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Advancing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Afghanistan

The Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security

Introduction

Afghanistan is facing a complex humanitarian crisis that is affecting two thirds of the country.¹ This includes but is not limited to displacement, unemployment, poverty and malnourishment, poor health services and adverse effects from disasters.² Although these particular challenges are not new to Afghanistan, which has suffered from prolonged conflict, they have become increasingly dire following the withdrawal of US troops and the Taliban's seizure of power in August 2021.³

Women's rights in Afghanistan have deteriorated rapidly in the past two years with the rights to education and employment stripped away, along with freedom of movement and dress. The severity of discrimination, at a scale that is both "widespread and systematic" has prompted legitimate allegations of "gender persecution"⁴ and "gender apartheid."⁵ While others have characterised the situation as a "war against women,"⁶ which has threatened to erase two decades of progress⁷ and instilled "...a return to the oppression of the 1990s."⁸ It is therefore both unsurprising and disheartening that Afghanistan was ranked at the bottom of 177 countries in this year's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Index, which measures 13 indicators under the broad themes of women's inclusion, justice and security.⁹

The worsening situation in Afghanistan is taking place amidst a time when the world is seeing a "reversal of generational gains in women's rights"¹⁰ and 614 million women and girls are living in conflict affected countries, a 50% increase since 2017.¹¹ Within this context, efforts to advance the

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https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-2024-ifrc-network-country-plan-maaaf001?_gl=1*nfr6mj*_ga*MTQ5MjYxMDI3LjE3MDI1MDc0OTM.*_ga_F60ZNX2F68*MTcwMjUwNzQ5Mi4xLjEuMTcwMjUwNzYxOC40Ny4wLjA.

2

https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-protection-brief-december-2023?_gl=1*18m9vvi*_ga*MTQ5MjYxMDI3LjE3MDI1MDc0OTM.*_ga_F60ZNX2F68*MTcwMjUwNzQ5Mi4xLjEuMTcwMjUwNzYxMC41NS4wLjA.

³ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/09/afghanistans-two-years-humanitarian-crisis-under-taliban>

⁴ As noted in the Secretary General's Report on Women, Peace and Security released in September 2023 at page 12/36 citing A/HRC/52/2.

⁵ <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15421.doc.htm>

⁶ https://www.amnesty.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/TALIBAN-WAR-ON-WOMEN_ICJ-Afghanistan-Report.pdf

referenced in the Women, Peace and Security Index 2023/2024, p.45.

⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/03/afghanistan-un-experts-say-20-years-progress-women-and-girls-rights-erased>

⁸ Secretary General's Report on Women, Peace and Security released in October 2023 at page 12/36, citing A/HRC/53/21 at page 2/36, see also: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/af-IWD2023_Gender-Alert-4-ss-020323.pdf

⁹ The Women, Peace and Security Index 2023/2024 (Georgetown University and PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security)) tracking 13 indicators under three pillars: inclusive, justice and security.

¹⁰ Secretary General's Report on Women, Peace and Security, October 2022 at page 1/21, citing A/HRC/53/21.

¹¹ Secretary General's Report on Women, Peace and Security released in September 2023 at page 1/38, citing A/HRC/53/21, citing United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), "Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: the gender snapshot 2023" (New York, 2023), p. 23

WPS agenda are more critical than ever, both to ensure hard-won advances in gender equality are not further rolled back and so vital progress on the agenda continues.¹² The urgency of the situation was emphasised in October 2023 by the United Nations (UN) Secretary General, warning the global community that “concrete progress [on the WPS agenda] is slow, stagnant or even going backwards. We need to implement the women, peace and security agenda in full, now.”¹³ There is an urgency to prioritise the WPS agenda in Afghanistan given the rapid deterioration of women’s rights under the Taliban regime.

On October 31st, 2023, the anniversary of landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security hosted a convening on advancing the WPS agenda in Afghanistan with activists, feminists, practitioners, humanitarian actors and those with first-hand experience working on WPS issues in Afghanistan. The convening provided an opportunity for women leaders in Afghanistan to share how their daily lives have been impacted since the Taliban takeover in 2021; to better understand how Afghan feminist civil society is responding; and to explore the role that the international community can play in ensuring continued support for women who have remained in the country. This report reflects an effort to build a collective agenda, led by the voices and priorities of women in Afghanistan and the diaspora by providing a summary of the key challenges identified by this community. It concludes with recommendations on how the Australian Government and civil society can and must continue to support the implementation of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan, notwithstanding the challenges posed by the current situation.

