

# What is the ‘Problem’ with Gender in Afghanistan?

A discourse analysis of the Women, Peace and Security  
National Action Plan in Afghanistan (2015-2022)



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# Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to critically investigate the discourses of gender present in the National Action Plan of Afghanistan (2015-2022), asking how the ‘problem of gender’ is conceptualised and problematised in the policy. This is done through Carol Bacchi’s theoretical and methodological ‘What’s the problem represented to be?’ (WPR) – approach which aims to analyse policy through identifying problem representations. Furthermore, the study is guided by and builds upon social construction theory, poststructuralism and intersectional gender studies. Through a discourse analysis of the NAP, four dominant problem representations were identified: 1) gender inequality as a failure of Islam, 2) gender inequality due to women’s vulnerability, 3) gender inequality as a result of insufficient gender parity, and 4) that Afghanistan’s peace-process is failing due to there not being enough ‘peaceful women’ involved in it. In turn, these problem representations rely on conservative and traditional assumptions of women as victims and men as perpetrators, as well as superficial notions of ‘equality’, ‘participation’ and ‘gender’.

*Key words:* WPS, UNSCR 1325, NAP, Afghanistan, gender, women, WPR,  
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# 1 Introduction

*“[...] language is the medium of politics, as well as its vehicle, its shield and its disguise.” – Shepherd (2010b: 1)*

The ontological point of departure for this thesis is that language matters. It permeates all aspects of social life; it guides us culturally, socially and politically - and as such, there lies an enormous power in the words we utter and the discourses we produce and take part in. If we are to understand policies concerning Women, Peace and Security – we must investigate and engage with the discourses that are entailed in them.

## 1.1 Presentation of the Problem and Research Question

Two decades have passed since the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in October 2000. Its adoption constituted a symbolic, pragmatic and normative shift in international peace and security with its ambitious goal of mainstreaming gender throughout all aspects of conflict, post-conflict and peacebuilding situations. UNSCR 1325 as well as its subsequent nine resolutions (1820; 1888; 1889; 1960; 2106; 2122; 2242; 2467 and 2493) together form the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda aiming to guide policy on issues relating to gender inequalities in a security context.

Initially, UNSCR 1325 was to a large extent merely an urging for change without a concrete vision for its operationalization. It was not until 2005, when Denmark became the first country to adopt a National Action Plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 (Barrow 2016: 248) (after numerous calls to UN member states to do so (UNSC 2002)), that a concrete process for the realization of UNSCR 1325 was put in place. Since then, 92 UN member states have developed such plans (WILPF 2021). National Action Plans are national “translations” of the global WPS agenda designed to fit a national context. They are produced by governments and intended as domestic policy strategies for its implementation, building on the global framework but allowing for a prioritization deemed most fit for the specific national needs (Hamilton, Naam & Shepherd 2020).

The transformative nature of the agenda has been expressed repeatedly and the immense and fast-growing scholarship on the topic as well as generous resource allocation is a testament to the global commitment to its realization. However, despite wide engagement from the international community, twenty years since its inception the implementation of UNSCR 1325 still lags significantly behind. There is a wide gap between the promises of peaceful and inclusive societies and the current situation worldwide. Armed conflict continues to disproportionately affect women, and women are still to a large extent absent from peace negotiations and post-conflict peacebuilding. Why is this? How is it possible that a global movement aimed at the advancement of gender equality has made such little progress? How come that these problems seem to be resistant to change, despite countless policies aiming to address them? What are we missing?

In this thesis, I intend on investigating a crucial aspect of the agenda that concerns its language and discourse. More specifically, I am interested in *policy formulation*. Policies, including NAPs, seek to address specific problems and as such they formulate a problem representation (Bacchi 2009). Rather than taking the ‘problem’ for granted and focusing on how this problem should be tackled, I take a critical approach to the policy proposed in asking what the problem is represented to be. I make no attempt at explaining or answering the puzzle of *why* the WPS agenda is lacking in substance despite far-reaching international engagement, but I do believe that by analysing discourse and problem representation in policy a wider understanding of the challenges we are faced with can be revealed. An alternative interpretation of the disconnect between gender-mainstreaming policy and reality is thus introduced. Through examining the discursive components of NAPs and in particular how the concept of ‘gender’ is problematized, my hope is to ascertain if any discursive patterns emerge and if so, what this tells us about the presuppositions underlying these formulations. Perhaps the conceptual and discursive organization of NAPs is constitutive in the upholding of conservative understandings of gender, women and security? Maybe NAPs unintentionally reproduce the inequalities and gender hierarchies they are set out to address through their representation of the problem?

Thus, the aim of the thesis is to examine how issues of gender are conceptualized and problematized in NAPs. Afghanistan’s NAP has been chosen as the material for analysis. The research question I seek to answer is: *How is ‘the problem of gender’ discursively constructed in Afghanistan’s National Action Plan?*

## 1.2 Relevance and Positionality

I have chosen to study this, in such a manner, for a number of reasons. As the main motivation lies the critical and, to some extent, deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a country that has been severely impacted by violent conflict for several decades, especially harming the lives of civilians. As an illustrative and recent example, in May this year a high school for girls was

bombed in the capital of Kabul by Taleban insurgents, killing 70 girls and harming over a hundred (Barr 2021).

Furthermore, the case of Afghanistan is made relevant today because of the American decision to withdraw its troops from the country on the symbolic day of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (Barr 2021) - twenty years since its entry. What this will entail for gender politics in the country is uncertain. Some have speculated that the return of the Taleban is a considerable risk, and that the gains made in regard to women's rights over the past two decades will be put in jeopardy (Nossiter 2021). This alone makes the investigation of a policy still in effect that aims to deal with gendered violence in the country extremely relevant to study. What's more, ever since the American intervention in 2001, Afghan women have been subject to intense debate regarding the status of their rights. Afghan women have been internationally understood as oppressed victims of the Taleban as well as the patriarchal norms permeating the country, and as such have also been subject to various international aid programs aiming to help them out of such destructive conditions. These aid programs have received much attention and criticism for their insensitive approach to the Afghan context. Following this, I find it interesting to investigate a policy on women, peace and security in Afghanistan that is *domestic* and comes from the government of Afghanistan themselves.

One might argue that much has already been said about the WPS agenda and its discourse; for instance, WPS literature has been described as "extensive, detailed and crowded" (Kirby & Shepherd 2016). An additional paper on the subject could thus be considered superfluous. However, a focus on problem representation using the WPR-approach has not received much scholarly attention in the study of NAPs. Such a focus allows for a subversion of the subject of analysis: from an analysis of *solutions* to the problem, to an analysis of the '*problem*' itself. If we are to evaluate the implementation and 'success' of an NAP, it is not only highly relevant but also necessary to understand the discursive assumptions and underpinnings that implementation builds on. What security? And security for who?

