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FROM SOLIDARITY TO SUPPORT: A COLLABORATIVE RESPONSE TO THE EMERGING AFGHAN REFUGEE SITUATION

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From Solidarity to Support: A Collaborative Response to the Emerging Afghan Refugee Situation

Background: The Urgent Need for Action

The collapse of Afghanistan's government in recent events has caught the world by surprise. There are rising fears for human rights, and particularly women and girls rights, under the new Taliban rule. As of now, over a hundred thousand Afghans have fled from the country,¹ and another 18 million Afghans are in need of humanitarian assistance,² particularly women and girls, who in the past have suffered under similar regimes. The European Union (EU) needs to plan a rapid response to ensure that we don't lose the 20 years of progress on women and girls' rights.

As the world awaits how the human rights situation unfolds in Afghanistan, there is an urgent need within the EU to take into account the Afghan voices and perspectives, and prepare for the possible situation based on lessons and learnings from the 2015 migration crisis. Against this backdrop, New Women Connectors, in collaboration with SEEK and European Coalition of Migrants and Refugees (EU-COMAR) hosted consultations with Afghan refugees and experts to map the road ahead for an emergency response. The purpose was to meaningfully engage Afghans, particularly women, themselves to map out an inclusive response and action plan for addressing the immediate needs of the refugees and of those who are left behind. The paper aims to highlight some of the key findings and recommendations from the consultations.

Mapping the Refugee perspectives

1. Immediate Needs of Resettlement and Humanitarian Action

The people of Afghanistan are in midst of anxieties. The Afghans at risk, including women and girls, journalists, activists, allies of Western forces, artists are fearing for their lives and need a safe passage out of the country. Those who have been able to be evacuated through international support face an uncertain future ahead.

The Afghans left behind are preparing for life under the Taliban, and face new challenges. Many Afghans rely on money from the Afghan diaspora but have been struggling to access it now with the partial collapse of the banking system.³ These are the immediate concerns that need to be addressed through coordinated resettlement and humanitarian action.

"I am 39 years old. This is the second time I am going through this experience. The first time I was just 2 years old. Can you imagine my plight?" Afghan participant woman.

Recommendations

- The EU and Member States should adopt a coordinated approach and a rapid response to provide safe routes for asylum and refuge for at-risk Afghans.
- Support should be provided to the UN and humanitarian organizations to continue their work in the emergency zone and to accelerate relief work to address immediate needs of the people including shelter, food, and financial support.

2. Battling Hostile Public Perception.

While Afghan refugees and diaspora in the EU welcome the support of the EU provided to the refugees, there have been concerns around the rising mistrust and resentment of the refugees amongst the citizens of the host countries. The recent demonstrations, such as the burning of tyres and attacks on the refugee camps in the Netherlands,⁴ have raised fears of what the future holds for those who are to start their lives in the host countries.

"Now, more than ever before, there is an increased need to boost efforts for a positive change in public perception of host communities towards refugees and migrants, so they are willing to welcome Afghans." - Panelist

Recommendations

- The EU leadership must engage on an urgent basis with the Member States to encourage the shift in the hostile and negative public narratives around refugees to a more welcoming approach.
- More efforts need to be directed for the preparedness of host communities for welcoming the refugees through research, advocacy, and campaigns for shifting narratives and public perceptions of refugees.

3. The future of “Afghans in Afghanistan”

There are rising fears amongst the Afghans, including the diasporas and displaced and those who are left or stayed in Afghanistan, of what happens next in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, with experiences of the last rule still haunting them. With the best and the brightest leaving the country, including many of the women rights activists, there are questions of what happens for the rights of those who are left behind.^{5,6} Amidst these concerns, the Afghans call for the EU and the international community to put pressure on the Taliban to uphold human and women rights, and that the United Nations and international aid agencies and organizations continue their work within Afghanistan and provide support for grassroots organizations, networks, and activists that are still in Afghanistan and working with Afghan citizens and refugees.

“I am worried about what happens to women who have to work as they have to provide for their families but who are not able to escape Afghanistan as they do not have the connections or they did not work with the US government. I hope the humanitarian community supports them for long-term solutions with Taliban so they continue their education and work” Afghan woman participant

Recommendations

- While establishing diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, The EU and the Member States should demand the Taliban to clearly specify laws affecting women and girls’ access to education and economic participation, uphold and respect human rights, and particularly equal rights and opportunities for women and girls.

