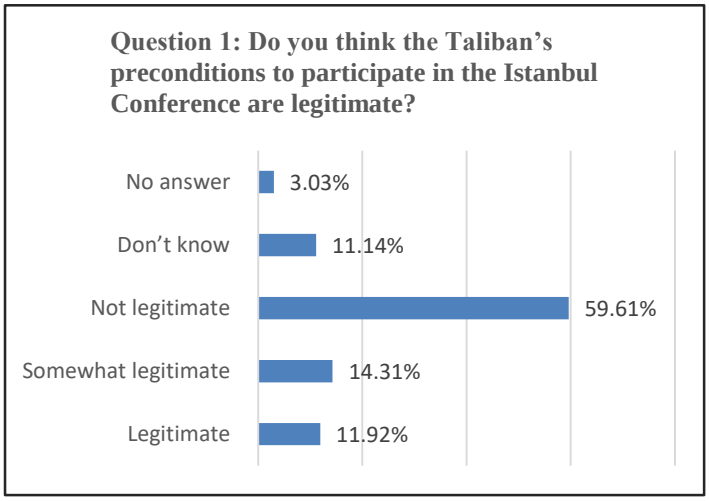
WOMEN'S PEACE BRIEF

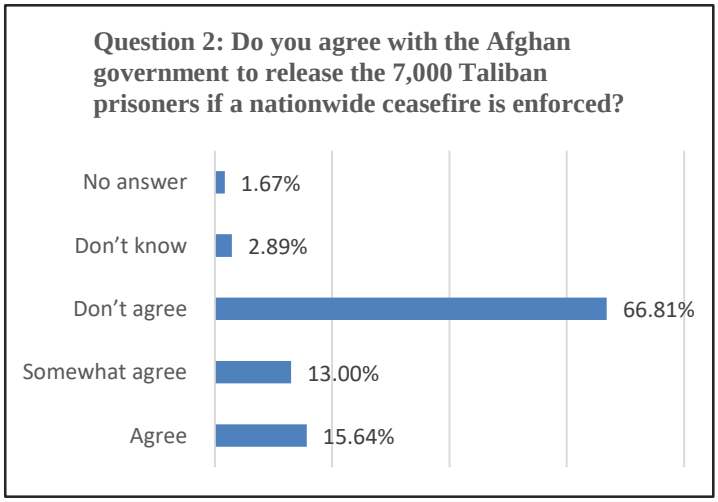
Afghan Women's Opinions on Taliban Preconditions for Participation in the Turkey Conference on Afghanistan Peace

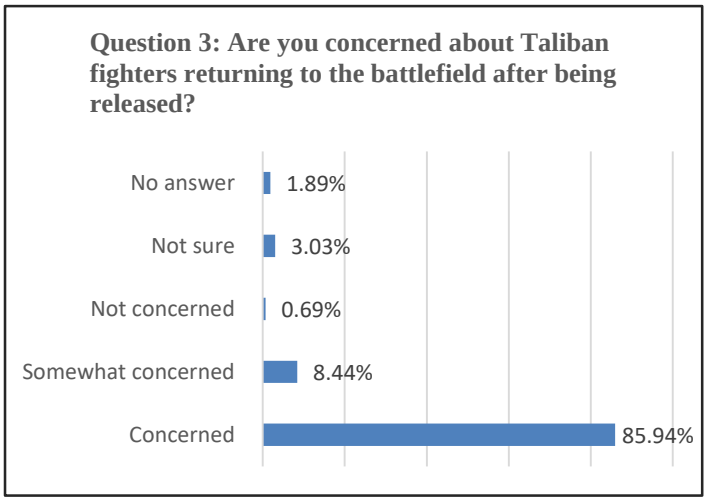
Summary:

