

Written evidence from Afghan Solidarity Coalition (ASC), UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub [EAP0017]

1. The evidence is submitted by the Afghan Solidarity Coalition (ASC), a grouping of organisations that have been working on research, peacebuilding and women's rights with local partners in Afghanistan. This group has helped evacuate at risk colleagues and continues to coordinate activities including fundraising and resettlement assistance to Afghan human rights activists, women peace builders, artists, film makers, researchers, doctors and LGBTQI+ activists.
2. The members of the Coalition include:
 - [UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub](#) – an international research network based at the London School of Economics, working with over 40 partners and local and global civil society, practitioners, governments, and international organisations to advance gender justice and inclusive peace. Afghanistan is a focus country for research with three key projects there
 - [LSE Centre for Women Peace and Security](#) - a research centre for scholars, practitioners, activists and policy-makers to develop strategies to promote justice, human rights and participation of women in conflict-affected situations around the world
 - Middlesex University London ([Dr Neelam Raina](#)) and University College London ([Prof Brad Blitz](#)), who are part of the GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub and lead Hub projects focusing on Afghanistan
 - [International Civil Society Action Network](#) - ([Sanam Naraghi Anderlini MBE](#)) promotes inclusive and sustainable peace in countries affected by violent conflict, extremism, militarism, and closing political space
 - [MOSAIC Lebanon](#) – a gender/LGBTQI+ focussed organisation
 - [Open Asia Foundation](#) – an Afghanistan based organisation that promotes democracy, human rights, justice and rule of law as well as to take cultural initiatives
 - [FUUSE](#) - an Emmy and Peabody award winning company based in Norway specialising in creating music and film projects rooted in art, culture, and activism to encourage dialogue around social and political issues
 - [Women for Peace and Participation](#) - promotes the social and political inclusion of women and youth in Afghanistan in peacebuilding processes at the grassroots, national and global levels.
3. Since February 2019, members of the Gender, Justice and Security Hub have been working collectively on a UK government ODA funded research programme which includes three projects in Afghanistan covering studies on forced displacement, return and political reintegration, culture and conflict, peacebuilding, and conflict prevention activities, through a gender lens and principally led by Afghan women.
4. The ASC was formed in August 2021 to coordinate the efforts of Hub members with other agencies who were also trying to evacuate and resettle their colleagues. Over the course of our collaboration, we have gathered names and information regarding 285 Afghans at risk, including their families, all of whom meet the criteria for UK assistance. Of these 55 have been evacuated.

5. The focus of our evidence is the design and implementation of the ACRS, specifically to ensure that the scheme is gender responsive, conflict sensitive and inclusive of those who are prioritised by the scheme.

In what ways does the Afghanistan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme differ from other routes to claiming asylum?

6. The ACRS scheme has not yet been opened and no opening date has been made public.
7. The ACRS differs from claiming asylum in terms of accessibility, maximum number of people, eligibility, facilitation to travel and status in the UK.
8. **Accessibility:** ACRS works through a referral system. HMG has stated that it will work with UNHCR to identify people most at risk and refer them for resettlement, replicating the approach the UK has taken in response to the conflict in Syria. It has also said that it will work with 'partners' in the region to implement the referral process. Contrary to applying for asylum, it will not be possible for eligible individuals to apply to ACRS directly. However, UNHCR has clearly stated on their homepages that they are not participating in any referrals for any resettlement programmes for Afghans.
9. **Maximum number:** There is an announced limit to how many Afghans the scheme will resettle – a total of 20,000 over five years, with 5,000 to be accepted in the first year. The government needs to clarify if this is one year from the end of evacuations by the UK on 28th August, one year from the announcement of the scheme, one year from the date the scheme will open or the end of the 2021 calendar year. Due to issues with accessibility and a lack of clarity and transparency of this new, but not yet open, scheme, the question about whether this will be first come, first served basis or not is not clear.
10. **Eligibility:** ACRS prioritises those put at risk by recent events in Afghanistan, specifically "a. those who have assisted the UK efforts in Afghanistan and stood up for values such as democracy, women's rights and freedom of speech, rule of law (for example, judges, women's rights activists, academics, journalists); and b. vulnerable people, including women and girls at risk, and members of minority groups at risk (including ethnic and religious minorities and LGBT)." This is a more concrete set of criteria than the general asylum eligibility categories.
11. ACRS states explicitly that it focuses on people affected by events in Afghanistan, who are located in Afghanistan **or in the region** – this will include countries that would be regarded as "safe third countries" in the asylum process. Asylum claims are not considered if individuals have travelled through a safe third country.
12. **Facilitation to travel:** The Government has announced that it will make efforts to facilitate travel of those who have been called forward but have not been evacuated yet. None of the at-risk individuals that we are in contact with, some of whom received a call forward email, have received facilitation to travel.
13. In addition to this, we have seen evidence from an email shared with our group that the MOD is advising approved ARAP applicants whose data was breached by the FCDO to "*actively consider evacuating to a third country, where support and your onward journey to the UK can be arranged by the High Commission/Embassy staff.*" The advice to travel across

borders into third countries without HMG's facilitation is alarming. On 14th October we contacted special advisors to the Home Office and to the FCDO to raise this as an urgent matter and requested the advice be changed to a version of: *"Those at risk should be advised to stay safe and stay indoors, out of harm's way. Land borders are closed, with only intermittent movement, and human trafficking is evident and increasing."* We are yet to receive a response.

