

## **Written evidence submitted by Women for Women International (AFG0045)**

I have been working with Women for Women International in Afghanistan for nearly six years, with my most recent position being Program Manager. Women for Women International welcomes the Foreign Affairs Committee's inquiry and call for evidence on UK Government Policy in Afghanistan. In particular, we have been encouraged by the Committee's proactive engagement with Afghan women's rights activists and experts who were evacuated from Afghanistan in August 2021, myself included.

### **1. How well did the UK handle the international military withdrawal from Afghanistan, including on cross-Whitehall co-ordination? How effectively did it plan and coordinate with the US, other allies and countries in the region, particularly around the evacuation of those eligible to come to the UK? How can decision making structures be improved?**

1.1 Women for Women International worked closely with the FCDO to evacuate our colleagues and their families from Afghanistan. Five of our colleagues and their families were evacuated, but the process was incredibly difficult. Conflicting correspondence via email and phone between the FCDO and our colleagues meant that people were waiting outside Kabul Airport for over 24 hours as they tried to pass through Taliban Checkpoints and make it to the Baron Hotel. My family and I had this experience before we were able to join the military aircraft that eventually brought us into Birmingham International airport via Dubai.

1.2 Whilst I have made it safely to the UK, some of my other colleagues have had more complex journeys with families being separated. In the overcrowded and high-pressure environment outside Kabul Airport, the son and brother of one of our colleagues were separated from the rest of their family. The 13-year-old son is now stranded in Afghanistan unable to reach the UK. In the hotel where I am currently staying, I hear many similar cases to this.

1.3 We also know that many women's rights activists remain in danger in Afghanistan. The UK Government should continue to work with Governments of neighbouring countries and other international organisations to ensure safe and legal exit from the country for women and their families at risk of imminent danger and a pathway to safe resettlement. This would include providing visas for and assisting with the escort and evacuation of Afghan women at risk, and their families.

### **2. What are the humanitarian and human rights implications of the Taliban takeover? How can the UK support those at risk – particularly women and girls – both in the immediate and longer term? What steps is the Government taking to do this?**

#### ***Human Rights and Food Insecurity.***

2.1 We are now in the lean winter season in Afghanistan and a record 22.8 million people face acute food insecurity - the highest number in the past decade of available reporting and a 37% increase since April 2021. Combined with a spiraling economic crisis, the people of Afghanistan need urgently administered aid to meet their needs and prevent catastrophe – financial support (beyond funds provided solely for humanitarian response through UN agencies alone) must restart as soon as possible, including funding for women's rights organisations and NGOs.

2.2 When I think about the human rights implications of the Taliban's takeover, I can say that Afghan people, including and especially women and children, are starving and their lives are at risk. With no

opportunity for income generation or access to cash or food, many women and children have resorted to begging for their food. Women are also in isolation and living in fear and uncertainty as their mobility has been restricted and they have told our organisation that they are in need of not only food but psychosocial support.

### ***Education and Work Rights***

2.3 Discussions between the UK Government and the Taliban must prioritize rights to work and education for women and girls. Women make up at least 50% of Afghanistan, what will happen to the country if that 50% is left behind? Any economic crisis will become exponentially worse, healthcare will become inaccessible for women and children, and human rights will be violated.

2.4 Women for Women International's program research has shown that a relatively high proportion of women (39-49%) report that their girl-children are enrolled in and attending school. Our data mirrors the national average of about 40% of girls in Afghanistan attending school and with 87% of the people in Afghanistan still supporting girls' education<sup>1</sup>, the international community will have a role in ensuring that any aid going to Afghanistan includes conditions which enable women and girls to maintain access to equal education.

2.5 The UK Government should pursue all avenues to safeguard the rights of Afghan women and girls including by ensuring humanitarian aid has specific provisions and includes women aid workers to support the specific needs of women and girls and mitigating and responding to ongoing conflict and violence across the country.

2.6 I ask the UK Government to ensure that the voices, experiences, and rights of Afghan women do not become afterthoughts in the response to Afghanistan's humanitarian and human rights crisis. Protection, education, and equal rights must be considered part of essential and basic needs and services for any policies and exemptions set forth by the UK Government and their allies. The experiences and participation of Afghan women like myself and so many others who have long hoped and worked for a brighter future should be central to both the immediate and long-term response of the UK Government.

***January 2022***

---

<sup>1</sup> [How will Taliban rule impact girls' education in Afghanistan? \(trust.org\)](https://www.trust.org/en/2021/08/14/how-will-taliban-rule-impact-girls-education-in-afghanistan)