



Solutions for Addressing the Humanitarian Crisis in Afghanistan

The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security hosted an expert discussion on solutions for addressing the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan on January 20, 2022.

More than 20 million Afghans are on the brink of famine and the country faces near universal poverty in the next six months. The financial system has collapsed, with healthcare and education soon to follow. Afghan women and girls continue to suffer disproportionately.

Panelists shared key recommendations for how to holistically address the humanitarian situation by discussing how to equitably distribute aid, engage with the Taliban, and approach the overlapping economic and health crises, all while ensuring women are centered in the response.

Engaging with the Taliban

- **The debate on whether or not to engage with the Taliban must move to *how to engage the Taliban*.** It is possible to engage in order to mitigate the economic and financial crisis facing the Afghan people, without recognizing the Taliban regime. UN Security Council Resolution 2516 (2021) providing sanctions relief for humanitarian assistance is a welcomed step, but further coordinated actions by the U.S. and U.N. are needed.
- **The international community should use its leverage to push the Taliban to deliver on its commitments in the health, education, and financial sectors**, including opening schools and enabling women's full participation in public life. Measures to address the humanitarian crisis should not lose sight of the broader political and economic picture or shroud the oppressive actions of the Taliban.
- **Accountability to the Afghan people is key for future stability and governance.** Preventing the collapse of institutions without emboldening the Taliban is critical to address the needs of all Afghans.

"The international community should be telling the Taliban: How are you listening to your own people? How are you making the process inclusive? How are you protecting the space for Afghan media to operate independently for Afghans to tell you what they think of you and your governance? This is not against Islam or Afghan culture. If you are so scared of this system, then you are failing to protect your citizens, and it will be very difficult to continue engaging with you." - Shaharзад Akbar

Addressing the Economic Crisis

- **Tailored sanctions, while critical, should not deny Afghan people economic support and humanitarian relief.** Sanctions provide strong leverage for Afghan women and the international community, but the price of sanctions should not be paid by the people.
- **Expand sanctions relief to encompass private business and commercial transactions**, which can be key partners in alleviating the economic crisis. While humanitarian aid is essential, it cannot alone bear the burden of revitalizing Afghanistan's economy.
- **International actors must actively engage and invest in Afghanistan's private sector to build trust, encourage risk-taking, and stimulate in-country financial transactions.** The private sector is currently enabled by comfort letters and general licenses issued by governments which serve as sanctions exceptions. International partners should ensure clear communication with

banking systems, hold meetings with national businesses and raise public awareness to encourage demand for commercial and financial transactions.

Ensuring Inclusive Humanitarian Assistance

- **UN agencies and aid providers must consult and engage local women's organizations in the design and delivery of aid projects**, including by pressuring the Taliban to involve women. For example, OCHA and the Danish Refugee Council have negotiated on the provincial and village levels throughout the country to ensure women serve as service providers. The meaningful inclusion of women as leaders, project designers, aid distributors, and direct recipients is integral to the effective delivery of humanitarian aid.
- **Gender should be mainstreamed in all internationally-supported programs by dedicating financing to meeting the needs of Afghan women and girls.** Directly funding women's groups that reach larger communities and women heads of households is a key first step.
- **Organizations led by men should advocate for women-led organizations to be included in humanitarian projects**, including by refusing to accept or implement projects until women-led partner organizations are able to operate.
- **The international and donor community should monitor aid provisions to ensure equitable distribution to women and minorities.** Women should have access to support in any form, including food, shelter, work, and education. Women-led NGOs must also be equipped with resourcing and programs to ensure access to the money moving through the country.

"If we fail to help the women of Afghanistan and do not plan for them, then Afghanistan and women especially will face a dire situation with no return. This situation will have negative impacts on the entire region, and this is not something to take lightly." - Mahbouba Seraj

Advancing Effective Program Design

- **Humanitarian aid providers should ensure sustainability and economic opportunity in program design to avoid aid dependency.** Continuation of development assistance and training projects is a key factor in ensuring long-term stability.
- **Programs should be designed with a small grant approach**, which would enable smaller, women-led organizations to be a part of aid disbursement within the funding restrictions the Taliban has set on NGOs.

Protecting Civic Space

- **Protecting Afghanistan's civic space is vital to effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms.** Taliban are moving from targeting former security forces to stifling all critics, and particularly women activists. Ensuring protection of civil society is critical to monitoring threats to women and minority groups and easing the humanitarian crisis.

"Do not forget Afghanistan and the people of Afghanistan. We need champions at the international level to speak on behalf of Afghanistan. We need heads of state, elected representatives, diplomats, celebrities, people in the arts and media to speak up because their statements make a difference." - Dr. Suraya Dalil

Supporting the Health Sector

- **Provide necessary salary support for the health workforce** of nearly 24,000 people, of which 8,000 are women. Maintaining the salaries of Afghan health-care workers should be a multiyear priority to stave off the humanitarian crisis and ensure long term resilience.

- **Focus on critically important areas such as nutrition, maternal and child health, mental health and COVID-19** to combat the overlapping crises facing the Afghan people. This includes supplying medications, vaccines, and fuel to ensure the continuity, stabilization and sustainability of the health system.
- **Ensure the physical safety and security of the health workforce.** Physicians, hospital directors, well-known experts and doctors have been disappeared, tortured and killed. Frontline workers who remain in Afghanistan need to be taken care of and their safety and security should be on the table in a dialogue with the Taliban.

The panel of leading Afghan women and U.S. policymakers included **Palwasha Hassan**, Director, The Afghan Women's Educational Center and Senior Fellow, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security; **Rina Amiri**, U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights; **Mahboubah Seraj**, Executive Director, Afghan Women Skills Development Center (AWSDC); **Shaharзад Akbar**, Former Chairperson, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC); **Muqaddesa Yourish**, Former Deputy Minister for Commerce and Industry; **Dr. Suraya Dalil**, Director, WHO Special Programme on Primary Health Care and Former Minister of Public Health, Afghanistan; and **Maryam Rahmani**, Country Representative, Afghan Women's Resource Center (AWRC). This event series and policy recommendations are part of Onward for Afghan Women, a project of the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security.