s involvement in Track II processes, indicators have also drawn on Women, Peace and Security indicators relating to women’s participation in formal peace processes and on the concept of ‘transfer’ in Track II literature,²⁶ suggesting the need to look at upward transfer from Track II to Track I, lateral transfer to other Track II initiatives, and downward transfer to broader constituencies.²⁷

These insights provide useful criteria for how efforts to increase women’s participation in the South Asia regional programme can be understood – examining not just numerical representation but also levels of influence, and the relevant design factors that may shape these. Broader literature on Track II dialogues points to potential tension points when objective setting and assessing outcomes are based on influence over high-level peace negotiations. The UN Secretary General’s distinctions are a helpful reminder that different strategies and emphases may be necessary to advance gender equality – in particular looking beyond numerical outcomes.

Notes

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- 2 Burgess H, Burgess G (2010), *Conducting Track II Peacemaking* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace), p 5.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Chao Track dialogue events take place twice a year in Bangkok, with Beyond Boundaries events held alternately in Kabul and Islamabad a few times a year.
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- 21 Staats J, Walsh J, Tucci R (2019), 'A Primer on Multi-track Diplomacy: How Does it Work?', U.S. Institute of Peace, July.
- 22 *The Washington Post* (2017), 'Do women matter to national security? The men who lead U.S. foreign policy don't think so', 2 February (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/02/do-women-matter-to-national-security-the-men-who-lead-u-s-foreign-policy-dont-think-so/>)
- 23 Preferences can relate to: bringing issues to the negotiation and implementation agenda; putting issues into the substance of the agreement; taking part in the implementation of an agreement; or the demand for negotiations to begin, for negotiations to resume, or for an agreement to be signed.
- 24 Ross N, Dixon S, Shluchter A, True J (2015), 'Making Women Count – Not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women's Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations', UN Women, October (https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2017/making_women_count-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5712)
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MNA Mehnaz Akbar Aziz expressing her views during a CRSS roundtable conference with Chairman of the HCNR Dr Abdullah Abdullah in Islamabad on 20 September 2020.
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Efforts to increase women's participation in the South Asia regional programme

Efforts to promote women's participation in dialogues have been varied but concerted in the last four years, including more explicit references to women's participation throughout the process. In 2020 there was a substantial increase in the number of women participating in project activities, particularly activities accompanying the main dialogues – with women outnumbering men in some cases. While donor-funded work can have quotas for a minimum percentage of women (for example, 30 per cent), national partners have also committed to making 'it a priority not to have "men only" panels, expert groups, policy briefs, and dialogue contingents, and to aim for 50% presentation of men and women'.²⁸

This section first considers the main methods used by consortium partners to increase women's participation, before offering analysis on the impact such efforts have had. The evidence suggests that efforts have focused on: including gender representation as criteria in participant selection across all activities; facilitating specific women-led activities; and undertaking activities that broaden opportunities for representation.

There is considered deliberation by organisers when it comes to participant selection for activities, balancing expertise in a particular issue area, influence, and representation. Organisers suggest that gender representation is increasingly a factor in participant selection. As explored in a conflict sensitivity review of the programme by Saferworld,²⁹ four major issue areas are considered when deciding on participants:

- the policy influence that attendees wield (including technical expertise and institutional credibility)
- the groups they represent (including considerations of seniority, prior experience of formal government discussions and continuity)
- their potential for confidence-building or disruption
- logistical concerns (such as availability, security and travel arrangements)³⁰

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Organisers suggest that there is more scope for women's representation in side initiatives, as different types of participant influence and expertise are preferred for different events. For example, policy roundtables and the authorship of policy briefs and op-eds have been identified by organisers as opportunities to engage women in programme activities, with some partners explicitly trying to 'ensure the participation of at least one woman in panel events'.³¹

Specific women-led bilateral forums have been instituted in the Afghanistan–Pakistan strand. Since 2019, four exchanges have taken place with delegations from one country travelling to the other to meet with the Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry, decision makers, parliamentarians, and civil society representatives in the other. The aim of the forums is to 'discuss the role of women in bilateral relations' and trade, and prompt the development of more sustained networks and platforms for cross-country engagement. In all cases, professional interactions with men remained limited to side events, such as welcoming dinners. Building on this, it has been suggested that an Afghanistan–Pakistan bilateral women-led parliamentary caucus could be formed – in order to establish a formal mechanism to raise issues faced by women on both sides of the border, and develop relevant policy

recommendations. The shift to virtual platforms on account of challenges posed by COVID-19 has also enabled women to attend, who otherwise might not have been able to travel domestically and internationally (often due to competing professional and personal demands; for example, the expectation in Afghanistan that women should travel in the company of a man family member).

Facilitating the participation of women has also been closely linked to broadening the representation of participants and issues more generally. This has included side activities such

as youth summits, Twitter conversations, policy roundtables and young entrepreneurs' events. An Emerging Leaders Forum (instituted in 2018 within the Chao Track dialogues) explores a broader range of issues than the high-level dialogues do – from climate change to

education – while 'providing new perspectives on traditional issues of contention between both states'.³² The gender breakdown of participants in this forum has been roughly 50 per cent women and 50 per cent men. In the Afghanistan–Pakistan strand, consortium partners have built on their youth-focused work to trial models of including young business leaders. Three forums have brought together young entrepreneurs from Pakistan and Afghanistan, roughly achieving gender parity while also providing a platform to test digital approaches across a border where digital connectivity is relatively underexplored.