Despite immense difficulties and harsh restrictions, women’s rights activists and civil society organisations working towards gender equality, peace and security within Afghanistan have persisted. Their resolve and commitment to advance human rights and combat gender discrimination must be recognised and these efforts supported. This report reflects the insights, strategies and requests of these representatives, who have not been named in this report, in order to protect their safety and security. It urges the Australian government, other international donors and civil society to resume, maintain and enhance support to women’s rights and women-led civil society organisations and activists who have stayed in Afghanistan or are creatively operating outside its borders to impact the lives of Afghan people. Despite the severe risks and difficulties, these organisations are working to ensure that the realisation of women’s rights in Afghanistan remain a domestic and global priority.

¹² <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15221.doc.htm>

¹³ <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sqsm22005.doc.htm>

Challenges and vulnerabilities facing Afghan Women and Women's Rights Organisations

Grief and loss: rolling back 20 years of improvements in women's rights

Over a period of 20 years from the early 2000s up until the Taliban takeover in August 2021, women and girls in Afghanistan saw significant changes and improvement across various levels of society. This included the adoption of a new constitution in 2004, which recognised the rights of Afghan women, the passing of the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) law, and the signing and ratification of the UN Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979).

Women's rights organisations and networks in Afghanistan were committed to and actively engaged in efforts to eliminate widespread gender discrimination in the country. As one speaker explained, Afghanistan's network of women's rights and civil society organisations played an important and significant role, which was recognised by the previous government, especially in the areas of peace and security. This influence meant that women's rights organisations were able to have dialogue with and challenge the leadership in Afghanistan, which has since changed with the current de-facto government.

The scope of programming by women's rights organisations and broader civil society in the country has been significantly curtailed since 2021 and is now limited to public health initiatives or humanitarian relief. As one speaker explained: projects targeting women as beneficiaries or rights holders have failed to receive approval to operate from the Taliban. This has had a direct impact on the ability of organisations to carry out initiatives that specifically seek to work with women and girls.¹⁴ Concerns were also raised that when funds do arrive in the country, for instance, through the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), they often fail to reach local civil society and women's organisations. If funds do reach these organisations, the amount received is limited and estimated by speakers to be as little as 5% of original amounts received from donors. This is despite women and girls being the most marginalised in the current humanitarian context and the gendered segregation of society. As a result, organisations with the experience, knowledge and networks necessary to address women's needs and rights in Afghanistan are limited in their scope and operation. For instance, funds received in response to the Herat earthquake were not allocated to support women's leadership in response efforts, which was a key concern for speakers, especially

¹⁴ It was reported in 2022 that 77% of women's rights organisations did not have funds to operate by UN Women: https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Gender-alert-2-Womens-rights-in-Afghanistan-one-year-after-the-Taliban-take-over-en_0.pdf citing Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group Afghanistan. Research on Women Challenges, Barriers and Opportunities for women-led CSOs in Afghanistan's Humanitarian crisis.

as women were disproportionately impacted by the disaster.¹⁵

Despite limited financial support and a restrictive environment, women led civil society and rights organisations have managed to remain functional and operational on the ground. By adopting various strategies, these organisations have established numerous safe spaces across the country, providing an entry point to access the most vulnerable and marginalised women and girls, through the provision of Gender Based Violence (GBV) support services. They continue to carry out health consultations, referrals to specialised care agencies, and deliver educational, literacy and income generating programs as well as support peace building in communities. The ability to implement these programs has been made possible through consultation and coordination with de facto authorities and through the use of context appropriate terms and language. Nonetheless, these activities carry a high level of sensitivity and risk for women led organisations and the individuals who access these services.

