

Debate Pack

31 May 2023

CDP-0116 (2023)

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Support for Afghan women and girls

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1 Summary

A Westminster Hall debate on support for Afghan women and girls will take place on Tuesday 6 June 2023, from 9:30-11:00am. The debate was scheduled by the Backbench Business Committee and will be led by Wendy Chamberlain MP.

2 Background

Since the Taliban captured Kabul in August 2021, the rights of Afghan women and girls have been increasingly restricted.

Speaking in March 2023, a group of UN experts, including Richard Bennett, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, said [“20 years of progress for women and girls” had been “erased” under Taliban rule.](#)

This debate briefing summarises the restrictions against women and girls, and the international response.

2.1 Restrictions against women and girls

Since August 2021, [the Taliban have issued several orders and decrees restricting the rights of women and girls.](#) These include:

- September 2021: Female civil servants prevented from returning to their jobs (with some exceptions in the health and education sectors)
- September 2021: Suspension of secondary education for girls
- December 2021: Requirement for women to be accompanied by a male relative for travel of around 70km or more from their home (known as mahram)
- May 2022: Requirement for women to wear certain forms of hijab
- December 2022: Ban on women from attending universities
- December 2022: Ban on women from working for national and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In April 2023, this was extended to UN partners.

[UNESCO estimate that around 80% of school-aged Afghan girls and women, totalling 2.5 million, are now out of school.](#) The ban on university education also affects 100,000 women. Primary education has remained largely open to

girls, and [in some provinces to Taliban's ban on secondary education](#) has not been applied.

The International Labour Organization estimates that [female employment was 25% lower at the end of 2022 compared to pre-August 2021 levels](#). It estimates this [caused a 5% reduction in Afghan Gross Domestic Product](#) (around US\$1 billion) by mid-2022.

The Commons Library Insight, [Afghanistan: Ban on female aid workers and future of UK aid](#), 18 May 2023, provides more on the Taliban ban on women working for NGOs. It's been reported that [talks are currently ongoing on an agreement for some women to resume work](#), and [that some local agreements are possible](#).

There have been some reported protests against these changes within Afghanistan. In both [December 2022](#) and [March 2023](#) women gathered to protest the Taliban's ban on education. There are also reports that the Taliban itself is divided, with [some members supportive of girls being allowed to attend secondary school](#).

[Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty International](#) state several female protesters have been tortured and subject to mistreatment by the Taliban when detained.

2.2

International response

Condemnation by the UN and others

In April 2023, the UN Security Council, chaired by the United Arab Emirates, [unanimously passed a resolution expressing "deep concern" at the "increasing erosion of respect for the human rights and fundamental freedom of women and girls" in Afghanistan](#) by the Taliban.

The Council condemned the current Taliban ban on Afghan women working for the UN, called for a reversal of restrictions on access to education, employment, and freedom of movement, and for a continued UN presence in Afghanistan and dialogue with the Taliban.

The [Organization of Islamic Cooperation has also criticised Taliban restrictions on girls' education and condemned the ban on female aid workers](#). In May, the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, said [the UN would not disengage from Afghanistan and would continue to raise the rights of women and girls](#).

The UK co-chairs the Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan. In October, [this called for the Taliban to reverse its policies](#). In addition to statements at the UN, the UK Government has also said [it would work with Muslim-country](#)

[partners to support Afghan women](#) and [lobby the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, on its restrictions](#).

The international community has limited leverage

The UN and international community currently have limited leverage over the Taliban.

The UK Government has acknowledged that [its ability to support those in Afghanistan is “limited”](#) and that [it would be “realistic” about the level of UK aid to the country that can effectively be distributed](#), given the ban on Afghan women working for NGOs (they have represented up to 40% of staff).

In January 2023, International Development Minister [Andrew Mitchell opposed making UK aid conditional on the Taliban removing its restrictions](#), arguing the Taliban was unlikely to be affected and conditionality would harm those the UK is seeking to help.

[Analysis by the US Institute for Peace](#) suggests that the international community could consider steps such as tying recognition of the Taliban as Afghanistan’s government to its policies for women and girls, providing support to organisations focused on the rights of women and girls, and exploiting divisions with the Taliban to develop carve-outs from the restrictions.

The US Institute for Peace has also produced [analysis on recent dissent within the Taliban](#).

International Crisis Group has also argued [that aid donors should focus on achieving long-term change in the country](#) and continue to fund humanitarian appeals to avoid the country’s humanitarian situation deteriorating further.

The UN aid appeal is underfunded, and needs are high

Currently, [the UN’s US\\$4.6 billion appeal for Afghanistan is just under 9% funded](#).

The [UN Development Programme](#) estimates that a 30% fall in aid to Afghanistan could lead to a drop of income per person of around 40% compared to 2020 (US\$306 compared to US\$512), in a country where 85% of the population lives below the 2020 poverty line.

In 2022, the [World Food Programme estimated that 96% of female-headed households were struggling to find enough to eat](#), compared to 89% of male-headed households.

Since April 2021, [the UK Government has provided £532 million in aid to Afghanistan](#) and committed that at least 50% of its beneficiaries would be women and girls.

