



Select Committee on International Relations and Defence

Corrected oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan

Wednesday 28 October 2020

10 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Alton of Liverpool; Baroness Blackstone; Baroness Fall; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Lord Mendelsohn; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Baroness Rawlings; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham.

Evidence Session No. 11

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 92 - 99

Witnesses

I: Baroness Hodgson of Abinger, Co-Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security, and former Patron, Afghan Connection; Dr Sima Samar, Special Envoy of the President and State Minister for Human Rights and International Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Member, UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Displacement, and Member, UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger and Dr Sima Samar.

Q92 The Chair: Good morning and welcome to this meeting of the International Relations and Defence Select Committee in the House of Lords. I welcome our witnesses who are going to give us expert evidence today. Dr Sima Samar is special envoy of the President of Afghanistan and State Minister for Human Rights and International Affairs of Afghanistan. Baroness Hodgson of Abinger chairs the Advisory Board of Gender Action for Peace and Security, and is on the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office Steering Board of the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative. She co-chairs the All-Party Group on Women, Peace and Security and is was a patron of the Afghan Connection.

Welcome to both of you. Thank you for joining us to share your expertise as we take public evidence for our inquiry. At this stage, I always remind Members and witnesses that our session is on the record. It is transcribed and broadcast. I remind members of the Committee that, when they ask questions, they should declare any interests immediately at that stage. If there is any time remaining at the end of this session, I will turn to my colleagues for supplementaries.

I shall begin, as usual, by asking the first quite general question before I then turn to my colleagues for the more detailed questions to follow. To what extent have women's rights and participation progressed in Afghanistan since 2001? What have been the main achievements, and what have been the failures?

Dr Sima Samar: Good morning, everyone. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today. I hope that our discussion will be useful.

There is no doubt that the participation of women and progress on women's rights in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime after 2002 is remarkable, but we still have a lot of issues to talk about. I begin with the achievements. Access to education, as you all know, was restricted during the time of the Taliban. There were very few schools for girls. I was running some of the schools, particularly a high school for girls that was the only one in the country during the Taliban regime. Now, between 37% and 40% of the children attending school are girls. A lot of girls go on to higher education and to university. There are between 25% and 32% or 33% of girls participating in higher education, and in some of the private universities it goes up to 36%.

If we look at access to health, a lot of women want the possibility to study medicine and become doctors. A lot of midwives have been trained, and they play a very active role in the reduction of mother and child mortality rates in the country. Due to the continuation of conflict in the country, Afghanistan is, unfortunately, one of the countries that still has polio. There is lack of access to places that promote vaccination for everyone and lack of access to vaccine for everyone. We still have

problems through not having enough female staff in the remote parts of the country and in the areas controlled by the Taliban.

If we look at women's access to business, we now have women who are the head of a company or who run a company. Of course, they are not as big as the companies run by men, who earn millions of dollars, but they already play a strong role in the community. They also have a role in the production of items for business. I saw a young girl who was sending dried fruit to India. I was surprised, because she was also sending it to Europe, including England, so there is a drive to those areas. Women play a strong role in the production of saffron. The country and our partners are trying to replace opium with saffron, and women play a strong role in collection, packaging and so on.

There are more women in the judicial system, including in the Attorney-General's Office. There are female prosecutors. For the first time in our history, we have a special prosecutor's office for the elimination of violence against women, but it is not enough. It is in the capital city, but most of the women who face violence are in the rural part of the country, which they cannot reach. It is usually one person. If she is sick or has other problems, she cannot handle all the cases.

We have female judges. Unfortunately, again because of security, they cannot go to even the capitals of the provinces. They stay in Kabul. We have more than 170 female judges. They are appointed in different provinces, but they stay in Kabul or in the provinces where there is more security. We need to provide security for everyone. Our aim should not be only for the big cities.

We have more than 3,000 women police. We have around 2,000 women in the army; it is not exactly 2,000—it is around 1,800. As you know, we have women in politics. We have a 25% quota in parliament. Of course, we are not saying that it is perfect, but, even physically, a woman sitting beside a warlord in parliament is itself a big achievement.