14. **Status in the UK:** Anyone who is resettled through ACRS will receive indefinite leave to enter or remain in the UK, and will be able to apply for British citizenship after five years in the UK under existing rules. This means a person who gets this status is able to legally work and earn an income. This person is also able to travel out of the country. This is not the case for those who seek asylum. This is a more generous regulation than the current asylum system, which grants five years leave to remain as a refugee if you qualify for asylum before being able to apply to settle.
15. While ACRS remains opaque and closed, misinformation around who is and is not eligible spreads in Afghanistan and is used to exploit the vulnerability of women. Extortion of money with promises of access to the scheme, is easier when the scheme is closed and unclear. The highest number of fake passports being reported from the ground have been for women, who have to use middlemen and agents to do their application for them, often at huge costs, and then have been given fake documents, which, when used, put them at even more risk¹.
16. In addition to this the ACRS and the ARAP scheme are culturally blind to the notion of family in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan the legal age of adults is not seen as 18, but is connected to marriage. An unmarried 19-year-old girl is still part of the family unit with her birth parents. However, both these schemes are currently not reflective of this cultural difference.

Are people resettled through the Afghanistan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme more likely to be facing persecution based on certain protected characteristics?

17. Yes, people eligible to be resettled through the ACRS, especially women and minority groups, are more likely to face persecution in Afghanistan based on certain protected characteristics.
18. Afghan women are currently facing persecution in Afghanistan because of their gender. We are in regular contact with women-led Afghan civil society organisations, local women's peace network members, and numerous women judges, security sector officials, journalists and others, many of whom are now in hiding. The news from the country worsens by the day, especially for women who have been promoting peace, development, justice, and security in their society as their visible work, which, combined with their gender, makes them particularly vulnerable to persecution. Recent reports on the killing of activist women are starting to make this real danger of persecution clear.
19. The scheme is not currently responsive to these protected characteristics and different cultural contexts. Nor is it sensitive to the particular needs of women and children when facing resettlement. We have detailed in what way from 22-27.

¹ Personal communication with Dr Neelam Raina via WhatsApp on 8th November 2021

20. We have already seen evidence of reprisals, summary executions and hardship by the Taliban:

- a. On the 30th August 13 Hazaras were killed by the Taliban, including a 17-year-old girl in Daykundi province.
- b. In Ghor, a female police officer, 8 months pregnant, was tortured and killed in front of her family.
- c. In Kabul and Herat, CSO offices dedicated to women, peace and security, development, and preventing violence against women were raided. With the Ministry of Interior in the hands of Sirajuddin Haqqani, women in the police, staff and beneficiaries of many women-led CSOs have been forced into hiding.
- d. Women stepping out to buy milk for their toddlers have faced beatings in Balkh².
- e. Just this past week (November 5), a women's human rights defender was shot dead by the Taliban in the north of Afghanistan.
- f. Reports about the selling of a 9-year-old girl for cash, to buy food for the family are appearing (November 6).
- g. We are hearing reports that four Women Human Rights Defenders have been murdered in Mazar e Sharif (November 7). They had been called by somebody fronting as a representative of an INGO promising to provide visa assistance and relocation.

21. These are just some examples of verified reports from Afghanistan and from our colleagues on the ground. The true extent of reprisals against women and minorities in Afghanistan is likely much higher.

22. There are numerous reports coming from Afghanistan that young unmarried women and girls are being forced to marry Taliban members. Many of them have no choice but to do so or risk being executed. In addition, the Taliban's demand that women must have a *Mahram* (male chaperone) to go to work, access public life and services, is untenable, and a de facto prison sentence for countless women/girls – especially female headed households where women are unmarried, widowed or divorced.

23. This gendered segregation of society means that women are facing particular persecution. This makes it especially difficult for female members of households to access even basic health services and aid distribution services, not to speak of going to work or receiving an education.

24. Many organisations who were working for the safety of minority groups and women who face persecution are now unable to operate despite them being even more essential now. Those working for these organisations are now facing persecution themselves because of their work and many women's human right defenders have been forced into hiding.

