

Submission to the House of Commons Special Committee on Afghanistan (AFGH)

Context

The Committee has heard important, informative, and heartbreaking testimony of what happened in the lead up to the fall of Kabul in August of last year and what has happened since.

We would like to highlight a few key points to help inform the Committee’s deliberations and the formulation of recommendations.

Women, girls, and LGBTQI people face daily challenges in Afghanistan – including violence. While life has deteriorated for most since last August, women, young women, girls and LGBTQI people face grave challenges, especially those who have organized and spoken out for their rights. There are numerous reports of attacks on women by local authorities.¹ Women face severe mobility restrictions, within the country and to board international flights.² These mobility restrictions combine with the general economic collapse to produce severe drops in income and hunger. Women report wide-spread depression and psychological problems, with numerous cases of suicide.³ A recent report by 14 UN independent human rights experts noted that the global freezing of assets is also a contributor to the ‘suffering of women.’⁴ Members of the LGBTQI community report being attacked, sexually assaulted, or directly threatened by members of the Taliban because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.⁵

The devastating humanitarian situation harms all, and it is important to ensure that women (especially women who head households) are central to humanitarian assistance efforts. There are reports of assistance not reaching women and their families.⁶ Humanitarian good practice notes the importance of ensuring women’s needs, voices and skills are part of the response. To do this, women humanitarian workers are needed, as are consultations with the full diversity of women, with an emphasis on women-headed households.

Despite difficult circumstances, women continue to organize, resist, and work towards a better Afghanistan – both inside and outside of Afghanistan. According to our partner in the country “women’s rights organizations are standing their ground and working, but women-led work is even harder than before.”

¹ Kumar, Ruchi and Hikmat Noori (2022). *Taliban Launch Raids on Homes of Women Rights Activists*. The Guardian. January 20th, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/20/taliban-arrest-afghan-womens-rights-activist-witness-says>

² *No Long-Distance Travel for Women Without Male Relative*. Aljazeera. December 21, 2021.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/26/afghanistan-long-distance-travel-women-without-male-escort-taliban>

³ Biweekly Updates from Women and Peace Studies Organization.

⁴ Farge, Emma (2022). *US asset freezes worsen Afghan women’s suffering – UN experts*. Reuters. April 25, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-asset-freezes-worsen-afghan-womens-suffering-un-experts-2022-04-25/>

⁵ Human Rights Watch (2022). *“Even if You Go to the Skies, We’ll Find You”: LGBT People in Afghanistan After the Taliban Takeover*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/01/26/even-if-you-go-skies-well-find-you/lgbt-people-afghanistan-after-taliban-takeover>

⁶ Women for Women International (2022). *“No One Hears Our Voices” Situational Assessment and Recommended Actions Based on the Perspectives and Experiences of Afghan Women*. March. <https://www.womenforwomen.org/no-one-hears-our-voices>

Many activists have fled the country or are in hiding. Others continue with their activism under very difficult circumstances.⁷ Women in Afghanistan have organized protests and media conferences. The Afghan Women's Network continues to operate one shelter for women facing violence, out of the 30 that they operated prior to August 2021.⁸ There are many Afghan women now in Canada who continue to speak out and advocate.⁹

Women-led organizations continue their work, but face enormous challenges, including the lack of financing. For years, women's organizations in Afghanistan have been under-funded.¹⁰ Current restrictions on Canadian organizations operating in Afghanistan (as outlined by many witnesses to this Committee) make it difficult to support the day-to-day operations of women's organizations. A key Global Affairs initiative aimed at supporting women's organizations in Afghanistan (Women's Voice and Leadership) has frozen all work. At the Equality Fund, we are unsure if we will be able to continue to support an organization that continues to function. They operate a lifesaving shelter and services in Kabul despite great difficulties. (We are not naming this organization in this public document for security reasons).

According to the Urgent Action Fund Asia and the Pacific (UAF-AP) the financial needs of human rights defenders are underestimated by the global community. The Fund raised \$1.2M to meet survival and security needs of defenders in Afghanistan thinking it would last them until June. All the money was disbursed by December 2021. Relocation outside of the country, within Kabul, away from certain provinces as well as psychosocial support are huge needs. UAF-AP estimates that more than 300 grants will be needed this year to support the resistance and resilience of Afghan women and non-binary defenders. They told us "the determination to survive is the resistance they continue to mount against forces oppressing them. Many defenders have moved their work to more secure online modes and channels."

Many women's rights activists and women human rights defenders (including journalists, politicians, judges and civil society leaders) are still attempting to find asylum. Many activists are still in Afghanistan, often in hiding. Others are in 'lily pad' or third countries, still waiting on more durable resettlement options. They face expiring visas, no means of economic support, and declining hope.

As many have noted before the Committee, there is an urgent need to address the slow pace, lack of transparency, and bureaucracy of Canada's support to Afghans under threat. Canada currently offers no hope to those still in Afghanistan, as official refugee determination by UNHCR is required.