We have a lot of achievements. As you know, there are talks going on in Doha. We have four women out of 21 delegates from the Afghan government side. It is not enough and we are not satisfied, but it is better than nothing. I believe that the participation of women, particularly at the negotiation table, is a very powerful tool for the benefit of the republic—the people who believe in democracy. It will put pressure on the Taliban to accept the reality and the existence of women being part of society. That is something we keep calling for.

We all know that Security Council Resolution 1325¹ was a ground-breaking achievement, but it will be more meaningful and useful when we

¹ The Security Council adopted resolution (S/RES/1325) on women and peace and security on 31 October 2000. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the

implement it properly, and that requires 30% of women to be part of the peace process. Women's inclusion in the peace process will make the peace more durable, sustainable and successful. We need more women. I keep lobbying for that. We should be acknowledged as equal citizens of our country.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I now turn to Baroness Hodgson.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Thank you, and good morning. It is a huge honour to share this platform with Dr Samar, for whom I have enormous respect and whom I have had the pleasure of meeting on several occasions.

We should not forget that in 2001 women had almost no rights under the Taliban. They had a saying that a 'woman's place is in the home or the grave'. They enforced its very strict version of Islamic Sharia law, banning women from schooling, from working, from leaving the house without a male chaperone and from showing their skin in public. Women were not allowed to talk to men outside their families. They had almost no healthcare, because women were not allowed to work, all the doctors were men, and women were not allowed to connect with men outside their families. They were not allowed to be involved in politics. They were invisible in public life. They were mostly imprisoned in their homes.

We all remember the iconic pictures of women from head to toe in blue burkas, which you can still see on the streets in Afghanistan. Since then there has been enormous progress, as Dr Samar was saying. The new constitution of Afghanistan in 2004 gave women equality and established a quota of 25% of seats in the lower House for women.

Recently, President Ghani has been very strong on ensuring that women are included in the government. He has created positions in the provinces for women deputy governors. Dr Samar listed all the areas where women are now working, where they were not before. Some of them are ground-breaking. The UN Ambassador for Afghanistan, Adela Raz, is a woman. We have only just had our first woman ambassador to the UN.

In 2017, a woman cadet won best overall cadet in the officer training academy. As Dr Samar listed, there are women who are lawyers, teachers, pilots and journalists. Women are in the police and in the army. The First Lady has also spoken out a lot and organised symposiums in Kabul addressing issues for women, and making sure that they are prominent.

However, there is a long way to go, as Dr Samar so rightly said. Security is one of the worst failures. Women are threatened and assassinated. Last Sunday, a woman police officer was shot dead in Kandahar. Fawzia Koofi, one of the negotiators in Doha, was attacked five or six weeks ago.

Her driver was killed, and she was shot. She ended up in hospital, injured but, *incredibly* luckily, not badly.

There is a persistence of traditional norms across the country: child marriage and virginity tests; and sex outside marriage being a sin for women. There is a lack of healthcare, as Dr Samar said, particularly maternal healthcare. There are high rates of insecurity. There are very high breast cancer rates in very young women. Of course, there are no cancer services.

Accurate data is hard to obtain in Afghanistan. One quotes figures, but it is hard to know how accurate they are. There are high rates of domestic violence, estimated by some to be as high as 87%. Of course, that is against a background of endemic corruption in the country. There has been progress, but, as Dr Samar so rightly says, there is a lot further to go.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We now turn to the detailed questions.

Q93 **Lord Purvis of Tweed:** Thank you both for being positive, but also for balance from Baroness Hodgson. Earlier in our inquiry, we had evidence from Dr Ashley Jackson from the Overseas Development Institute, which described some of the descriptions of progress very critically. She called them “one of the greatest lies of this war ... the advances have been inflated, fabricated and revealed to be false ... investments made ... have been driven by donor political prerogatives”. It is good to have a balance of views.

I looked at the Human Development Index. Over the last decade, there has been a plateauing of some of the progress made after considerable advances. Dr Samar, you mentioned areas where there are still challenges to security. You mentioned averages across Afghanistan, but averages may skew some of the information with regard to the socioeconomic background of people or geographical background.

