

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Situation for women and girls in Afghanistan, HC 1087

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Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Mr Richard Bacon; Mrs Pauline Latham; Chris Law; Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger; Nigel Mills; Navendu Mishra; David Mundell; Kate Osamor; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 1 - 51

Witnesses

I: Sveto Muhammad Ishoq, Founder, Chadari.

II: Elizabeth Winter, Executive Director, British & Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG); Orlaith Minogue, Senior Conflict and Humanitarian Advocacy Adviser, Save the Children; Mark Calder, Senior Humanitarian and Conflict Adviser, World Vision; Hsiao-Wei Lee, Country Director and Representative, Afghanistan, World Food Programme.

Examination of witness

Witness: Sveto Muhammad Ishoq.

Q1 Chair: I would like to start this session of the International Development Select Committee's inquiry into Afghanistan. This is a one-off session and we are particularly looking at the situation as it is for women and girls. We are very fortunate to be joined by Sveto. Can you tell us a little bit about you and the organisation you run, but also about your experiences in Afghanistan and what brought you from Afghanistan to here? Tell us about your journey.

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: I would like to thank you sincerely for holding such a critical and important session on such an important topic that the world has forgotten. It is important to remind the world of the facts, the stories and everything that is happening. My name is Sveto Muhammad Ishoq and I am a women's rights activist and social entrepreneur from Afghanistan.

I run a project called Chadari, which is a storytelling platform for Afghan women to share their stories with the world. We also hold online sessions on public speaking and other leadership classes for Afghan women and girls. We also organise events and raise awareness about the current crisis happening in Afghanistan.

Thank you so much for asking that very important and interesting question about my experiences in Afghanistan. Whenever I describe my experience of living in Afghanistan, it is one of the best moments of my life. The UK is the sixth country that I have lived in. When I tell them, a lot of people find it very cool and interesting, but, for the majority of other countries I have lived in, it was because I was living as a refugee and I had to leave. When I compare living in those countries, Afghanistan is my favourite one, obviously, and I have the best memories from that time.

When I was six months old, my family sought refuge in neighbouring countries and in 2009 we moved back to Afghanistan, so I actually never lived in Afghanistan before 2009. I started living there from 2009 and I went to high school in Kabul and then I went to the American University of Afghanistan to do my bachelor's degree. From my experience of living, working and studying in Afghanistan, I have the best memories.

Q2 Chair: Why were they best? Was school boys and girls? At university could you do whatever course you wanted?

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: Yes. It was the best because I could work and I could study. I could start my business. I created this social enterprise where we worked with illiterate Afghan women and provided them with job opportunities. Within the limits of Islam, I could do whatever my religion and culture allow, though nothing outside of that. I remember that the Afghan youth are the most passionate, hardworking



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and innovative people. Afghan women participated in the public sphere and were engineers, doctors and nurses. They could be in every sphere that we could possibly think of, for example in sports. That is the Afghanistan that I have lived in and I have experienced stuff.

Q3 Chair: As a young girl, did you think there were any limits about which careers you could go into or what you could do as a business, for example?

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: Yes, definitely. In Afghanistan, you live in a very conservative society. Even before, we had a very conservative society. If you look outside of Kabul, Mazar and other big cities, the people's mentality is definitely very narrow-minded and conservative. I can speak of Kabul because I lived there. That was not the case and people were striving hard to get education. People were so hardworking and families were very supportive of girls' education. You could live your life and progress.

Q4 Chair: You went back in 2009. Then why did you leave and when was that?

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: I lived there from 2009. Then, in 2018, I went to China to do my first master's as a Schwarzman Scholar. I did a master's in global affairs. When I returned back to Afghanistan, I was very determined to continue working, especially seeing the developments in China. As you know, China is very developed. It is the second largest economy in the world, so I was very happy seeing that progress but also frustrated with the development issues that we have in Afghanistan, with so many problems that we have. I was very determined to go back and bring more changes with the knowledge and experience that I have gained in China.

I went back in 2019 but then, unfortunately, we had to leave within a few months. That was the second time I had to leave my home, because the political situation was not going well and we had elections coming up. My family decided to move to another country, so we moved to Kyrgyzstan. There were a few years of becoming refugees there and starting everything from scratch, again leaving your home, everything that you have in your country, and starting life from scratch in Kyrgyzstan.

Q5 Chair: Leaving your home is a massive thing. That cannot have been a decision that your family took lightly. What were the motivators for that?

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: It was definitely the security situation. We did not see the situation improving, even though we tried hard and lived there for more than 10 years. I did not want to leave, but obviously I did not want my family to feel worried about me and my security, so we had to leave. We went to Kyrgyzstan and it was during that time when I got a full scholarship from LSE here to do my second master's.

When Afghanistan collapsed, I did not come from Afghanistan, because I already left Afghanistan in 2019, but I was still connected, so I created my project when I was not in my country because I wanted to continue



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my activism. I wanted to continue working for Afghan women and playing my part, although I was not physically present in the country.

Q6 **Chair:** It is a tough question to ask, but how was not being there when the US and UK troops withdrew, and the consequences of that? Presumably you were still chatting to your friends and emailing them.

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: I have faced a lot of problems in my life, if I count the problems and the challenges. For example, one challenge that I faced in my life was surviving a terrorist attack. Taliban attacked my undergraduate university in 2016, where I lost my classmates and my friends. We lost 15 students and more than 50 people were injured. I was there until past midnight in that situation when they entered the university and attacked. When I compare that experience, even though that was the hardest one so far, nothing compares with losing my country.

It was so difficult and so challenging, even though I was not inside Afghanistan. I was not there and I had not experienced that. It was when I was actually applying for my UK visa. There were some lockdown issues in Kyrgyzstan. For me to get a UK visa, I went to three countries, now that I remember. Yes, it has been challenging. Once it was rejected, but I reapplied again. I went to three countries because there was not a centre for a tuberculosis test, which is a requirement of the UK, so I went to Tajikistan to do that. Then I went to Kazakhstan, because there was no embassy in Tajikistan, so I went to Kazakhstan to apply.

I was actually in Kazakhstan, applying for a UK visa, being super-excited to come to the UK to do my second master's, especially when I have family here. I was very happy and very excited. During that process, I saw how the Taliban would take over provinces one by one. It was very stressful and I have friends in different provinces. They would tell me the updates all the time.

My best friend, who is right now in the US, lived in Mazar, so in the north of Afghanistan. She was giving me updates about Mazar. Until they took over that city, I thought, "No, there is no way that they can come to Kabul and take over Kabul". My friend was texting me and telling me, "They are here. They are coming". Because she was working for an NGO and they were working on child marriage and women's issues, she just left her home. She just left and took one bag with her and left for Kabul, because there were rumours that they will come to Mazar.

When the Taliban came to Mazar, she told me, "Okay, Mazar is gone", and it was one of the scariest things for me, even though I was not there. I was shocked and I could not believe it. Nobody could believe it. When they took over Mazar, that was the time when I understood that, "No, we are gone", because Mazar is one of the biggest cities that we have and it is very strong. Once they took over Mazar, I lost my hope, and I was right. In a few days, they took over Kabul and my phone was exploding with messages, texts, calls and everything. It is such a difficult experience. It is very difficult when I recall now my time there. It is



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difficult to have family members and friends there who are keeping you updated.

Q7 **Chair:** What were the messages and calls saying?

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: They were just saying, "We are scared. We are afraid. We do not know what happened". One thing for sure is that my generation and a lot of the youth have not been under the Taliban regime before, during 1996 to 2001, because a lot of them were refugees in other countries, like me, or they have not had that experience. During these 20 years we have been hearing and they have been showing Taliban as something very scary and something you should be scared and afraid of.

