

Written evidence submitted anonymously (AFU0004)

Current context for human rights and humanitarian impact in Afghanistan

- 1.1. Since the Taliban's takeover in 2021, and the subsequent withdrawal of international forces in Afghanistan, the past two years have seen intensifying restrictions on fundamental human rights for women and girls. This has had acute and grave consequences on the humanitarian context. Prior to the takeover the country was already in crisis, in 2016-17 45%¹ of the population were food insecure and poverty rates in 2019-20 47%² of the population.
- 1.2. There are several challenges facing Afghan people beyond the Taliban takeover. After decades of conflict, the scale of the humanitarian need is immense. Since 2021, the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance has risen to over 29 million³ from 18 million in 2021.⁴ Despite falling prices, the cost of staples remain above average⁵ and much of the population are facing increasing food insecurity due to prolonged drought⁶ conditions exacerbated by climate change.⁷ Eighty percent of the population are dependent on agriculture,⁸ meaning the impacts are broad and deep.⁹
- 1.3. Since the Taliban takeover and the establishment of the de facto authority, most humanitarian aid workers in Afghanistan have witnessed the crisis increasing day by day. The de facto authorities added political pressure to humanitarian aid workers and imposed widespread restrictions on women's rights including banning women working with national and international NGOs.¹⁰ Since this ban, many international donors and agencies reconsidered their role and engagement and there was a sharp decline in aid to Afghanistan including the UK's which saw a reduction by over half.¹¹ These cuts have continued despite warnings this will only further harm the most vulnerable women and girls¹² and the repercussions of these cuts have meant that the World Food Programme (WFP) have had to scale back and reduce support for 10 million hungry people¹³.
- 1.4. The deterioration in Afghanistan's economic conditions has been exacerbated by vulnerability to global shocks, limited livelihood opportunities, growing numbers of returnees from neighbouring countries, limited banking capacities coupled with constraints on access¹⁴ and availability of hard currency. According to the World Bank in 2022, 70 percent of Afghans were unable to meet their daily needs, and this remains true as reports show that 'more than three quarters...borrowing food or money to buy food'¹⁵ and 'households are sacrificing health and educational opportunities'¹⁶ to meet their food needs. Further adding to the deteriorating economic situation is the inability of half the population – women- unable to be economically active, and the cost of excluding women costs the Afghanistan economy \$1 billion equating to 5% of their economy.¹⁷
- 1.5. Despite the challenging settings, CAID's partners are demonstrating their ability to deliver vital humanitarian programmes that are making a positive difference. Funding humanitarian aid has been beneficial in the face of the worsening economic situation. Most funding has been for emergency purposes; humanitarian aid should therefore be extended given the parlous economic context.

¹<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/560691563979733541/pdf/Hunger-before-the-Drought-Food-Insecurity-in-Afghanistan.pdf>

² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>

³ Afghanistan | OCHA (unocha.org)

⁴ Afghanistan Flash Appeal 2021 | Financial Tracking Service (unocha.org)

⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-key-message-update-humanitarian-food-need-down-last-year-amid-falling-prices-remains-above-average-july-2023>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/prolonged-drought-deepens-afghanistans-humanitarian-crisis-2023-08-11/>

⁷ Prolonged drought deepens Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis | Reuters

⁸ FAO - News Article: FAO Director-General QU Dongyu will address the High-Level Event on the Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan

⁹ Afghanistan: Drought - 2021-2023 | ReliefWeb

¹⁰ <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/03/02/afghanistan-ingos-find-workarounds-taliban-ban-on-women-ngo-work>

¹¹ UK aid to Afghanistan - ICAI (independent.gov.uk)

¹² <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistan-taliban-restrict-womens-rights-worsening-humanitarian-crisis#:~:text=The%20country%20is%20also%20facing,went%20from%20bad%20to%20worse>

¹³ <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-afghanistan-forced-drop-10-million-people-lifesaving-assistance-deepening-despair-and>

¹⁴ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertynsouthasia/rethinking-payments-afghanistan#:~:text=Afghanistan%20remains%20a%20challenging%20environment,70%20percent%20in%20Asia>

¹⁵ Afghanistan Socio-economic Outlook prepared by the United Nations Development Programme <https://www.undp.org/afghanistan/publications/afghanistan-socio-economic-outlook-2023>

¹⁶ <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-food-security-update-2nd-quarter-june-2023>

¹⁷ <https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/one-billion-cost-excluding-women-afghanistan#:~:text=Curbing%20women's%20access%20to%20work,cent%20of%20the%20Afghan%20GDP>