The India–Pakistan strand has also effectively used social media channels, including two rounds of 'Twitter cafés'. Organised simultaneously in India and Pakistan, these brought together opinion-shapers – senior journalists, academics and lawyers – on both sides of the border to participate in online conversations. The first, in March 2018, focused on long-term strategic issues that were to be discussed in upcoming policy roundtables, including climate change and water management. In the Twitter cafés, these topics were explored with an explicit focus on women's participation in security and foreign policy. The discussions also fed into an Emerging Leaders Forum that took place soon after. A subsequent Twitter café took place later in 2018 under the theme #SharedHistory – emphasising commonalities between India and Pakistan's historical experience and challenging narratives that demonise their neighbours. On the Indian side, the panel consisted of all women, building on the theme of women in security from the earlier Twitter café.

Another – perhaps less successful – approach was an attempt to merge the Emerging Leaders and the Strategic Dialogue strands of the Chao Track process. It was anticipated that the approach would allow for more women to participate in strategic-level discussions, as well as provide a mentoring space for the younger contingent. While there was some useful knowledge exchange between 'seniors' and younger participants, the agenda largely maintained the scope and frame of a strategic dialogue, structured by 'senior' participants. Women's participation was relatively small compared to previous Emerging Leaders meetings, with organisers noting the influence of senior participants over delegate selection and agenda.

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PAJC Member and renowned journalist Naseem Zehra sharing her insights on bilateral relations during the 7th PAJC meeting of Beyond Boundaries participants held by CRSS on 22 December 2020 in Islamabad.
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Assessing efforts

By expanding the range of activities, there has been an overall increase in women’s participation across the programme, exceeding targets. The introduction of women-led and youth-focused platforms has provided spaces that women are more easily able to access, while leaving the composition of the strategic-level dialogues largely intact. One partner expressed that “We typically exceed the quota and, in some instances, have had more women involved compared to men.” However, in the case of the Beyond Boundaries and Chao Track dialogues, women remain underrepresented.

This is reflected in numerical assessments. From December 2017–2020, 73 per cent of participants in the Beyond Boundaries dialogues were men, as were 77 per cent of participants in the Chao Track dialogues from September 2018–October 2020. With the inclusion of the Emerging Leaders and the economic connectivity Chao Track activities, this number falls to 51 per cent. In each of the youth summits (Afghanistan–Pakistan), Twitter cafés (India–Pakistan) and youth entrepreneur events (Afghanistan–Pakistan), women represented just over 50 per cent of participants. Six women were responsible for writing 140 media op-eds, while 20 men drafted 915 – meaning that women contributed just 13.5 per cent of all op-eds. Woman authorship of policy briefs was 36 per cent (of 13 briefs) from October 2020–January 21.

Activities that have seen mixed results are: policy roundtables (42 per cent participation of women in 29 events from June 2019–January 2020), focus group discussions (13 per cent over seven events from June 2018–December 2020), and ideas conclaves (33 per cent from one event in November 2020). Focus group discussions and policy roundtables are normally closed-door activities that accompany the strategic-level dialogues, providing spaces and avenues for discussion, establishing joint positions, and agenda development in preparation for upcoming dialogue events, or for disseminating recommendations and supporting their uptake. If we think about the activities as concentric circles with the main strategic dialogues at the centre, the closer the activity is to informing or being informed by the high-level dialogues, the less likely it is that women will be involved.

Activity	% women's participation
Beyond Boundaries dialogues (December 2017–2020)	27
Chao Track: main dialogue (September 2018–October 2020)	23
Chao Track + Emerging Leaders and economic connectivity	49
Youth summits	49
Youth entrepreneur events	52
Policy roundtables (June 2019–January 2020: 29 events)	42
Focus group discussions (June 18–December 2020: 7 events)	13
Ideas conclaves (November 2020: 1 event)	33
Policy brief authorship (October 2020–January 2021)	36
Media op-eds	13

Beyond numbers

Numerical changes are a common and straightforward way to evaluate efforts to increase representation. Assessing how participants are able to shape agendas and influence outcomes is more difficult, but crucial to ensure women's representation is not tokenistic. The research drew on interviews with women participants to gauge the

extent to which they felt they were able to assert influence. It also looked at levels of participation with relation to the content of agendas and outputs, to further assess how women's participation has shaped activities. In order to demonstrate more robust correlation, regular monitoring of 'influence' over a longer period of time would be required.

There were indications that women have been instrumental in putting forward certain agenda items and contributing to discussions – although many research interviewees pointed out that it is often the same women that repeatedly contribute to activities, resulting in a more limited range of representation compared to men

participants. Overall, recommendations and outputs from side activities – where women comprise close to 50 per cent or more of participants – reflect a broad range of concerns and perspectives. For example, joint recommendations from the 24th Chao Dialogue (the Emerging Leaders Forum) touched on security issues, the inclusion of women in national and international security dialogues, and the need

to bring together women experts from both sides of the border for a discussion on bilateral issues.³³

There are mixed and inconsistent findings from the strategic dialogues. Generally, research participants noted slight regional variations. The small number of Pakistani women delegates felt they had been actively involved in 'agenda setting' (making decisions and proposing changes in the agenda or content of the programme). On the other hand, Afghan women delegates felt that they had participated in events and were involved in the dissemination of policy messages, but not in agenda setting or decision-making processes. In Pakistan in particular, it was noted that women participants – drawn from senior positions such as members of parliament, CSO leaders or senior government officials – had been instrumental in putting forward new agenda items such as discussions on youth participation and trade issues faced by women business owners.