UK aid is expected to fall in both 2022/23 and 2023/24: The Commons Library Insight, [Afghanistan: Ban on female aid workers and future of UK aid](#), 18 May 2023, has more.

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Press and media articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

[Taliban 'agree to consider allowing women to resume agency work in Kandahar'](#)

Sunday Post
25 May 2023

[She founded an Afghan girls school. Now she runs it in exile in Rwanda](#)

National Geographic
Nina Strohlic
23 May 2023

[Taliban repression of Afghan women is form of apartheid, says Nelson Mandela widow Graça Machel](#)

Daily Telegraph
Ben Farmer
22 May 2023

[UK slashes aid to Afghanistan by more than half, watchdog says](#)

The Independent
Sophie Wingate
18 May 2023

[UNDP warns that restrictions on women's rights will worsen economic catastrophe in Afghanistan](#)

United Nations Development Programme
18 April 2023

[Arrest of leading education activist leaves Afghans confused and worried](#)

The New Humanitarian
Ali M Latifi
12 April 2023

[We must listen to the voices of Afghan women and girls when making decisions about them](#)

Politics Home
Wendy Chamberlain MP
8 February 2023

[Afghanistan: The Taliban's punishment of women is an act of desperation](#)

Middle East Eye
Syed Irfan Ashraf
15 January 2023

[Turkey, Saudi Arabia condemn Taliban's university ban for women](#)

Al Jazeera
22 December 2022

[Three women among dozen publicly flogged in Afghanistan - Taliban official](#)

BBC News
Mattea Bubalo
23 November 2022

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Press releases

[Women's participation during crises: UK statement to the OSCE](#)

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

26 May 2023

[Extract]

Emma Logan (UK delegation to the OSCE) says that the series of restrictions imposed by the Taliban are effectively erasing women and girls from Afghan society.

Thank you, Mr Chair, for convening us on this important topic at a time when threats to gender equality continue to increase. And I would like to thank our expert panellists for their sobering updates, reminding us of the terrible situation Afghan women face in terms of participation in political and public life.

At the global level, the Global Gender Gap Report 2022 shows that Political Empowerment is the largest remaining gender gap, and it is also the subindex with the widest dispersion among countries. The report says that at the current rate, it will take 155 years to close this Political Empowerment gap. Clearly, speeding up progress to increase women's meaningful and representative participation in decision making processes is vital, both to enable women to realise their right to full and equal political participation and because women's political leadership plays a critical role in securing and strengthening democracy. We must get more women into civic and political leadership roles, and we must promote and support women's rights organisations and movements as a critical part of strengthening the enabling environment for women and girls' full and equal political participation.

Since August 2021, the Taliban have imposed a series of restrictions effectively erasing women and girls from society. No other country treats its women and girls the way the Taliban do. Their decisions have no grounding in religion and will cause untold damage to the people and country of Afghanistan.

The toll on women and girls' mental health has been huge. Afghan women self-censor for fear of reprisal, and opportunities for basic human interaction outside of their homes are being curtailed. Underpinning this, is an exclusive power sharing arrangement that excludes anyone but the Taliban from having a say on Afghanistan's future.

Educated and empowered Afghan women would help Afghanistan by contributing to society, the economy, development and peace across the country – without this, Afghanistan will not achieve stability or prosperity.

The United Kingdom calls on the Taliban to respect international law, and uphold the human rights of all Afghans, including women and girls, and ethnic and religious minorities. We will continue to advocate for Afghan-led efforts towards inclusive governance, and remain committed to supporting the people of Afghanistan.

[...]

Mr Chair, as you and the Secretary General have outlined for us, we can only build a fairer, freer, and safer world if we put women and girls at the heart of the OSCE's work. Women's leadership, perspectives and knowledge are essential for local, national and regional progress. At the PC/FSC earlier this year we discussed the issue of Women, Peace and Security, which demonstrated that participating States remain overwhelmingly in favour of the OSCE doing more on this across our region. The UK stands ready to support.

[We will not abandon the women and girls of Afghanistan: UK Statement at the Security Council](#)

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

29 April 2023

Statement by Ambassador Barbara Woodward at the UN Security Council meeting on the situation in Afghanistan

Let me start by commending the penholders, UAE and Japan, for their approach to securing the Council's support for this important resolution.

Since the Taliban took power, they have imposed restriction after restriction, resulting in the systematic erasure of women and girls from society. Banning Afghan women from working for the UN in country is the latest example of the Taliban's complete disregard for women's fundamental rights.

This latest ban is a direct violation of the core tenets underpinning the UN Charter, including the principle of non-discrimination. It will severely impede the delivery of life-saving aid to women and girls in a time when 28 million people – over two-thirds of all Afghans – are in need of assistance.

So we welcome the Council's unanimous condemnation of the Taliban's latest decision and call for an immediate reversal of all policies which restrict women's rights and fundamental freedoms.

We join other Council members and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation countries in co-sponsoring this resolution to send an unequivocal message to the Taliban: there is no justification for what you are doing to women and girls in your country.