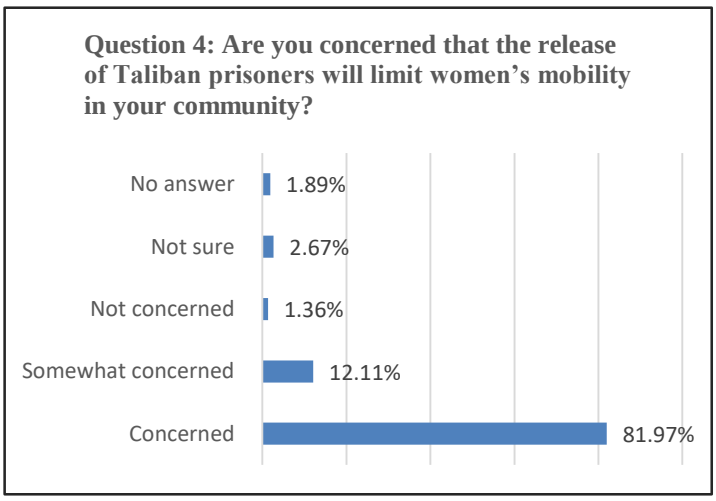
- **3,600 women in the provinces of Herat, Nangarhar, Balkh, Helmand, Takhar, Bamiyan, Kandahar, Daikundi, Panjshir, Jawzjan, Farah, Faryab, Badghis, Baghlan, Kunar, and Paktia were polled on the Taliban's preconditions for participation in the Turkey Conference on Afghanistan Peace for June 2021's edition of the Women's Peace Brief.**
- **59.61% said the Taliban's preconditions for participation in the Istanbul Conference are not legitimate, 14.31% said they are somewhat legitimate, and 11.92% said they are legitimate.**
- **66.81% of respondents did not agree with the release of 7,000 Taliban prisoners by the Afghan government in exchange for a nationwide ceasefire while only 15% agreed and 13% somewhat agreed.**
- **85.94% of respondents said they are concerned that the Taliban fighters will rejoin the battlefield if they are released and another 8.44% said they are somewhat concerned.**
- **81.97% were concerned that the release of Taliban prisoners will limit women's mobility in their community and another 12.11% said they are somewhat concerned.**
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were organized in 13 provinces. Participants overwhelmingly echoed the responses of the women polled in the survey. The majority stressed that Taliban preconditions are not legitimate and strongly disagreed with the release of 7,000 Taliban prisoners (saying that they will rejoin the battlefield). They proposed a number of measures that the Afghan government and the intentional community could put in place to ameliorate women's concerns over the release of these prisoners.**

Background and the Survey Questions: Since the postponement of US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan from the agreed 1st May 2021 to the 11th September 2021, the Taliban have refused to attend the Istanbul Conference that was scheduled for the 24th April. According to media sources, the proposed 10-day Istanbul Conference was expected to discuss an interim power-sharing administration between the Afghan government, the Taliban, and the political opposition. A precise date for the conference is not formally agreed on yet, but according to news sources the Taliban have preconditioned their participation in the conference to the release of 7,000 Taliban prisoners and the removal of their leaders from international blacklists. A month later, news reports showed that the Taliban proposed three additional conditions: that the agenda should not include decision-making on critical issues, the conference should not be longer than three days, and their delegation should be low-level. In response, the Afghan government said it would agree to the release of 7,000 Taliban prisoners if there was a breakthrough in peace talks and a nationwide ceasefire was enforced.









Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held in 13 provinces (Herat, Bamiyan, Kandahar, Helmand, Takhar, Nangarhar, Panjshir, Daikundi, Paktia, Badghis, Farah and Jawzjan):

Participants were asked their thoughts about the survey results and how they themselves would respond. Except for one participant in Helmand province, all participants agreed that the Taliban's preconditions were not legitimate. When asked why, the participants generally emphasized that peace at any price is not acceptable to them. They also highlighted the previous experience of releasing 5,000 Taliban prisoners (most of whom rejoined the battlefield) and made the case that the Taliban can no longer be trusted. Hence, they argued that release of these prisoners would translate into a rise in the level of violence. This sentiment is understandable because the level of violence was unprecedentedly high in all of these 13 provinces during June. The participants also stressed that these preconditions are illegitimate because they are only in the interest of the Taliban, not in the interest of the Afghan people or the peace process. The participants noted that these preconditions signify that the Taliban are not serious vis-à-vis the peace process, arguing that if they were, they would bring these preconditions to the negotiation table. According to the participants, the Taliban engage in these talks not for peace but for their prisoners to be released. However, the participants highlighted that these preconditions could be legitimate if three conditions are met: if both sides set preconditions, rather than only the Taliban side; if agreeing to these preconditions result in a ceasefire; and if there are guarantees that the human rights and democratic advancements of the past two decades are preserved.