We know that Afghanistan has one of the youngest youth populations. A lot of Afghans did not have that experience and that is why they were very scared, especially women and girls. They were very scared. They were telling me about their fears, how they feel. They are afraid. We have the Chadari community, which is my project's WhatsApp group. At the same time, it was like a support system for them to share their stories, making them feel more comfortable with the situation by talking and sharing. It was definitely very difficult for everyone I know.

Q8 **Chair:** You said that, particularly for the younger generation, the Taliban was almost this scary, unnatural thing to be afraid of. Particularly thinking about women and girls, have those fears actually become a reality, or is it not as bad as you thought it would be?

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: It is very difficult to answer. I honestly feel like I am outside of Afghanistan, so I do not give myself 100% authority to speak on behalf of women who are there. I would definitely say that it depends on the generation. For example, even in my household, like my aunts, they do not have many issues with the current Taliban regime, because it is the second time that they are living through it. They do not have these ambitions that the Afghan women and girls have and want.

On top of that, there is the literacy that we have. There is a lot of illiteracy in Afghanistan, so that is also impacting them. The new generation very much knew their rights, were literate, went to school and university, especially in big cities. It depends on the provinces. I am not talking about the rural areas. Around 80% of Afghanistan is rural areas, so there was a very different reality there. I can speak only of the big city that I lived in.

Q9 **Mrs Latham:** You just said there that some of the women have lived through it twice, obviously because they are older. For those who have lived through it for the second time, it is the second time in their life but they have had the period of freedom in between and were able to do things. Have they just decided that it is much easier to be submissive and do what they are told, whereas younger people who have never had that experience are fighting against it more? Which do you think is the most sensible way to be? Is it better to be just, "Okay, it has changed. I will do what I am told", or do you feel that people should fight for their rights?



Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: That is a consensus. I can definitely say on behalf of all Afghan women and girls that no one is happy with the rules that they are making there right now. One thing I want to make clear is that we Afghans want our Islamic rights. The Taliban think that we are westernised and have western values and that is not true. Afghan women are very much traditional and cultural, and very much love and value their religion. That is a big misinterpretation by the Taliban. They think that, over the 20 years, Afghan women have changed or have different mentalities. All Afghan women want our Islamic rights. We do not want something more or less. We just want our Islamic rights.

All the things that they have been doing so far, all the restrictions and policies, clearly contradict Islamic teachings and our religion. For example, if you look at the education side, Afghan women and girls are not allowed to go to secondary school, high school and university. It is a complete contradiction because there is no basis for that in Islam. Even the first word in our religion is "iqra", which means "read".

In Hadith, our prophet says that it is compulsory for every Muslim man and woman to seek knowledge. It is compulsory and, with the fact that they are not allowing women and girls to go to school and university, seek education and get knowledge, they are doing something completely against what God has said to us. That is something. All Afghan women want their Islamic rights, their basic human rights, and nothing more and nothing less.

You asked about the strategy and what they should do. My personal opinion is that resistance should have its own strategy. For example, we cannot become radical and very imposing, because, in these regimes, if you look at other countries, it is not effective, so we need to be very careful about our strategy. For example, we have had very brave women protesting on the streets and we have seen the consequences. It is a very difficult situation and they have changed their strategy now.

Now they are using social media and indoor gatherings. Non-violent civil resistance is the best solution right now for Afghanistan, which is already happening. It is already happening and people are already showing that resistance. For example, Afghan men have been supportive of this, but we need more of that. I would love to see more of that because, in Afghanistan, it is very difficult to do. In every country right now, it is very difficult to do things without the men's support. Even in these very developed countries, there are a lot of issues with gender equality and things like that, and we cannot expect Afghanistan to be like—I do not know—the UK overnight. I think that it will take a lot of time and support. I think that those are the solutions.

Chair: I completely hear your last point. Around the world, we need more men standing up for women's rights. Very often, it is the men that are curtailing women's rights.

Q10 Chris Law: Thank you, Sveto. It has been really interesting listening to what you have been saying so far. I am particularly interested in rural



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communities. I know that you said that you are from Kabul. What we learn about here is Kabul, by and large. My understanding also is that the way the Taliban exercises its authority differs from region to region. Why do you not tell us a bit more about the regionality of Afghanistan and where restrictions are much harsher in some areas than others, so we can get a picture of how it is?

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: If I talk about the rules that they have implemented, we already know on the education side how they have banned girls from secondary education. That is directly impacting 1.1 million children. Included in that is one of my relatives. She has five children and two of her children were going to school last academic year. The new academic year starts after March. This academic year, they will not be able to go to school, because they are entering seventh grade. That is on the education side.

On university as well, it is everywhere, in both public and private universities. They cannot go to university. They were allowed and this is a new law that they did, a new edict that happened. It came last month. This is impacting Afghan women's futures a lot, so everyone is frustrated about these laws and rules.

As I mentioned before, they are trying to resist and using different strategies. There have been a lot of things happening, so secret schools have opened. I have friends who are running secret schools. People turned their homes into classrooms.

In terms of rural areas, the Taliban has been more strict on some areas. For example, if you look at the ruling about mahram, the male guardian, in Kandahar, the city in the south of Afghanistan, women cannot leave their home without a male guardian, and that is very strict, or they cannot visit a male doctor without a male guardian. In Kabul, that is not the case. In Kabul, Mazar and other cities, that is not the case. My aunt tells me how she is leaving home without a male guardian, so it depends on the strictness.

In big cities, it is difficult to manage people. It is very difficult. In those smaller cities, it is easier. The restrictions are very different, in terms of in some areas less strict and in some areas very strict. That is how it works.

Q11 **Mr Sharma:** Thank you very much for coming. I am quite familiar with the culture and traditions because I come from the very neighbouring country, India, which has had a relationship with Afghanistan for centuries. Afghanistan was a very tolerant country, accepting everybody, very modern in its approach. I have watched many movies as well about that situation, so I am quite familiar.

In the last few years, certainly, there is a general view—everybody accepts it and you have confirmed it—that a large number of women and girls are not getting the treatment they should be getting under the law. Afghanistan is not one community. There are many others—Hazara and others. Do you think that different communities, especially women and



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girls from those communities, are in a vulnerable situation or are at risk under the present regime? Can you categorise and say, "The women from this community are less at risk and other communities are more"? What is your view on that?

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: Everyone is treated equally in terms of discrimination. All these policies are impacting everyone equally. When we look at the statistics and the other issues that are going on on the ground, we can definitely say that the Hazara community in general, so not only women but also men, is impacted more by the current regime. They are being targeted and threatened. It is not only women. It is men as well. In terms of how these policies impact one category of women over the other, I do not think that that is the case. It impacts everyone equally. Everyone is suffering equally as a result of those policies.

Q12 **Mr Sharma:** In my constituency, quite a large Afghani community moved into, particularly, the Ealing and Southall area. There is a lot of, as you also indicated, the Hazara community. I have quite a large number of people living in my constituency who came from there. There are the Afghani Sikhs and Hindus as well. From the religious point of view, they feel that they have extra discrimination due to that. Do you think that that is true, or that, no, everybody is treated badly from the different communities?

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: From the religious aspect, I personally do not know anyone from Afghanistan who are from a different religion. That is why I cannot comment on that. There should be some of the discrimination around them, but in Afghanistan 99% are Muslim. That is why it is not very mainstream and that is why, unfortunately, I am not aware of the cases.