Since April 2021, the UK has given \$662 million to address the deepening humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. We remain committed to supporting the UN and our partners working in country. We will not abandon the women and girls of Afghanistan.

5 Independent Commission for Aid Impact [ICAI]

UK aid to Afghanistan

Information note May 2023

18 May 2023

[Extract – removed references contained within full report]

[...]

The rights of women and girls continue to be eroded

2.7 Many of the gains achieved by Afghan women and girls over recent years, which we described in ICAI's 2022 report, have been eroded since August 2021. There are now severe restrictions to women's freedom of movement, right to education and right to work.

2.8 In March 2022, the Taliban reversed an earlier pledge to reopen girls' secondary schools. In December 2022 a ban on women attending universities was announced. On 24 December 2022, the Taliban then issued an edict banning women from working with national and international NGOs. This resulted in a widespread pause or shutdown of many aid operations until mid-February 2023, while NGOs, UN agencies and donors sought to coordinate their response to the edict. The restrictions, which did not initially apply to the UN and other international organisations, were, however, followed in April 2023 by another ban restricting female national staff members from working for UN agencies.

2.9 The impact of these restrictions varies between and within provinces. From January 2023 onwards, national-level exemptions were informally agreed for health and community-based education workers. A range of local-level exemptions were also negotiated by NGOs. However, 94% of NGOs initially fully or partially ceased their operations, with over 70% of their activities directly impacted. The effects were also felt by service users. The protection of citizens sector was one of the most impacted areas of humanitarian work. A January 2023 poll found that women could no longer access services from one in five of the 87 Afghan NGOs surveyed. The services offered by NGOs in Afghanistan have been scaled back. The proportion of organisations reporting operations as either fully or partially suspended decreased from 38% and 68% respectively in mid-January to 12% and 58% in early February.

2.10 The World Economic Forum found that banning women from working in the government and formal sectors will cause Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP) to contract by a minimum of \$600 million in the immediate term. Restrictions on women's private sector employment could lead to a

further \$1.5 billion loss of output by 2024. This is likely to exacerbate the country's significant brain drain and growing shortage of human resources, particularly in the health and education sectors.

2.11 Muslim-majority countries and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have condemned the latest edicts and have been engaging with the Taliban on women's rights, with the OIC stating on 29 December 2022 that the decision to prevent women and girls from accessing education ran contrary to Islamic law. The UN's Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed, also met with Taliban officials in Kabul in January 2023 to try and negotiate a reversal of bans and restrictions on women. Following the meeting, she reported that there had been some progress in engaging with the Taliban on the rights of women and girls, but that the international community, including other Islamic states, was not doing enough to engage on the issue.

2.12 We heard from interviewees that local and national civil society organisations have been more impacted by the ban than international organisations. While UN and international NGO female staff were able to negotiate with local Taliban officials to continue their activities, the Taliban refused to negotiate with Afghan women, raising the risk of getting their projects cancelled. Local women-led organisations have raised concern that UN agencies were not adequately using their negotiating position with the Taliban to stand up for national organisations.

[...]

While still a large donor, the UK is reducing its support to Afghanistan

2.21 The UK has been an active and significant donor to Afghanistan. In August 2021, the UK government announced a doubling of UK aid to Afghanistan, to a total of £286 million for the 2021-22 financial year, with funds channelled through UN partners and international NGOs. On 30 March 2022, the UK government announced it would provide a further £286 million commitment for the 2022-23 financial year. The key priorities were to support food security and protection interventions, as well as increase preparedness for winter, and FCDO hoped to disburse 90% of its commitment by the end of December 2022. The UK also provided £5 million for immediate support after the earthquake in eastern Afghanistan in June 2022. The overall allocation was, however, subsequently reduced to £246 million, resulting in activities being halted or rephased in programmes for polio inoculations and landmine and improvised explosive device clearance.

2.22 Having spent 95% of its revised ODA allocation by late November 2022, the UK was left with a limited budget for Afghanistan for the remainder of the 2022-23 financial year. As a result, funds planned to be provided through the World Bank-administered Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) were rephased to the 2023-24 financial year, which enabled the remaining financial allocation to be spent on humanitarian programming. In March 2023, Andrew

Mitchell, the minister of state for development and Africa, announced FCDO's 2023-24 ODA budget for Afghanistan and Pakistan of £141.9 million, 53% lower than the 2022-23 figure of £304.4 million.

2.23 As things stand, we understand that the UK's support for Afghanistan in financial year 2023-24 will be £100 million in total, £75 million of which will be spent on humanitarian support. The intention is that 90% of this sum will be disbursed by December 2023.

2.24 The UK government's Afghanistan ODA allocation has reduced over the past two years, in the context of successive reductions to UK ODA and the unprecedented scale of ODA utilisation for housing refugees in the UK. Respondents (including from UK-based NGOs) offered the view that a pound of ODA spent in Afghanistan can have a much greater impact than a pound of ODA spent in the UK. We were told that repeated failures to fulfil pledges risk damaging the UK's standing with its partners. Several respondents questioned how this was consistent with the UK government's commitment to reinvigorate its position as a global leader in development, as set out in the Integrated Review Refresh published on 13 March 2023.