Women in Afghanistan are grappling with exclusion from representation and participation in decision-making. They are absent at the executive level of organisations and boards of directors within government ministries, including the Ministry of Economy, where budget allocations are made. As one speaker explained, only men are accepted in leadership positions or management roles. After years of gradual increases in women's leadership and participation in all spheres of decision-making, Afghan women have now been effectively removed from these roles. This echoes the warning made by human rights defenders at the UN in December 2022, that women were "literally being erased from public life."¹⁶ Another change being lamented has been the replacement of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA), with the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.¹⁷ Previously regarded as the Taliban's "moral police,"¹⁸ the ministry operates to enforce the Taliban's restrictions on women.¹⁹

Faced with the denial of their basic human rights and reversal of two decades of efforts, women in Afghanistan are in grief, lamenting the loss of hard-won gains. "Unfortunately, we lost everything in one day."²⁰ Another speaker shared that there is "fear of an unknown future, [with]....precious time passing under our eyes." However, as the convening made clear and as speakers emphasised: *there are still women and activists in Afghanistan and those outside the country who continue to advocate for their rights, and while they are facing grave difficulties, they are also resilient and continue to organise and provide vital assistance.*

¹⁵

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2023/10/trapped-in-their-homes-women-and-girls-comprise-majority-of-earthquake-casualties-in-afghanistan>

¹⁶ <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc15153.doc.htm>

¹⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/afghanistan/report-afghanistan/>

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-replaces-womens-ministry-with-ministry-virtue-vice-2021-09-17/>

¹⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/29/afghan-women-frightening-return-vice-and-virtue>

²⁰ Also discussed in

<https://ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/03/afghanistan-un-experts-say-20-years-progress-women-and-girls-rights-erased>

Severe restrictions on daily life and mobility

Since the Taliban resumption of power, citizens of Afghanistan have faced countless restrictions on their daily lives.²¹ However, the restrictions facing women are specific and targeted, with a wide array of disastrous consequences that affect women's education, health, livelihood and security.²² "Women are victims twice," explained one speaker; struggling both under the Taliban's general repression against Afghan society and further as a result of the oppressive policies targeting women, which has been characterised by speakers in Afghanistan and at the UN as amounting to "gender apartheid."²³ "[We are affected] once, because we are Afghans living in Afghanistan and again, because we are Afghan women living in Afghanistan."

Restrictions have also impacted women's physical health, as they are often unable to visit a doctor and attend health check-ups without a mahram (a male chaperone). Women have also been prohibited from travelling prolonged distances alone, leaving them "in legal limbo."²⁴ Women cannot visit many public places (gyms, parks, bath houses)²⁵ and beauty salons have been closed.²⁶ A prohibition on women working at NGOs initially caused many organisations to suspend operations or significantly roll back their operations.²⁷ Although women are continuing to work under certain conditions, including from their homes, the effect has undermined their capacity to reach women and girls.²⁸ As a result, speakers reported that women are effectively being forced to stay at home which, as noted previously, meant they were more vulnerable during the recent earthquake and unable to evacuate.²⁹ Women who continue to work in offices in Afghanistan reported frequent visits by armed

²¹ This includes freedom of expression, opinion, media, etc.

²² For an illustration of the restrictions facing women in Afghanistan, see: "Women in Afghanistan: From almost everywhere to nowhere"

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2023/08/women-in-afghanistan-from-almost-everywhere-to-almost-nowhere>

²³ UN Human Rights Council, Richard Bennett, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2023/07/experts-taliban-treatment-women-may-be-gender-apartheid>

²⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/15/taliban-rules-trap-afghan-women-no-male-guardian>

²⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/27/taliban-bans-women-from-national-park-in-afghanistan>

²⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/09/afghanistan-human-rights-state-collapse-warns-turk>

²⁷ Tracking the effects of bans:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/tracking-impact-report-ban-women-working-ngos-ingos-and-un-afghanistan-fifth-snapshot-may-2023>

²⁸

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

²⁹ UN Women reports that as a result of women being at home, they experienced greater casualties from the October 2023 earthquake:

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2023/10/trapped-in-their-homes-women-and-girls-comprise-majority-of-earthquake-casualties-in-afghanistan>

members of the Taliban, who search their offices and document their coming and goings, impacting their safety at work.³⁰

Women also face practical livelihood challenges related to obtaining a tax identification number (TIN),³¹ despite efforts to engage with the Taliban and seek donor and United Nations support on the issue. Without a TIN, women's ability to access social services and employment is limited, which is especially difficult for female headed households which represent approximately 25% of households in the country³² and are already the most vulnerable³³ and food insecure.³⁴