A comparison of recommendations from the Beyond Boundaries dialogues in August 2019 and December 2020 – in which the number of women participants rose from 30 to 44 per cent – shows increased reference to the need for more women's representation and involvement in discussions of security concerns. There were also observable changes in the content of the recommendations. For example, as well as topics that feature regularly – bilateral relations, trade and the peace process – topics relating to culture, arts and education were also included. Broader recommendations from Beyond Boundaries dialogues in March 2020 were also noted, addressing issues of people-to-people relations, health and education; however, in this case the number of women participants had

“ Numerical changes are a common and straightforward way to evaluate efforts to increase representation. Assessing how participants are able to shape agendas and influence outcomes is more difficult, but crucial to ensure women's representation is not tokenistic.

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Women Parliamentarians

January 2021 - Islamabad



MNA Mehnaz Akbar Aziz in conversation with MP Shinkai Karokhail during a side meeting of PAJC members with Speaker of the National Assembly Asad Qaiser held by CRSS on 23 December 2020 in Islamabad.

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dropped from the previous meeting. It is therefore difficult to assert concrete trends or correlation, as there has not been significant nor sustained increases in women's participation to date, with numbers fluctuating from one event to the next.

Fluctuations in numbers of women and the content of recommendations also reflect how dialogue agendas are shaped by contextual priorities based on the 'health of bilateral relations'³⁴ at any given time. When tensions escalate, dialogues shift towards crisis management and responding to policy positions and state rhetoric – which can harden 'masculine' approaches to bilateral relations (as discussed in more depth in subsequent sections). In contrast to the observed changes in the Beyond Boundaries dialogues, there have been limited shifts in the content of agendas or recommendations from the main Chao Track dialogues, which remain focused on security perspectives and official positions, and prioritise crisis management when addressing complex topics. This inflexibility reflects the current state of India–Pakistan relations, which – in contrast to Afghanistan–Pakistan – lack formal inter-governmental talks. This creates expectations

of Track II processes to play a distinct crisis management role (this is discussed further in the next section).

Unintended outcomes

Increased women's participation also leads to outcomes not conventionally associated with regional dialogues, such as changes in bilateral relations. Such outcomes include expanded agendas, network and coalition building, and recommendations on new issues. While initiatives such as Chao only reach a specific number of individuals, Twitter cafés allow for increased people-to-people contact (even if this is done virtually), bringing in a wider range of perspectives. Different criteria therefore emerge for participant selection; for example, organisers of Twitter cafés looked for people with significant social media followings, as well as expertise in a specific issue area such as education.

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Increased women's participation also leads to outcomes not conventionally associated with regional dialogues, such as changes in bilateral relations. Such outcomes include expanded agendas, network and coalition building, and recommendations on new issues.

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Women-to-women dialogues and the Emerging Leaders Forum are platforms for women, young people and civil society from across the region to share their views on bilateral relations, exchange knowledge and ideas, and reflect on possibilities for resolving tensions. This results not only in increased understanding of others' perspectives, but also opportunities for network and coalition building, particularly for women business leaders, parliamentarians and young entrepreneurs. Such forums have also resulted in discussions and recommendations on issues that have previously not been addressed in main regional dialogues – such as how to involve women affected by conflict.

Connecting the dots

High-level strategic dialogues benefit from year-round coordinated and sustained support from organisers and participants. Agenda development, participant selection and results management are developed through consultations, stakeholder engagement and side meetings. These allow participants to build agreement around their positions on specific issues, and to ensure that the dialogues and their outcomes are appropriate, relevant to current bilateral security and trade dynamics, and that they achieve uptake from senior policymakers. Support activities include policy roundtables and focus group discussions, and to a lesser degree the development of policy briefs. This has led to a significant impact: research participants noted that the crucial space provided by the Beyond Boundaries process and the bilateral work undertaken by PAJCCI have led to the exchange of ideas, trade promotion, and to addressing the concerns of business leaders. It was noted that this has resulted in a friendlier Pakistan–Afghanistan visa regime and more supportive border control mechanisms.

At present, non-strategic-level activities – which often have higher levels of women's participation – have less systematised channels to feed into policy spaces and less well-defined options for uptake and follow-up on recommendations. Research participants suggested that links between side activities, and between side activities and the main strategic dialogues, could be strengthened so that recommendations have horizontal and vertical impacts in decision-making spaces. For example, one recommendation of the 24th Chao Emerging Leaders Forum – to create a platform for women experts from both sides of the border to discuss bilateral issues – has not yet materialised. While there has been a trend to hold the Emerging Leaders Forum and main Chao dialogues back-to-back, there is limited systematised knowledge exchange between the two forums.

Similarly, participants involved in exchanges between women's chambers of commerce and industry noted that their meetings resulted in the development of a memorandum of understanding with the aim of promoting trade with each other. However, so far, expected options and opportunities to 'improve trade conditions, initiate or increase trade between counterparts, or progress towards any economic activity resulting in revenue generation' have not yet emerged.

There have been some efforts to coordinate activities. In December 2019, organisers in Afghanistan and Pakistan aimed to sequence events so that a strategic dialogue would be followed by a youth leaders' summit in Kabul and a women leaders' conference in Islamabad. This was intended to expand the number of groups feeding into Track II processes and test some of the ideas put forward in traditional strategic forums. For logistical reasons this was not possible and subsequent events have not appeared to trial the same model or the reverse sequence, with the women leaders' conference and youth leaders' summit taking place before the strategic dialogues so that they could feed into the agenda and recommendations. As some side initiatives are in their infancy or have been ad hoc – taking place less regularly than others – a clearer sense of how they support and correspond to the strategic dialogues would expand their relevance and impact.