[...]

6

PQs

[Afghanistan: Humanitarian Aid](#)

22 May 2023 | 185051

Asked by: Preet Kaur Gill

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent assessment he has made of the impact of the Taliban's ban on female aid workers on the UK's humanitarian and development work in Afghanistan.

Answered by: Leo Docherty | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Afghan women are vital to the delivery of humanitarian and development operations in Afghanistan. They have access to populations their male colleagues cannot reach, providing critical life-saving support to women and girls. FCDO is supporting partners to adapt programmes and find solutions that enable women to play an inclusive role in the design, delivery and monitoring of assistance, and ensure that Afghan women and girls can access aid in an impartial and equitable manner.

[Visa Applications from Afghanistan: Women and Girls](#)

22 May 2023 | 733 cc10-1

Asked by: Munira Wilson

What steps her Department is taking to support women and girls applying for UK visas from Afghanistan.

Answered by: Robert Jenrick | Home Office

More than 24,000 people have arrived in the UK from Afghanistan under or since Operation Pitting, of whom 21,000 have been resettled under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy or the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. There is not a visa application centre in Afghanistan for security reasons, but those who have left the country can make a visa application in the normal way. The ACRS is designed to support vulnerable people such as women and girls at risk.

Asked by: Munira Wilson

For the fourth time in recent weeks, I feel compelled to raise on the Floor of the House the case of five British children who have been in hiding in Kabul for the past 18 months. Four of those British passport holders are girls and only one of them is allowed to attend school. I and my team have not been able to bring them to safety, to be with their family in the UK, because their Afghan mother cannot secure a visa. I am grateful that the Minister has looked at this case personally, but it has stalled again, because his officials are insisting she travels to Pakistan to do her biometrics. He will be aware that it is totally

unsafe for a woman to risk her life to travel on her own, without a chaperone, to Pakistan to get a visa, even if Pakistan grants her a visa to travel there. So please, will the Minister waive the requirement for biometrics in this case and those of other women and girls who face mortal danger, as this family does?

Answered by: Robert Jenrick | Home Office

I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the tenacious way in which she has represented her constituents. She knows that I intervened personally to seek a swift resolution to this case. I am told that UK Visas and Immigration has the application under consideration and is speaking with the hon. Lady's office to help progress the application, and I hope we can resolve it very soon.

Asked by: Sir Julian Lewis

Does the Minister accept that the female population of Afghanistan is enslaved at present? Has he seen the amazing film by the courageous Sky correspondent, Alex Crawford, called "Women at War: Afghanistan", which spells that out? Will he spare a moment to look at early-day motion 1188, marking the 90th anniversary today of the founding of the Academic Assistance Council, now the Council for At-Risk Academics? I came across that organisation while it was trying to rescue female academics from potential enslavement and bring them to this country so that they could join the faculties of the University of Southampton, among others.

Answered by: Robert Jenrick | Home Office

I would be pleased to look at the material that my right hon. Friend recommends to me, in particular the early-day motion. The treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan by the Taliban is abhorrent — we all condemn that. That is one of the reasons we have created the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, to support as many as we possibly can.

Asked by: Joanna Cherry

I recently had a meeting with the Prime Minister to discuss the plight of female judges and prosecutors who were encouraged by the United Kingdom to take up those roles, when they were trying to produce a democracy under the rule of law in Afghanistan. I would like to see humanitarian visas for some of those women, so that they can come to the United Kingdom. The Prime Minister seemed quite sympathetic and said he would take the proposal away and look at it. Will the Minister assure me that the Home Office would also be sympathetic to that request?

Answered by: Robert Jenrick | Home Office

I would be very happy to look into that. I remember that the hon. and learned Lady has campaigned on this issue for some time, since the fall of Kabul, so perhaps a useful way forward would be for she and I to meet to discuss this further.

Asked by: Tracey Crouch

As part of the Government's resettlement scheme for Afghan citizens facing threats of persecution from the Taliban, the Home Office granted visas to the Afghan women's junior development football team. The women's parliamentary football team played a match against them and, despite the studded tackle that left me wincing in agony, I was struck by their gratitude for and appreciation of our generous and lifesaving hospitality. However, there are many sportswomen left in Afghanistan, banned from participating in their sport by the Taliban and under threat of severe recriminations if they even dare to kick a ball, ride a bike or wield a cricket bat. What is the Minister doing to support those women and girls, particularly if they wish to come to the UK to play their sports?

Answered by: Robert Jenrick | Home Office

As my hon. Friend has said, the Taliban have banned Afghan women and girls from competing in sports and exercising in gyms. Afghan women who competed in sports, ranging from football to cycling, are now forced to stay home, amid the kind of intimidation to which she refers. I think particularly of the bravery of those Afghan women who recently posed for photos with the Associated Press, alongside the equipment that they used to be able to use, now covering their faces with burqas. These are the reasons why we have made our important and generous offer through the ACRS, which is a scheme we want to take forward to help more women and girls out of Afghanistan to a place of safety and a new life in the UK.