Education ban

The Taliban's ban on secondary and post-secondary education has had a devastating effect on the lives of girls in Afghanistan.³⁵ Speakers urged attendees to consider the experiences of the young women and girls, who, after several years at school or university, have been prohibited from finishing their studies or obtaining a degree. One speaker foreshadowed the inevitable consequence if the education ban continues: "We will not have female professionals in the future of Afghanistan.... imagine the situation." As Human Rights Watch recently reported, girls are not the only ones who have been disfranchised because of the Taliban's management of the school system. A decline in the quality and access to education, which has been directly impacted by the prohibition against women teachers, means "schools are failing boys too."³⁶ The effect is "irreversible damage" which has had a widespread impact on an entire generation of learners.³⁷

In response to the ban, Afghan civil society and the diaspora have organised to ensure students can access education opportunities and resources through the provision of online, open learning opportunities. Free courses offered remotely by organisations involved in the forum are currently reaching over 20,000 students directly, with over 200,000 learners connected through online

³⁰ As reported in May, this has been possible for some women as a result of exemptions for specific sectors or through negotiations: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/tracking-impact-report-ban-women-working-ngos-ingos-and-un-afghanistan-fifth-snapshot-may-2023>

³¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/18/afghanistan-taliban-deprive-women-livelihoods-identity>

³² <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/statement/2022/12/statement-the-decree-barring-women-in-afghanistan-from-working-in-non-governmental-organizations-is-yet-another-stark-violation-of-womens-rights>

³³ https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/summary-report_september-2023-women-consultations.pdf

³⁴ <https://www.wfp.org/videos/wfp-data-shows-almost-100-households-headed-women-afghanistan-not-getting-enough-food-medi>

³⁵ According to the OHCHR, it has led to an increase in child marriage, labour and malnourishment: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/03/afghanistan-quality-education-must-be-equally-accessible-all-un-experts-say#:~:text=Since%20the%20ban%20on%20education,and%20even%20dying%20from%20malnutrition.>

³⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/06/schools-are-failing-boys-too/talibans-impact-boys-education-afghanistan>

³⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/dec/06/human-rights-watch-taliban-schools-damage-education-afghanista>

libraries. By participating in the administration and delivery of online learning opportunities, Afghan women and young people - including former students who have been prevented from continuing their studies or working in their field of expertise - are finding ways to support the empowerment of others by mobilising to provide access to education opportunities for themselves and their peers.³⁸

While access to open learning platforms is playing an important function in filling the gap left by the ban, Coalition members and speakers emphasised that alternative learning cannot replace formal education, which provides greater opportunities for work and opens doors for women to obtain higher education and professional qualifications. Although participants emphasised the importance of supporting the localisation of education in Afghanistan and its transfer from development organisations to local partners, they also expressed concern that in a context where monitoring, evaluation and learning is weak, and an absence of rule of law exists, the prospect of education in the country is troubling. Concerns were expressed that without a legitimate governing authority and given the current governance architecture, the education system, which is already under immense pressure, is at risk of collapse if wholly transferred to local authorities.

Consequently, those committed to advancing the right to education in Afghanistan, including equal rights for all genders, should seek to support the capacity, professionalisation and institutionalisation of organisations that are currently providing immediate services, while working to ensure long-term improvements in the country's "fragile" education system.³⁹ This could include by investing in organisations still in operation. As one speaker explained: "if the situation continues, the country will face difficulties moving forward, it creates risks and hazards for the future of Afghanistan."

Compounding discrimination: diverse sexual orientation and gender identity

Concerns were raised about the hardships experienced by lesbian, transgender and bisexual Afghan women, who face threats and abuse from family members and can find it nearly impossible to flee to safety given the requirements for women to be escorted by a mahram in public. This group, often overlooked amidst Afghanistan's array of challenges facing all segments of society, requires targeted protection efforts and recognition of their specific needs. Donor governments including Australia must acknowledge not only their presence in Afghanistan but also the need for advocacy and resources to ensure the safety of LGBTQI communities in a highly restrictive and conservative context.