Notes

- 33 Chaophraya Dialogues (2018), 'Dialogue twenty-four' (<http://www.chaophrayadialogue.net.in/2018/03/25/dialogue-twenty-four/>)
- 34 Saferworld interview with consortium partner, January 2021.

Afghanistan MP Fatima Kohestani expressing her views during a side meeting of PAJC members with Speaker of the National Assembly Asad Qaiser held by CRSS on 23 December 2020 in Islamabad.
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Barriers to participation

The analysis of women’s participation in these processes provides a mixed and fluid picture. While there is a general trend of a numerical increase in women’s participation across the programme, this is concentrated in a few activities – some of which are specifically women-led, and are relatively nascent and ad hoc. This has led to a disparity in numbers of women participating in forums such as the youth summits, the Emerging Leaders Forums, and policy roundtables and high-level strategic dialogues. There are systemic and structural dimensions relevant to the programme and context that act as barriers to women taking part in activities and in their ability to influence decision-making in regional dialogues.

The nature of the security and foreign policy arena

The origins of the dialogues as forums to address security-related issues and high-level political negotiations have shaped much of the programme’s development. Tensions between India and Pakistan and between Pakistan and Afghanistan are informed by nationalist-driven security narratives. Interviewees noted how issues of nuclear power, regional proxy wars, traditional warfare, resources and security have underlined foreign policy development and bilateral relations. Nationalist state-building narratives have led to the dominance of hard security frameworks, such as counter-terrorism, in foreign policy decision-making. These also shape other sources of bilateral tensions such as energy, economic and resource security. Participants observed that these hardened views are deeply rooted in national narratives and social and gender norms.³⁵ They also prevail among people working in foreign policy departments, particularly in India and Pakistan, including among the ex-ambassadors and other retired civil servants who participate in Track II processes.

This has had the following implications for the regional dialogues. Firstly, security and high-level politics are spaces that are dominated by men, where very few women have access to senior decision-making positions. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, women’s representation in key decision-making positions at political and administrative levels, including within parliamentary groups and committees, remains low,³⁶ and women tend to chair committees that are less connected to resource allocation and economic decision-making. In Afghanistan, only eight of the 38 members of the High Council for Reconciliation – responsible for leading peace matters in the country – are women. As of September 2020, there were only four women among 21 negotiators in talks with the Taliban.

Similarly, the make-up of participants in the strategic dialogues is mainly current or past security, political and foreign officials with a strong level of influence and networking capacities at the highest levels of government and among policy makers; these include ex-ambassadors, ex-military personnel or ex-ministers. The security and foreign policy spheres of academia and journalism are also dominated by men. From the organisers' perspective, there are fewer women to draw from who have held senior positions in these arenas, who are politically active parliamentarians, or who have developed specific technical expertise in issues such as military strategy, nuclear de-escalation or crisis management.

Secondly, a narrow view of security makes it difficult for bilateral dialogues to cover issues beyond conventional 'national' security, or in ways that challenge pre-existing views and go against established interests. This unintentionally creates a distinction between 'hard' topics (security issues) and 'soft' topics (education, climate change and social matters), with the latter viewed as having less direct relevance to national security discussions or as optional add-ons to be included only after 'hard' security parameters are well established. In this narrative, 'hard issues' are traditionally reserved for men and women are seen as having less to contribute to them, while also assuming which types of security are 'normal' and whose insecurities are 'problematic'.^{37,38} Women's representation is viewed as being more 'naturally' located in conversations around topics such as education, climate change, health and social matters. This is mirrored in the greater numbers of women in forums covering these issues, including the youth dialogues – which, as a result, have the opportunity to be a more productive area to promote progressive social change. It is also reflected in organisers' arguments that broadening objectives to better respond to women's lack of representation would lead to a discussion that

'focuses on sociological aspects [and pacific issues] like crafts, culture, tourism etc.'³⁹

There is also a tendency to assume that women are primarily present to discuss women's issues, instead of acknowledging their broader views on a range of topics. This has been demonstrated by women-led delegations being mainly invited to discuss women's participation and women's concerns with other women

from across the border. A paradigm has developed whereby women, having been kept out of traditionally men-dominated security arenas, have found voice and representation in forums where entry barriers are lower and which cover a broader

range of issues or develop critical perspectives on conventional security issues. The greater representation and influence of women in these discussions is then used to argue that they are unsuitable for high-level dialogues, which are focused on 'hard' security. This neglects the possibilities for looking for solutions beyond conventional security-enforced options in high-level decision-making arenas.⁴⁰

Thirdly, discussions in this domain have the tendency to omit the impacts of security and foreign affairs policies and decisions on women, girls, men and boys, as well as the links between gender norms and the perpetuation of conflict and violence.⁴¹ Women are usually not part of discussions and decision-making processes, which then fail to take into account women and girls' perspectives – this is also due to context analyses seldom integrating a gender perspective. A United Nations Development Programme human and security expert in Pakistan observed the absence of gender training, agendas or orientation for foreign service staff.⁴² In the meantime, the lack of women's meaningful participation restrains options to consider the links between gender and foreign policy, as well as the impacts that decisions in foreign policy have on women and girls. A regular participant in the dialogues observed that, "[o]rganisers and funders need to be clear about the questions they need addressed by these processes, and how these issues affect women. If these questions are not asked at the very inception of the project, 'including women will be at best a token exercise'".⁴³