Humanitarian Aid: Women

11 May 2023 | 183120

Asked by: Drew Hendry

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps his Department is taking help (a) resource and (b) encourage participation of women-led organisations at pledging conferences for international humanitarian emergencies in 2023.

Answering member: Mr Andrew Mitchell | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK remains committed to supporting women-led organisations in humanitarian crises in 2023. Last year, we co-hosted the Afghanistan Pledging Conference, providing a platform for Afghan women's rights activists to speak, and we provided \$185 million to the UN's Country Based Pooled Funds globally, which direct humanitarian funding to local organisations, including women-led organisations. In 2023, we launched the £38 million Advancing Gender Equality through support to Women's Rights Organisations programme, which will provide grants to women's rights organisations and work to amplify their voices in key fora such as pledging conferences.

Matiullah Wesa

17 April 2023 | 175729

Asked by: Vicky Ford

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what diplomatic steps his Department is taking to call for the release of Matiullah Wesa, head of Afghan education NGO Pen Path; and what steps his Department is taking to (a) clarify where he is being held, (b) clarify the reasons for his arrest and (c) help ensure he has access to legal representation and contact with his family.

Answered by: Leo Docherty | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK Government has repeatedly condemned the Taliban's decisions to restrict women and girls' education. We are committed to upholding the rights of women and girls and regularly press the Taliban to provide full and equal access to education for all. We support the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's call for the Taliban to clarify where Matiullah Wesa is being held, the reasons for his arrest, and to ensure he has access to legal representation and contact with his family.

Afghanistan: Girls

28 March 2023 | 169495

Asked by: Ms Anum Qaisar

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, if he will make an assessment of the adequacy of funding provided by his Department for education projects for girls in Afghanistan.

Answered by: Leo Docherty | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK Government has repeatedly condemned the Taliban's decisions to restrict women and girls' access to education, including through UN Security Council and Human Rights Council resolutions and public statements, most recently on 13 January 2023. The Government continues to support the delivery of education, including through bilateral and multilateral contributions to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN partners, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Education Cannot Wait, and the Global Partnership for Education. Ministers and officials are engaging regularly with Afghan women, including those working on education and we are considering remote learning interventions, including online platforms.

Afghanistan: Education

28 March 2023 | 169496

Asked by: Ms Anum Qaisar

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for educational online learning platforms in Afghanistan.

Answered by: Leo Docherty | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK Government has repeatedly condemned the Taliban's decisions to restrict women and girls' access to education, including through UN Security Council and Human Rights Council resolutions and public statements, most recently on 13 January 2023. The Government continues to support the delivery of education, including through bilateral and multilateral contributions to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN partners, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Education Cannot Wait, and the Global Partnership for Education. Ministers and officials are engaging regularly with Afghan women, including those working on education and we are considering remote learning interventions, including online platforms.

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme

1 February 2023 | House of Lords | 827 cc655-7

[Extract]

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger

I beg leave to ask the Question standing in my name on the Order Paper. I draw the attention of the House to the fact that I co-chair and run the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security, and set up and run the Afghan Women's Support Forum.

To ask His Majesty's Government how many people were evacuated from Afghanistan to the United Kingdom under the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme in 2022; and how many of these were women.

Lord Murray of Blidworth | Home Office

Operation Pitting was the largest UK military evacuation since the Second World War. About 15,000 people were evacuated to the United Kingdom. Since then, a further 6,000 people, including those under ACRS pathway 1, have arrived via neighbouring countries. The Home Office is working to assure information on its caseworking systems. This includes reporting on total volumes by gender. Once this work concludes, the Home Office will include all Afghan resettlement statistics, including gender breakdown, in its quarterly immigration statistics publications, the next of which is due on 23 February.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger

I thank my noble friend for his Answer, but I am disappointed that he cannot give me specifics on the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. I gather that there is no application process for this and the slow speed, lack of communication and transparency creates a feeling of abandonment for the Afghan people. How are eligible people identified for this scheme? Under pathway 3, there is provision for those who are particularly vulnerable; I am talking about the women and girls at risk. Does my noble friend realise that some vulnerable women who either held significant positions or were related to those who did have been on the run and hiding since the Taliban took over? Can he imagine what it feels like to be hunted down in this way? We have only to remember the murder of the ex-Afghan MP Mursal Nabizada a few weeks ago. What steps are His Majesty's Government taking to ensure that those women human rights defenders are able to access the ACRS? How many do they hope to accept this year?

Lord Murray of Blidworth | Home Office

I agree with much of what my noble friend says. By way of context, the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme was divided into three pathways, to which she alluded, the first of which concerned those evacuated during Operation Pitting and those on the removals list. Pathway 2 is the principal method; it concerns referrals from the UNHCR. Pathway 3 is administered by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. That is the pathway envisaged for Chevening scholars, GardaWorld employees and those who work for the British Council. I understand that the Foreign Office has received some 11,500 expressions of interest that are being worked through at the moment. In relation to her question on vulnerable women and children, I say that the principal focus of the ACRS has been to protect the vulnerable. Since the events in Afghanistan last August, thousands of women and girls have been brought to safety in the UK, including female judges, women's rights activists and a girls' football team. Of course, in pathway 2 the UNHCR makes referrals based on an assessment of protection needs, including vulnerabilities.