Where are the areas of greatest challenge for women’s development? On women’s development, Afghanistan is still 170th of 189 countries in the world. Where would you say are the most challenging areas on socioeconomic groups, cultural or geographical backgrounds?

Dr Sima Samar: As I mentioned, and as my friend Baroness Hodgson—a good friend of Afghanistan—mentioned, progress in Afghanistan is not equal for every part of the country. In some parts of the country where there is security, there is more development. I will give you an example. Although there is not a lot of money or support for development, in Bamiyan you can see women who have more freedom. They are in journalism. They have a bicycle riding group and they ride bicycles to go to university and school, but that is not possible in areas such as Zabul, Uruzgan, Nuristan or Paktika, in conservative parts of society. A lot of development money was spent in those areas, because the overall agenda and theory was to gain the hearts and minds of people who are

more problematic in the areas where the Taliban was strong, unfortunately.

It all depends on the level of education in those societies, but if the security is not good, of course the level of education is not good either. I will give you an example. Every year, in the university entrance exam, we do not have a lot of girls from the provinces that I mentioned because there is hardly a high school with a good quality of education for girls. First, we do not have the facilities and, secondly, we do not have female teachers. When girls reach the age of 10 or 12 in their schooling, either at fifth grade or sixth grade, the drop-out rate is much higher because their families do not allow them to attend the school if it does not have female teachers.

We should focus on those needs and then try to have equal distribution of resources. I argue that we should build a good quality of development and education, health and so on in the provinces that have less violence, which do not produce opium and do not participate in terrorist activities, in order to show people the benefit of a peaceful life and living non-violently. The definition of peace is different from my point of view; it should be human security rather than only a ceasefire.

We need to focus on those areas. Of course, female education, female access to health services and female security can be an indicator of so-called human development.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Obviously, I do not have the in-depth knowledge across the country that Dr Samar does. Lord Purvis talked about development. There was progress ~~that~~ but some has slipped back. We should remember that the pull-out of Western forces and the pull-down, and the handing over of security to Afghan forces, has had an effect in some places. My understanding is that there are some areas that the Government are holding well, and other areas where they have had to let go. Obviously, as Dr Samar said, where the Taliban has more control, progress for women will have slipped backwards. Because some of those areas are very insecure, it is very hard to collect accurate data there. We do not always quite know how things are, but some very worrying things have come out.

There are many girls out of school in provinces such as Ghazni and north Faryab. I suspect that things are not very good in those provinces, whereas in other provinces such as Bamiyan, which Dr Samar talked about, where the Hazaras have much more of a tradition of encouraging women into society, things are much better. It is very uneven across the country.

Q94 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** Good morning, and thank you very much for that very useful testimony. I declare an interest, having lived for two years in Afghanistan rather a long time ago—1961 to 1963—when the role of women in Afghanistan and their position was a lot less good than it is now, but better than it became under the Taliban.

Could both of you say something about the current lack of protection, fair application of the rule of law and access to justice for women in Afghanistan? This is rather a difficult question to answer: could you give some idea of your view of the balance between what is written down in law in the constitution and in parliamentary laws, and what is actually practised on the ground by law enforcement agents and ordinary people in their daily lives?

Dr Sima Samar: In my personal view, if there is no rule of law in the country, nothing will function. Health, education and the judicial system will be problematic if the law is not completely implemented, and unfortunately we face that practically in our country.

For the first time in our history, domestic violence has been criminalised, and we have an elimination of violence against women law in the country. It was signed by President Karzai in 2009, before the election, but it has not been approved by Parliament in 10 years. That shows that we still have a lot of problems with the conservative mentality of some Members of Parliament. There are not a lot of them, but they take the law hostage by misusing Islam and *Takfiri*, the Daesh-style of accusation. People still try not to be seen as *Kafir* or non-believers, so the law is stuck in the Parliament. It is enforced in some parts of the country, but wherever a judge does not believe in it, and his mentality is not as good and does not accord with the law, he does not apply the law of the country.

