

To: Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, UK Prime Minister

Cc: Rt Hon Liz Truss MP, Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Affairs, Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, Secretary of State for Home Department, Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, Secretary of State for Defence, Victoria Atkins MP, Minister of the Afghan Resettlement Scheme, Gillian Keegan MP, Minister of State at the Department of Health and Social Care, Robin Walker MP, Minister of State at the Department for Education, Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, Members of Parliament

Dear Prime Minister

Subject: Afghanistan Response

Following [our letter](#) on the 17th of August 2021, we write as civil society organisations, experts and networks working directly in or with partners in Afghanistan. Our partners include Afghan women's organisations and networks, activists, journalists, and peace negotiators. These women and organisations have played a vital role in their country, and have partnered with, and been consulted by the UK Government to advance HMG foreign policy, development and humanitarian objectives and goals, including on Women, Peace and Security.

The UK Government has assisted GAPS member organisations in the immediate evacuation of some of those Afghan women. The commitment of the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and Home Office teams involved in the evacuation of women and their families to safety has been and continues to be commendable. While some of these women and other activists were evacuated to the UK, others who received the visa waivers were unable to reach the airport in Kabul safely and have not yet received a response or follow-up communication from the UK Government as to whether the visa waiver continues to apply if they flee to a third country, and how to access this protection. Following their quarantine, those who have arrived in the UK are either living in bridging accommodation or still in the same quarantine accommodation, with severe movement restrictions, and without any contact from any UK official to explain the next steps in terms of accommodation, services and legal status.

Moreover, many of the women we are supporting are reporting gender-specific and serious concerns to their safety and security, health and wellbeing, and that of their families. Finally, women and girls in Afghanistan, and women's organisations supporting them need increased and continued support from the UK Government.

We are asking that the UK Government fully considers the following priorities and take immediate actions:

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and Home Office:

1. **Ensure safe and legal routes for those facing imminent danger and their dependents to reach safety.** Many women and other activists who were given visa waivers to be evacuated by the UK Government were unable to reach the airport. They remain at risk in Afghanistan and/or have had to travel to third countries to save their lives. We thank the FCDO teams in the UK and abroad who are working hard to help those who have reached out to them. We also welcome the Home Office's [announcement of establishing a dedicated case working team to bring more to safety, including those called for evacuation previously](#). We urge the UK Government to publish more details on how these people can access this protection, confirm to them the extension of this protection in writing as a matter of urgency, and to inform them of how the UK will continue to assist their evacuation and resettlement in the UK.
2. **Increase funding and support to local and women's organisations in Afghanistan, and to humanitarian and peacebuilding programmes to respond to the needs and rights of Afghan women and girls.** Many Afghan women's activists, peacebuilders and journalists who have worked to support human rights and stability in Afghanistan are unable to flee Afghanistan or will choose to stay. The UK should do all it can to support local and women's organisations, activists and journalists through its aid portfolio and diplomatic action. The UK's support should start by emphasising the role of Afghan women's organisations and aid workers as essential in conducting needs assessment and providing humanitarian aid, both of which will be necessary to reach women and girls in need within Afghanistan. The UK should actively leverage all multilateral avenues to safeguard Afghan women and girls and increase funding and support to peacebuilding and humanitarian programmes, ensuring they are women and locally-led, gender-responsive and conflict sensitive. Funding must be flexible to respond to rapidly changing needs, especially for women's and local organisations to cover staffing, security and relocations, safe houses, immediate humanitarian aid such as food, water and shelter, and lifesaving health and GBV services. The absence of this support and flexibility will not only risk the lives of many but will be a determinant factor on whether these organisations and the civic space they fought for in the past 20 years will be lost or maintained. Moreover, the UK should work with other governments to seek a quick solution to the liquidity crisis, and support banks, as well as national and international civil society efforts in identifying and establishing safe payment routings needed for access to lifesaving humanitarian aid and wider development assistance.

As a key donor, the UK should work closely with the UN and the donor community to ensure that aid funds are based on needs, not politicised or used to prevent migration to the UK.

Home Office:

3. The UK should **take its fair share of those seeking international protection** and participate in relevant regional and global fora to support the region in global responsibility-

sharing for those displaced from and within Afghanistan. Moreover, the UK should **create and offer safe routes out of Afghanistan for anyone who believes they may be at risk**, work closely with neighbouring countries to assist third country safe passage out of Afghanistan for those who wish to resettle in the UK, and provide other viable routes for applying for entry clearance to the UK from Afghanistan, as well as facilitate applications from home without individuals having to engage in unsafe travel outside the home. Furthermore, the Home Office should define in detail and publish the application and approval process for the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), and ensure clarity on how the 'UNHCR selection' option and the 'referral process' for the ACRS will work.

