

The Honourable Marc Garneau, M.P.
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Global Affairs Canada
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

April 09, 2021

Re: Intra-Afghan peace talks and the Afghan peace process

Dear Minister Garneau,

We are writing to you on behalf of Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WAfghan), the Canadian Federation of University Women, and the Women and Peace Studies Organization (Afghanistan) to call for Canada to take a resolute, committed and vocal leadership role within the international community in the defense of women's human rights, an inclusive peace process and the preservation of democracy in Afghanistan. To this end, we request a meeting to discuss the urgent human rights situation in Afghanistan, and specifically, threats to the security and rights of women and girls.

We share below the key demands we have identified through our engagement with Afghan women activists and networks:

1. An immediate, unconditional and true ceasefire as a *precondition* to legitimate peace negotiations, and the establishment of mechanisms to bring transgressors of the ceasefire to justice;

Afghan women are gravely concerned that the US will proceed with its plan to withdraw all remaining troops by May 2021, leaving behind a peace and security vacuum. Afghan women are increasingly concerned about the deteriorating security situation in their country. In 2020, over 8,800 civilians were killed, and women -- judges, journalists, activists -- have increasingly become the target of such attacks, with Human Rights Watch reporting two weeks ago that women are leaving the profession of journalism altogether. These terrorist attacks must end.

2. A plan for *responsible troop withdrawal* that accounts for the real risk of escalating violence and human rights violations if the withdrawal process is rushed;

Only four women represent the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in the intra-Afghan peace talks, and not surprisingly, the Taliban have no female representatives on the negotiating team. Women need to be *part* of the main meetings (30% representation), not just side meetings.

3. Equal participation by Afghan women in intra-Afghan peace talks

The US Secretary of State Blinken's recent push to accelerate discussions on a negotiated settlement may indeed undermine the Afghan constitutional order, and most certainly is in contradiction to an "Afghan owned, Afghan led" process. Canada and other international partners cannot look the other way as the US and other countries make a hasty power-sharing deal that puts lasting peace at risk. There are strong indications that the outcome of the Istanbul meeting (scheduled for 15 April) will result in the formation of an interim government, that includes the Taliban. Now more than ever, it is important that formal international observers monitor human rights protections in agreements made during the talks.

4. Protection of women's and girls' rights, including their unconditional right to education at all levels, during and after the peace negotiations, as currently enshrined in the Afghan Constitution, and as a central part of the commitment made to Afghanistan by the international community.

More girls attend school today than at any previous time in Afghanistan's history. Girls' education is now widely accepted across Afghan society, as families demonstrate demand for both boys and girls to be educated. This progress is at risk with restrictions the Taliban have imposed on girls' education in areas under their control and in light of rumors that concessions will be offered to the Taliban during negotiations to limit girls' education, such as restricting female education to certain grade levels only (and no access to higher education), to religious schools only, and implementing stricter sex segregation measures.

In her 23 March 2021 briefing to the United Nations Security Council, Sharharzad Akbar, Chair of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, described the loss of legitimacy of these talks in the face of increasing targeted violence, and called for the world's attention. As an emerging human rights crisis, Afghanistan needs Canada to vigorously engage with this issue -- which is squarely in line with Canada's feminist foreign policy goals -- and exert its diplomatic influence over these negotiations. We believe that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should lead a robust, multi-faceted Government of Canada plan to engage with other countries in support of the demands of Afghan citizens, particularly women, as outlined above.. Specifically,

1. We ask that Government of Canada make a bold public statement outlining its position in response to the Afghan peace talks, which should unequivocally call for the protection of the current Constitution of Afghanistan, stating its opposition to the imposition of any new government on Afghans through undemocratic processes, and insisting on the full and non-negotiable protection of women's rights;
2. We ask Government Canada to use its diplomatic channels to engage state actors to realize the recommendations outlined above, notably, the United States Administration, and to make clear to the US Government that Government of Canada is opposed to the proposal for the imposition of a Supreme Council of Islamic Jurisprudence, that would grossly undermine the significant investments made in democratic development and good governance in Afghanistan;

3. We ask that the Government of Canada lead the initiative to call for a new NATO mission focused specifically on the protection of women's and girls' rights in Afghanistan.

We are requesting a meeting with you to discuss such a role for Canada, as well as to gain insight into the Government of Canada's internal deliberations on its role in the intra-Afghan peace process, and to provide our recommendations about how Canada can be more engaged in supporting the rights of Afghan women and girls, to ensure a durable peace.

The Afghan peace talks constitute the most important peace negotiations underway in the world today. They have the potential to end what is one of the most violent, and longest, wars in the world today. The epicentre of the fight of women's human rights lies in Afghanistan, a country where Canada has invested \$3.3 billion, and where Canadian lives have been lost. We are asking the Government of Canada to enact the principles underlying its Feminist International Assistance Policy and the soon to be officially released Feminist Foreign Policy, and to step up to espouse a leadership role on what is the most important human rights agenda of our age: the protection of women's and girls' rights.

Thank you for taking the time to review our concerns, and we look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience with regards to our request for a meeting.

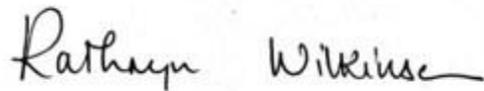
Sincerely yours,



Laila Rashid
Chair, Board of Directors
CW4WAfghan



Lauryn Oates
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Kathryn Wilkinson
President, Canadian Federation of University Women



Wazhma Frogh
Founder
Women & Peace Studies Organization- Afghanistan

Muzna Dureid
Co-founder
Syrian women's political Movement

Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan is a federally-registered Canadian charity, with the mission to engage Canadians to take action, in partnership with Afghan women, towards improving conditions of human rights, ending women's oppression, and providing educational opportunities for women and girls in Afghanistan. With a membership of over 2,500, we are Canada's largest, most representative CSO voice on Afghanistan issues. Thanks to our longstanding work in Afghanistan, we are able to work closely with affected Afghan women, entire communities and women's organizations, communicating with them daily to ensure a depth of awareness about current realities on the ground. Dr. Habiba Sarabi, the sole women peace negotiator for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan at the recent Moscow meeting, echoed the views of many Afghan women when she reiterated in a meeting with us recently this week the need for international solidarity.

The Canadian Federation of University Women

The Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) is a self-funded, non-partisan organization of close to 7000 women across Canada that works to improve the status of women by promoting human rights, public education, social justice and peace in Canada and abroad. Each year, CFUW and its Clubs award close to \$1 million to help women pursue post-secondary studies. Since its founding in 1919, CFUW has worked tirelessly for gender equality for women and girls.

Women & Peace Studies Organization (Afghanistan) is a local civil society organization working with over 200 women peacebuilders in different provinces of Afghanistan. The organization along with other women groups and activists call for a negotiated political settlement and for international guarantees for any peace agreement with the Taliban.

Th Syrian women's political movement is a Syrian local movement that works to enhance Syrian women's participation in peace talk. The movement propose feminist solutions related to Syria's future.