25. Recent reports also suggest that the Taliban are not permitting women to operate as aid workers, or they are facing restrictions such as the need for a man to escort them during this work. It is female aid workers that play a pivotal role in assessing the needs of women and girls, and minorities. Aid will be less likely to reach women-headed households and

² Personal communications with Dr Neelam Raina on WhatsApp on 4th November 2021.

those who have been ostracised from society, for example divorced women and women who were in formal employment.

26. The systems put in place to tackle gender-based violence have been dismantled by the Taliban. This, coupled with many female aid workers not being able to operate means that women's expertise is not being heard, and gender-based violence is likely to become entrenched as women face increased persecution.
27. Minority groups are particularly vulnerable because of their identity – this includes ethnic and religious minorities (Hazara, Tajik) and LGBTQI+ persons and disabled women and girls. Forced displacement of almost 3,000 Hazara residents was reported from Daykundi and Uruzgan provinces in September alone.

What measures are needed to support people with certain protected characteristics arriving via the Afghanistan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme route?

28. ACRS has been designed as a referral programme, with UNHCR and other international NGOs as referring bodies. This approach should recognise and respond to the dynamic circumstances and very particular needs of the most vulnerable people in Afghanistan. The scheme must now start operating, and in a way that is responsive to individual needs based on gender identity, sexual orientation and expression, and ethnicity.
29. Given the fast-changing conditions in Afghanistan, HMG should make sure that there is a centralised, coordinated implementation of the ACRS that is co-designed between HMG and its counterparts in civil society to effectively prioritise, refer and resettle through the scheme to ensure that people with protected characteristics are adequately supported.
30. We suggest establishing an ACRS Central Implementation Group, comprising Government and civil society representation to deliver on the scheme's commitment to cross-sectoral collaboration and effectively deliver the scheme in a way that is responsive to the protected characteristics of those being processed. This Group will bring their combined expertise to bear on questions of eligibility, priority and referral and ensure that these reflect Afghanistan's particular cultural, security and gender concerns. It is important that this Implementation Group includes voices of women from the region, who understand the cultural, socio-religious and geopolitical context of Afghanistan/South Asia.
31. The Central Implementation Group would work with HMG to co-design the implementation of ACRS, making sure that those who are eligible can resettle in the UK as soon as possible. The Group would:
 - i. Recommend and refer at-risk people to the ACRS including collating and collecting names of individuals, organisations, groups, contractors, implementors who assisted with these efforts;
 - ii. Provide updated and current information of risk and context specific advice for groups of people at risk;
 - iii. Identify the obstacles and the critical pathways to ensure their protection and safe and timely passage to the UK; and
 - iv. Critically assess the scheme to ensure that it delivers for those most at risk and vulnerable. This includes understanding the cultural contexts that the scheme needs

- to respond to and being sensitive to the particular needs of women and children when facing resettlement.
- v. Advise on the needs of those arriving in the UK and their temporary housing structures and needs. For example, we have evidence of single Afghan women of ethnic minority being placed in hotels on the same floor as single men who then face harassment based on both their ethnicity and gender.
 - vi. Recommend orientation advice for women who arrive in UK, to provide guidance on safety and protection within social settings to allow them to remain safe whilst they resettle in the UK.
32. By establishing this Implementation Group with civil society HMG can continue to receive on the ground up-to-date information on who is facing persecution in Afghanistan. The Group would ensure that the decisions shaping ACRS are based on accurate and up-to-date information rather than information provided on an ad-hoc basis in this fast-changing environment. This advice will also be gender specific and relevant.
33. ACRS must include the protection, respect for and participation of Afghan women-led civil society organisations and women in decision making and delivery of all sectors, including but not limited to health, education, security, justice and governance sectors. By including women from these CSOs in an ACRS Implementation Group, HMG will be ensuring that the support needed for those with protected characteristics is given.
34. HMG has recently worked with Stonewall and Rainbow Railroad to receive LGBTQI+ Afghans and activists who have stood up for their rights. We commend HMG for working with these charities to make this possible and ensure that they receive ongoing support from these organisations as they transition to their new lives in the UK. HMG should also take this approach with settling women, girls and ethnic minorities to ensure that their individual needs are met in the same way.
35. Protected characteristics have a direct relation with vulnerability, this scheme should be carefully designed to allow for risk to be minimised, and the process to be sensitive to this vulnerability and mindful of safeguarding as well as asking sensitive and context informed questions. Transferring learning from other such schemes from other such contexts would be inappropriate, irrelevant and counterproductive.
36. On the 25th of September we proposed this approach to Victoria Atkins' office and we are yet to get a response to our letter. We have also subsequently contacted Stephen Barclay, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster as Chair of the Cabinet Committee overseeing the resettlement scheme on the 22nd October. We are yet to receive a response.

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