Q13 **Mr Sharma:** Kabul was a multireligious, multicultural city. A large number of people from the Sikh community and Hindus lived in that area. While you were living in Kabul, from 2009 onwards, for nine or 10 years, I am sure that you must have come across quite a large number of people from those communities in that area.

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: No, definitely. Even during the republic, there has been a lot of discrimination around them, definitely. There have been reports of people asking them, "Where are you from?" or not recognising that they are Afghans and they can be Sikh or from other religions and still be in Afghanistan. There have been reports of that. Even during the republic, I would hear those stories. I have no doubt that it might have become worse for them, in terms of living in peace in that country, especially exercising their rights of praying and their religious rights.

Q14 **David Mundell:** Thank you very much, Sveto, for coming here today and what you have said already. You have outlined what the situation is. Do you see that there is any resolution to that situation for women and girls? If you do, is there any part we can play in that?



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Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: Definitely, yes. I always like to speak about solutions, because we always talk about problems but not really about solutions. I always try to give some of my thoughts on that. One of the best things that can happen right now is through whatever is happening already—it has started—through dialogue with the Taliban. I know that the secretary general of the NGO NRC—the Norwegian Refugee Council—visited Afghanistan in January. He had some discussions around reopening NGOs. We would love to see more of that.

That will be very effective, speaking, communicating, messaging, hearing what they have to say, communicating your requirements and then finding something on the middle ground so we do not go very extreme at both ends. That is not the solution. The best solution is, given the situation in Afghanistan, there should be some kinds of guidelines on both sides in order to agree to, for example, allow women to work for NGOs. There should be some rules around that, considering their needs and the international community's needs. In that way, it can continue.

Another thing that the international community can definitely do is to increase negotiations with the ulama, the Islamic scholars. As I mentioned before, and I strongly emphasise again, whatever is happening in Afghanistan is against our religion and culture. They keep emphasising that: "This is Islam and we are following sharia law". Sharia law does not restrict women. The wife of our prophet was a businesswoman. Aisha, another wife, was teaching. She was a scholar.

We have all these strong women who were playing an active role in the public sphere and they were even teaching men. Our prophet was teaching women, so there were not a lot of those kinds of restrictions that they are doing now and these extreme policies. There is no extremism in Islam, so there is no place for these extreme views at all. That should be emphasised through Muslim communities and the Muslim world.

The Muslim world should take a more active stance. I am very disappointed, as an Afghan and as a Muslim, seeing them staying silent on the issue, because they can play a key role here in countering those arguments that they are saying. For example, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation condemned the Taliban banning women from work and education. Yes, condemnation is great, but there should be more of a direct and proactive approach of face-to-face discussions, negotiations and talking. Dialogue is very important at this point.

Another suggestion that I would definitely make is listening to the local Afghan voices. There are a lot of representatives who are from the diaspora who Afghan women are not happy about and who they do not feel represent their voices. The first thing that can be done is a survey or something to find out who the representatives of Afghan women in Afghanistan should be here.

After that, it is important that the Afghan men should be engaged. There are a lot of Afghan men who are supportive, both inside and outside.



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They should be engaged and provided with capacity building and a network. Coalitions should be built with those men, so that there will be a community of Afghans who have some strategy to approach the Taliban and, again, going to negotiations and talking with them. Pressure can be applied from the international community side, the Afghan diaspora and inside Afghanistan.

I have another suggestion. In coming here, I really want to represent the voices of Afghan women inside Afghanistan. That is why I put it on my story on Instagram, telling the international community how it can help. For lot of people, a lot of women, their only word was "education", so Afghan people, Afghan women right now are thirsty for education. They are stuck at home. They do not see any future for themselves. They do not know the point of even studying online because they cannot work afterwards. They feel stuck and abandoned. It is a very difficult situation in terms of mentally and from every angle.

The 20 UK universities have provided online education. That is great. That is amazing, but then we have so many issues in Afghanistan right now, such as internet issues and electricity. Even in Kabul, in 24 hours there is one hour of electricity and it is very difficult. There should be alternative ways of creating and increasing the projects on the education side, for example educating through radio or offline applications in native languages. What the UK universities have provided is great, but they are English and I can count on my fingers how many people speak English and they live in urban areas, not rural.

When we think of Afghanistan, we have to think holistically about the whole country. That has been something that I want to mention as a mistake of the international community as well during the 20 years. It has largely ignored the rural community and focused mostly on urban. The strategy was very ineffective, because it was about western terminologies, gender equality and women's rights. Those are great, but I do not think that that is very applicable and very realistic in the situation that Afghanistan is facing right now.

Another type of project that can happen in Afghanistan is income-generating projects. Right now, Afghanistan is facing one of its biggest humanitarian crises, where 28 million people are in need of aid. Women are concerned about where their next meal will come from. It is very stressful. Creating those income-generating projects, such as even teaching women how to run a business or supporting home schools for illiteracy, something that will give them hope and, at the end of the programme, income, will be great.

Chair: I will pause you there. You have given us your list, all of which sounds very practical. Thank you very much.

Q15 Kate Osamor: Thank you for vision and everything that you have said. I have to take you back slightly. I say "take you back" because we obviously need a long-term solution, but are you hearing presently of evidence that domestic violence is becoming much more rife at home?



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That is especially from the picture you have just painted about work insecurity, lack of energy, a lot of people living in rural areas, not speaking English. It is not that that should be the main language, but those are the people providing the assistance and you cannot go and get the assistance because it is not in the language you feel comfortable in. Do you think that that is impacting on the domestic abuse? Have you heard about it and do you have any solutions?

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: Could you repeat your question? You said domestic violence, but I did not get as a result of what.

Q16 **Kate Osamor:** I picked up on some of the things that you said. I was asking whether you think that could be impacting on domestic violence. That was one part of the question. The other part is whether you have heard that that is happening—that women and girls are at the end of abuse.

Sveto Muhammad Ishoq: The cases of domestic violence has definitely increased. There are the things you mention. There is a lot of mental pressure. There is a lot of financial pressure happening. That plays a big role.

Another big thing is that, since the Taliban took over Afghanistan, they have been banned and eliminated from the sphere of the judicial sector—the lawyers, the judges and the prosecutors. There are no females judges, lawyers or anything in that legal field. That directly impacts the gender-based violence.

With the humanitarian crisis and financial difficulties, men are frustrated. They do not have a job and there is a crisis. That is how the violence increased in households and there have been a lot of cases like that. There has been an increase in violence and women are in a vulnerable situation, because women cannot really seek help. There is a rule that it has to be a lawyer who they can hire, and they cannot hire men, so that is another restriction. It directly impacts the cases of domestic violence. There is no access to justice for women right now in Afghanistan and that is very concerning, given the whole situation.

Chair: That is a shocking thought to end it on, but, because of time, we have to end it on that. Sveto, thank you so much for being so honest. You have been an amazing advocate for Afghan women and girls and we are really grateful that you came and gave evidence to us now.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Elizabeth Winter, Orlaith Minogue, Mark Calder and Hsiao-Wei Lee.

Q17 **Chair:** We are now resuming the International Development Select Committee's session on women and girls in Afghanistan. We are joined by our second panel, half in the room and half virtually. Could I start by asking you to introduce yourselves?



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Mark Calder: My name is Mark Calder. I work for World Vision UK. I am a senior conflict and humanitarian policy adviser. World Vision has been in Afghanistan for 20 years. It is a child-focused humanitarian organisation, working in a little more than 100 countries, basically trying to build environments that are enabling for children to realise their rights and, particularly, to help them climb out of poverty and injustice.