As such, this thesis positions itself both among other scholars that discursively investigate NAPs (see Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic 2015; Hojlund Madsen & Hudson 2020; Hudson 2017; Lorentzen 2020) as well as the existing literature on gender in Afghanistan (Abirafeh 2009; Kandiyoti 2007; Bahri 2014; Partis-Jennings 2017, etc). The aim is to build upon and nuance the previous literature through the use of a (in this context) novel theoretical and methodological framework for analysing WPS in the context of Afghanistan.

## 2 Previous Literature and Contextualisation

### 2.1 Women, Peace and Security & National Action Plans

Although ground-breaking in its rhetoric and novel normative understanding of ‘security’, the WPS agenda has not made the progress it set out to do twenty years ago. As such, international debate on the agenda is to a large extent focused on its (failing) implementation (Swaine 2010). Some argue that this considerable disconnect is due to the interpretive nature of the agenda. Being a non-binding and normative “soft-law” framework rather than one with legal liability, UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda comes with a degree of ambivalence, generating different interpretations in different contexts and consequently varying degrees of success (True 2016). Furthermore, the lack of legal liability means that there is no formal exhortation for states to act (Otto 2010).

When the prompt for national-level implementation through NAPs came, these policies emerged as possible instruments for the agenda’s future development in national contexts. However, there has been debate as to the productiveness of initiating a plan specifically aimed at gender issues, when ‘gender mainstreaming’ in its original meaning would favour an approach that instead coordinates all government policies and incorporates gender everywhere (Swaine 2010). The argument holds that “by developing specific action plans there is a risk of divorcing women’s concerns into separate arenas for separate treatment, thus doing little to reform the already established structures and systems which women are seeking to access and reform” (ibid.). Further, some point toward the content of NAPs as the pitfall of WPS implementation; paying attention to their instruments, verification missions, timeframes or if there is enough political will and capacity to see it through (see Lippai & Young 2017; Yadav 2020; Basini & Ryan 2017; Jacevic 2018; Fritz, Doering & Belgin Gumru 2011 etc.). Basini and Ryan (2017) argue that perhaps NAPs should not be advocated as the principal format for WPS implementation in post-conflict countries since they are often characterized by weak institutions and governmental bodies that are unable to allocate sufficient resources to implement their objectives.

Another significant debate in regard to WPS and NAPs is that of its discourse. On the one hand, there is a sense of optimism regarding the potential of NAPs

where the main argument is that since these policies are produced on a national level, they will be adequately translated and made to fit the local context and thus advance the women, peace and security agenda in a satisfactory way (Tryggestad 2009, 2010; Basu 2016). Hudson (2009: 152) argues that the dedication and massive mobilization from women's activists have paved the way for NAPs that are able to transform societies, holding that "the document [UNSCR 1325] is being used as a tool by local women to give them leverage with ruling parties." (ibid.). She also holds that the agenda has played an important part in our redefining of 'security', from a matter of *national* security toward a concept of *human* security (Hudson 2015; Hudson in Shepherd 2013: 24-36). On the other hand, there are many who are sceptical of the theoretical underpinnings of UNSCR 1325, claiming that it is built on conservative and neoliberal understandings of gender that inhibits true change. The language reproduced in UNSCR 1325 and NAPs is said to be constitutive of a narrow understanding of peace as the absence of conflict (Hudson 2017), and that it is informed by conservative notions of men, women and gender (Shepherd 2008, 2010, 2013; Pratt & Richter-Devroe 2011; Pratt 2013; Cohn, Kinsella and Gibbings 2004, etc.). Shepherd (2010: 46) further argues that these representations are "constitutive of how we understand global political processes and our place within them". She posits that the best way to investigate policy is asking *how* it means as opposed to merely *what* it means (ibid.).

As such, there are two major schools of thought: one highlighting the progressive aspect of the agenda and one more radical feminist school questioning the discourse perpetuated in policies for the implementation of WPS.

## 2.2 Women, Peace and Security in Afghanistan

UNSCR 1325 was passed just weeks before the "war on terror" and the U.S.-led NATO invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. One of the cited reasons for the military intervention was to 'save' Afghan women from the brutal Taleban regime (Bahri 2014; Abirafeh 2009: 16; Holt 2019: 330-331). Although to a large extent motivated by geopolitics (Bahri 2014; Ahmed-Ghosh 2003), intervention also had ideological and humanitarian roots (Hans 2004: 233). Indeed, women in Afghanistan have suffered under the rule of many violent and oppressive regimes, and during the years of Taleban rule "women's space [was] all but annihilated." (Giles & Hyndman 2004: 21). Violence against women, understood as both direct, structural and cultural violence (Galtung 1990), was imbued in every part of Afghan society (Giles & Hyndman: 237). Kandiyoti (2007) argue that the systematic oppression of women in Afghanistan are, in part, determined by factors such as poverty, displacement, the drug economy, insecurity caused by armed groups as well as destructive gender norms. Combined, they "produce extreme forms of female vulnerability." (Kandiyoti 2007). Furthermore, women are largely absent or significantly under-represented in political institutions, and the deteriorating security situation has further pushed women away from the decision-

making table due to their perceived role as ‘providers of security’ for the household (ibid.).

Gender politics in Afghanistan are characterized by the ongoing contention between an international agenda for social change, a government in need of external aid, polarized political factions as well as local women’s activist groups (Singh 2020; Lewis 2019). Afghan women have been said to be “at the center of conflict between Western concepts of modernization and Afghan codes of culture.” (Abirafeh 2009: 14). International aid aimed at the empowerment of women have been present in Afghanistan since 2002 (Abirafeh 2009: 16), and much criticism has been voiced against it, mainly due to its (often) insensitive approach to the local context. Abirafeh (2009) finds that the policy formulation coming from international aid were based on a one-dimensional discourse understanding Afghan women as a “*chaddari*-clad figure in need of assistance” (Abirafeh 2009: 11, emphasis original). She also criticised the depoliticised nature of aid, claiming that aid is never neutral or ‘technical’, but rather is highly political and especially so in issues related to gender (ibid.) Furthermore, others have argued that Western gender policies in Afghanistan failed to properly take into account the deep-rooted patriarchal as well as theocratic nature of the culture in order for the policies to bear any effect (Bahri 2014). Partis-Jennings (2017) argues that the peacebuilding project in Afghanistan is characterized by hypermasculine ideals of protection and patriarchal norms, producing an environment of insecurity.