³⁸ See also <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/news/hope-for-afghans-forced-out-school>

³⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/education>

Recognising the Leadership of Women's Civil Society Organisations

Women and women led-civil society organisations in Afghanistan have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience despite the formidable challenges impacting all aspects of their lives and work. It is imperative that the Australian government and organisations wishing to support women's rights and advance the WPS agenda in the country recognise the leadership, capability and agency of women driving change inside the country. Mechanisms must be found to support their activism and locally-led initiatives. Increased and flexible funding to women led organisations inside the country is essential to directly drive locally-led efforts to advance women's rights, while the international community works from outside.

Recommendations to the Australian Government

Through the convening, the following recommendations have been identified for the Australian government and broader community of donors:

1. Recognise and support the leadership, capability and agency of women who continue to drive change inside Afghanistan

Funding to Afghanistan from the Government of Australia and other donor countries must include allocations for women's rights and women-led civil society organisations, working directly with women and girls. This requires a commitment to ensure direct support in the form of flexible, multi-year and core support to women-led and women's rights organisations, who have continued to operate in an extremely difficult environment and despite sanctions.

"... [O]rganisations are waiting for funds and opportunities to serve the people of this country. Please consider investing in them and give them an opportunity to prove themselves so we can put an end to the current crisis. Let history remember us as survivors, as agents of change, and peace builders, and not as victims."

With decades of experience, women-led CSOs and women's rights organisations in Afghanistan have a deep understanding of Afghan women's struggles, which has fuelled their ongoing commitment to the realisation of women's rights. As their continued operation in Afghanistan shows, they are the most equipped to drive change in the country with their knowledge of local context and wide-ranging networks.

2. Increase efforts alongside the international community to keep Afghan women's rights on the agenda, including in the provision of humanitarian relief

The Australian government and other like-minded donor countries must continue to insist that the Taliban reduce its restrictions on women, at the very least regarding the right to education for women and girls. Australia should continue to work with the international community, INGOS, and the UN and through diplomatic channels on this issue. *The Australia government must be persistent and unwavering in its advocacy for the participation of girls in formal education beyond primary schooling.*

At the same time, Australia must remain active in condemning the appalling treatment of women and girls by calling out the failure of the Taliban to protect their rights in international fora, including through UN resolutions. As part of this advocacy, Australia should encourage other governments to continue to do the same and strengthen their resolve. Formal diplomatic relations and recognition of the Taliban regime should not be considered unless accompanied by a reversal of restrictive laws against women and girls. Australia, alongside the global community, should not allow the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan to become normalised or forgotten.⁴⁰ As one speaker noted, “the situation in Afghanistan is a concern for everyone.” Australia must ensure that the international community does not forget the women and girls in Afghanistan. Australia could also consider taking a leadership role to include gender-apartheid as a crime in domestic and international legislation.

3. Advocate for women's participation in negotiations and deliberations with the Taliban, and ensure women's rights and ending gender discrimination are part of the agenda for peace

Speakers expressed disappointment at the lack of women's presence at the Doha peace process between the Taliban and (former) Afghan government, which they regarded as failing to secure achievements for women in Afghanistan, despite high hopes by Afghan women leaders.⁴¹ Women's participation in peace negotiations is vital to ensuring the promotion and protection of women's rights and working towards sustainable peace. The Australian government in its commitment to advancing the full realisation of the WPS agenda must leverage its global influence in support of women's right to meaningful participation in peace and security negotiations, and support spaces that enable Afghan women to collectively influence and inform these discussions.

⁴⁰ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/afghanistan-perfect-storm-human-rights-challenges-require-urgent-redress>

⁴¹ On the participation of women in the peace talks, see: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2022/10/no-peace-without-women-afghan-activists-on-why-womens-representation-matters>

4. Support initiatives that provide practical support for working women, including improving access to tax identification cards (TINs)

Speakers noted reluctance of donors to make progress on and assist women in gaining access to tax information cards, a necessary requirement for accessing social services and employment, which is particularly acute for female headed households. Although women's lack of access to identification pre-dates the Taliban takeover, it is an ongoing issue that women-led organisations have struggled to advance despite raising the issue, for instance, with the UN and other international actors without progress.⁴²