Elizabeth Winter: I am Elizabeth Winter and I am director of the British & Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group, which has been going for more than 30 years. It is the umbrella group for all the British and Irish NGOs that are operational in Afghanistan.

Hsiao-Wei Lee: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Hsiao-Wei Lee. I am the country director for WFP Afghanistan. WFP has been working in Afghanistan for about 60 years.

Orlaith Minogue: I am Orlaith Minogue, senior conflict and humanitarian advocacy adviser at Save the Children UK. Save the Children has been operating in Afghanistan since the mid-1970s. Thank you for having me today.

Q18 **Kate Osamor:** Elizabeth, you gave evidence to our inquiry into Afghanistan last year. How has the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan changed since then?

Elizabeth Winter: It has just got worse, incredibly worse, which is why I brought a fact sheet to tell you how it is. The humanitarian situation has been damaged by climate change, by a cold winter, by the third year of a drought and, on top of that, by the difficulties now in providing humanitarian assistance. Banking difficulties have continued and it is a very challenging environment in which to work. People are dying of cold and hunger. It is difficult to reach people in the rural areas some of the time. It has got more difficult.

Q19 **Kate Osamor:** In your view, what are the prospects for the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan improving over the next 10 years?

Elizabeth Winter: Over the next 10 years, I would very much hope that they will improve. I would hope that governance will improve, so that it is possible to return to some normality in programmes. It is not sustainable to do only humanitarian assistance. That is not going to be enough. The economy has collapsed. Afghanistan needs a great deal of support.

Q20 **Kate Osamor:** In your view, what would improved governance look like?

Elizabeth Winter: That would allow women to work in NGOs. It would allow women to play a full part in looking after members of their society, to be educated in all the things that, at the moment, they are not allowed to do. It would include men supporting them. It would include an environment in which it was safe to talk about things that affect you, whether it is rights or not being able to earn a living, whatever it might be. At the moment, it is a climate of fear. People are not sure how much worse things are going to get and they are not able to have honest



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conversations. Language has had to change and people are expecting that things might get even tougher.

Q21 Mr Sharma: Ms Lee, can you describe the current humanitarian situation in Afghanistan?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: I echo the previous speaker in terms of the situation and the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. Over the past year and a half, we saw a fairly rapid deterioration, certainly on the food security front, but it is that combination of factors that she also mentioned. There have been three years of drought. It was Covid-19 also in the urban locations and then, of course, the economic crisis that followed August 2021.

When it comes to acute hunger, we have seen that the number of people who were acutely hungry in the winter of 2021 was around 23 million. It was a rapid decline. With the massive amount of humanitarian assistance, including humanitarian food assistance, that we were able to provide as a humanitarian community, we saw some slight improvement in 2022, with an estimated 20 million people acutely hungry.

I am particularly concerned that, because there was this massive drought last year and the economic situation did not improve, that humanitarian need remained very high. In 2023, there are some small opportunities for improvement. For example, the drought is supposed to end in the next few months. We need to capitalise on those opportunities. If we do not, we would see the humanitarian needs remain extremely high. I think that they will also remain high at least for the next three to five years even with improvements. Without any improvement and sustained humanitarian assistance, I would only see this situation deteriorating even further.

We need to look at not only now but also in the future. There is the question about what happens in the future and we need to make sure that education goes to girls for sure, but also to boys. I would hate to see a situation 10 years from now where even the boys and men are not educated.

Q22 Mr Sharma: Generally, when that kind of humanitarian and economic situation arises, there are a lot of families where the seniors in the families adopt very negative mechanisms. Negative thoughts come to protect. Do you have or have you heard any evidence regarding forced marriages, where a child is forced to marry to protect the child, or child labour in that situation? Have you had any evidence on that?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: We have certainly seen some cases of it. Preventing that from happening is imperative. There are many different forms of negative coping mechanisms. One is the selling of distressed assets. That is one that we are quite concerned about as well, because, if people sell all their assets, they will not have the productivity in the future when they can be productive.



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Then, of course, there are the more egregious ones that we hear about, such as selling of girls for forced marriages. There is evidence of that. At the same time, I would also caution that there are times when we see it in the media, we follow up as WFP to see if there is something we can help with and there are times when it may not necessarily be true. The levels of malnutrition that we see in the clinics definitely show that the situation is extremely bad in Afghanistan at the moment.

Q23 Mr Liddell-Grainger: That was a fascinating answer. Elizabeth, you alluded to NGOs. The Taliban has decreed that no women can work in NGOs. I am going to ask two parts. The first part is what effect that has had. Secondly, out of all the NGOs that you are aware of that are working in Afghanistan, have any suspended operations? If they have, who has suspended their operations because of this? I will start with Mark.

Mark Calder: Thanks for the opportunity to speak. World Vision decided to suspend temporarily on the evening of the edict. 96% of organisations in Afghanistan have been impacted by the ban. It actually ties a little bit to the previous question.

Last year, as part of the faith and development bucket of our work, we actually worked with Islamic scholars, as Sveto was referring to previously, in order to challenge narratives around forced marriage. We were able to register a number of success stories where, through the discourse of orthodox Islam within Afghan society, they were able to help people reverse moves towards forced marriage. That is one of the negative coping mechanisms, as we rightly pointed out. Now, we cannot do that.

We have been able to resume some programming. We were given an assurance by the Ministry of Public Health that health was exempt from the edict. We sought further reassurances at the provincial level, so that we could be confident that our female colleagues would be safe and able to do their jobs. We have had a similar written assurance from the Ministry of Education, but at the local level we have not been able to get those reassurances so that we are confident that our staff will be able to do their work fully and safely, so we have not resumed that programming just yet.

Very many of our organisations—I would not want to speak to Save, but maybe Orlaith can come in on that—have a real difficulty countenancing programming without our female colleagues. There is the clear rights transgression there, but, practically, how do we do that in Afghanistan, with men providing aid to women? What kind of precedent will that set? What harms are going to be caused? The deputy secretary-general, Amina Mohammed said last week that this is not just a rights issue. If women are prevented from working for NGOs, lives will be lost. It is not rights over here against lives over there. Lives will be lost if this edict stands as it has.

Hsiao-Wei Lee: I echo a lot of what the speaker just said. The one thing is, for sure, looking at lives that will be lost. We look at what we can do



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to help minimise any risks, coupled with still providing the assistance that is very much needed. In this winter period right now, we are looking at 20 million people who are hungry. How we balance is, ultimately, the difficult question that we are all grappling with.

There are different aspects. We are finding ways to be able to deliver assistance, including with female staff. There are negotiations at both local level and sectoral level, as was previously stated, for example for health. In some provinces where women are able to continue working as NGO staff, our NGO partners are able to continue to work. For us as WFP, we have around 100 NGO partners, of which about 75% are national NGOs. The remaining 25% are international NGOs. Three are currently fully suspended. Many of the others, especially with the public health sector resuming, have been able to resume.

Q24 Mr Liddell-Grainger: Can I ask a follow-on, because it is an interesting conversation? Is the aid still getting through? That is a frightening statistic about how many people are hungry. I wonder if there are rural variations in aid getting through. Kabul is probably slightly different. Also, is it physically getting through?

Mark Calder: The exemptions that we have just now apply to health and nutrition, not to food distribution. This is an area that we are very keen to see expanded. If there was an exemption for food distribution, that would make a massive difference. We are talking about 6 million people in near famine-like conditions.