The Afghan WPS-NAP was established in 2015<sup>1</sup> and was complemented by other policies such as the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP). However, their implementation has not been up to par. It has been argued that this is due to the failure of norm diffusion in going from the global to the local, that UNSCR 1325 lead to a *translation* rather than a *transformation* (Singh 2020). Other potential causes that have been brought up are 1) the damage done from the ‘self-interested’ intervention in 2001, 2) the structural causes behind armed conflict, and 3) the individual focus of the WPS-agenda, disregarding communal values (Duncanson & Farr 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan’s National Action Plan for the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda was launched in 2015 and its mandate extends to the year 2022. Its development was conducted by the government of Afghanistan in collaboration with civil society, and four structures was set up to administer its implementation: 1) the steering committee with the Minister of Foreign Affairs acting as chairperson member; 2) the technical working group with various representatives from international organisations and diplomatic missions in Kabul; 3) the drafting committee; and 4) the coordination committee (Afghanistan MoFA 2015: 29).

# 3 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

## 3.1 Discourses and the ‘WPR’ approach

‘Discourse’ is a concept that has been widely used, often with different meanings attached to it. In general terms, it refers to practices of writing/speaking and to ways of thinking expressed through language. For the purpose of this study, I will be using a Foucault-inspired post-structural understanding of the term ‘discourse’ as utilised by Bacchi in her writings. Foucaults notion of discourse is wider than the understandings of discourses employed by linguists, where the subject of analysis is limited to the text itself and its language (Bergström & Boréus 2012: 358) Foucault broadens the concept and defines discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention” (Foucault 1977 in Bacchi 1999: 40). Bacchi speaks of discourses as ‘frames’, in that they produce and sustain frameworks for ways of thinking of an issue (Bacchi 1999: 40). As such, a discourse extends beyond language – both in what it entails and its reach. This perception of discourse can be understood as a system of rules that legitimizes certain knowledges but not others, and further says something about who has the right to speak with authority (Bergström & Boréus 2012: 360). Foucault and Bacchi thus share the strong emphasis on the relationship between discourse and power. Bacchi draws attention to “both the power *of* discourse to delimit topics of analysis and the power *to make* discourse” (Bacchi 1999: 41, emphasis original). As an extension of this, Bacchi applies a policy-as-discourse perspective. She recognizes the “power that concepts accrue through being embedded in governmental practices and programs” (Bacchi 2009: 237). However, unlike Foucault, Bacchi and the WPR-approach simultaneously holds that ‘common people’ have the power to challenge dominant discourses perpetuated by elites since *everyone* are recognised as subjects that constitute and are constituted in discourses (ibid.)

### 3.1.1 What Is the ‘Problem’ Represented to Be?

The ‘What’s the problem represented to be’ (WPR) approach is a form of discourse analysis. It is a critical analysis tool for analysing policy formulation. Its

basic premise is that policies and the formulations they contain should not be taken for granted. The WPR-approach builds upon three theoretical assumptions: 1) we are governed through problematisations, 2) we need to study problematisations (through analysing the problem representations they contain) rather than ‘problems’, and 3) we need to problematise (interrogate) the problematisations on offer through scrutinizing the premises and effects of the problem representations they contain (Bacchi 2009). It aims to shift the subject of analysis, from the ‘solution’ in a specific policy to the discourse employed to frame an issue as a ‘problem’, i.e., the policies’ *problematization* or *problem representation* (Bacchi 1999: 2). It holds that governments are constitutive in the construction of policy problems. Rather than viewing government policy as a response to a specific and clear-cut societal problem where the problem exists independent of any government involvement, Bacchi proposes that the policy process is instead an integral part in the *making* of a ‘problem’ (ibid.). As such, every policy contains within it both an explicit and implicit problem representation. Furthermore, there is a political and power dimension to the problem representation as Bacchi holds that “[b]ecause *every policy* constitutes a problematisation, it is fair to say that, in effect, we are governed *through* problematisations rather than through policies.” (Bacchi 2009: 31, emphasis original).

## 3.2 Two Foundational Intellectual Traditions

The main theoretical as well as methodological framework guiding this thesis is the WPR - approach, which in turn builds upon four intellectual traditions: social construction theory; poststructuralism; feminist body theory; and governmentality studies (Bacchi 2009: 264). An introduction to two of these doctrines will be provided<sup>2</sup>.

### 3.2.1 Social Construction Theory

Social construction theory, ‘social constructivism’ or simply ‘constructivism’ is a set of theoretical assumptions that emphasises the socially constructed component of many often taken-for-granted concepts or categories. Its main idea builds on the premise that knowledge is socially constructed and therefore does not exist

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<sup>2</sup> Since feminist body theory is a theoretical framework only related to the *effects* of policy problematisations, I have chosen to exclude it from this section since an analysis of effects and consequences are outside the scope of this thesis. Further, governmentality studies and the concept of ‘governmentality’ is an extension of poststructuralism and Foucault’s understanding of discourse and is therefore seen as superfluous in this section.

outside of the social world. Social interaction and social processes play an important role in the (re)production of knowledge, and discursive practices “maintain, construct and constitute, legitimize, resist and suspend truth as they (re)produce meaning [...]” (Shepherd 2010b). Following this, questioning where concepts come from, how they are produced and reproduced makes possible a unique look at the discursive and governing practices that are dependent on them. Social construction theory can thus act as a “useful destabilising role in the study of public policy” (Bacchi 2009: 264).

### 3.2.2 Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism draws on the premises of social construction theory in that it also challenges or even rejects what has come to be accepted as ‘givens’, ‘truth’ or ‘knowledge’, making it an anti-essentialist paradigm. Poststructuralists further extends this critique by bringing closer scrutiny to the political aspect that goes into the process of accrediting meaning and significance to concepts (Bacchi 2009: 265). ‘Knowledge’ and ‘truth’ can only be accepted as such if it is produced and reproduced by those who hold significant power in society, so called ‘elites’ (McMorrow 2018). This necessarily leads to the conclusion that any and every form of knowledge or truth is *not* universal, but instead very much contingent on history and its political, economic and social context (Bergström & Boréus 2018: 28). Consequently, poststructuralists are weary of “[...] universal narratives that attempt to offer an objective worldview, as these assumptions are heavily influenced by pre-existing assumptions of what is true – and usually underlined by the views of those in power.” (McMorrow 2018). Foucault’s notion of the power/knowledge nexus posits that there is a circular relationship between knowledge and power; knowledge is produced by those in power through discursive practices, and in turn, power is sustained by the acceptance of dominant discourses. Foucault summarises it as follows:

*“Truth” is linked in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which induce, and which extend it. A ‘régime’ of truth.”* (Foucault 1980: 133)

### 3.3 Feminist Theorising of Gender and Violence

‘Gender’ is a crucial concept for this thesis, and as such, it needs to be explored further. Initially, gender has been understood as a binary linguistic indication for the biological sex, i.e., male/female. Today, however, feminist scholarship and the emerging gender studies field has come to conceptualize ‘gender’ in a much broader sense. Departing from the school of constructivism and post-structuralism, many scholars view ‘gender’ as a word that is not fixed, but rather something fleeting and inherently dependent on cultural and societal norms (Scott

1986). Claude Lévi-Strauss's term 'floating signifier' is useful here – indicating words and concepts that are especially open for interpretation with no agreed upon meaning (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 63; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 33-35).