The reform of the judicial system—the Attorney General’s Office, the prosecutor’s office and the courts in general—is not completely done yet. The whole reform of the judicial system in Afghanistan was delayed and not much attention was paid to it. I mentioned the elimination of violence against women and the special prosecutor’s office in the different provinces, but it is only one person. Recently, it has at least been all female; that is the good part. Another issue is lack of awareness among people. People do not know much about the law and the implementation of the law.

Unfortunately, because of corruption in the country, a culture of impunity continues, particularly on violence against women. Even under the elimination of violence against women law, when a woman complains about the violence done to her by a partner, father-in-law, brother-in-law or someone—particularly the husband—he might be jailed for three or six months, but the problem is that she depends economically on that person. She usually takes back her claim in the prosecutor’s office, because who is going to feed her and her children? There is lack of social security and all those issues.

As I said, it is a good achievement to have the elimination of violence against women law and the criminalisation of domestic violence for the first time in our history, but even in the law there are some issues that need to be reformed, including the point I just mentioned.

Implementation of the law is another issue. Unfortunately, there are a lot of problems with the implementation of law and the rule of law in the

country. We have to promote the accountability of people who break the law, never mind that they are the prosecutors, the police or the whole legal system. The police, the prosecutor and the courts are parts of the legal system chain, and they all have to be looked at and focused on in order to provide justice to the people.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Access to law is very important and is very variable across the country, I suspect. Generally, insecurity has increased since the peace talks began. There have been many attacks on women. There was a terrible attack in May on a maternity hospital. They killed midwives, pregnant women, women who had just given birth and new babies. Women in senior positions are being particularly targeted, as I talked about earlier.

As Dr Samar said, there are many more women now in the justice system as lawyers. The first woman sat in the Supreme Court in 2018, and there are more women judges. The figures vary. I think Dr Samar said that there are now 170. In 2018, there was one report saying 300, but the data is not always very accurate.

I think it helps. Nangarhar has just appointed its first female court judge, so there has been progress on encouraging women into the judiciary and into the police. There has been a lot of work trying to ensure that women in the police are protected, because, to begin with, women in the police had very lowly positions and were often attacked themselves. Their families did not want them to go into the police. They were given a bad reputation, but there has been a lot of work on that, taking women police officers to Turkey for training, so that when women go to a police station they do not necessarily talk to a man, but, again, it is patchy across the country.

Lord Hannay, you asked in particular about written parliamentary laws and how they are practised on the ground. Dr Samar has told us about the EVAW law. It is terrible that it was not put through Parliament. It had to be introduced by presidential decree, and that says a lot about the climate still in Afghanistan. I suspect that at local level many people do not know their rights. Therefore, local justice is able to prevail. There are still reports of women being stoned to death for adultery or being made to marry their rapist to maintain family honour.

I have already touched on the high rates of domestic violence. As Dr Samar said, it is very difficult, because it is very hard to be a woman on your own in Afghan society. Even where there are refuges, particularly in the major cities, to go there is to commit social suicide; it is very difficult for women to have a way out of them and to start a life on their own. They will often be unprotected. Even their families refuse to take them back after they have been to a refuge. There is a whole area of difficulty that still needs to be addressed.

Q95 **Lord Alton of Liverpool:** I thank Dr Samar and Baroness Hodgson for their powerful testimonies. Notwithstanding the problems of collecting accurate data, may I invite our witnesses to provide the inquiry with any

further details they may have about current levels of access to, enrolment in and completion of education for girls in Afghanistan? How does it vary? They have already touched on this, but do they have any details about how it varies in different parts of the country?

Among the obstacles girls face, can you say something more about the impact of the Taliban's ideological commitment to early child marriage, which Baroness Hodgson referred to, denying a girl the opportunity to complete her education, and the previous implacable hostility to girls' education manifested by their attempt in neighbouring Pakistan to murder Malala Yousafzai? Given those things, how will a return to power or power-sharing by the Taliban jeopardise the gains that girls and women have made?

Dr Sima Samar: I want to clarify the number of judges. We have more than 300 judges currently; 171 are appointed in different provinces, but they live in the capital or in provinces close to the capital because of security. They work there rather than going to a district in Badakhshan or in Ghor, for example. I want to be clear about that.