- Advocacy efforts for diplomatic dialog should be directed in at least 2 directions: with Taliban where these should be channeled through (local) influencers, elders and ways that have proved effective for dialog with the Taliban; and, with EU member States to ensure women-rights is protected by Taliban. This can be accelerated through research-based diplomatic dialogs.

4. Wanting the Help to Help

There is a great interest in Afghan diasporas and activists to help those back home, but with the current crisis in place they are left feeling helpless as they lack the means and connections to do so. These Afghans are in contact with the local populations through families and friends, and many in the past have been leading and/or supporting local initiatives to provide access to health, education, and other basic services to those in need back home. But now they face uncertainties as to how to continue their humanitarian and charity work in a safe way. Moreover, as the refugees and diaspora are located in different countries across Europe, their work is mostly happening in silos and there are limited platforms to synergize their work.

“I am watching as my country burns and my family desperately needs help. I need help to help my family. My sister is a widow and lives in Kabul with her 2 daughters. Who will bring food for them, now that Talibans have asked them to limit going outside”. - Afghan woman

Recommendations

- The EU should support collaborations and knowledge sharing platforms to connect the networks of: Afghan diaspora in the EU, networks of friends of people of Afghanistan, networks of Afghans in Afghanistan
- The EU’s External Action can leverage the networks of local and diaspora-led civil society organizations working with Afghans and grassroot organizations in Afghanistan to support relief efforts.

5. Amplifying Afghan Voices

There is a general consensus on the need to amplify the voices of the Afghans, particularly the women and girls, and for providing them a platform to tell their own story instead of it being told for them. There has been a lot of media attention 'on' Afghanistan, but not 'by' the Afghans. A wider scale support is needed so that Afghan voices don't get drowned in the noise of others speaking for them. Women and girls are in an increased vulnerable state. Their rights can be protected by taking measures to provide increased visibility.

“There are still a lot of Afghan-activist-women in Afghanistan. We should give them a channel where they can express themselves and give us the news (from Afghanistan) so the world does not forget them” - Afghan woman participant

Recommendations

- Any migration response needs to be build on a participatory course of action and encourage self representation of the people of Afghanistan so their voices are included in the policies regarding them.
- To provide spaces and platform to amplify voices of women and girls, extra support in the form of women-led support groups should be made available on an urgent basis.

Conclusions

After 40 years of prolonged war and devastation, Afghanistan is again in the face of a humanitarian crisis. The EU should take the lead to build a European-led solidarity for providing protection and assistance to those who are the most at risk, including refugees, asylum seekers, and those left behind. These efforts can be synergized through a collaborative approach that takes into account the needs and the voices of the Afghans. This is the time to build bridges by directing efforts towards positive public perception in host countries, and by initiating EU dialog at diplomatic level to stand together and support those at-risk and the most vulnerable.

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Acknowledgements:

The policy brief draws from the expert consultation on “We Stand with Afghanistan” held on 27th August 2021 and from personal conversations with Afghan refugees and experts. The consultations were organized by SEEK and New Women’s Connectors, in collaboration with Global Refugee Led Network, European Coalition (EU-COMAR) and UNIRE. The recorded video can be accessed at: shorturl.at/qsGK2. The panelists included:

- Ms. Anila Noor (Founder, New Womens Connector)
- Ms. Umbreen Salim (Managing Director, SEEK)
- Ms. Shaza Alrihawi (Co-founder, Global Refugee Led Network)
- Mr. Syed Hasnain (President, UNIRE Italy)
- Ms. Zala Ahmad (Afghan Refugee, Founder and MD HOLD Afghanistan)
- Ms. Mary Mozafary (Afghan refugee and human rights lawyer)
- Ms. Silsila Mahboub (Afghan refugee, Refugee Advisory Board UNHCR Bulgaria)
- Ms. Tehmina Salik (Afghan refugee, Councillor Danish Refugee Council)
- Ms. Shazia Amer (Integrative Counsellor, founder Iqtesa, Migrant from Pakistan)
- Mr. Pamir Ehsas (Norwegian-Afghan jurist, founder Brighter Tomorrow)

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SEEK is a migrant women-led feminist research network envisioning the power of research and knowledges to promote social, political and epistemic justice for diverse populations, particularly the refugees and migrants, in public perception and public policies in the European societies and beyond.

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New Women Connectors is a refugee women-led initiative that actively advocates for “gender transformative changes” in EU migration policies. We promote equal opportunities and inclusion while avoiding stigmatization of vulnerable groups.

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