What is entailed in the word *gender* that does not fit within the word *women*? In *violence* but not in *war*? *Discourse* but not *language*? These questions are brought up by Shepherd (2010), highlighting a crucial notion of words as carriers of certain connotations, and with that different interpretations and practical effects. The uneven usage and interfusion of 'gender' and 'women' is a common critique against UNSCR 1325. Swaine (2010) finds this to be one of the main challenges for the resolution's implementation, contending that the synonymous use of 'gender' and 'women' has "all but eradicated the *equality* aspects of the gender debate" (Swaine 2010, emphasis original). The implications of using 'women' and 'gender' as synonymous to each other can for example be seen in the employment of quantitative "add women and stir"-approaches to issues that are ultimately deeply complex in nature. Swaine argues that these matters call for an intersectional understanding of gender that sheds light on the effects of several intertwined systems of power (ibid.). This concern is further corroborated by Abirafeh (2009: 23) who holds that "While 'gender' is a political term, 'women' lends itself more readily to technical solutions".

A common theme that continually emerges in literature on gender is its relationship to power (Scott 1986; Cockburn 2010; Butler 2004). Violi writes that "we have to look at how gender has been constructed and transformed historically and culturally [...] to be able to use this concept as a powerful tool for transforming power relations." (Violi 2014: 220).

Scott defines gender as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power." (Scott 1986). She argues that gender is ever-present, permeating all aspects of life and society and that hierarchical relations implicitly rely on "generalized understandings of the so-called natural relationship between male and female." (Scott 1986).

Cynthia Cockburn introduces the concept of a 'gendered continuum of violence' (Cockburn 2004: 43; Shepherd 2010a: 108-109). She makes reference to Galtung's tripartite understanding of violence as direct, structural and cultural in nature and claims that it is "meaningless to make a sharp distinction between peace and war, prewar, and postwar" (ibid.). Instead, she sees a relationship where "gender links violence at different points on a scale from the personal to the international, from the home and the back street to the maneuvers of the tank column and the sortie of the stealth bomber: battering and marital rape, confinement, "dowry" burnings, honor killings, and genital mutilation in peacetime; military rape, sequestration, prostitution, and sexualized torture in war." (ibid.). Gender thus ultimately refers to a relation of power, characterized by the domination of men and the masculine, and the simultaneous subordination of women and the feminine (Cockburn in Shepherd 2010a: 108). Scott extends this thought and argues that the legitimizing of war often relies on notions of manhood, "[...] the association between masculinity and national strength" (Scott

1986) as well as an implicit understanding of power where men need to defend vulnerable ‘womenandchildren’ (ibid.; Runyan & Peterson 2015: 140).

Another common discursive theme, apart from the victimisation of women, in scholarship on the WPS-agenda is a dichotomous and homogenous understanding of men and women; women are peaceful victims whereas men are aggressive perpetrators. It is an instrumentalist view, where the inclusion of women is assumed to bring more peaceful societies (Shepherd 2016). Cohn (2004) introduces the concept of women’s ‘use value’ and the troubling trend toward justifying women’s participation on the basis of their supposed resourcefulness in peacebuilding. Cynthia Enloe argues that women’s inclusion is important “not because women are somehow innately, biologically wired for peacefulness, but because women are so often outside the inner circles where militarizing decision are being made” (Enloe 2007: 15). Bjarnegård (2010) argues that “women do not operate in a vacuum and the political environment and its ensuing power structures, through which they [women] are to navigate, must be better understood.” Women are not immune to corruption, rather, they have historically not had any opportunity to engage in it. Frerks also challenges this stereotypical notion, and further questions why “Male casualties are often accepted as [a] logical consequence of conflict and warfare, while female and infant casualties are socially and culturally problematised” (Frerks 2014: 2). Feminist scholarship is increasingly sceptical of the sole focus on ‘women’ and simultaneous neglect of the experiences of ‘men’ (Charlesworth and Wood 2001; Cohn, Kinsella & Gibbins 2004). Bacchi notes that this scepticism is motivated by two interlinked factors: a wish for theorising men and masculinity and a wish to nuance the essentialist and universalist understanding of the category ‘woman’ (Bacchi & Eveline 2010). As Swaine put it, gender equality is “ultimately about relational connections between men and women” and not only a woman’s concern (Swaine 2010).

### 3.3.1 Intersectionality

‘Intersectionality’ was first coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and is an analytical framework that aims to understand how interlocking identity markers are vexed and work together to form different forms of both discrimination and privilege. An intersectional approach takes into consideration several factors (e.g., gender, sex, race, class, sexuality) that may affect an individual’s experience of oppression rather than merely focusing on one single aspect. The intersectional approach has gained significant appeal among feminist scholars and has “played a major role in facilitating consideration of different axes of power in a wide range of political discussions and academic disciplines” (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall 2013). An intersectional analytical framework allows for an understanding of how intersecting power relations not only shape individual experiences but also “social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural representations and ideologies in ways that are contextualized and historicized [and] introduces a level of complexity into everything.” (Collins & Bilge 2016: 52).

# 4 Methodology

## 4.1 The ‘WPR’ approach

As this thesis sets out to analyse policy, the main methodological framework guiding the analysis will be Carol Bacchi’s tool intending to initiate critical engagement with public policies – the WPR-approach. It is a form of discourse analysis, and Bacchi holds that the approach can be utilized for a broad range of fields but is especially fruitful in analyses of policy pronouncements (Bacchi in Bletsas & Beasley 2012: 22) such as NAPs. Bacchi states that “[t]he tasks in a ‘WPR’ analysis is to read policies with an eye to discerning how the ‘problem’ is represented within them and to subject this problem representation to critical scrutiny” (Bacchi in Bletsas & Beasley 2012: 21). Further, the aim is to “understand policy better than policy makers by probing the unexamined assumptions and deep-seated conceptual logics within implicit problem representations” (ibid.: 22). This task is made possible through posing a set of interrelated questions to the policy under interrogation (Bacchi 2009):

1. What’s the ‘problem’ represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the ‘problem’?
3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?
6. How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted and replaced?