Fourthly, another limitation highlighted by research participants is that, currently, Track II strategic dialogues generally privilege those based in capitals and from well-connected, well-educated backgrounds. While Afghanistan–Pakistan dialogue organisers point to the fact that regional parliamentarians are now a common feature in programme activities, those interviewed as part of the research still felt there was a lack of diversity for both men and women. In the case of Afghanistan, for example, Track II processes were criticised for their failure to include women from a broader spectrum of society including from provinces and ethnic and religious minorities. One interviewee said: "We still see that only women with connections... are selected to participate in these processes".⁴⁴

Objectives of Track II regional dialogues

The objectives of the South Asia regional programme – for 'improved bilateral relations between the governments of Pakistan and India, and Pakistan and Afghanistan' and for 'increased

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There is also a tendency to assume that women are primarily present to discuss women's issues, instead of acknowledging their broader views on a range of topics.

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opportunities for regional economic connectivity to promote peace and stability in the region’ – reflect the particular strategic environment of bilateral relations between India and Pakistan and between Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁴⁵

While different participant selection criteria have been used for activities such as the Twitter cafés, the most widely used criteria emphasise the ability to impact on tangible, high-level policy change in the political, economic and security arenas. Overall, there is a preference for participants who have influence ‘to change government policy and public perceptions in order to improve bilateral relationships’.⁴⁶ As a result, participant selection emphasises seniority and influence – “those who engage with the public and have traction through various channels, who write and are visible in the media”.⁴⁷ Regular participants are parliamentarians, security experts, retired civil and military bureaucrats, and some civil society and media leaders. Given the systemic barriers in the foreign policy sphere, this has effectively negated the wide inclusion of women in the strategic dialogues. As declared by an interviewee in India, “There are very few women who have managed to reach the core of influential networks, and the dialogue structure demands you have influential people in the contingent”.⁴⁸ This creates an interesting tension with normative positions on women’s meaningful participation. As consortium partners explain, they only choose women who can ‘meaningfully participate’ – being able to contribute to discussions, shape agendas and outcomes – in the strategic dialogues. This means women with influence and networks.

This creates an interesting tension with normative positions on women’s meaningful participation. Consortium partners explain that they only choose women who can ‘meaningfully participate’ – are able to contribute to discussions, shape agendas and outcomes – in the strategic dialogues. This means women with influence and networks. As a consortium partner elucidates further, “To prioritise gender representation over influence is not possible to do in the strategic dialogue but for other things such as policy briefs, webinars, other project activities, then it’s extremely possible for equal representation – our roundtables show that we always have women onboard. Not because we have to but because they are experts.”

This is particularly relevant in the Chao Track II process. As observed by interviewees and organisers, Track II processes have taken on specific qualities and objectives because official inter-governmental talks between India and Pakistan are currently inoperative. As a result, Track II dialogues are the only space for negotiation and exchange that

is currently open between India and Pakistan. “Since the two governments do not engage officially for long periods, Track II dialogue is the only source of information for policymakers. In peace times when dialogues resume, governments can pick up ground realities from the Track II dialogues”.⁴⁹

Organisers also distinguish between programme activities where the objective is to consider and collect different options for solving a problem, and those where the objective is to “solve the problem” and “test the possibility of ideas and how to move things forward”.⁵⁰ They argue that while the former allows for broad participation and agendas, the latter requires a smaller group of influential participants with an understanding of policy change processes. The emphasis on what changes are possible can reinforce established positions and the status quo of conflict management, overlooking possibilities to explore broader conflict-transformation approaches.⁵¹ ‘Task force’ activities were highlighted as a space where a range of experts are asked to reflect on alternative approaches to resolving specific concerns. Women’s participation in and influence on content and policy outputs have been visible in task forces, although the ratio of women to men’s participation has only been 1:3. In order to align with dialogue objectives, the process of ‘upwards filtering’ – whereby ideas and knowledge from one strand of activities feeds into another (in this case the strategic dialogues) – may also lead to a dilution of analysis from task forces.

A narrow focus on high-level policy change and associated programme objectives has also overlooked significant and valuable outcomes from activities where women’s representation and influence has been prominent – the women-led and youth-oriented events. Such outcomes include: broader gender representation; consideration of issues and policy options beyond established positions; contributions to shifting polarised public narratives towards neighbouring countries and regional security; and building commonalities and spaces for cooperation. For example, participants noted that women-to-women dialogues have enabled knowledge exchange, supporting participants to understand issues faced by their counterparts across the border as well as develop joint recommendations reflecting shared priorities.⁵²

Women-led forums have also had an impact at national and local levels outside of immediate programme objectives. Afghan women involved in

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A narrow focus on high-level policy change and associated programme objectives has also overlooked significant and valuable outcomes from activities where women’s representation and influence has been prominent.”

