



AFGHAN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION REFUGEE & IMMIGRANT SERVICES

AWO presentation to Canadian government officials

August 7th, 2021

Thank you for inviting us to speak with you today.

I'm joined by my colleagues Adeena Niazi, the Executive Director of the Afghan Women's Organization and Mina Saboor, our Board Secretary.

I want to start off by extending our gratitude to the Canadian government that has played an important role both from a military and development perspective but also in resettling Afghan refugees and accepting immigrants in the decades of war since the 1980s. Minister Monsef, Neelofar, Adeena, Mina and I are all products of those efforts and it goes to show that when Afghan women and girls are given the opportunity to be educated, their potential is limitless and their contributions to society is immense.

For those that are not familiar with our organization, we have been around for more than 30 years and have provided multiple services to newcomers in Canada, with a special focus on women, their families, refugees, and people who have experienced war and persecution.

We are a sponsorship agreement holder and have been fortunate to successfully settle over 5,000 refugees from around the world since the inception of our sponsorship program. We have welcomed Afghan, Syrian, Iraqi and Eritrean newcomers among others. On average each year we serve between 19-24 thousand clients --- over 95% of whom are refugees and the majority of our staff were refugees themselves. So, in terms of any concerns you may have Minister Mendicino about capacity to resettle Afghan refugees, we will work alongside the government to help with the resettlement process.

We have also been advocating for the human rights of Afghan women and girls, including during the last time the Taliban were in power in the 1990s.

During the 1990s, Adeena was regularly travelling to Afghanistan, and since girls were not allowed to go to school, our organization had a number of home-based/underground schools and small educational and income generation projects for widows. The girls that were attending our classes were risking their lives but they were motivated to come because of their desire to learn. In fact, when the Taliban were ousted from power and schools were reopened, when the government conducted tests to see the level that the girls were at, those that had been educated in our underground schools exceeded the levels set by the government. We wanted to present this example because it breaks our heart that at the front line of the violence in Afghanistan are women and girls and it should not come as a surprise to anyone that increased Taliban control will **disproportionately** harm women and girls.

Currently we have an all-girls orphanage in Kabul. We have received several threatening letters which has forced us to relocate the girls to safety and remove the orphanage sign.

In the past couple of weeks, we've been contacted by many human rights defenders and women in leadership positions, including women parliamentarians who are extremely concerned about their safety. You have already heard from Ms. Karokhail and Ambassador Soroosh about the current risks and challenges that Afghans are facing. You will also hear from Ms. Ghizaal Haress later and we are grateful for the organizers for bringing the voices of the actual Afghan women on the ground to you today.

Due to the seemingly endless violence in Afghanistan for more than four decades, civilians, particularly women and girls have been at risk like few other peoples around the world. According to the UNHCR, Afghan refugees constitute one of the largest protracted refugee situations in the world and one of the biggest displacement crises in modern history. Just last month the UNHCR warned of imminent humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and urged the international community to step up support to the Government and people of Afghanistan.

We also urge the Canadian government to take immediate action to support the Afghan Government and protect Afghan women through the following measures:

Extend the initiative currently underway for interpreters and individuals who worked closely with the Canadian Government for Afghan women leaders, and women advocating for human rights ***whose lives are at immediate risk at the hands of the Taliban***. Canada's proud tradition of providing protection to those at risk and defending women's rights should take priority over whether these women have had close ties to the Canadian Government. After all, these women are facing the same risks that those who worked with the Canadian Government are facing.

We urge the government to provide special protection for these Afghan women by creating a separate refugee program or allow these women and their families asylum under the recently launched dedicated refugee stream for human rights defenders. But the program will only have meaningful impact if applications for at-risk women and their families in Afghanistan are fast-tracked given the deteriorating situation inside Afghanistan.

While we appreciate that all women and girls at risk cannot be rescued, we urge the government to help those ***whose lives are at immediate risk***. For those women, girls and minorities that are left behind, we urge Canada to make all humanitarian and development assistance conditional upon the protection of fundamental human rights, including the rights of women and minorities, education, employment and movement.

We also urge the Canadian Government to engage the Afghan civil society in the diaspora in matters related to international development and immigration/refugee policies relating to Afghans to ensure the well-intentioned actions of the Government of Canada is sensitive to local issues and the people most at-risk.

We would also like to propose the Government of Canada consider expanding the current re-settlement program to incorporate a temporary refugee protection component, similar to what Canada instituted in 1999 during the Kosovo crisis, when 7000 Kosovars were re-located here with the option to re-settle or be repatriated when conditions became more favorable for them to do so.

In our discussions with Afghan women leaders and rights activists, many of them have spoken of the desire to be afforded an option such as this one. If the environment becomes safe enough for them to return, they would prefer to have the opportunity to do so.

While there's always the concern that an outflux of refugee may lead to loss of knowledge base and human capital from Afghanistan but leaving women leaders and human rights defenders who have put their lives at risk to speak out against injustice and advocate for human rights at the mercies of the Taliban will lead to even greater harm that will be irreversible. We cannot let these women's voices be silenced and urge the Government to act immediate to address their concerns.

Thank you for your time.