In my analysis, only three of the abovementioned questions will be used (1, 2 and 4). The reason for this is simply that they pertain to the aim of this thesis, namely, investigating and critically engaging with the discursive construction of the ‘problem of gender’ in NAPs.

## 4.1.1 Operationalisation

Bacchi notes that the suggested questions are, to some extent, open for alteration (Bacchi 2009: 20-21). Hence, I have chosen the questions I deem most fit for my study and its purpose. The operational questions guiding the analysis are:

- 1: What is the ‘problem’ represented to be in the NAP?
- 2: What presuppositions and assumptions underpin this representation of the problem?
- 3: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?

### 4.1.1.1. What is the ‘Problem’ Represented to Be?

The first question is one of clarification and aims to assist in identifying the implicit problem representation within the policy. Bacchi (2009: 4) recognises that this might be a challenging task since policies are complex and may therefore contain several proposals and sometimes even contradicting representations. This complexity needs to be accounted for, and in our analysis, we need to “be careful not to distort documents when choosing particular segments to support an interpretation” (Bacchi 2009: 20). Our role as researchers is one aiming for objectivity, however, is almost always characterized by a degree of subjectivity. The analytical process has a distinct constructive and interpretive aspect to it which one needs to be aware of (ibid.). In circumventing this, Bacchi suggests that one way to ascertain a specific policies’ dominant problem representation is paying attention to how funding is allocated; if a government spends more money on some solutions and less on others, it may give us a clue to what the ‘problem’ is thought to be (Bacchi 2009: 4).

### 4.1.1.2. What Assumptions or Presuppositions Underlie this Problem Representation?

When the problem representation(s) have been identified, the analysis moves toward investigating the ‘conceptual logics’ that underpin the problem representation. By ‘conceptual logics’, Bacchi refers to the “meanings that must be in place for a particular problem representation to cohere or to make sense.” (Bacchi 2009: 5). Here, we ask what epistemological and ontological inferences are assumed. What is taken-for-granted? What deep-rooted notions of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ determined by cultural values make this representation possible? Bacchi speaks of a ‘social unconscious’, i.e., basic and fundamental worldviews that underpin the problem representation (Bacchi 2009: 5).

How then, might we go about in determining what these conceptual logics are in a specific policy? Since we are all a product of the ‘knowledges’ and cultural values present in our time, this may be tricky. Bacchi suggests three

recommended analytical tools for question two, namely: analysis of *binaries*, *key concepts* and *categories*. ‘Binaries’ refer to dichotomies that are often used in public debates, such as for example public/private, male/female, economic/social, legal/illegal etc. What exists on one side of the binary is automatically excluded from the other side, and what’s more, there is often a hierarchical relationship between the two where one side is privileged and deemed more important than the other (Bacchi 2009: 7). Needless to say, binaries are simplifications of what are in fact deeply complex and intricate relationships. In analysing policy, Bacchi suggests that our task is to “watch where [binaries] appear in policies and how they function to shape the understanding of the issue.” (ibid.).

‘Key concepts’ are concepts that often emerge in policies but are rarely endowed with a definition due to their flexibility in terms of what they actually *mean*. Bacchi holds that concepts are open-ended and contested, resulting in different political ideologies taking on different meanings of the same concept (Bacchi 2009: 8). Such contested concepts might be ‘gender’, ‘equality’, ‘participation’, ‘democracy’, ‘liberty’, ‘peace’ or ‘violence’. In relation to UNSCR 1325, ‘participation’, ‘prevention’ and ‘protection’ could all be considered key concepts. One of the tasks related to concepts is to “identify key concepts in problem representations and to see which meanings are given to those concepts.” (ibid.).

The final analytical tool in relation to question two is taking into account the role of ‘categories’ present in policies. Bacchi understands categories as extensions of concepts; they are concepts that “play a central role in how governing takes place.” (Bacchi 2009: 9). We are especially concerned with categories that involve *people* when analysing policy and problem representation. They may be categories of age, gender, sexuality, diseases, social or economic status, education or citizenry. The WPR-approach encourages a stance that does not take these categories for granted, but rather question how they operate and give certain meanings to problem representations (Bacchi 2009: 9). As an illustrative example, Foucault argues that ‘homosexuals’ did not exist prior to the nineteenth century (even though same-sex activities had indeed existed for a long time), because ‘homosexuals’ as a category of people is the result of systematic organisation of people and their behaviour (Bacchi 2009: 9). As such, Bacchi holds that people are, in a sense, ‘made up’ (ibid.).

#### 4.1.1.3. What is Left Unproblematic in the Problem Representation?

The third and final question takes a critical stance. In asking what is left unproblematic, if there are any silences or if the ‘problem’ can be thought about differently – it aims to problematise the problematisation. Bacchi writes that “The objective of Question 4 [question 3] of a WPR approach is to raise for reflection and consideration issues and perspectives silenced in identified problem representations.” (Bacchi 2009: 13). Bacchi suggests paying attention to the confinements of the underlying problem representation(s), asking not only what *is* problematized but also what *fails* to be problematized. Here it is useful to consider

if any competing problem representations might exist (not in the policy, but outside) that are not brought up. For example, could a cross-cultural comparison reveal that the problem representation is reflective of a cultural or institutional context?

## 4.2 Policy Material

The material that will constitute the basis for the analysis is one policy document: Afghanistan's NAP "Afghanistan's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 – Women, Peace and Security, 2015-2022". It is deemed suitable for this kind of discourse analysis as it is a government policy.

### 4.2.1 Reflections on the Chosen Material

The practice of choosing material and texts to study in a discourse analysis is in itself an active exercise and needs to be acknowledged as such. My personal interest in the context of Afghanistan have guided my choice, and therefore the analytical process has begun prior to scrutinising the policy. Bacchi notes that "Often you will choose policy texts in order to develop a particular argument." (Bacchi 2009: 20). Although it is not my intention to develop a specific argument, my previous knowledge and understanding of feminist literature and its critique of dominant discourses have certainly played a part in my decision to conduct a critical examination of policies on women, peace and security. Here, it is necessary to perform self-scrutiny and reflexivity of one's own problem representations in order to produce meaningful contributions (Bacchi 2009: 34).