As you know, more than 8 million children go to school, but due to the security situation the number of girls' schools that are closed is much higher than before. I talked yesterday with someone from Ghor, where only two districts out of nine are fully under the control of the government. In those districts, girls are allowed to go to school, but in the other seven districts, which are mainly under the control of the Taliban, only the capital building of the district is under the control of the government. The girls' schools are closed, so they do not have access to education, unfortunately. The number given by the Ministry of Education is that between 3 million and 4 million children do not have access to education. Some schools are still open on paper, but in reality they are not open for girls or, if they go, it is a very small number. They take a risk to get an education.

Of the 3 million to 4 million children who do not have access to education, the majority are girls. The other problem, which I already mentioned, is that the drop-out rate of girls from school is much higher compared with that for boys, because of the lack of facilities and the lack of female teachers. The overall patriarchal, male-dominated mentality in areas under the control of the Taliban unfortunately limits girls' education and promotes child marriage and forced marriage.

People say that the Taliban changed. It has not changed. Taliban lashed a woman when she was talking by phone to some man. She was crying while they were hitting her, "I was talking to my brother". It is so difficult because we do not know who was on the other end of the telephone, unless you know the man who was talking. Not everyone has access to the internet in order to see the face. They were lashing the woman because she was talking on the telephone. There are still a lot of problems. The drop-out of girls from school is high. They are only able to partially read and then they drop out. They cannot take a very active role in development and in decision-making in their families or society.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: I back up everything that Dr Samar says. I return to the fact that accurate statistics are difficult to find. According to the Malala Fund, 3.7 million children are out of school in Afghanistan. The figures vary as to how many of them are girls, but Human Rights Watch says that 85% are girls and that there are around 2.2 million girls out of school. It is estimated that 37% of adolescent girls are literate, compared with 66% of boys, so girls are half as literate as boys.

In many parts of the country, there is a shortage of schools and insufficient transportation to get children to school. Some very remote villages do not have schools. In some places, they have set up community schools. There is also an issue about teachers. Many of them do not have minimum academic qualifications themselves, so the quality of education can be very variable.

Only 16% of schools in Afghanistan are for girls only, and many lack proper sanitation facilities, which also hinders attendance. There are many schools that have been funded from the West. As Baroness Anelay said, I was patron—that has now finished—of an organisation called Afghan Connection that built schools in the north-east. That was very encouraging; village elders would approach the organisation, wanting schools, and asking it to come and build schools. They wanted their girls educated. They recognised how important education was, and would be, for everybody, to lift villages out of poverty.

We have a problem. In the areas that are controlled by the Taliban, the Taliban is now taxing organisations to do things and to build schools. Western, especially British, organisations cannot fund schools there, because they would be paying terrorists to allow them to build, which is contrary to UK law. We are not allowed to fund terrorism. In areas where the Taliban holds sway, that is a very difficult issue.

Dr Samar talked about girls falling out of school. Again, the data has to be taken lightly, but the average is 5.6 years in school for an Afghan girl who actually goes to school, with early marriage often preventing completion of their education. Insecurity is a major cause of girls not going to school in many places. In 2018, Al Jazeera reported that 60% of Afghan girls are out of school due to conflict, poverty, child marriage and discrimination.

The Chair: We are very grateful for the expert evidence you are giving. I am also mindful as to time, which is always our enemy, so I ask Baroness Fall and Lord Grocott to ask their questions one after the other, and I invite our witnesses to address both questions together.

Q96 **Baroness Fall:** Thank you so much for your time and your testimonies this morning. I want to return to the question of women and their participation in politics in Afghanistan. You touched on this already when you talked about the percentage in parliament and participation in the negotiations in Doha.

What was your assessment of the participation, and what are the barriers to future progress? In particular, I want to ask about women in politics on the ground. There is a sense from previous testimony we have heard that there is a sort of elite of women politicians in Afghanistan now, but that does not necessarily trickle down to the grass roots.

Q97 **Lord Grocott:** I can help a little, because Dr Samar has already answered a lot of the first part of my question, which was about the number of women taking part in the peace talks. I think she said that it was four out of 21. Obviously, it is important that women's representation is strengthened for all sorts of reasons, including the durability of any peace settlement. Unless Dr Samar wants to add to any of that, I think we have probably covered that section.