[...]

Baroness Smith of Newnham

My Lords, like the noble Baroness, Lady Hodgson, I am disappointed that the Minister was not able to give us any meaningful statistics today, beyond a figure of 6,000 people. I have had conversations with the noble Lord, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, who has spoken to the officers of the APPG on Afghan Women and Girls. Would it be possible for the Minister to undertake for similar meetings to be held with the Home Office, ideally on a cross-party basis, and with DLUHC? Many of the issues about bringing in women and girls, and indeed British Council contractors, link to visas and the provision of accommodation. However hard the FCDO and the MoD are working, those departments cannot deal with these issues alone. Will he agree to a meeting?

Lord Murray of Blidworth | Home Office

Pathway 3 applications, as I have said, are led by the FCDO and its engagement will be the principal point of contact. Of course the Home Office works closely with the FCDO and will continue to do so. I will keep the question of a meeting under review and, if it becomes necessary, certainly.

[...]

Lord Swire

My Lords, some people put the amount of Afghan refugees in Pakistan at up to half a million, some of whom are extremely vulnerable, particularly young women, former judges and former politicians. They live under a constant threat of being returned to Afghanistan, where they would certainly meet with jail or possibly worse. What conversations have the Government had with the Government of Pakistan to lift this threat of being returned to Afghanistan?

Lord Murray of Blidworth | Home Office

I am afraid that I cannot answer my noble friend's question. That is probably a matter for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office but I can no doubt ask the relevant Minister to write to him.

Lord Coaker

My Lords, as the noble Baroness, Lady Hodgson, reminds us, in discussing the Afghanistan resettlement scheme and the help we rightly give to some, we should never forget the continuing persecution of women and girls across the world. Of the three pathways under the Afghan scheme we are accepting at-risk people from three groups: British Council, GardaWorld and Chevening alumni. Within this, is it only those who worked for the UK who are considered, or is any other priority given to women and girls?

Lord Murray of Blidworth | Home Office

As I hoped to make clear in an earlier answer, the first pathway relates to those removed during August 2021 and those who should have been removed. The second pathway relates to those referred by the UNHCR to us, and the third pathway contains the three categories that the noble Lord just identified. The short answer to the question is no, it is not just people who worked for the United Kingdom Government in various forms; it is broader than that because the UNHCR refers refugees to us who have applied.

[...]

Afghanistan: Girls and Women

23 January 2023 | 827 cc6-8

Baroness Gohir

To ask His Majesty's Government what representations they have made to the Taliban concerning its commitments to allow Afghan girls to go to school and Afghan women to work.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

My Lords, the latest announcements banning Afghan women from universities and aid work represent a further violation of the rights and freedoms of Afghan women and girls, and they have no religious or moral basis. We are working with the United Nations, NGOs and other donors to understand the impact of the bans and to ensure that lifesaving humanitarian assistance continues wherever possible. Alongside international partners, we will also continue to press the Taliban directly to lift those draconian decrees.

Baroness Gohir

I thank the Minister for his response. While we are waiting for the Taliban to shift their stance on women's rights, what is plan B? Women are being erased from public life and are starving. My understanding is that there are some in the Taliban leadership willing to talk about women's rights. Are there plans for the Government to make an official visit to Afghanistan, to talk directly with the Taliban on women's rights? Also, are there plans to talk to the countries that have a good relationship with the Taliban, for example by convening a meeting with the various stakeholders? Ambassadors in London, particularly from Muslim-majority countries, could be brought together for a meeting. Are there plans to convene such a meeting?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

My Lords, I assure the noble Baroness that we are doing all the above. Indeed, from the time of the Taliban's takeover, we have engaged directly with neighbouring countries. We are working directly with the United Nations. In fact, earlier this morning, I met with Sima Bahous and Amina Mohammed, the Deputy Secretary-General of the UN, who had just returned from visits to Afghanistan and the near neighbourhood. I am dealing with various Muslim countries directly, including the OIC, on engagement. We are also engaging directly with the Taliban; a number of visits have been made by our chargé from Doha, and those will continue.