Furthermore, my analysis of problem representation only relies on *one* piece of text. Bacchi typically advises against this, arguing that in order to get a complete understanding of problem representations, it is often useful to include more than one text to analyse. Debates, other related government statements, media coverage or diplomatic pronouncements may be necessary to examine as well in order to get the full picture (Bacchi 2009: 20). The motivation for why I have chosen to examine only one text are threefold: 1) NAPs are in many ways comprehensive in their content regarding policies and suggested activities regarding women, peace and security since their mandate span over several years, 2) for practical reasons (time, , scope, language barriers, inaccessibility) it would be difficult to study other related materials, and 3) the aim of this thesis is to study problematisations that are present *in NAPs* in order to extend on the existing literature on WPS and NAPs with a specific focus on Afghanistan – and as such it follows logically that only Afghanistan's NAP will be able to constitute the material for analysis.

# 5 Analysis

## 5.1 National Action Plan of Afghanistan (2015-2022)

### 5.1.1 What is the ‘Problem’ Represented to Be?

There are multiple problem representations present in Afghanistan’s NAP, which according to Bacchi is to be expected. Here, the dominant representations are presented.

#### 5.1.1.1. Equality in the Name of Allah

The document is initiated with a proclamation that the following text is “In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate” (Afghanistan MFA 2015, appendix) and continues with an excerpt from the Afghan Constitution stating that:

*“Any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law.” (ibid.: IV)*

In his opening statement, President Ashraf Ghani again makes reference to Islam and the constitution writing that:

*“Our constitution binds us, the Afghan citizens, in reinforcing networks of rights and obligations. Reaffirming our commitment to the values and obligations of our sacred faith of Islam, chapter 2 not only enumerates the fundamental rights of the citizens but makes the state into the agency for the realization of these universal rights.” (ibid.: V)*

Here, we can make out a distinct problem representation permeating the action plan: that women’s empowerment and equality is a constitutional as well as a religious *obligation*. Reference to the ‘duty’, ‘obligation’ or ‘commitment’ to uphold the values of Islam and the contents of the constitution is repeated several times in the document. Gender inequality is thus represented as a result of

inadequate enforcement of Islamic and constitutional values; the problem is theological and constitutional in nature. Women's rights and the female subject of the policy is understood within the framework of Islam and 'Islamic civilisation', where the failure of women's rights is a direct reflection of the failure of the duty to uphold Islamic constitutional values.

#### 5.1.1.2. Women as Victims in Need of Protection

'Women' are understood in a number of ways in the document; they are political and economic minorities, they are citizens of Afghanistan, they are gender activists and members of the police, military and civil service (Afghanistan MFA 2015). As such, a somewhat nuanced understanding of what it means to be a 'woman' is put forward. However, women as *victim* and women as *a tool for change* are the two dominant discourses repeated many times. The construction of woman as victim can be ascertained in the following passages:

*"Women have experienced tremendous upheaval throughout the history of Afghanistan and have been forced to bear the brunt of over three decades of conflict and insecurity."* (ibid.: 2)

*"Women are vulnerable to sexual violence, including: rape, sexual harassment, trafficking, forced prostitution, and forced marriages."* (ibid.)

*"Internally displaced women and women living in conflict-affected communities are particularly vulnerable to insecurity."* (ibid.)

*"Women are vulnerable to various types of violence in conflict and post-conflict societies."* (ibid.: 6)

*"Awareness among all military personnel on how to protect women from violence."* (ibid.: 23)

Because of the vulnerability of women, the *protection* of women is frequently emphasized in the action plan. In relation to this, there is often a considerable disconnect between policy writer and policy subject. Women are often described in terms of being the 'Other' through the use of words such as *they*, *them* or even as *our* women – implying a passive victim outside of the policy process. Men are the normative 'standard' and women the 'exception' that need to be dealt with.

A problem representation thus emerges where women are not, even in a document aiming to increase women's representation, seen as more than 'victims of violence' in need of protection from their male perpetrators. Scott (1986) argues that these types of representations reproduce existing understandings of the 'natural' relation of power between men and women. As such, the 'problem' is

the perpetual victimhood of women. Contrastingly, nowhere in the document are men or boys described in terms of vulnerability or as victims.

### 5.1.1.3. Women as Peaceful Nurturers of the Nation State

In conjunction with the understanding of women as victims is the representation of women as possible tools for peaceful change. The resourcefulness and usefulness of the women that are currently excluded from peace processes, state-building and the development of the country is emphasised throughout the document. Women need to be included because they are effective:

*“[...] the NAP, is important because in any post conflict society the development of the country depends on men and women. Men and women must possess equal access to opportunities and resources to achieve this goal.” (Afghanistan MFA 2015: 1)*

*“the participation of women in peace building efforts is recognized as a prerequisite for peace and reconstruction across the country, which is of crucial importance. The Afghan Government is committed to ensuring women’s representation at all levels of decision-making, with particular focus on women’s role in the peace process in 34 provinces and acknowledges that durable peace and stability in Afghanistan requires the participation of women in political and social life.” (ibid.: 5)*

*“Women in the security sector is an encouraging force for more women to join the security forces.” (ibid.)*

*“The UNSCR 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda is relevant to the current Afghan context, particularly in the state building and transitional process, women’s empowerment and active political participation is of crucial importance.” (ibid.)*

Here, women are instead valued for the role that they can play in the development of Afghanistan and in the pursuit of peace and stability. Women’s equal participation is framed as a conditionality for peace to be durable. The ‘problem’ thus seems to be a problem primarily related to the status of Afghanistan rather than one pertaining to the status of women. Afghanistan’s development through state-building and peacebuilding efforts is severely challenged, and this problem can be repaired through increasing women’s meaningful participation in the process. The view of women is thus dual: they are victims, but they also possess agency for action.

#### 5.1.1.4. 'Add Women and Stir'

Finally, when paying attention to the suggested solutions in Afghanistan's NAP, a problem representation that conceptualizes gender inequality as solvable through an increased number of women is made evident. There is a consistent focus on the quantity of women throughout the document:

*"[...] the High Peace Council (HPC), comprised of 70 members, of which nine are women. Seventy-one women are also active in the Provincial Peace Committees and Secretariats across 33 provinces."* (Afghanistan MFA 2015: 5)

*"there are increased numbers of women in the police, military, civil service but still not enough in order to respond to emerging needs of women."* (ibid.)

*"Another development is that provincial headquarters and large districts have established Family Response Units (FRUs) staffed with policewomen."* (ibid.: 4)

*"NAPWA also commits the Afghan Government to increase women's representation in the civil service to 30 percent."* (ibid.)