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these forums have used their positions in Track II dialogues to advocate and campaign – including through building alliances with groups in Pakistan and India – at the highest policy levels on the issue of women's inclusion in the intra-Afghan peace process. As one research participant, an Afghan women rights defender, noted: "I believe that no process is perfect and we are still learning how to improve and maximise the effectiveness of such programmes, but let's not underestimate the impact of processes such as Track II in the mobilisation of women and increasing their participation in the peace process."⁵³

As talks progress in 2021 between the Afghanistan government and the Taliban – with the possibility that the Taliban may soon become a significant political and economic actor in official forums – Afghan participants expressed concern about the risks to gains made by women. While the Taliban has shown some recognition of the importance of women's voices in the peace process,⁵⁴ no real commitments have been made, and women groups have not been able to send their own independent representatives to meet with the Taliban despite several attempts. Participants pointed to the value of bilateral and regional platforms as the Taliban seeks to consolidate its place within the Afghan political landscape and develop policy positions.

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As one consortium partner noted, the lack of women in the dialogues is also a “symptom of men having been networking with each other, and preferring to keep that circle to men, and women find it hard to break into that circle.

At the same time, they also highlighted the need for trust-building, firstly among participants of Track II processes before extending this to the Taliban or other groups inside Pakistan.

Such outcomes may also be less visible or hindered by a lack of clear, consistent links and ‘transfer channels’ with other programme activities and policy spaces, and less-structured dissemination and uptake strategies. Attempts to merge the Chao Emerging Leaders Forum and the Strategic

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Dialogue strands illustrate how the emphasis on high-level policy change can in fact restrain the potential development of wider outcomes.

As noted by a regular senior-level woman participant in the strategic dialogues, Track II processes designed to imitate Track I objectives can not only limit conversations to national security approaches but will also be led by a majority of men in elite positions, representing state concerns:⁵⁵ “While women remain underrepresented in official Track I peace processes, Track II diplomacy has offered women a space to meaningfully participate in conflict-resolution efforts”.⁵⁶ This kind of work can respond to the need for dialogues that directly inform current regional security and economic

concerns, while also meeting the expectations and demands of a wider constituency that values other aspects of the dialogues. Several respondents observed that the dialogues would benefit from greater clarity on the objectives of Track II. Merely replicating the concerns of Track I, they pointed out, was not necessarily suited for the objectives of Track II nor for the inclusion of women and a gender perspective.

As noted by some interviewees, Track II spaces are usually designed to compile perspectives and solutions that go beyond those put forward by government and state institutions. They constitute an opportunity for people who are not decision-makers or policymakers to share their views and bring new ideas on board in order to explore new channels of collaboration between the two parties. “Track II dialogue makes a difference in any setting if you bring on board people who are not usual participants to a Track I dialogue. People who think out of the box . . . If you bring the same people from Track I to Track II then you are reinforcing the biases of the former onto the latter. You need to bring people from the outside who have not been with the government, who know what it is like when governments make mistakes”.⁵⁷

A lack of women foreign policy experts?

The dominance of men in the foreign policy, security and economic political arenas in each of the countries becomes self-replicating – with women less able to access decision-making spaces due to the very fact that they are not currently represented within them. As one consortium partner noted, the lack of women in the dialogues is also a “symptom of men having been networking with each other, and preferring to keep that circle to men, and women find it hard to break into that circle”.

A lack of familiarity with those outside of trusted networks can therefore lead to channels for new participants to enter the foreign policy space closing down. Organisers acknowledged that the effect of “gendered personal networks” within traditional security dialogues may be higher where the “dominance of the older guard of men dictates their preference to engage with more people ‘like them’”.⁵⁸ The process and criteria for selecting participants, involving donor considerations and limited consultations with (mostly men) past participants and diplomatic missions, can reinforce the status quo and reliance on personalised networks, with participants drawn from the same circles. Interviewees noted that the current process has led to a very small pool of women participating time and again in the strategic dialogues. Careful

attention should be given to how considerations for a trusted, networked group of people can inadvertently limit access for women, because of a lack of familiarity with those outside specific circles. As reported by some interviewees, even where women are involved, some men participants – mainly senior officials – can be dismissive of women’s participation and do not take women’s opinions into consideration.

The entry barriers become higher for women to participate in dialogues or to influence senior policy positions and processes. For example, according to organisers there are only five or six senior women experts in the field of nuclear studies. This creates a curious logic that there are only some women who are seen as usefully able to contribute to strategic conversations. Research participants instead observed that within the existing security framework there remains space to bring more women on board. They pointed to women experts in the foreign policy and security sectors who are yet to become an active part of the Chao Track process, including women diplomats who have worked on India–Pakistan relations in different capacities in the course of their careers.

The lack of visible and relatable role models has also discouraged younger women and girls from entering the field, thereby perpetuating existing inequalities.⁵⁹ Current trends linked to more women joining the work force and foreign policy sphere might bring some change, with a steady increase in the number of women involved in the various facets of policy development. However, a considerable barrier is that these younger women lack exposure to high-level dialogue spaces; nor do they have the necessary experience of negotiations and influencing high-level policy change in order to engage foreign counterparts. Men and women interviewed in the context of this study explicitly said that most capacity-building initiatives supported by international organisations focused on the capacity building of women in social peacebuilding, with little attention paid to political negotiation skills and diplomacy.

A prominent peace activist who has participated in events noted: “Donors and international organisations must move on when supporting Afghan peace initiatives. There are local peace NGOs that provide training and skills on conflict resolution and peacebuilding at local and community levels; what is needed is to build the capacity of Afghans on negotiation skills at higher political levels.”⁶⁰

Notes

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MNA Aisha Ghousa Pasha delivering a keynote address on the role of women in strengthening bilateral relations at the Pak-Afghan Women Parliamentarians Conference held by CRSS on 28 January 2021 in Islamabad.