Lord Collins of Highbury

I recognise that the Minister addressed this issue in the Statement last Thursday, in which he mentioned the visit of the Deputy Secretary-General. Could he tell us a little more about her reaction to her meetings in Afghanistan and what possibility there is to pursue dialogue? He also

mentioned the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, which is critical to reaching out to other Islamic countries. Can he tell us whether he has met that organisation directly on this issue?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

On the noble Lord's second point, I have met Tariq Bakheet directly in Jeddah — "Tariq" is a good name to have on these things — and we continue to engage directly with the OIC. The Deputy Secretary-General and the director of UN Women were both there, together with the SRSG. They went to Herat, Kabul and Kandahar and met a range of Taliban Ministers. About 40% of 50% of those involved with the NGO sector, for example, are women, so they made the case very powerfully for the need for that to continue. There has been some progress; for example, we have seen women doctors and nurses returning to the health sector. However, the situation is quite dire and they left Afghanistan very clear about the picture there. As we have said before, much of the power centres on the Emir in Kandahar, and his edict seems to be final.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger

My Lords, widows and women who head households are now confined to their homes because they are unable to go out without a male escort. How can we ensure that aid will reach them, because people are starving there at the moment in this very cold winter?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

My Lords, first, I pay tribute to my noble friend's contribution in the field of working with Afghan women. I know that she recently met a series of Afghan women leaders, as did I. We are working with the United Nations and other agencies. There has been a pause on non-essential, non-humanitarian support, but we are also looking at workarounds. For example, in certain provinces — about 26 of the 36 — there has been some movement where health workers have been allowed back. Martin Griffiths, the head of OCHA, is currently in Kabul and we will also be meeting him to establish what channels are open to us.

Baroness Hussein-Ece

My Lords, I commend the Minister for being personally very committed and active on this issue, but can I probe him a bit further on the ban by the Taliban on women being seen by male doctors? Of course, women are being banned from education as well. The impact of that will literally be a death sentence for many women and their children, as well as elderly dependants. What is happening about women who need medical assistance and help? How is medical help reaching those women and families if they are being denied treatment by male doctors?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

My Lords, first let me tell the noble Baroness what we are doing with certain NGOs which are still operational. The concept of mahram is where a woman has to be accompanied by a male relative or near-relative. Even some of the NGOs have been working through that as a workaround while there have been restrictions, to ensure that women are seen and provided with the support that they need. The Deputy Secretary-General made another point that is particularly pertinent; I do not think we will see the Taliban retracting on the decrees, but they certainly seem open to workarounds, where I think there is some progress to be made. That said, the situation remains very dire.

Lord Singh of Wimbledon

My Lords, the Minister said in his earlier reply that the cruel and arbitrary treatment of women and girls had no religious justification. In view of that, and knowing what the Taliban are doing with their misunderstanding of Islam, could the Minister and the Government prevail on Muslim leaders around the world to condemn this sort of behaviour in forthright terms? The silence is deafening.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

My Lords, I assure the noble Lord that we are doing exactly that. What better example could there be, perhaps, than seeing the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations — the second most senior person in international, multilateral organisations, herself a hijab-wearing Muslim — together with Sima Bahous, the leader of UN Women, also a Muslim, being part of the UN high-level delegation that attended? What that demonstrated to the Taliban directly was not just that they must engage women but that women must be pivotal to any society progressing. In every progressive society, irrespective of what the religion is, that is essential to ensure that society is progressive and that people prosper.

Baroness Sugg

My Lords, the Taliban are still hunting down women who held public positions. Recently, the ex-MP Mursal Nabizada was killed. Can my noble friend the Minister tell me whether there is anything we can do to help these women — these human rights defenders — who are in such danger in the country?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

My Lords, I join my noble friend, and I am sure all of us, in expressing abhorrence at these actions, which, literally, as my noble friend said, identify individuals. First and foremost, we must protect their identity. That is why, with some of the NGOs we are supporting on the ground, particularly some of the women's charities, we are working directly with them, but, in the detail

we sometimes provide, at their behest and for their protection, we do not share those details. We are also working directly with women leaders. My noble friend Lady Hodgson and I met separately with some of the women leaders who were directly involved with the Government. I think that also provides a very important conduit to the kinds of priorities that are needed for woman representatives, be they human rights defenders or, indeed, ex-politicians within Afghanistan.

Lord Purvis of Tweed

My Lords, the UK is one of the biggest funders of the World Bank's Afghan trust fund, which is the means by which the Taliban govern and are delivering services. What reassurance can the Minister provide that British funds are not being used directly by the Taliban for their discriminatory policies?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

My Lords, we have to be stringent in that. I agree with the noble Lord that we need to ensure that there is due diligence on the ground to ensure that that happens. I cannot guarantee that every single pound and dollar from that trust fund has not been utilised in some shape or form by the Taliban, but that funding is getting through. We are working with international partners on the ground. We can further enhance this by ensuring that the partners we are working with also have their verification processes. This is a strange conundrum: providing humanitarian support, health support and educational support is vital. Why should the people — the woman and girls of Afghanistan — suffer? We need to work through the barriers that the Taliban are putting in front of us.

Lord Johnson of Marylebone

My Lords, my noble friend the Minister mentioned that the Taliban might be open to workarounds —

Baroness D'Souza

I thank the noble Lord. First, is the Taliban group that undertook negotiations in Doha still intact, does it still have any power, and are the Government in touch with it? Secondly, would the Minister say whether the FCDO is prepared to increase the number and amount of cash transfers to those most in need, given through the various NGOs, local and otherwise?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

My Lords, on the noble Baroness's second point, I also reflect on the contribution of the noble Lord, Lord Purvis. We must ensure that any money or support we provide, particularly when it comes to cash transfers, gets through to the people who need it. The systems and structures in Afghanistan at the moment are extremely fragile. We must look at innovative ways to ensure that we can get over some of these barriers. Technology provides an

example, and perhaps that pre-empts the question of my noble friend Lord Johnson, who was going to come in. We need to look at innovative way of delivering both cash transfers and education as well. I think that may well be the way forward.