The other half of the question was about the generally expressed fear that we have heard from some of our witnesses that, somehow or other, the advances that have been made in respect of women's rights, participation and everything else in recent years might be forgotten during the peace talks, in the face of so many other important objectives. Might that one fall by the wayside?

Dr Sima Samar: On women's political participation, as I said, we have a 25% quota system for women in parliament. We still have some problems, because most of those women are somehow ethnically or politically connected or related, in order to be supported to come to the parliament. I would still say that the physical presence of women is positive, but we need more committed women to be Members of Parliament, rather than being somebody's tool to come to the parliament. That is one of the issues.

The second point is that participation in politics requires a budget. The majority of women in the country are not as rich as the men who got richer after the fall of the Taliban. In parliament, we have more businessmen, unfortunately, and not real politicians committed to promoting democracy or democratic values in the country.

The other problem that female politicians face is male-dominated ideology and the misuse of culture and tradition in the country, and religion. There is a combination of misuse of religion and misuse of culture and tradition, which is unwritten law by men; male domination and patriarchal ideology in one package restrict women's mobility, activity and participation in politics. Unfortunately, that is not only in Afghanistan; in our region, there is the same kind of tool against women.

There are four women in the 21-member negotiating team on the government's side. There are 21 men on the Taliban side, so of the 42 people only four are women; the other side has no women. Another issue that restricts women's participation is that the US-Taliban negotiation ignored the Afghan government. I think that put a lot of pressure on the Afghan government side. There is still the issue that the Taliban does not want to recognise the Afghan government. People keep saying that they are intra-Afghan talks, but there is no delegate from the Afghan

government; there is a delegation of people. Of course, the role of women is included in that.

The international community is our partner, and we appreciate its support, but both sides have to learn from their mistakes during the Taliban regime, or before jihad and after the fall of the Taliban regime, in order to fix the partnership, and to have more success in Afghanistan. If we are not successful in the promotion of human rights and the freedom of women in Afghanistan, it will have a very negative impact in the region, in Muslim countries and all over. No country is excluded from that kind of mentality—as we have seen, unfortunately.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Dr Samar has covered the political participation angle. I think the President has been very supportive of women in positions. He has appointed a lot of deputy ministers who are women, on top of the parliamentary quota.

To turn for a minute to the Doha talks, as Dr Samar said, there are four women out of 42 people in all. There are no women on the Taliban side. The women had requested that between 34% 30% and 40% of the negotiators from the government side should be women. They have around 20%.

As I understand it, the peace talks are set up in committees. I think there are four main committees and some temporary committees. As there are so few women, that makes it very difficult for them to cover all the bases. The women who have been sent are brilliant. They would hold their own anywhere, but being one woman on a committee is very hard, whoever you are. I think most of us women have probably at some time been the lone woman in the room, and it is very hard to hold your line.

The Taliban wants to replace the constitution. That is one of its negotiating tactics. It wants to set up some committee of Islamic leaders, and I think we all know what that may mean. Added to that are some worrying rumbles. Saudi has announced that it is going to build 100 religious schools in Afghanistan. One could see things going very badly.

As Dr Samar said, when the US was talking to the Taliban, it was without the Afghan government and there was no mention of women's rights. That is a very worrying development.

The Chair: Thank you. We have just 11 minutes left, so I ask Baroness Blackstone and Baroness Smith to ask their questions together, one after the other, and then for answers to both.

Q98 **Baroness Blackstone:** What is your assessment of the effectiveness of foreign aid expenditure in strengthening women's rights and increasing women's participation? Perhaps in answering that question you could also tell us a bit about what you think are the most and the least effective interventions by foreign aid.

Q99 **Baroness Smith of Newnham:** My question turns more specifically to the UK and what the UK can do. Very often in evidence sessions there is

the more general question, "And what can the UK do to help, or what is our role?"

More specifically this morning, I would be interested to know how you think the UK can best direct its aid. Clearly, Afghanistan is a country to which we direct a lot of aid, but are we directing it in the best way to support women? Are there examples of good practice or things where the UK could do more to have an effective impact?