In terms of our ability to programme fully within the health and nutrition sector, absolutely, we would not programme unless we were confident that we could deliver effectively. In terms of aid getting through and the classic food distribution model, that currently is being stymied by the edict that prevents our female staff reaching women and girls as much as anything. Of course, it is women and girls that benefit disproportionately from humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.

Orlaith Minogue: To pick up on some of these points, at Save the Children we too paused our programming across the 17 provinces where we work in response to the ban on female aid workers. Since that time, we have been able to restart programming with mixed male and female teams in certain areas. As mentioned, we have had an exemption in the areas of health and nutrition, so we have mixed female and male teams out in mobile health clinics, reaching communities.

We have also been able to get assurances that our female staff, both community-facing staff and office staff, can return to work in community-based education. We have female teachers providing education to girls in several provinces and those negotiations continue. We are negotiating with the authorities, sector by sector and province by province.

A real priority for us at Save the Children at this point is preserving that operational space to negotiate with the authorities, making the case for



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why it is not safe, principled or possible for us to deliver aid with male-only teams, for a number of reasons that have already been touched on. One is that we know that there are very many female-headed households in Afghanistan after decades of conflict. Those households are particularly vulnerable and in particular danger from all the crises that they are facing that have already been mentioned. We do not believe that we can reach them with male-only teams. We do not believe that trying to do so is principled. We think that it is unsafe and would pose safeguarding concerns.

At this moment, we are all facing such a difficult conundrum. We know that our pause in programming is having a detrimental impact on the communities that we work to serve. We are also very worried about what male-only programming would look like. We think that this is a really precious and delicate space in which we are negotiating with the authorities to make the case for why we need to be able to resume work with mixed teams across all sectors.

Q25 Chair: Orlaith, we will push on that a little bit in a few minutes. Hsiao-Wei, I was surprised that you switched your microphone off when Ian asked whether the food was getting through. You are the director for the World Food Programme. I assumed that you would be the first person to answer that. Is the food getting through?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: Sorry, I was not quite sure whether I was being asked to speak first, so I unmuted and then muted. It is the most important question and I am really glad that you asked because, at the end of the day, we are most concerned about whether people are receiving assistance and able to receive assistance. At the moment, for the most part, food assistance is still getting through. Even on 3 January I visited distribution sites here in Kabul and saw lines of men, as well as women, receiving assistance at our distribution sites.

In conversations with the women, I asked them whether they had concerns about, at the time, not having female staff at the distribution site. What they expressed to me was more around their needs at this point in time. They had some concerns around the security, whether they would be turned away, much more so than they had about not having female staff at the distribution site. They also had taken some measures among themselves to organise themselves.

For food distributions, there are different aspects of our programme cycle. There are ones where women's participation is particularly critical, especially to engage with the female-headed households that Save the Children just mentioned. At the moment, for WFP, we did a mass retargeting process over the last few months. That is where that engagement is particularly critical. At the distribution site, it is still important, but people are, at the moment, still able to get assistance. This is something that we have seen across 34 provinces in the country. Women are still accessing our distribution sites.



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We are looking at what we call absenteeism, whether there is a trend of an increase or the same number of people who access our distributions in December compared to that in January. We are still tallying up the totals, but, right now, we are initially getting that there is not a significant difference between the December/November data and January.

It is quite critical. There is that balance in terms of making sure people in need are still getting assistance while making sure we continue the advocacy efforts, trying to make those openings especially at the provincial level, as well as for sectoral openings.

Chair: As I said, we will come back to it, but the question for me is whether women and girls should be forced to organise to try to get food distribution rather than the very well-funded international organisations providing a solution for them.

Q26 **Nigel Mills:** Orlaith, I want to pick up on a couple of the things you said. Roughly what proportion of your operations are now back up and running? Is it a small proportion or is it quite a lot of them?

Orlaith Minogue: It is very much in flux. As I say, negotiations are under way, province by province and sector by sector. Given that a large amount of the children's programming in Afghanistan is focused on health, nutrition and education, we are in the fortunate position that we have been able to restart a substantial amount of our programming across a number of provinces.

We are not quite at 50% back yet. That has been over the past month. That is the amount of time we have had since the edict has come in. We are hopeful and positive that more of that will come through, as those negotiations proceed and as we demonstrate our ability to programme under the exemptions we are currently allowed.

Q27 **Nigel Mills:** How high will you be able to get it? Will you get it up above 80% or something?

Orlaith Minogue: That is very difficult to say at this stage. Certainly, we have been in Afghanistan a very long time. We have no intention of not being there in the future to serve these communities.

It is our number-one priority to advocate for exemptions to this ban, to call for this ban to be reversed in the first place, to work as pragmatically as we can to carve out these exemptions, and to continue to negotiate at all levels—at the community level, at the provincial level and the national level—in order to push that through.

It is very difficult to put a figure on it, but it is certainly going to be our everyday focus in the weeks and months ahead.

Q28 **Nigel Mills:** As you say, you have been working there a long time, Orlaith. If you get written permission from a regional administrator, are you confident that will hold and they will not go back on it once they have issued it?



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Orlaith Minogue: We have not restarted any programming with female staff where we do not have the confidence that, every day they head out into the community or they go to the office, it will be safe for them to do so on that day. We are continuously making assessments around viability and the safety of our female staff. The safety of all our staff is a huge priority for us.

So far we have found that moving slowly and surely, building up those relationships and getting those assurances, written and verbal, from the authorities in charge is working. It is paying dividends. It is not a one-stop shop. Staff safety is something we need to be continuously paying attention to, mindful of and prioritising.

Q29 **Nigel Mills:** Mark, you seem to have had a slightly more difficult experience.

Mark Calder: It is a very similar experience, to be fair. There is a challenge in the question in terms of how you measure the proportion. We had 38 programmes last year. We have 15 health and nutrition programmes that we have been able to resume because of the exemption, and five WASH—water, sanitation and hygiene—programmes, specifically linked to healthcare infrastructure, that we have been able to resume.

On the staffing side, we have slightly fewer than 500 staff working on those programmes. Before the edict, we had over 2,000 staff, if you included all the auxiliary and support staff. We are in a very similar situation to Save. If we have assurances, both at the ministerial level and at the local provincial level, that are clearly enforceable, so we are not going to face issues at the point of delivery, we will resume, if we can include our female colleagues.

If we do not have those, we have to continue to work at all levels of advocacy within Afghanistan to eke out genuine and reliable space for our female colleagues to work.

Q30 **Nigel Mills:** What do you mean by “enforceable”? I doubt you can go to court to do something, can you?

Mark Calder: No. That is a good question. We know the context in which we work intimately. We have long-established relationships with community leaders, religious leaders and local officials, et cetera. If we feel the assurance given to us by a Minister, for example, are paper assurances that would not necessarily be realisable in the context in which we work, we would need reassurances from the local community as well.

“Enforceable” is probably the wrong word. Basically, are they reliable? Do they make sense in the local context we have been working in for some time?

Q31 **David Mundell:** Hsiao-Wei, can I begin with you? How optimistic are you that the ban might be reversed?



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Hsiao-Wei Lee: There is a general sentiment here in Afghanistan that a full reversal of the ban is not likely to be possible. This has been reaffirmed by the various visits we have had at the highest level as well as the engagements I have had with various Ministers about this.

We do see openings. I have spoken about it; other speakers have spoken about it. We see openings at sectoral level, openings at district level and openings at provincial level. The conversations also get them a bit more comfortable with some of the mechanisms we use. If we talk about having distributions for women on certain days of the week or in different distribution sites, for example, that makes them a bit more comfortable.