7 Other Parliamentary material

7.1 Early Day Motions

[90th anniversary of the Council for At-Risk Academics](#)

EDM 1118 (session 2022-23)

18 May 2023

Sir Julian Lewis

That this House celebrates the 90th anniversary of the Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara), a charity founded – as the Academic Assistance Council – at the Royal Society on 22 May 1933 by leading academics and scientists in the UK to rescue their counterparts in Nazi Germany who were being forced out of their posts; notes with approval the subsequent widening of Cara’s mission to rescue university academics and their families at risk from persecution, violence and conflict anywhere in the world; congratulates Cara for helping thousands of academics to find refuge and work in the UK and its universities, where they have greatly contributed to this country’s scientific, cultural and artistic life; applauds the vital role of UK universities and research institutes in working in partnership with Cara to provide places, funding and other essential support for those whom Cara rescues, as well as the generosity of the many foundations, other institutions and individuals who also support Cara’s work; commends the determination of many current Cara scholars, most recently from Ukraine, Afghanistan and the Middle East, to return home when they can safely do so, in order to help build better societies in their own countries; and encourages Cara to continue and redouble its life-changing efforts.

[The death of Mursal Nabizada, former Member of the Afghan parliament](#)

EDM 758 (session 2022-23)

16 January 2023

Wendy Chamberlain

That this House is deeply saddened by the killing of former Afghan MP Mursal Nabizada and her bodyguard; strongly condemns the actions of their killers; calls for a full and open investigation into the incident; notes with concern the removal of women in Afghanistan from public life; and urges the Government to create an asylum route for Afghan women at risk of harm as called for by the members of the all-party Parliamentary group for Afghan Women and Girls.

7.2

Petitions

[Female Judges and Prosecutors in Afghanistan](#)

9 May 2023 | Petition P002830

Wera Hobhouse

The Liberal Democrats stand in solidarity with women facing persecution in Afghanistan. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), my hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and Baroness Burt of Solihull for signing this petition to help evacuate and resettle female Afghan judges. I also thank the more than 56,000 people who have signed the [Change.org petition](#). We have a duty to the people of Afghanistan. It is our responsibility to ensure that these women who have stood up for the rule of law have not done so at the expense of their life.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that female judges and prosecutors in Afghanistan, who have stood for the rule of law and a more inclusive and equal Afghanistan, are now deeply concerned for their own safety; further that they live with daily death threats and in constant fear of violent reprisals; and further that female judges and prosecutors, their children and their families are at continued risk of violent attacks.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to immediately help evacuate and resettle female judges and prosecutors, and their families from Afghanistan by providing emergency visas urgently.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[Female Judges and Prosecutors in Afghanistan](#)

3 May 2023 | Petition P002832

Joanna Cherry

As a member of the all-party parliamentary group for Afghan women and girls, I rise to present a petition to the House of Commons from the residents of the United Kingdom. The presentation of this petition mirrors an online petition signed by more than 56,000 people. This petition has been signed by the Dean of the Faculty of Advocates, Roddy Dunlop KC, and reflects the solidarity of people in the legal profession across the jurisdictions of Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom with the plight of our colleagues in Afghanistan.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,
Declares that female judges and prosecutors in Afghanistan, who have stood for the rule of law and a more inclusive and equal Afghanistan, are now deeply concerned for their own safety; further that they live with daily death threats and in constant fear of violent reprisals; and further that female judges and prosecutors, their children and their families are at continued risk of violent attacks.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to immediately help evacuate and resettle female judges and prosecutors, and their families from Afghanistan by providing emergency visas urgently.
And the petitioners remain, etc.

8 Further reading

8.1 Committee publications

[Situation for women and girls in Afghanistan](#)

International Development Committee

Non-inquiry session

Opened 20 January 2023 and closed 21 March 2023

These evidence sessions were focused on the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, especially for women and girls following the Taliban's decision to ban women from working for NGOs. The Committee looked at the impact of that ban on the delivery of aid to Afghanistan and about how it is affecting women and girls on the ground.

8.2 Commons Library publications

[Afghanistan: Ban on female aid workers and future of UK aid](#), Commons Library Insight, 18 May 2023

[The UK aid budget and support for refugees in the UK in 2022/23](#), Commons Library Research Briefing, 27 April 2023

[Aid to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan](#), Commons Library Research Briefing, 1 April 2023

[UK immigration routes for Afghan nationals](#), Commons Library Research Briefing, 26 January 2023

[Afghanistan: One year under a Taliban government](#), Commons Library Research Briefing, 10 October 2022

8.3 All-party groups

[All-Party Parliamentary Group on Afghan Women and Girls](#) (Membership)

[Afghanistan All-Party Parliamentary Group](#) (Membership)

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