In the above quotes, there is a direct causal relationship assumed between the number of women involved and positive results. Furthermore, this is further corroborated in the matrix outlining the plan's practical implementation, where we can read that some of the specific actions to be taken, expected results as well as the indicators of success for various aspects of the NAP are:

(Action): *"Increase the representation of female employees in the civil service through quotas and their representation in recruitment committees."* (ibid.: 14)

(Indicator): *"Increased women civil servants."* and *"10% increase in female civil servants."* (ibid.)

(Indicator): *"Number of women in the leadership position in security sector."* (ibid.)

(Indicator): *"Number of women-only training facilities."* (ibid.)

(Expected results): *"Number of women in security promoted to higher positions."* (ibid.: 15)

(Expected results): *"Increased number of women participating in all phases of peace process."* (ibid.)

(Indicator): “Number of women participating in drafting peace policies and strategies.” (ibid.: 16)

The pattern that emerges is clear: the ‘problem’ is that not enough women are participants in various civil service and peacebuilding activities, and this is a problem because it is assumed that women bring peace and equality. It is a quantitative approach to gender equality, assuming that a lack of parity between men and women is to be at fault.

Although the involvement of men and boys as an active and important part of the strive toward gender equality is mentioned once in the ‘prevention’ section (it is also the only time ‘men and boys’ are mentioned at all): “Involve men and boys in the fight against all forms of violence against women”, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on women. This dominant focus on women further implies a problem representation where gender related issues faced by society is seen not necessarily as a *collective* responsibility between all genders and citizens, but rather something that concerns women and should thus be solved by women. It is ultimately a ‘women’s issue’.

## 5.1.2 What Assumptions and Presuppositions Underpin These Problem Representations?

In Afghanistan’s NAP, there are several ‘conceptual logics’ and notions of ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ that underpin the identified problem representations. Through the investigation of binaries, key concepts and categories as well as the meanings attached to them an understanding of these underlying assumptions can be revealed.

### 5.1.2.1. The Male-Female Dichotomy

The binary of *man* and *woman* appears in the introduction of the NAP, where it is stated that “[...] the development of the country depends on men and women.”, and that “Men and women must possess equal access to opportunities and resources to achieve this goal.”. Further, under the heading of ‘Constitutional Provisions’ it is established that “The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law.”. Here it is made clear that men and woman should be equal. Although stating that men and women have equal duties before the law, the problem representation revealed in section 5.1.1.4 where gender equality is seen as a ‘women’s issue’ seem to contradict this.

The binary of *man* and *woman* is also present indirectly in the document in places where only women are mentioned. Women are several times discursively constructed in terms of being the ‘other’ or ‘different’ – both through the use of words such as ‘they’, ‘them’ or ‘our’ but also where women are described as victims of violence, as vulnerable objects or as agents of change for the

development of Afghanistan. Men (although not mentioned), being the opposite of women, are thus according to Bacchi's framework automatically understood as *not* being victims, *not* vulnerable and *not* peaceful. This understanding reinforces a power structure where men are inevitably the stronger part and women the weaker. It is a simple analysis where women are oppressed and men the oppressors. The dichotomous binary of man and woman also ignores anyone who might fall outside of this spectrum – it is an understanding of 'gender' and gender equality based on understandings of biological sex. A clear distinction between *men* and *women* also relies on assumptions that issues concerning men and issues concerning women are inherently different and separated from each other.

#### 5.1.2.2. 'Gender', 'Equality' and 'Participation'

Many key concepts appear in Afghanistan's NAP, here I will focus on a few that are especially prominent and/or important, they are: 'gender', 'equality', and 'participation'.

'Gender' is not given a definition in the action plan and appears in very vague and broad contexts – references to abstract notions of 'gender mainstreaming' or 'gender sensitivity' are made but what this actually entails in practice is difficult to ascertain based on the text. Instead, 'gender' is very clearly linked and connected to 'women' in Afghanistan's action plan. It does not get mentioned very often (17 times compared to 'women' 290 times), but almost every time 'gender' is mentioned it is in conjunction or coupled with something related to women or the dichotomy of men/women. In this sense, 'gender' is understood in essentialist terms. For example, it is stated that the constitutional article stating that all "citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights" is the "foundation for incorporating principles of gender equality and non-discrimination". As such, 'gender' is put in direct relation to 'man and woman', indicating a dichotomous and biologically motivated understanding of the term. Further, the next sentence begins with "Women's rights to vote and representation in the National Assembly is enshrined in the 1964 Constitution" and thus further corroborates the notion of gender = women. Some other examples of this are:

*"The Government will implement and monitor reforms and capacity-building programs in the governance, justice, and security sectors in order to incorporate a gender responsive approach based on women's needs." (Afghanistan MFA 2015: 5)*

*"Women's human rights are promoted through gender mainstreaming of laws, policies, and institutional reforms." (ibid.: 6)*

*"Conduct a mapping of all existing government programmes with an analysis of the extent to which they include a gender perspective and specifically respond to the needs of women." (ibid.: 25)*

Here, gender is essentially understood as synonymous to women. It is a view that frequently occurs in policies and programmes dealing with ‘gender’ issues and is according to Swaine (2010) one of the major obstacles for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 transformative potential. When treating gender and women as equal, the binary of man/woman is further reinforced – excluding men (or other genders) from being thought of in terms of vulnerability. As Frerks (2014: 2-3) notes, it raises questions on who is deemed a legitimate victim. Whereas women who endure violence are labelled as ‘victims’, men who are subject to the same kind of violence are instead thought of as natural casualties of war (and are thus not included in action plans such as this one). Only referring to women when speaking of gendered effects of conflict inhibits a truly inclusive approach that does not rely on pre-determined understandings of gender. An intersectional approach further draws attention to the limits of conceptualizing gender as merely men and women; holding that gender refer to various and interlinked systems of *power*, where factors such as class, sexuality, race, religion etc. also play a role in institutional power relations. Taking into account other identity markers and social categories is crucial if we are to make sense of the Afghan context. In line with Abirafeh’s (2009: 23) observation, it is clear that the usage of the word ‘women’ instead of ‘gender’ enables technical rather than political intervention.

Another key concept in the NAP is that of ‘equality’. It is mentioned a couple of times in the document:

*“The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law.” (ibid.: 3)*

*“Men and women must possess equal access to opportunities and resources to achieve this goal.” (ibid.: 1)*

*” [...] equal distribution of resources between men and women.” (ibid.: 7)*

What meaning is attributed to the word of equality in Afghanistan’s action plan? As seen here, ‘equality’ is intricately linked to concepts of ‘rights’, ‘duty’, ‘access’, ‘opportunity’ and ‘resources’. As such, there is an underlying understanding of a form of a-priori equality where focus lies on ensuring that the access to opportunities is equal – i.e., that everyone has the exact same resources. This conceptualization of equality as ‘equal opportunity’ is constitutive of a problem representation where it is assumed that the ‘problem’ with inequality is essentially a product of material and/or external factors that can be easily amended through legislation that establishes everyone’s equal right to the same privileges (Bacchi 2009: 188-190). Hence, an underlying assumption emerges that sees inequality as ‘surface level’, rather than something that is deeply rooted in structures embedded in Afghanistan’s social and political fabric. Perhaps one should not focus so much on equal *access* but instead on equal *outcome*. If the

outcome is not equal despite equal opportunity, then, surely, unequal access is not the root of the problem.