There are still many Ministers, members of Cabinet and certainly provincial governors, district governors and authorities at the local level who are sympathetic to allowing women to work. Some of the openings are a little bit more confidential. Some of the negotiations we have had are, "Yes, you can have female staff work, but do not make it too public. Do not have them come in with visibility signs". That also includes not only workers at the distribution sites but also our female monitors, for example.

Then what we are hearing is that there is a set of guidelines that the de facto authorities are developing. As to when those guidelines will be available and in force, that is unknown. They have given an indication that this is something they are working on and that they will try to accelerate it. It could be in March, but it could also be even longer. It is quite critical that during this period of time we try to negotiate some of those openings while recognising that a full reversal is unlikely.

The last thing to note is that years of negotiations with the Taliban, both the lessons from the 1990s and everything we have learned over the past year and a half, indicate that a full reversal of a directive like this, which came out with the backing of the supreme leader in Kandahar and the potential backing of the council, would cause them to lose face.

The indication I have had from Ministers and other influential Afghans we have engaged with has been, "Do not push for an ideological reversal. That will not get us very far. Rather, find more pragmatic openings and exceptions".

Q32 **David Mundell:** Is there more that the UK Government could be doing or not doing? Are there things we could do that would be helpful in that regard?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: The biggest thing right now would be to give a little bit of space and time. One of the things we have learned over the past year and a half is the concept of time in Afghanistan, the concept of how these things are thought through, is a bit different to our western concept of time.

Of course, we want to see change immediately. Of course, we do not want to lose the gains we have seen in women's rights in Afghanistan. It does not sit well with us to see this happening. Everything that we are



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being told—we have seen openings—is, “Do not make this into a big public ideological event because then we end up clashing over that as opposed to finding pragmatic solutions”.

Another aspect is recognising the enormous need in Afghanistan there is right now, but—I touched upon this in my comment about education—we want to make sure that investments into Afghanistan are made now, for future generations, in a few months from now and in a few years from now. For us, as an international community, that will be the right approach for a more stable Afghanistan.

Q33 David Mundell: Elizabeth, I want to ask you the same questions in terms of the possibility of the ban being reversed and what the Government here could be doing in relation to improving the situation.

Elizabeth Winter: As far as reversing the ban is concerned, I entirely agree with what has been said. It seems highly unlikely. Any negotiations that take place now would probably require a face-saving element, were any parts of it to be reversed. I entirely agree that pragmatic solutions, discussions and negotiations are the way forward.

I would also remember what Sveto said as well about involving Afghans in that, many of whom have had long experience with international NGOs and international programmes. They know what to say and how to get the negotiations to find those pragmatic solutions.

In terms of what the UK ought to be doing, you will not be surprised when I say that we should return to 0.7%. You will not be surprised to learn that I think we should not abandon Afghanistan now and that funding should certainly continue for humanitarian assistance, not forgetting the basic services and how to support them as well. We need support for civil society, which is really reeling at the moment. We need support for Afghan NGOs.

We should be listening to Afghans and referring back to the ICAI report, which was the hook for this meeting. I have been watching state-building for decades now. We have been not listening to Afghans, not listening to the lessons that have been learned and written about before, not reading them again and spending a lot of money without seeing where it goes or what happens to it. Those have all been problematic.

Mark Calder: I would echo everything my colleagues have mentioned there. At the moment, in the current fiscal environment for the UK, there is clearly the temptation to follow the path of least resistance when it comes to next financial year's budgets. There will be a temptation to divert aid away from Afghanistan. This really cannot happen in the case of Afghanistan because that will weaken the international community's hand as it seeks to expand these exceptions. If we do not have any money to be spending on the most vulnerable children in Afghanistan, what is the point of being allowed a bigger carve-out by the de facto authorities? It is absolutely critical at this juncture.



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It would be a very perverse outcome if a massive transgression against the rights of Afghan women and girls were used as an opportunity to take money away that disproportionately benefits Afghan women and girls. We would really urge the British Government to hold the line on supporting Afghanistan generously and give some flexibility and patience, as my colleagues mentioned, as to how that is going to be dispersed by partners in the next financial year.

I know the Afghanistan budget is likely to be agreed next month. That is certainly something that we are asking the FCDO to bear in mind just now, as they make plans.

Elizabeth Winter: It has just been cut by another £40 million. Of the £286 million that was supposed to be spent this year, it was announced in December that there had to be a cut of £40 million. Some programmes that had been agreed already had to stop.

Having said that, we are all very grateful to FCDO for the work it does in trying to bring donors together to reach consensus on these things, in not forgetting Afghanistan and in doing whatever they can to make sure donors still work together, work with the UN and work with the NGOs to see that things go forward and that programmes do continue. We would urge you to support that as well.

Q34 **David Mundell:** Orlaith, have you seen any evidence of an impact on future funding programmes other than what Elizabeth has just referenced?

Orlaith Minogue: Right now we do not know what the budget for Afghanistan will be for next year, but we would be very concerned about any potential reduction in FCDO funding for programming in Afghanistan.

As Mark mentioned and building on what we have already spoken about, this is a time of negotiation. The money that humanitarian agencies have to spend on reaching vulnerable people in Afghanistan is what incentivises the authorities to respond to our requests for exemptions.

Any withdrawal of that would weaken the humanitarian community's negotiating hand in Afghanistan and further restrict our ability to reach people, and so we would be very concerned. We have not yet had reassurances from FCDO that it will be able to maintain that going into the next financial year. That is certainly a concern.

In response to the question about what more the UK Government could be doing, it could be backing the humanitarian community in its prioritisation of negotiation. There is certainly a huge amount of work under way, which the FCDO is central to amongst donors, in trying to understand how to move forward with these negotiations in a principled manner, being very clear that we do not want to see the replacement of female NGO staff in Afghanistan with male staff or a massive roll-back in the rights of women in the sector.



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That is something we would really like the UK Government to be championing at all stages of these negotiations, as it is a very important and powerful message.

- Q35 **Chair:** Have you had any indication that programmes that are being paused because of the ban on female NGO workers are likely to receive funding cuts, or is this you being nervous around that? I ask because I and the honourable Member for Barnsley, Dan Jarvis, have asked the Development Minister a couple of times and we have not had a response. Is this a fear?

Elizabeth Winter: We are nervous. We have been told that staff on the payroll can be paid until the end of March, which is the start of the new financial year. None of the FCDO staff we speak to knows what the budget is going to be for next year. We are frightened that, yes, this could be taken as a reason to withhold some of the money or to redistribute it.

It is not that we are not fully aware of the financial difficulties there are at the moment, but, as everybody has already said, we think it is extremely important that money continues to go to Afghanistan.

Chair: We will be writing to the Development Minister after this session. It is definitely something we will try to get clarity on.

Elizabeth Winter: Thank you.

- Q36 **Mrs Latham:** Hsiao-Wei, how has the reaction of the UN and its agencies been to the ban on women working for NGOs?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: First of all, WFP shares the widely held view—in particular, this is also the IASC view—that the decision by Afghanistan's de facto authorities to ban women from working with NGOs is a major blow for vulnerable communities, for women, for children and ultimately for Afghanistan as a country.

We had conversations about this as a humanitarian community starting on Christmas Day, or actually on Christmas Eve when we learned about this. Ultimately, it is a very difficult decision. From that very day, what I said to the humanitarian community was that we recognised that the ban may even apply at some point to UN female staff. Whatever decisions and whatever actions, we need to take into consideration that this is not limited to NGOs but to the humanitarian community as a whole and to the country.

