

## **Statement on behalf of the Australian Civil Society Coalition on WPS DFAT-Civil Society Dialogue on Afghanistan – 14 December 2021**

This statement is made on behalf of the Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security, which is a non-partisan and independent coalition of civil society organisations, networks and individuals working to advance the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in Australia, the region and globally.

Members of the Coalition advance the WPS agenda through their daily work including building evidence and practice, raising awareness, facilitating dialogue and supporting women's rights partners in Australia and overseas.

In the context of Afghanistan, a number of Coalition members continue to deliver development programs and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan and are members of the Australian Council For International Development's Afghanistan Community of Practice.

The Coalition believes there is a unique opportunity for Australia to make the WPS agenda central to its agenda at home and abroad in partnership with civil society. This must go beyond diplomacy to build engagement, and a constituency behind this agenda and invest in tangible activities that advance the WPS agenda to the forefront of Australia's efforts to foster peace, stability and prosperity in the region.

Nowhere is this more important than in Afghanistan. The current humanitarian crisis and imminent economic collapse are having a disproportionate impact on women and girls. The international community, not just the Taliban, are contributing to the erosion of vital gains in the rights and wellbeing of women and girls.

The defacto government's denial of women's equal rights to education and work and the systematic exclusion of women from participation in government and public life are of deep concern to civil society, as are the ongoing reports of attacks on women's rights activists and threats to their lives.

However the international community's approach of economic starvation of the country in order to have influence over the Taliban regime is also contributing to the denial of healthcare, food and other vital services to the Afghan people. This foreign policy approach is driving mass hunger and joblessness with an estimated 22.8 million people facing acute risk of hunger and 8.7 million facing emergency levels.

As the most gender unequal country in the world, it is undeniable that women and girls are the most at-risk in Afghanistan and are the first to feel the impacts of conflict, instability and erosion of public services. Gaps in humanitarian funding at this crucial time risk eroding the achievements that have been made in protecting the rights of Afghan women and girls.

There is an urgent need for the international community, including Australia, to protect "essential advances" that have been made over the past two decades through our diplomatic and development efforts, and the targeted investments in women's rights and gender equality.

In a context of rising instability, the Women, Peace and Security agenda can play a critical role in strengthening and sustaining civil society, particularly feminist civil society to advance prevention, participation, protection and relief and recovery efforts.

The Coalition recognises that Australia has a longstanding contribution to the WPS agenda in Afghanistan and supporting women's inclusion in peace processes and has also given some prioritisation to the protection of women's rights activists in its humanitarian visa intake. These steps are acknowledged and appreciated.

Building on these efforts, the Australian Civil Society Coalition urges the Australian government to

1. Advocate for women's participation in the formation of an inclusive future government in Afghanistan
2. Urgently increase support for the humanitarian response efforts, with a particular focus on ensuring that women's security and needs are prioritised in humanitarian funding. This includes providing an exemption from sanctions for humanitarian actors consistent with peer governments in the US and Germany.
3. Commit to sustain resourcing and core support to feminist civil society in Afghanistan over the long term given its critical role in challenging institutionalised gender discrimination.

As part of today's dialogue, we would like to explore how Australian civil society can support Australia's efforts to promote women's security and needs in the humanitarian response effort and support women at grave risk who are seeking urgent protection.

We believe there is a critical opportunity to create space for information sharing and dialogue about the crisis in Afghanistan between government actors and Australian civil society, including many of the Afghan diaspora groups represented here today as well as those of us with a continued presence in the country.

There is a critical opportunity to create a civil society-government partnership to mutually support Afghan women and girls and promote the WPS commitments of both Australian and Afghanistan.

We hope we can listen to the voices in the room today from the Afghan diaspora, including newly arrived refugees, as well as to engage in further opportunities for critical discussions to support the security of women and girls in Afghanistan.