The final important key concept I have identified in the text is that of ‘participation’. ‘Participation’ is one of the three pillars in UNSCR 1325 and therefore appears repeatedly in the document – in fact, it occurs 58 times (more than both ‘protection’ and ‘prevention’). The ‘active’, ‘meaningful’, ‘effective’ and ‘equal’ participation of women is reiterated repeatedly in the NAP. Here, we must ask *under what conditions* women are expected to participate. In what environment is the participation of women conducted? Is it a male-dominated space where women, despite participating, are expected to adapt to the existing norms and codes of conduct? Despite countless calls for women’s participation, there is little concern in Afghanistan’s action plan for the power structures at play that may inhibit women and other disadvantaged groups from making their voices heard and realizing their full potential. Simply adding them to the equation supposes that putting a woman in a visually male concept is inherently radical; instead of reflecting on the limits of that inclusion. Again, this reinforces the problem representation where ‘women’ are the ones to be ‘fixed’ through incorporating them into already existing (and damaging) structures.

#### 5.1.2.3. The Category of ‘Women’

‘Women’ are unmistakably the main category present in Afghanistan’s NAP and although I have made explicit reference to how women are constructed in the policies’ problem representation I will here probe more deeply into the assumptions that lie behind these representations.

The victimization of women, together with the urgent calling for their participation in peacebuilding and state-building processes together form an understanding of women as essentially harmless and peaceful. This relies on stereotypical notions of gender and a conceptual logic that associates women with peace, stability, nurturing and grander moral values – this in spite of research claiming that the inclusion of more women does not necessarily lead to better outcomes (Childs and Krook 2006: 523), and that women are not less inclined to corruption (Goetz 2007). The notion of women as biologically peaceful in turn rests on the presupposition that women are somehow immune and *outside* of the cultural norms permeating a society. Gender relations, whether they are characterized by patriarchal norms or not, are ultimately perpetuated by dominant discourses upheld by men, women and everyone else. From a poststructuralist perspective, ‘women’, although existing at the bottom of the power hierarchy, are still very much a product of the same ‘knowledges’ and ‘truths’ that instill such a structure. As Bjarnegård (2010) noted, women do not operate in a vacuum.

### 5.1.3 What is Left Unproblematic in the Problem Representations?

#### 5.1.3.1. Where Are the Men?

Departing from the thought that gender relations rely on the *relationship* between genders, one of the major shortcomings in Afghanistan's NAP is the failure to properly take into account a nuanced understanding of Afghan men. Men, like women, are victims of war and of oppressive structures – facing sexual and other types of violence during conflict. However, the representation of men as victims is completely missing from the action plan. Instead, they are conceptualized mainly as perpetrators or as responsible for ending violence against women. Extending on this thought is the lack of reflection on how male dominated spaces may affect both women and men. An analysis of men and masculinities as constitutive in the upholding of gender inequalities is missing and would be a welcomed addition to the heavy focus on women. Further, an alternative problem representation where issues of sexual violence, equality, inclusive and participatory societies are not seen as 'women's issues' but rather issues relevant for everyone regardless of gender could possibly lead to greater involvement of men.

#### 5.1.3.2. Surface-Level Equality

Following this, another aspect that is left largely unproblematic in Afghanistan's action plan are the overarching and underlying structures and systems of power that are constitutive of inequality and its effects. The representation that emerges in the NAP operates at a surface level, assuming that gender equality and gender parity are essentially synonymous. Such an understanding is a one-dimensional analysis of the 'problem' and undermines the need to re-examine fundamental and deep-rooted notions of gender permeating Afghan society. A different focus on these underlying structures would allow for the 'problem' to be conceptualized in a way that encompasses a wider array of potential solutions – going from technical quantitative approaches to political and context-sensitive solutions. As Cockburn (2004) noted, violence is a spectrum and as such needs to be combatted at all levels.

## 6 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to conduct a discourse analysis of Afghanistan's National Action Plan, asking how it constructs the 'problem of gender' through the use of Carol Bacchi's theoretical and methodological framework, the WPR-approach. In the analysis, three questions were asked to the policy material aiming to find out what the problem representation was, what underlying assumptions underpinned the problem as well as what was left unproblematic in the problem representation. The analysis was informed by Foucault's and Bacchi's notion of discourse as well as the theoretical frameworks of social constructivism, poststructuralism, gender studies and intersectionality. This study has contributed to the existing field of research on the discourse of Women, Peace and Security and National Action Plans as well as to literature on gender in Afghanistan.

Through an analysis of Afghanistan's action plan, it was revealed that the dominating discourse in the plan is characterized by a rather simple understanding of gender, women, men and equality. Women are subject to essentialist understandings as victims and inherently 'good' and moral beings where their inclusion is assumed to bring peace and equality. This essentialism can also be seen in the plan's understanding of men, which is limited to a notion of men as perpetrators. Further, the action plan lacks a transformative understanding of gender and does not address issues of intersectionality or structural systems of power that impedes progress. Instead, it is largely permeated by quantitative and technical approaches to gender equality. Here it should be noted that although this paper takes a critical stance, the intention is not to reveal some kind of malintent behind the action plan. There is no suggestion that the existing problem representations has intentionally left out certain aspects in favour of others; instead, it merely encourages a scepticism toward dominant discourses.

As this thesis did not set out to analyse effects of the discourse entailed in the action plan, a natural avenue for future research is the investigation not only of National Action Plan implementation – but the relationship between the discourse perpetuated in policy and the lived effects of the Afghan people it aims to 'deal' with. How are policies aimed at issues of gender perceived by the people of Afghanistan? Do they make the difference they set out to make? Further, taking inspiration from Bacchi's operational questions, one might ask where this problem representation comes from and how it has been produced. Seeing as much of the critique against UNSCR 1325 as well as criticism against the international aid apparatus in Afghanistan seem to resemble the findings here, perhaps the problem representation is a consequence of the institutional context the policy is a part of. One could question whether international views and discourses of Afghanistan and Afghan women have been so pervasive that they have made their way to the national context.

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