We want to be able to support and continue to fight for women to be able to work. We also want to be able to make sure that life-saving assistance continues to be delivered. We are mindful of the need to ensure the safety and security of our beneficiaries and humanitarian workers as well as the resources that we receive.

In short, you will have seen the number of high-level engagements there have been—the Deputy Secretary-General, to Martin Griffiths and to the



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deputy executive director of UNICEF—on these issues. We will continue to have those levels of engagement, to negotiate with the de facto authorities and to understand where the operational space remains.

Q37 Mrs Latham: How have you communicated your position on the ban to NGOs working in Afghanistan?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: For us, we have shared with our partners that we respect the decisions they make. We do not want to jeopardise their registration in the country, but we also respect where they decide to continue.

We know that a lot of female staff were not able to go to work, especially at the very beginning. We also made a commitment to continue paying for both fixed-term costs during the period of the operational pause for our partners who had to suspend as well as all of the female staff who were unable to come to work.

I have also personally engaged with a number of our partners. We have 100 partners. I have been trying to engage with both international and national NGOs along the spectrum of decisions they have made. That ranges from NGOs that almost look at me as though I was delusional to think they should stop because of the high levels of need to NGOs that have expressed concerns around continuing.

To all of those NGOs, my message is that we respect the decision they make and that, if they have concerns, they should please come and speak to me directly about them. In our advocacy and negotiations, we are trying to have an impact more broadly, beyond WFP's activities.

Q38 Mrs Latham: Orlaith, what communications and support have you received from the United Nations and its agencies regarding the ban?

Orlaith Minogue: There has been a lot of co-ordinated work and advocacy under way amongst the various UN agencies and bodies and the international NGOs, as well as national partners. There has certainly been a huge, difficult and complicated effort to try to coalesce around guiding principles for how we should work, how we should, as a humanitarian community, ideally be negotiating with the authorities and supporting female staff, particularly in the initial days of the pause, as has been mentioned.

It has been a very busy and complicated time for the humanitarian community in Afghanistan, and those conversations continue. Donors, including the UK Government, are part of those conversations as well. There is a huge spectrum of views amongst organisations as to what the best approach to take is. That has to be recognised. Ultimately, what brings all of the different stakeholders and actors together is the desire to do what is best for the people in need in Afghanistan. If we keep that as our central principle, that guides us through these conversations.

We have not come to any conclusion as of yet. We are continuing to see high-level visits to Afghanistan. We are continuing to see those



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discussions with governors and authority figures at various levels. As I say, those are producing further exemptions to the ban, which we hope to see continue. We are not going to have one unified response among the various actors anytime soon, but the work certainly continues at pace to respond in as principled a manner as we possibly can. Of course, this issue around male-only programming is the contentious one at the heart of this.

Mark Calder: I just want to add, following what Hsiao-Wei has said, that we are a partner of the World Food Programme. We have not felt any pressure from the World Food Programme to do one thing or the other. They have been very understanding and very sympathetic of our stance when it comes to our suspension and our qualified resumption of programming where we have had reassurances from authorities that we can programme safety with female colleagues. I just wanted to echo that because it might have more weight coming from someone who has been a beneficiary of that generous approach from the World Food Programme.

Q39 **Chair:** Hsiao-Wei, I understand you are in a very difficult position. There are no real winners here, only losers, which seem to be women and girls. It also sounds as though the UN organisations made a decision to go ahead with male-only staff in the majority of cases. The consultation was telling people that was the position you had taken and they could or could not follow your line. Is that an accurate representation of what happened? Were you open to changing your position and standing in solidarity with some of the NGOs that did not want to continue unless female staff were able to work?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: On Christmas Day, when the humanitarian country team came together, there was a conversation around this. One of the things I said was that, no matter what decision we make, we should be united about that. At the end of that HCT meeting, it was decided that this was such a critical issue it should ultimately be raised to the IASC principals for a discussion.

We waited for a few days for that discussion to take place, and there was then a decision. The IASC comprises both UN as well as NGOs. The decision was for an operational pause, and that operational pause excluded life-saving and time-critical activities. Based on that, WFP continued our life-saving activities, but we did pause things that were outside of that parameter.

There were those discussions at the HCT, which comprises donors, NGOs and the UN, and then a discussion at the IASC. As WFP, we ultimately followed that decision. That is the decision the UN has also followed.

Q40 **Chair:** The answer is, yes, you made the decision and then told people what your position was. Is that right?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: No.

Chair: The UN made the decision. You have just said the IASC made the decision.



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Hsiao-Wei Lee: IASC comprises a number of NGOs as well as the UN. It was a collective decision. That is what we followed.

Q41 **Chair:** The decision was made with some of the biggest NGOs.

Hsiao-Wei Lee: Yes.

Q42 **Chair:** A lot of the small ones were just told that this was going to happen.

Hsiao-Wei Lee: There is also representation at the HCT by an entity called ACBAR. It is like an NGO forum. They represent over 50, if not 100, NGOs. They do have a voice at the HCT.

Q43 **Chair:** If it is business as usual for some of the biggest humanitarian programmes, what is the motivation for a change in policy around employing women in frontline humanitarian situations?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: I am sorry. Did you say "withholding"?

Chair: I would assume UNICEF and World Food Programme are the two biggest providers of humanitarian support. If you are just continuing as usual, what is the incentive for the Taliban to shift their policy around women NGO workers?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: First, there was a recognition that withholding assistance is not necessarily a leverage. That was taken into consideration by the IASC. Secondly, we did not go on as though it were business as usual. I did mention that we paused some of our activities, in line with the IASC decision.

Thirdly, when I mentioned the gamut of NGOs I have engaged and spoken with, it was some of the smaller ones that very strongly said to me they did not think we should suspend. They are on the ground; they are part of the community. They see the critical need there is on the ground. They see that they are still able to serve the population, including women and girls.

When you ask about representation, we have also done engagement with our partners as well. We have engaged with them as Afghans. We have spoken to them about whether we would be able to gain leverage by suspending our assistance. The answer was "not much", certainly not for the timeframe we would have to suspend assistance.

Q44 **Chair:** Let me pause you there because of time. Elizabeth, am I being unfair? It is fine to say yes.

Elizabeth Winter: It is an incredibly difficult situation that everybody found themselves in. It is still evolving; it is still developing. People are still working out what we would do if lives needed to be saved and the only way was to send in men. Ethically, that is really difficult. It is really difficult, if you are a small NGO on the ground and you are seeing people dying from hunger.



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Having said that, people are looking at what they could do and what they could say that might change the situation. The Taliban has publicly said, "The more you push us, the more we are going to dig our heels in", not just about this but about everything we disagree on. They have a totally different view of the world than we do.

We have to do what Sveto said: talk to them, engage them and persuade them. We have to do whatever it takes, over a period of time that will probably be quite lengthy, to change mindsets, to show that we are to be trusted, to show that we have the interests of Afghans at heart and that we are not the foreign spies some of them think we are. That is going to take time, it is going to take diplomacy and it is going to take skill from people who are already years in the job, whether they are Afghans or not, and it is going to take understanding from the other side, as it were, as well.

It is evolving. We will be able to tell you more about who has suspended programmes and for what reason. We are certainly going to be looking into what BAAG members have decided to do. We have a weekly meeting with all operational agencies. It is a very large meeting. It takes place every week. We are now meeting the Foreign Office, which we also appreciate very much, every week to discuss these issues.

We are all facing dilemmas. We are just trying to find the best way forward, as has been said, for the sake of Afghanistan and its people.