2. *Human rights of women and girls and navigating the context*

- 2.1. Over the past two years there have been a series of widespread restrictions on the rights of women, and they remain extremely grave. Women and girls have seen their access to livelihoods reversed, as those who worked previously are now unable to and the economic and political shift has driven a new phase of displacement,¹⁸ forcing people to move and making it impossible to return.¹⁹ As the curtailment of rights increased, so too did the women-headed households' vulnerability to poverty, and as household incomes decline, child labour has increased.²⁰ These pressures are seeing Gender Based Violence (GBV) increase, with implicit and explicit condoning of the de facto authority is considered by the UN Special Rapporteur Report to be 'normalising gender-based violence, both inside and outside the home'²¹
- 2.2. Many NGOs downsized as funding reduced in the wake of the Taliban takeover, and particularly since new restrictions on women working in December 2022, whether for proclaimed principled grounds or for practical reasons. Development programmes have reduced, and many smaller scale initiatives have not been able to get funding due to political concerns.
- 2.3. When the ban on women was applied to female aid workers, CAID partners and others engaged with the Human Rights Council and contacted the UN Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohamed who met with Taliban officials²² to encourage a reversal of the bans and called for engagement by the international community on this issue.
- 2.4. Despite the sanctions imposed on women's participation in national and international NGOs, partners have found pathways to meaningful engagement with the de facto authorities. Partners have engaged closely with community and district level authorities including governors, ministry officials and high-level members of the de facto government who have been able to maintain women humanitarian aid workers working in some capacity.
- 2.5. There are often local solutions to operating challenges. For example, at the local and district level de facto authority officials engage with NGOs, including compromises on project design and approaches by NGOs to ensure that lifesaving work can continue. Recent experience shows that there is not a linear regression in human rights or the ability of NGOs to operate. Indeed, whilst the overall context remains exceedingly challenging, there are positive examples of more acceptance by representatives of the de facto authority that women can work. Where this is happening, there are positive impacts for women employees, for female project participants and a hope that progress is possible.
- 2.6. The context is not as difficult or as sensitive as it once was, partners have seen local media discussing the role of women, and since the takeover the de facto authorities have been more willing and open to engagement. Partners report that UN OCHA and UN Women have been able to meet with de facto authority officials at the regional level. In addition, reports of meetings between the Prime Minister of Qatar and the Supreme Leader²³ encouraging the easing restrictions on women and girls to enable Afghanistan reintegration to the international community. There has also been a willingness amongst Afghan universities to readmitting women²⁴ and so this signals hope for further progress.

¹⁸ <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/MRS-71.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/expert-opinion/one-year-on-the-taliban-takeover-and-afghanistans-changing-displacement-crisis>

²⁰ <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/afghanistan-fifth-starving-families-sending-children-work-incomes-plummet-past-six-months>

²¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5321-situation-women-and-girls-afghanistan-report-special-rapporteur>

²² <https://icaei.independent.gov.uk/html-version/uk-aid-to-afghanistan-information-note/#:~:text=In%20August%202021%2C%20the%20UK,UN%20partners%20and%20international%20NGOs.>

²³ <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-chief-s-rare-meeting-with-qatar-official-reignites-debate-on-fate-of-afghan-women-/7118894.html>

²⁴ <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-women-university-ban-f2ffb09a8bacc80b371ad2be88d9b182>

- 2.7. There are signs that engagement is leading to positive results for women to participate in education and in humanitarian work and so the international community have a huge role and responsibility in ensuring these signs lead to better human rights outcomes for Afghan women and girls, and reducing or discontinuing essential aid is not the solution.
- 2.8. The statement by the UK at the UN Security Council (UNSC)²⁵ that engagement was predicated on the reversal on key human rights and governance issues and international recognition and development assistance will not be achieved without this. However, partners are clear Afghan women and girls must not be abandoned and the UK needs to be part of the efforts to improve human rights. Afghan human rights advocates need complementary international advocacy for removing the ban on women working and to make progress on wider human rights.
- 2.9. Afghanistan is highly dependent on aid, with international aid funding 75% of public spending²⁶ and so with donors turning away from Afghanistan following the bans on women this has left critical gaps, with the Humanitarian Response Plan only 23% funded²⁷
- 2.10. Despite the reductions in aid to Afghanistan, the UK states it continues to be one of the ‘top 5 donors to Afghanistan’²⁸ bilaterally and through the UN. Given this, the UK should utilise modalities through the UN Mission in Afghanistan to advance dialogue on human rights and the rights of women and girls. Furthermore, the UK should use its ties²⁹ with many Gulf and Muslim majority states to leverage their influence where they have closer political ties with senior leaders within the Afghan government.
- 2.11. The work of humanitarian organisations in the past two years has been tough. There have been many limitations and challenges; NGOs have faced compromises in delivering programmes. Despite the very difficult operating environment, some NGOs, including CAID partners, are finding ways to deliver effective programmes including working with and for women and girls. For example, business exhibitions are being held across provinces. There are also small grants for women to learn business tools and engage in economic activity. CAID and our partners see potential for expanding the space for women through economic empowerment programmes. The de facto authority does not prevent such interventions where particular dress code and behaviours are adhered to. There is scope to widen women’s agency and rights through economic activities. Some healthcare activities are also possible, with CAID partners talking to the de facto authority about the presence of female workers.
- 2.10 Partners are reporting that the UNDP is directly implementing a capacity building project for CSOs with trainings over a month for both women and men. These kinds of initiatives are more possible for international organisations than for local organisations. It is therefore important to consider how international organisations can work with Afghan organisations to improve sustainability and localisation.

²⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/while-the-taliban-continue-on-this-path-international-recognition-will-not-be-on-the-table-uk-statement-at-un-security-council>

²⁶ <https://www.rescue.org/article/afghanistan-entire-population-pushed-poverty>

²⁷ As of July 2023 <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-critical-funding-gaps#:~:text=More%20than%20halfway%20through%20the,the%20same%20time%20in%202022.>

²⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-afghanistan-development-partnership-summary-uk-afghanistan-development-partnership-summary-july-2023#:~:text=The%20UK%20is%20one%20of,Afghanistan%20in%20a%20principled%20manner.>

²⁹ <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/editorial/08/05/2023/qatar-uk-ties-grow>

3. Principles for governments and other international actors

- 3.1. Aid delivery should not be politicised, it should be premised on needs. International donors have a responsibility to support sustainable work inside Afghanistan. Donors including the UK should work with international allies and use international processes to find solutions so that humanitarian workers can work. As well as ensuring accountability for UK funding to organisations in Afghanistan, the UK has a responsibility to work with other countries and through international processes. For example, the UK should utilise channels for example through the UN's Special Coordinator³⁰ to advance on a coherent approach to Afghanistan. Working with other countries and using international processes to hold the de facto authority in Afghanistan accountable for its responsibilities as the government of the country.
- 3.2. Furthermore, the UK has invested significantly in Afghanistan in particular in the rights of women and girls over the past 20 years, between 2001 and 2020 the UK on average annually spent 3% of bilateral ODA on Afghanistan amounting to over £3.5 billion over that period³¹. The ICAI reported³² that this investment over this period focused on short term objectives and in doing so failed to build the resilience of the Afghan people and to maintain critical human rights. Learnings must be taken from this, and CAID partners suggest that learning spaces with Afghan civil society can ensure that aid is able to strengthen civil society, build people's resilience and advance human rights.
- 3.3. The UK can improve its coordination with INGOs and UN agencies to overcome key challenges and develop a coordinated approach for the international community for engaging with the de facto government and authorities. Coordination between donors should focus on expand funding opportunities for human rights activists, women's led organisations and women's rights advocacy groups to support advancing human rights. In addition, with losses in income for four out of five households³³ since 2021 funding for income generating activities is essential as well as for life-saving humanitarian programmes to ensure households do not end up in a chronic state of food insecurity.
- 3.4. A 'no engagement' policy has consequences on the people of Afghanistan and is unlikely to achieve rights for women and girls or to support Afghanistan economic development. Crisis Group³⁴ as well as CAID partners report that further isolation of the de facto government by the international community will hinder any escape from life-threatening poverty for Afghan people. The UK should continue supporting the delivery of local programmes, including paying women staff members. In many cases partners women staff have been working from home and have the tools they need to do their jobs. CAID's partners take risks to include women in programmes so they can be accountable and true to our shared humanitarian principles.
- 3.5. Needs are at an all-time high and yet funding has diminished³⁵, funding needs to be delivered and will have greater impact if it is accessible, flexible, timely, coordinated and targets vulnerable populations. Given the volatile and changing context across Afghanistan, it is important for donors to provide flexible funding for civil society so that where openings for more fundamental programmes are feasible, these opportunities can be realised. Serious funding is needed for sustainable livelihoods funding for Afghan people to be able to meet their basic needs, and partners have suggested funding for mahrams should be encouraged to allow women to work.

³⁰ <https://unama.unmissions.org/secretary-general-appoints-feridun-sinirlio%C4%9Flu-t%C3%8Crkiye-special-coordinator>

³¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ica-recommendations-on-uk-aid-to-afghanistan-uk-government-response/government-response-to-the-independent-commission-for-aid-impact-recommendations-on-uk-aid-in-afghanistan-country-portfolio-review-november-2022>

³² https://icaireview.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/UK-aid-to-Afghanistan_ICAI-review.pdf

³³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-food-security-update-2nd-quarter-june-2023>

³⁴ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistan-taliban-restrict-womens-rights-worsening-humanitarian-crisis#:~:text=The%20country%20is%20also%20facing,went%20from%20bad%20to%20worse.>

³⁵ <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-update-july-2023>

3.6. With the de facto authority more open to negotiate, CAID's partners have engaged with the de facto authorities to create space for women to work and progress on wider human rights, but the international community continues to not negotiate until women are allowed to work and participate in humanitarian work. There are ways the UK can engage directly, through international processes which could foster progress for the rights of women and girls. As well as funding, the UK can support effective international advocacy. Promoting human rights should combine international advocacy and accountability with funding for programmes which support achieving and advancing human rights in Afghanistan.

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