4. **Reconsider refused asylum claims and grant immediate protection to any person from Afghanistan with an outstanding protection claim, and expedite existing and new family reunification applications** considering the [UNHCR non-return advisory for Afghanistan](#). The Home Office should also expand eligibility to facilitate family reunification for broader categories of family members and dependents. Many of those evacuated were not able to bring their family members who continue to be at risk and are part of the family unit, and information should be provided as to how family reunification will take place and how they can apply.

Home Office and Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC):

5. Now that [it has been announced that those](#) evacuated [under 'Operation Pitting' will fall into the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme \(ACRS\)](#), the Home Office should **clarify, publish and communicate in detail to those within ACRS what immediate support they will receive, by which department, and what the processes to access the different types of support are**. The Home Office should appoint a focal point to immediately clarify and communicate in appropriate languages the post-quarantine plan, confirm that individuals and their families are eligible for ACRS with a view to be granted Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), and will have access to mainstream housing and benefits, including but not limited to registration with a GP, psycho-social support, children's enrolment in schools, and permanent housing alongside information on how to access these. In addition, the Government should confirm that these people in bridging accommodation post quarantine will no longer be subject to any quarantine-imposed restrictions as reported and described [by Afghans affected](#) in several media reports as '[a prison](#)'. This should also be communicated to the hotels or accommodation where they are residing.
6. **Increase support to adequately respond to the needs and rights of Afghan families, and women and girls in the UK**. Asylum seeking and refugee women and girls, and sexual and gender minorities, have gender-specific needs which require immediate and longer-term response and coordination:
 - a. Some of the women we have supported are public figures and known for having challenged the Afghan government through their feminist work. They continue to

experience fear, safety and security threats despite having travelled to the UK, especially as they are housed in hotels with hundreds of other Afghan nationals. Some of these women are scared to leave their rooms uncovered, for example, or have asked to be moved to safer places within the hotels to no avail. Furthermore, many women and girls are reporting experiences of sexual harassment in the hotels, and no measures are being taken to ensure their safety from a Safeguarding perspective, an area of work in which the UK government has lead at an international level. **The DHSC and the Home Office should conduct risk assessments for these women, and put in place safeguarding measures in the hotels to ensure the safety and protection of all women and girls.** These measures could include a floor for women at risk or for female-headed households, moving some women to separate locations, having trained safeguarding leads/officers within the hotels, etc.

- b. Women's and girls' health (and broader refugee) needs are not being met. Women we are in touch with have experienced difficulties in accessing menstrual hygiene items, especially when those at shift in hotels are men. Pregnant women have not yet been referred to midwifery or maternal services, despite the fact that they do not need to be registered with a GP to access these services and [can be seen by a professional at their home/location, in children's centres, or in hospitals with out of area maternity teams](#). **The DHSC and the Home Office should ensure women's health needs are addressed immediately, including access to menstrual hygiene items and immediate referral to maternal services.**
- c. Access to healthcare overall needs to be improved. While some have received visits from doctors, many have not been referred to GPs and therefore are not accessing medications and treatment for chronic and acute health conditions, including high blood pressure, diabetes, and more. We are aware that a few women have fainted regularly because of the lack of access to their medications. Mental health needs are also not being addressed. Many of the people who were evacuated have experienced severe trauma, including torture. Families with small children were in hiding before being evacuated, and have been confined to hotels for weeks. Women we support are concerned for their mental health and that of their families, especially of children and adolescents. **The Home Office and the DHSC should refer families to GPs, walk-in clinics or other health services immediately to ensure these needs are addressed.**
- d. Those in quarantine and bridging accommodation with specific needs, such as disabilities, require more support to access their basic needs. They should be accompanied by a trained social worker/carer both within the accommodation and outside.
- e. Families have not been given any information about children's access to education, which is adding to mental health concerns for children. While this is primarily in the hands of local authorities, **the Home Office and the DHSC should liaise with children's centres to ensure children and families are supported and that they have access to age-appropriate educational and recreational activities.**

7. Some families have been relocated to remote areas with no access to services, shops, etc. While dispersal policies may apply, **the Home Office and DHSC should ensure that bridging accommodation allows families to leave their hotels without the need for a car, and that they can access services independently, ensuring extra support to those of them with disabilities and health conditions.**

We call on the UK government to consider these requests and the recommendations made, and set up an urgent meeting with the Home Office to discuss the next steps.

Signatories:

Gender Action for Peace and Security

Saferworld

Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Plan International

NIWEP

International Alert

SecurityWomen

Conciliation Resources

WomanKind Worldwide

LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security

Oxfam

Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth Network (WMC)

Gender, Justice and Security Hub

Minnie Rahman, CEO (interim), Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI)

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