Recommendations

The Government of Canada frequently mentions its feminist foreign policy and feminist international assistance policy. We call for the clear, coherent, and consistent application of these policies in the case of

⁷ See, for example, Mariam Safi's address to the United Nations Security Council on March 2, 2022.

https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/resource/un-security-council-briefing-on-afghanistan-by-mariam-safi/#_ftn19

⁸ Parria, Sara (2022). *Protections for Women Facing Violence Have Vanished Under the Taliban*. The New Humanitarian. April 20, 2022. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/04/20/afghanistans-empty-womens-shelters>

⁹ One of the witnesses who appeared before the Committee, Wazhma Frogh recently published this piece in CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/22/opinions/afghanistan-taliban-girls-education-media-frogh/index.html>

¹⁰ Sharma, Pushkar and Tenzin Doler (2021). *Afghan Women's Rights Activists Have Long Been Underfunded. This Must Change*. Open Democracy. September 2021. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/afghan-women-donors-leadership/>

Afghanistan. There is a need to consult with and listen to Afghan women and LGBTQI people and respond to their needs and priorities.

Recommendation 1 - the Government of Canada take immediate action to facilitate the evacuation, travel, and resettlement in Canada of Afghans at risk. In addition to fulfilling commitments to those who worked with the Canadian Armed Forces mission, there is also an urgent **need to focus on women human rights defenders, LGBTQI rights defenders, and women activists.** Many of these activists also worked with Canadian (and other international) initiatives and were encouraged to organize for their rights and pursue new opportunities.

We urge the Government to provide sex-disaggregated data on refugees arriving in Canada, including the primary applicant. It is important to know how many women rights defenders have been resettled in Canada.

Recommendation 2 - the Government of Canada provide support and resources to women-led and LGBTQI organizations operating in Afghanistan and to Afghan women participating in discussions on the future of Afghanistan outside of the country. In the short-term, Canadian humanitarian assistance should include support for women's organizations involved in the delivery of assistance, gender-based violence response and prevention, and related initiatives. In the medium term, there is a need for core or flexible funding for the range of women's organizations working on additional issues such as women's economic survival, girls' education, healthcare (including mental and psycho-social assistance), dialogues with religious authorities on the rights of women and girls, and community peacebuilding.

Support to Afghan women leaders in exile is also important if they are to play meaningful roles in dialogues and discussions on the future of Afghanistan.

As raised by many witnesses, changes to Canadian anti-terrorism legislation and/or special provisions to allow Canadian organizations to resume activities in Afghanistan without fear of prosecution are needed. Canadian provisions appear to be much more restrictive than those of other countries.¹¹

Recommendation 3 - the Government of Canada take strong diplomatic measures to ensure the support for women's rights in Afghanistan. We have heard time and again from Afghan women leaders that the international community must engage with the de facto leaders of Afghanistan, while withholding official recognition until basic human rights are respected. This includes but is not limited to the rights of women and girls to education, employment, protection from violence, and participation in public life. Specific recommendations include:

- Work with like-minded governments (with a focus on those who also have a feminist foreign policy) to develop coordinated and effective engagement strategies.
- Ensure that delegations include significant numbers of women and women in leadership positions.
- Engage/support the engagement of faith leadership from other countries with more progressive views of women's rights.
- Back up policy declarations with investments in women's rights organizations.

¹¹ Loft, Philip (2022). *Aid to Taliban- Controlled Afghanistan*. UK House of Commons Library. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9343/CBP-9343.pdf>

Recommendation 4 - the Government of Canada work with other governments and multilateral organizations to meet the humanitarian needs of all Afghans, including women, LGBTQI people and girls. In the current context, dedicated efforts are required to ensure that humanitarian organizations can employ women. This is essential to ensure that aid reaches women-headed households and moves to vulnerable individuals and communities. Women's participation in needs assessments, monitoring of distribution, and reporting/evaluation is also required. Humanitarian assistance must also include attention to sexual and gender-based violence, as well as reproductive healthcare.

Recommendation 5 - the Government of Canada develop mechanisms to consult with Afghan women leaders (in all their diversity) and representatives of women's and LGBTQI organizations both inside and outside of Afghanistan on a regular basis. We have heard that Afghan women feel abandoned by the international community. Given Canada's long-term support for women's rights in Afghanistan and commitments to feminist approaches, it is crucial that Global Affairs Canada ensures that there is more than token consultation with Afghan women and LGBTQI people. The full diversity of women's voices, priorities, and perspectives need to be heard by policymakers.

Conclusion

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy and National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security provide bold policy mandates. The crisis in Afghanistan is a litmus test of Canada's ability and determination to make these words count. Women's rights activists in Afghanistan listened to Canadian officials when we urged them to step up and claim their rights. They moved in brave and courageous ways – both before August 2021 and after. We are now called to be equally brave and courageous in our support of them.

Respectfully submitted by the Equality Fund

April 29, 2022

Inspired by the radical ambition of feminist movements, we are building the largest self-sustaining fund for gender equality in the world. At the Equality Fund, we combine gender-lens investing, bold government funding, and powerful, multi-sector philanthropy to unlock new capital for feminist movements globally. equalityfund.ca / equalityfund.ca/fr