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Looking forward: conclusions and opportunities to strengthen women's participation

The increase in women's participation across activities in 2020 reflects considered efforts over the last three years by consortium partners. Careful participant selection criteria have been expanded to support this, while specific activities such as women-led forums have been developed. Side activities such as the Emerging Leaders Forums and women-led forums have seen the overall programme exceed donor quotas around women's participation, while also providing platforms for the discussion of a wider range of security-related issues, bringing in different perspectives, as well as producing recommendations in support of greater women's participation.

The overall impact of efforts has been affected by structural and programmatic factors that continue to prevent women taking part in dialogue activities and/or which diminish their influence. While there is an emerging – as well as existing – cohort of women in the (traditionally men-dominated) foreign policy and security arena, a reliance on established, senior-level leaders and their personal networks raises barriers for newer participants. The silo between strategic dialogues and side activities where women, young people and other excluded groups have more presence also limits the possibilities for 'transfer' of ideas and gendered considerations of security issues between dialogue spaces. This effectively confines women's influence to the outputs of specific ad hoc events or forums. It also overlooks the benefits of having a range of activities that coalesce around and inform high-level dialogues, testing a wider range of options and perspectives than are usually considered.



Members of Parliament from Pakistan and Afghanistan in a group photo after the Pak-Afghan Women Parliamentarians Conference held on 28 January 2021 in Islamabad by CRSS.

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There is a risk that the premium placed on specific forms of policy impact will affect resourcing of activities that are beginning to show tangible value in increasing women’s participation and influence.

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such as the Emerging Leaders Forum and women-led events take place, as well the degree of planning and dissemination that occurs around them. Research participants also pointed to inherent limitations in the dialogues that constrain diverse perspectives (both on traditional and non-traditional bilateral issues), the inclusion of women and men from

A reliance on side activities to improve gender representation has also upheld the status quo in the strategic dialogues. This is reflected in the relatively low numbers of women represented, and agendas and recommendations that lack gender dimensions or a reflection on alternative approaches to crisis

management. A continued preoccupation with high-level policy change has overlooked the positive outcomes that efforts to increase women’s participation have had, beyond immediate policy influence, as well as the potential opportunities for impact that a broader conflict transformation perspective might have. There is a risk that the premium placed on specific forms of policy impact will affect resourcing of activities that are beginning to show tangible value in increasing women’s participation and influence. This is already evident in the irregularity with which side activities

beyond urban centres and – in the case of Afghanistan – from different ethnic groups, and a broader analysis of the impacts of bilateral tensions on different groups in society. Alongside a heavy focus on crisis management, the status of government positions and ways to shape pragmatic shifts within these, such factors could effectively limit the range and ambition of the programme in addressing bilateral tensions.

The strength of Afghanistan–Pakistan and India–Pakistan bilateral relations at any given time is also a significant factor in efforts to support women’s meaningful representation. Afghanistan–Pakistan relations seem to be on a positive trajectory, notwithstanding the potential entry of the Taliban into the formal Afghan political arena, while India–Pakistan relations have taken an increasingly frosty turn in 2020. Such environments may not appear readily conducive to increased women’s representation – given the risk that in response to crises and uncertainties, acting quickly can take precedence over a more inclusive approach. Safeguarding against such a de-prioritisation requires structural measures that are less easily undone, such as quotas, systematic links between activities and policy spaces, and pools of experts that are regularly consulted.

Considerations for the future

Enhance both women's participation and influence across activities

Quotas around participation can play a significant role in ensuring gender representation in participant selection criteria and collecting data on numbers of women taking part in activities. However, quotas may not be met consistently and efforts should be made to remedy this, particularly in the case of high-level events. A continued quota can supplement other efforts to ensure women's participation is not deprioritised in strategic dialogues and when contextual dynamics shift, such as a rapid escalation in tensions. A more equitable quota of 50 per cent could be applied where numbers already exceed the quota, signalling funders and organisers' commitment to gender equality. Yet increasing the number of women participants can also become a tokenistic exercise, and women's influence remains largely unevaluated – with a significant gap in analysis. While there are obvious challenges to tracking 'influence', there is emerging good practice on methods that could be tailored to such a programme. These include analysis of the content of agendas and outputs such as policy recommendations, media reports and proposals, in order to ensure women are able to participate meaningfully in the different decision-making phases of activities.

Strengthen women's negotiating skills and networking capacities

The organisers of the Beyond Boundaries and Chao Track processes are already paving the way for women to become more influential by inviting them to side activities. They are aware that more women are accessing higher education spaces and becoming relevant in foreign policy and security sectors, which means that in the near future there will be more women making decisions and influencing governmental positions and policymakers. Practical steps now will ensure that the already emerging cohort of women foreign policy experts can, over time, be pulled into networks of influence. Interviewees pointed to the need for funders and organisers to provide tailored support, training and exposure to negotiations, political peace building, foreign policymaking and diplomacy, for those who have not had access to high-level policymaking processes. This could include mentoring, as well as the opportunity for shadow participation in the main dialogues. If women receive relevant training and are given the opportunity to take part in regional dialogues, they

will be able to experience Track II diplomacy activities first-hand, gain experience of negotiations and interact with participants, including men. They will become effective agents of change as they progress in their careers, become valuable resources and active partners for Track II in the near future, and be perceived as having sufficient influence to contribute to the objectives of this kind of programming.