Q45 Chris Law: It is quite hard to hear how difficult the situation really is on the ground. It is our first opportunity to hear about it today. I just want to go back a little bit to UK aid funding. It was a shock to the international community when the UK abandoned its 0.7% commitment in 2020. The majority of this Committee, if not all, support a return to it very swiftly.

My question is for Mark and Orlaith in particular. How did that affect your programme? What programmes did you decide to cut and why? It must have been extremely difficult.

Mark Calder: I would have to come back to you with the specifics of the impacts of UK funding on our programming in Afghanistan at that point, if that is alright.

Certainly at the moment we are down to a bare-bones relationship with the UK as a partner. We have a programme that is shortly to wind up at the end of this financial year. We receive some UK money through our World Food Programme partnership. In my understanding, this is significantly lower than it would have been before the cut.

The cut from 0.7% has impacted our sector's programming across the world and the UK's leadership in the development and humanitarian space massively. I would not want to give specifics that I am unsure of at this stage.

Chris Law: Could you possibly write to the Committee about that?



Mark Calder: Yes, absolutely.

Orlaith Minogue: Likewise, we would need to follow up in writing with the detail on that. I can also echo that the UK reduction in aid has certainly had an impact on, say, children's operations in Afghanistan as elsewhere around the world. We can follow up with a little bit more detail on that.

We have FCDO funding for programming we do in Afghanistan around community-based education for girls. I mention that specifically as this is something that is a UK foreign policy priority and something very close to all of our hearts, particularly as we hear about the formal education restrictions there are on girls in Afghanistan.

We have fears and concerns about what UK funding for Afghanistan might look like into the next financial year. While understanding the financial constraints and the decisions that have been made, when we are having those conversations we are really thinking about girls who can currently access community-based education programming. That involves female teachers going out into communities and reaching girls with all kinds of skills, including vocational skills, which is a lifeline for those girls.

We want to make sure we do not have to say to any of them that will not be possible in the future. It is very hard-hitting when we think about those programmes and the specific girls they are reaching, but we can follow up with more information on the question asked.

Q46 **Chris Law:** Just following on from that, if we look at the last couple of years and, in particular, where we are at now with an increasing humanitarian crisis, how does our support compare to that of other international donors? Is there a sense on the ground that the UK has turned its back on Afghanistan, given how important soft power through development is?

Mark Calder: Yes, Afghanistan is still one of the biggest recipients of UK aid. In terms of the UK's leadership role in the development and humanitarian space more generally, that has certainly taken a bit of a hammering since the cut from 0.7%. At the moment in Afghanistan, the UK has a position as a donor that it should be very careful to protect in terms of the amount it donates.

The £40 million cut Elizabeth referred to came as a massive shock. I have had very constructive conversations with the FCDO on trying to increase the predictability and the flexibility of UK funding, which is something that would massively help to ensure we do not have situations like we had last year, where money that had already been pledged suddenly disappeared off the table. That is clearly unacceptable and a terrible example within the donor space.

Having said that, even if we crack that nut, the flexibility and predictability problem we are working on with really good engagement from the FCDO, until there is a return to 0.7% we are tinkering around the edges a little bit. The status the UK had as a leader in humanitarian



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aid, development aid and peace-building aid has certainly been diminished over the last few years.

- Q47 **Chris Law:** I would perhaps open that question to Hsiao-Wei and Elizabeth. We have heard today about the impact it is having. When the new Minister was in the Back Benches, he made a lot of noise about returning to 0.7%. Have you had engagement with Andrew Mitchell? If so, what kind of feedback have you had?

Elizabeth Winter: Some people have had engagement with him and been pleased at his own attitude. Whether that is going to have an effect on the Government, I cannot tell you. We certainly hope it will. I would echo what Mark said about the diminishment of the influence of the UK in these matters that had already happened.

The UK had huge international standing when DFID existed. As Government Departments merge, there is always fall-out, and there has been from the merger. We are told—I do not have figures—that the majority of senior positions held by DFID have now gone to people who were in the FCO and that the knowledge base we had has been diminished.

One of the most senior civil servants left because he could not cope with what was going on. We have had a tremendous loss of the soft power that you mentioned, and it is of great concern. We can only hope that it will be built up again and that we will recover it.

- Q48 **Chair:** Hsiao-Wei, could I just come to you? In your first or second answer, you mentioned that it was predicted that the drought would end and that there were opportunities in 2023 that the international community and the local community needed to seize. Could you very briefly tell us what those opportunities are and what we should be encouraging the UK Government to support?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: Weather forecasts are weather forecasts, but there are indications that over the next few months the La Niña event will end and we will end up looking at conditions that are conducive for cultivation. We need to capitalise on those conditions. We have seen from past years, after consecutive La Niña events, if the conditions are conducive, the harvest can increase quite significantly.

That is one aspect. Anything that we can do now for a better harvest in six months is something we should certainly capitalise on.

- Q49 **Chair:** Could you be very specific? Is that grain? Is it fertiliser? Is it equipment? What needs to be in place?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: Ultimately, for food security, it is a combination of factors. Yes, that includes preserving livestock. Right now our sister agency FAO has animal feed. We need to be able to get it out there to animals. They have seeds and fertilisers. With our logistics capacity, WFP is also helping them transport and move a lot of the seeds and fertilisers.



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We also need to use this opportunity to look at climate change. WFP, for example, works on a lot of community infrastructure that helps to prevent disasters. Last year it helped to prevent disasters from flash floods affecting villages or cropland. It could also be irrigation for water resource management, which we work on. It also includes opportunities that we have to help build livelihoods.

Those are some of the different aspects we can try to capitalise on now, but it is also about preserving anything that people have. A lot of families are very highly indebted. If they are stymied and stifled by debt, they are not able to be productive. That is where humanitarian assistance comes in and is very critical: we can ensure they have the space to be productive.

Those are just some examples. If I could just mention one thing on the UK's role and FCDO, there are a lot of conversations about funding, but I really want to emphasise the role FCDO has in policy development and advocacy. From what I have seen of the FCDO team that works on Afghanistan, they really understand the context of Afghanistan. They are sensitive to conflict dynamics and analysis. They look at this with a cautious but pragmatic approach, which is something I really appreciate. The FCDO is a very strong voice within the humanitarian community.

Q50 Chair: Thank you for raising that. I think I speak on behalf of the Committee when I say we are very proud of the work FCDO staff, particularly in country, are doing out there, as well as the work done by all of the NGO staff, who are doing quite remarkable things in very challenging circumstances, which is why we feel quite strongly that we need to defend and support them going forward.

Just because I do not want you to go away without saying it, is there, in one line, anything you specifically want reassurance from the Government about? Mark, I have you down as wanting predictability of funding. Is that right or is there anything else?

Mark Calder: Yes, predictability and also the amount of funding.

Chair: Okay, yes. That was a bit silly of me.

Elizabeth Winter: We would like them to continue the involvement they already have and to support us all in the work we are doing.

Orlaith Minogue: The Government should continue to support the humanitarian community as they engage in these difficult negotiations and push for a way to, with our principles in mind, reach as many people in Afghanistan as we can. They can be a real champion for that.

Q51 Chair: Hsiao-Wei, I have your 2023 potential harvest request. Is there anything else the UK Government should be doing?

Hsiao-Wei Lee: They should be looking beyond 2023. That is really where we should be looking. Everything we are talking about today is not just about 2023 but beyond.



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Chair: That is a good point to end on. Thank you all very much. Thank you for the work you are doing. I know these are very challenging circumstances. I do not envy the choices you are having to make on almost an hourly basis. Thank you for sharing your experiences of those.