In the survey, a majority of respondents (66.81%) did not agree with the release of Taliban prisoners in exchange for a ceasefire, which was a priority for women in the past. We asked participants in the focus groups as to what could explain this change in the attitude of women. A majority of the participants pointed to the rise in violence that followed the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners and stressed that women have lost their trust in the Taliban and their promises. All participants were unanimous that the Taliban do not take women's rights seriously. They also highlighted that women are particularly concerned about the rise in violence and the threat of the Taliban since women bear a bigger brunt of the violence as a vulnerable demographic. According to the UN, the number of civilian casualties for May and June 2021 was the highest for those months since UNAMA began recording casualties in 2009,[1] and women, boys and girls made up close to half of all civilian casualties in the first half of 2021.[2] Participants once again emphasized that the Taliban are not serious about peace and want to take advantage of this opportunity to release their prisoners. The participants

[1] UNAMA, 26 July 2021. "Civilian casualties set to hit unprecedented highs in 2021 unless urgent action to stem violence – UN report". https://unama.unmissions.org/civilian-casualties-set-hit-unprecedented-highs-2021-unless-urgent-action-stem-violence-%E2%80%93-un-report
[2] Ibid.

also expressed that women are concerned about their achievements of the past two decades, making the case that the release of 7,000 Taliban prisoners would further endanger those gains.

All of the participants unanimously echoed the concerns of 85.94% of the survey respondents that the 7,000 prisoners will rejoin the battlefield if released. A majority of the participants expressed absolute certainty, using terms like "they will obviously return to battlefield," "I am absolutely sure they will return to the battlefield," "there is no doubt that they will return to the battlefield," and "I am confident that they will return to the battlefield." They cited the experience of releasing 5,000 prisoners as the reason for their certainty. A minority of the participants pointed to reintegration as a measure that could prevent their return to the battlefield. A few of the participants in Kandahar, Takhar, and Jawzjan said that these prisoners might not rejoin the battlefield if they are provided with job opportunities. One respondent in Takhar said that they will not return to the battlefield if they are provided with marriage opportunities.

When asked what the Afghan government and the Taliban can do to allay women's concerns regarding the release of these prisoners, the participants pointed to a number of potential measures. As far as the Afghan government is concerned, the participants stressed that it should seek "strong" guarantees from the international community, particularly the countries who are involved in the Afghan peace process and those who support the Taliban. They also highlighted that the Afghan government should ask for guarantees from the United Nations. The participants also pointed to the role that sanctions by the international community and the UN can play in this regard and suggested that the Afghan government rally the support of the international community to make the Taliban abide by their promises. The participants also proposed that the Afghan government set particular punishments for those prisoners who rejoin the battlefield. Another measure that was suggested by the participants was agreement by both parties to a ceasefire and conditioning of prisoner release to the preservation of women's rights. The participants also suggested the establishment of a joint commission by both parties to monitor the released prisoners and propose measures in the event of their return to the battlefield. One participant in Daikundi province suggested that these prisoners be released from prisons but relocated to a third country, preferably to a mediator or hosted inside Afghanistan under the supervision of a mediator country. As to what the Taliban can do in this regard, the participants insisted that the Taliban cannot be trusted even if they provide guarantees. All of the participants cited that the 5,000 prisoners who were released previously joined the insurgents on the battlefield, causing a surge in the level of violence.

Methodology: Bishnaw's survey questions are based on discussions taking place at the negotiation table in real-time. Each month, researchers develop four closed-ended questions using a Likert methodological approach and one open-ended question which surveyors use in their telephonic surveys after having attained the consent of the participants. Peace Facilitators conduct short-hand face-to-face surveys in the provinces using the same questions. Findings collected from the tele-surveys and short-hand face-to-face surveys are then collated and key findings are drawn to inform the Focus Group Discussions that are subsequently held with women community leaders (members of Bishnaw's Women Peace Circles). By triangulating the voices collected, Bishnaw ensures that it checks its findings against several methodological approaches to best reflect on-the-ground realities. They are then consolidated into a Women's Peace Brief which Bishnaw not only transfers to the negotiating parties and stakeholders involved in the peace process but also (through a feedback loop) back to the respondents surveyed so that they may gain an understanding of the opinions of women across the country.

About Bishnaw: Bishnaw is an initiative that collects the opinions of women from a wide-sector of Afghan society on key issues related to the ongoing peace negotiations and shares those opinions with the negotiation table, stakeholders involved in the peace process, civil society organizations and the public. Additionally, by sharing its findings with women in the Track I, Bishnaw enables this Track to table the views put forward by women at the grassroots level. Alternatively, a key activity of Bishnaw is to also share its survey findings back with those surveyed via SMS technology, thereby treating them as stakeholders in this process.