Develop mechanisms to increase women's access to strategic dialogues targeted at both men and women

Research participants also suggested that within the current structure and objectives of the strategic dialogues, there are clear opportunities to support women's access to them. Established participants can act as gatekeepers to those on the periphery of the strategic dialogues. One option is for organisers to make systematic and deliberate use of other platforms – such as policy roundtables, task force meetings and joint authorship of policy briefs – to sensitise senior stakeholders to those who may be unknown to them, in particular women. This gives potential participants the opportunity to showcase their expertise and influence, and will help increase confidence among senior members and overcome misconceptions about those outside trusted circles.

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Established participants can act as gatekeepers to those on the periphery of the strategic dialogues.

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Create and fund a pool of experts to advise and enhance accountability on the integration of gender in Track II processes

Evidence suggests that supporting women to mobilise around common issues and input ideas as a unified, representative cluster increases their chance of being heard. One option is to support the development of an expert pool of women analysts, researchers, networks and media representatives. This could be initiated with current participants and gradually expanded to wider networks. This group could, for example, be drawn upon to enhance participant selection, which is shaped in the early stages of design and planning of dialogue activities, including through limited stakeholder consultation – which can reinforce selection from existing networks. A selective and judicious expansion of meaningful consultation to an expert group incorporating civil society activists, women's rights activists, and broader human rights and gender experts (among others) on agendas and participant lists could open up suggestions that were previously not considered, as well as provide additional checks on the relevance of proposed activities. Such consultations could be extended to agenda design, meeting structure, and the drafting of recommendations and dissemination.

Establish a specific objective on gender equality to safeguard existing efforts

A specific objective linked to the integration of gender representation would acknowledge the outcomes and gains already made in this area through existing efforts, as well as guide organisers with allocating time and resources to future initiatives. This would help safeguard forums such as the Emerging Leaders Forum as an effective space for women's participation, while also providing some foresight into how agendas might change in the future – as these participants are likely to hold influential positions in the years to come. Under this, a funded pool of women experts could build on the effectiveness of activities in which women have developed cross-border networks and coalitions. Protecting such spaces and national advocacy achievements is especially important where there are risks of disruption if contextual dynamics harden, such as the entry of the Taliban into formal Afghan politics. There are already areas where this could be strengthened; for example, interviewees noted that the formation of a bilateral Afghanistan–Pakistan women-led parliamentary caucus would help establish a formal mechanism to raise issues faced by women on both sides of the border, devise appropriate solutions and relevant policy recommendations, and unlock options for more inclusive regional cooperation by bringing innovative policy options to the fore.

Establish effective mechanisms to transfer knowledge and ideas between side events and strategic dialogues

Donors and organisers have already recognised the risk of silos developing between strategic dialogues and side activities, while experiments in merging dialogue spaces have demonstrated the risks of

senior leaders co-opting agendas. Organisers should instead consider ways to maximise the benefits of spaces where women's representation and influence are high, while also emphasising broader impact and policy influence. Currently, side initiatives are often ad hoc and lack systematic links to other programme activities. Paying attention to the 'transfer' of outcomes between activities could strengthen how recommendations, ideas and options are brought to the attention of senior participants and forums. This

could include sequencing activities to test and feed in ideas to strategic dialogues and vice versa, and concerted dissemination and uptake strategies that mirror those employed for the strategic dialogues.

Use online platforms and social media to broaden participation in regional dialogues and side activities

The India–Pakistan strand can build on its existing experience of social media engagement to further develop audience-oriented content for improving dialogues and the inclusion of women in these dialogues. Social media and an online presence offer women freedom, empowerment and control, enabling them to engage in a wider discussion – although it can also trigger safeguarding issues that need to be considered. The increasing reach of social media remains one of the most promising tools for civil society and others to challenge stereotypes about the abilities and potential impact of young women. The effective use of online roundtables during the COVID-19 pandemic has presented opportunities for women in the diaspora to continue to participate, including the entry of 'influential' diaspora women in strategic events. Communications efforts and outputs should also showcase women prominently, including publishing interviews with them and focusing media attention on their participation.

Broaden representation and assess longer-term risks to gender inclusion and diversity within the current programme theory of change

A common concern among research participants was that merely reconfiguring the gender ratio would by itself be an inadequate step in addressing the limitations of the dialogues. A number of participants called for a more expansive agenda that reflects a more diverse range of perspectives on security issues and bilateral relations; greater representation, including gender, ethnicity, location and migration status; and the incorporation of analysis on how bilateral tensions impact on women and men differently in relation to intersecting identities. Organisers and funders should evaluate how to balance demands for broader representation with current programme objectives. This could include conducting a risk assessment on how inherent programme assumptions that rely on specific networks of people and established policy positions and management of tensions can limit the potential to explore fresh thinking on conventional security issues and respond to longer-term conflict transformation demands.

“Paying attention to the ‘transfer’ of outcomes between activities could strengthen how recommendations, ideas and options are brought to the attention of senior participants and forums.”

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Develop a gradual, multi-year strategy to contribute to gender equality

In response, the integration of a gender-sensitive approach in all steps, activities, outputs and analysis could be considered as a longer-term objective, with the development of milestones to inform year-to-year planning. This approach could aim to incorporate gender as an inherent analytical category in developing dialogue processes, as well as within each discrete activity. This vision could build on the existing women-led and youth forums that have already begun to expand the range of topics discussed and perspectives considered; increase knowledge exchange and expertise on the gender-specific dimensions of conflict, foreign policy and securitisation; and provide suggestions on how improvements in bilateral relations can contribute to gender equality.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

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