The Chair: Dr Samar, your evidence about the UK role in that will be particularly valuable as we progress very shortly to looking at heads of report. We know that evidence on that will be essential to our consideration.

Dr Sima Samar: There is no doubt that the support of the international community and the donations of our partners were key for the promotion of women's rights and our achievements. We still have a very long and bumpy road ahead of us. We would like our partners to stand with us in order to achieve the goal that we have in mind.

For the first few years after the fall of the Taliban, the issue of women's rights and women's participation was quite good, but slowly it has fallen from the agenda. Not as much attention was paid to it as there should have been. The majority of the ambassadors or the people dealing with aid to Afghanistan, even from our partners, are men. On the Afghanistan side, it is always the Minister of Foreign Affairs or the Minister of Finance, who are men. Not enough attention, or equal attention, is paid to gender issues in general. That is one of the issues.

The second point is that, in some of the international conferences on Afghanistan, women's issues are side events. They keep saying, "Yes, we are talking about development and building roads, and men and women use the roads", but nobody thinks about toilets on the main road. When they built the main road from Kabul to Kandahar, for example, they spent more than \$700 million, but you will not find a single toilet for a female passenger. The men usually go to a corner, but nobody thought about the needs of women. We can speak openly here about this; it is such a male-dominated and male-mentality construction approach. That is one of the issues that shows why it is key to have women in designing the policy and the projects. That is just one example.

The UK had a positive role in education. Of course, we still need more support from the UK on education, because the quality of education is not as good as it should be. Yes, going to school is one issue, but having the quality of education to be a positive, effective citizen in the development and promotion of democracy, human rights and so on is another issue.

I think the failure of the UK project or funding was the—

The Chair: There is a problem with the video from Dr Sima Samar. I am not sure whether you can hear us, Dr Samar. For the moment, I invite Baroness Hodgson to answer. If we are able to go back to Dr Samar later, we will do so.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: I agree with all that Dr Samar said. Clearly, foreign aid has helped with women's rights enormously. We have had NGOs working on all sorts of projects to do with education, healthcare and access to justice, water and sanitation. It is patchy. One of the difficult issues right at the moment is that foreigners cannot get out of Kabul. The security situation is so bad that it is very hard to get out on the ground.

The winner in of all this has been education, but, as we heard, it has probably been pushed back in recent years. Not enough work was done on grass-roots projects, understanding local norms, what would work, how to work with local leaders and listening to women at the grass roots. It always was difficult with security, but probably more work needed to be done on that.

Are there any avenues where the UK's involvement could have an impact? I would like to see a strengthening of the institutions for women centrally and better resourcing for the Ministry of Women's Affairs, getting them to scrutinise legislation, as well as building and resourcing women's networks. There are amazing women's networks across Afghanistan, but some support and resourcing, especially at grass-roots level, would help.

We have already discussed addressing violence against women. There are 2.2 million girls out of school, so we must get more into education. There is healthcare, maternity healthcare and early child health. Many very young children still die in Afghanistan. We need to tackle corruption and increase security, because without peace and security life is impossible.

I urge the British Government to support the women in Doha right now, because unless the right answer comes out of the peace talks, and if women's rights are traded away, there can be no peace and security in Afghanistan if it is for only half the population. All the women we have helped to promote and get into high positions will be in terrible danger if the Taliban has its way.

The Chair: I was going to return to Dr Sima Samar. She was able to get in momentarily, but then it appeared that the screen froze again. I am just going to see if I can call her, in case she can do voice rather than video. Dr Samar, can you hear us at this moment? Sadly, it appears not.

Because Dr Samar's evidence was interrupted before she had the opportunity to address the last question put by Baroness Smith about the UK's role, I suggest that we contact her, of course to thank her for today and to see whether she is able to provide some evidence in writing that can assist us as we approach the end of our evidence-taking sessions in the next two or three weeks.

I formally thank both our witnesses today, Dr Sima Samar and Baroness Hodgson, for the depth and breadth of the expertise they have shared with us. I suspend the broadcast session until we begin again in about a minute's time.