5. Advocate for protection of Afghanistan's LGBTQI+ community

Speakers recognised that even with the previous government, individuals from the LGBTQI+ community faced extreme difficulties and marginalisation in Afghanistan. However, in the current context it has become worse, making it impossible for organisations still operating to identify specific needs for this community or for individuals to access support. Although such requests are still being made indirectly to organisations, for instance, for shelter or access to a safe house, women's organisations and CSOs are increasingly reluctant to provide assistance due to the significant risks they could face.⁴³ As reported by ILGA and OutRight International, "the safety of LGBT Afghans is considerably more precarious than it was previously."⁴⁴

Activists and organisations working to advance the rights of SOGIESC⁴⁵ in peace and security contexts and governments and other actors working to advance human rights in Afghanistan must be aware of the additional vulnerabilities of women and girls with diverse SOGIESC and the need to address their specific priorities.

6. Continue to advocate for the rights of Afghan women and girls to formal education at secondary and university levels, while also resourcing

⁴² <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/womens-access-identification-cards-can-accelerate-development-afghanistan>

⁴³ See BBC: The underground LGBTQ people trapped in Afghanistan: <https://www.bbc.com/reel/video/p0ft2gtk/the-underground-lgbtq-people-trapped-in-afghanistan>

⁴⁴ Cited in <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/sexualorientation/cfi-report-qa77/nqos/2022-11-10/ILGA%20World-Outright-Action-International.pdf>

⁴⁵ SOGIESC: "An abbreviation used to describe sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics collectively for the purposes of law and policy, most often in human rights and anti-discrimination law," as defined by the Australian Human Rights Commission: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/lgbti/terminology>

organisations working to address barriers to education

Afghan-led organisations have adapted to address gaps in formal education through the provision of online education, which seeks to address the immediate education and training needs of Afghan children and young people, particularly women and girls. However, these institutions are operating with limited funds, with former students and teachers often working in a voluntary capacity, and do not provide formal certification, despite high levels of demand and the provision of services to a large student user base.

The Australian government should support these organisations as they creatively navigate the ban on education through the provision of informal, online education services. This can be done by making financial aid available that would allow these organisations to expand their ambition, reach and impact. For instance, such financing could support hiring teachers who are qualified to meet international teaching standards. The Australian government and international community can also provide guidance and capacity building to ensure these organisations can formally register and be able to deliver and offer certification for formal degrees including BA, MA, and PhD to Afghan students. This could be done in partnership with existing academic institutions.

These contributions can support Afghan women in obtaining education, which can also increase home-based employment, for instance with an international employer, while also contributing to strengthening the economy. Formal qualifications will also provide women opportunities to migrate through skilled visa programs.

Other partnerships that the Australian government should consider include increasing online scholarship opportunities for girls through Australian universities and working with organisations to improve access to safe and secure mobile technology to reduce barriers to participation in online education programming. The government should pressure the Taliban to ensure Afghan girls who have received scholarships are able to leave the country.

7. The Australian government should ensure gender responsive funding for Afghanistan

Funding to support any programming in Afghanistan should be conditional on the requirement that initiatives are gender responsive and provide a dedicated budget for the protection of women's rights. This should include direct funding to women-led CSOs and women's rights organisations. Speakers noted that organisations that continue to operate in Afghanistan are failing to provide adequate resourcing to local organisations, nor materially improve the situation for Afghan women. Speakers indicated that it is important that all programs have a dedicated budget and initiatives that advance the right of women and girls.

8. The Australian government should recognise Afghan women as a high-risk group, and both increase and fast-track their access to humanitarian visas

The Australian government should prioritise the allocation of visas to women human rights defenders in Afghanistan, in recognition that they are an especially high-risk group.⁴⁶ This recommendation reflects recent calls for the Australian government to do more to speed up the visa process for this group and to address the uncertainty facing those who are waiting on the results of their applications.⁴⁷

Acknowledgements

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⁴⁶ This recommendation was not explicit in the convening however, there was a strong consensus on the need to protect human rights defenders and has been raised by advocates and since gained attention globally in recent months. See: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/as-the-taliban-pursue-women-activists-australia-must-prioritise-visas-for-human-rights-defenders/>.

⁴⁷ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/jan/17/australia-urged-to-speed-up-visas-for-afghan-women-who-fear-being-sent-back-to-taliban-rule>