

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 25, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

We write to you deeply concerned about the dire situation in Afghanistan. In light of the recent developments, we fear that the immense gains for Afghan women and girls accomplished over the past twenty years will be lost, and that women along with religious and ethnic minorities in particular will face increased attacks and assassinations by the Taliban, ISIS, and warlords.

The Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017, the Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act of 2019, and Section 1218 of the FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act demonstrate Congress' continued commitment to putting gender equality, women's rights, and the meaningful participation of women in society and conflict resolution at the heart of our foreign policy agenda, including in Afghanistan. We therefore urge you to use all available tools to protect at-risk groups and ensure that any political or peace process going forward is inclusive of women's political and peacebuilding participation.

First, with the tragic developments unfolding in Afghanistan, it is more urgent than ever that the United States take action to fully secure the airport and offer support and evacuation opportunities to Afghan women human rights defenders, rights activists, politicians, journalists, other highly visible women leaders, and Special Immigrant Visa recipients and applicants and their families at risk of being targeted by the Taliban.

Congress appropriated emergency funds for Afghan refugees, a significant portion of which should be made available for the Priority 2 program and assisting Afghan women fleeing the Taliban. Further interagency actions must also be carried out immediately to evacuate Afghan women seeking safety outside the country, establish a special parole program for at-risk Afghan women leaders, and establish a high-level Interagency Refugee Coordinator to manage the immediate impacts from the rapid developments in Kabul.

Second, we respectfully request that you work with all relevant agencies to conduct an assessment of the security situation in Afghanistan. Using gender-sensitive conflict analysis and an atrocity prevention lens, we urge you to identify women who are most vulnerable to violence, persecution, and other adverse outcomes, and provide Congress with an interagency action plan with specific, time-bound steps to be taken over the next year to accomplish the following three objectives:

- 1) Mitigate rising violence against Afghan women, girls, and religious/ethnic minorities;
- 2) Meaningfully include Afghan women, girls, and religious and ethnic minorities in any political or peace process; and
- 3) Establish policies and programs to protect and monitor the preservation of their rights and gains going forward.

Mitigating Rising Violence

As efforts are underway to evacuate vulnerable Afghan citizens who have helped the United States, we urge that Afghan human rights defenders and other individuals with high levels of visibility such as politicians, journalists, and negotiators – especially women – be offered humanitarian parole services, assistance and opportunities to be evacuated. Further, vulnerable Afghans, including women at risk of violence, including sexual violence, due to occupation, advocacy, or location, should be designated as a Priority 2 group of special humanitarian concern for the purposes of refugee processing and provided additional avenues for immigration and humanitarian relief. The *Improving Access for Afghan Refugees Act* introduced by the leadership of the Democratic Women’s Caucus provides a roadmap for expanding access to the refugee system for these at-risk populations. We furthermore urge you to direct diplomatic officials to prioritize Afghan women for Priority 1 referrals.

In addition, any transitional security arrangements should be directly informed by women’s priorities and established at the provincial and national levels accompanied by a monitoring mechanism. Monitoring mechanisms could be modeled after the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Syrian Justice and Accountability Center.

Meaningful Inclusion in the Peace Process

Research has found that women’s inclusion in peace negotiations makes the resulting agreement 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years. For any successful political or peace process to advance in Afghanistan at this stage, **there needs to be a diverse coalition of women leaders from local and provincial governance as well as from the international community, civil society, and the Taliban, and which must include women victims of war.**

We respectfully request that you advocate firmly and consistently in your role as convener on behalf of the United States and as part of efforts led by the international community that any political or peace process, and **any future agreement focus on safeguarding human rights with a woman-centered perspective.** As such, there should be ongoing virtual consultations with Afghan women parliamentarians and civil society leaders to understand the situation for Afghan women and girls.

Any future peace or political process should also address the rights of women victims of war, including their right to justice, and should include processes for the voluntary return and repatriation of Afghan women refugees into civil society and the provision of assistance such as housing, security, livelihood opportunities, and life skills training.

Protecting and Maintaining Women's Rights and Gains

While the role of the United States in Afghanistan has changed, it is critical that the United States support efforts by Afghan women to ensure any amended Constitution by the Afghan people or governing laws and institutions going forward recognize and uphold the fundamental rights of all Afghans to life, dignity, and property, and the protection of human, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. These rights include access to education, justice, work, and political participation; the freedoms of movement, expression, the press, and association and assembly; freedom from gender discrimination in community-level decision-making; and the right to work free from employment discrimination, especially for women in the media, judiciary, and security sectors.

Additionally, women's rights must be upheld and protected and women must retain rights such as access to health and safety, protection in school, work, and places of worship, safe retreat during times of violence, rights to political participation in all forms, equal protection and due process under the law, and other such equitable and autonomous rights. Further, women who are victims of violence, including domestic violence and violent conflict, must be protected and provided with legal, social, and psychological assistance to be able to seek justice within the justice system.

In order to achieve lasting stability and security in Afghanistan, the inclusion of Afghan women must be centered in a political process going forward. There must be free and transparent elections and women must be included in Parliament, the Cabinet, and local government. The United States should also support Afghan partners in their work to ensure that at least 30 percent of each party's electoral positions are reserved for women with increases in percentage over time to match the proportion of women in the general population.

Effective implementation of the U.S. women, peace, and security agenda requires ongoing and robust consultations with Afghan women and continued and vocal American support for women's inclusion and leadership in Afghanistan. Critical to achieving these aims is the appointment of a highly visible Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues to coordinate U.S. efforts to protect and support women and girls in Afghanistan, and key officials with expertise in issues of gender equity to advance this agenda in Afghanistan such as through the establishment of a Senior Gender Equity Official in the Office of the Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation.

Through our meetings with Afghan women officials and delegates, it has been conveyed to us the value of conditioning U.S. assistance on the preservation of civil and political rights of women and democratic norms that protect women's rights. We support the development of a strategy on how the U.S. might provide or withhold U.S. assistance based on meaningful progress on intra-Afghan peace negotiations and political processes going forward.

While our military posture in Afghanistan has changed, the Democratic Women's Caucus remains committed to working with you to advance an American foreign policy that fully implements our women, peace, and security agenda and supports the courageous and tireless efforts of Afghan women leaders to protect the rights of women and girls and secure lasting

peace and stability in their country. A permanent resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan and resulting threats to the American homeland cannot be achieved without the full and meaningful participation of women in Afghan society. We therefore urge you and this Administration to fully implement and advance women's rights and a women, peace, and security-centered approach to U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan as our military withdraws and our longer-term strategy in the country and region is defined.

Sincerely,



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Democratic Women's Caucus



Lois Frankel
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