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# **SEEK & NEW WOMEN CONNECTORS BRIEFING PAPER SERIES**

## **CONNECTING & COUNSELLING: ENSURING SAFE PATHWAYS FOR AFGHAN WOMEN AT RISK**

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# SEEK And New Women Connectors Briefing Paper Series, Issue 2

## Connecting and Counselling: Ensuring Safe Pathways for Afghan Women at Risk

### Background: The Urgent Need for Action

The fall of Afghanistan to Taliban has affected all aspects of life of Afghan people. The safety of individuals, particularly of women who have been working on positions such as lawmakers, lawyers, journalists and human right defenders are under an increased threat under the new Taliban rule. While US-coordinated airlift evacuated nearly 125,000 people (Human Rights Watch, 2021), another 18 million Afghans are in need of humanitarian assistance (IRC, 2021), and many await support for secure pathways for evacuation.

Legal experts are working on finding legal pathways to support those most at-risk in Afghanistan through regular pathways such as resettlements<sup>1</sup>, but also additional mechanisms such as safe, regular and complementary pathways<sup>2</sup>. The task is complex and involves multiple actors and states.

The European Union (EU), as a crucial actor and at forefront of humanitarian support efforts, needs to plan a rapid response to ensure safe and legal pathways for evacuation and resettlement. This necessitates a collaborative approach where coordinated efforts are directed towards addressing this crisis. Against this backdrop, SEEK Feminist Research Network and New Women Connectors collaborated with Legal-Aid and refugee rights organizations for consultations with Afghan refugees and experts to support efforts in order to map the road ahead for ensuring safe legal pathways and complementary pathways for those at most-risk in Afghanistan. The main aim of this event is to provide spaces in order to encourage discussion on how we as a network can mobilize the social and legal communities to direct resources and services to assist Afghan women and girls based on their needs. The paper aims to highlight some of the key findings and recommendations from the consultations.

1. Resettlement refers to "the selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection (host country) to a third State which has agreed to admit them – as refugees – with permanent residence status" UNHCR 2019

2. Complementary pathways refer to, "safe and regulated avenues for refugees that complement resettlement by providing lawful stay in a third country where their international protection needs are met" UNHRC 2019

### Mapping Refugee Perspectives

#### 1. Immediate Needs of Provision of Legal and Safe Pathways.

Since the Taliban takeover, the individuals and particularly many women at-risk who are left behind in Afghanistan have been under direct threat. This includes young girls pursuing school and higher education, and women working as teachers, lawyers, human, and women rights defenders, activists, and those engaged in the financial support of their families. The majority have not received the legal and psychological support needed to ensure their safety and well-being.

Very few of the individuals at-risk have been able to make it to the Western countries and the majority of the departures have been of land border-crossing including Pakistan and Iran (Human Rights Watch 2021). The legal mechanisms and humanitarian assistance infrastructure are under-developed in these countries, particularly in Pakistan where many refugees are stranded on the border. Moreover, adequate data and information on the ground are not available to inform strategies and initiatives to support the refugees.

**"They (Afghan women left behind) do not have access to digital resources to rally support for their cause or fill out resettlement forms, they may also be illiterate and not connected to support networks" - Nassim Majidi, Samuel Hall.**

### Recommendations

- The EU and the Member States should pursue a rapid response to provide safe legal pathways for asylum and refuge for at-risk Afghans and develop more Community sponsorship schemes.
- Afghan women and girls should receive prima facie refugee status determination to facilitate their legal stays abroad as refugees, and a specific group under threat and persecution in Afghanistan (Majidi)

- High schools around Europe and the US can do more to advocate with national governments to provide laissez-passers, and authorizations to travel, as part of their efforts to support Afghan girls' right to education. (Majidi).

## 2. Supporting Efforts of Non-Legal Specialists and Networks

The most at-risk individuals in Afghanistan are in urgent need of legal support to ensure their safety and evacuation. The increased demand for legal information, aid and services, has far exceeded the capacity of legal experts and organizations working to support the Afghan people. Many non-legal actors, such as nonprofits and public interest groups are filling the gap to support the refugees and asylum seekers with access to legal resources and justice. This includes providing support to lawyers and asylum workers with case-tailored research on country-of-origin of asylum seekers and knowledge repositories (Asylos) and consolidating legal resources and pathways, working with Afghan women to identify their needs and solutions (Pilnet). The provision of additional financial resources can support these initiatives to expand and build on their work further.

*"We are seeing that the legal community is so overwhelmed at the moment....there is so much demand that can be catered for.. So what we are really concerned about is how we can help the legal community as non-legal specialists (in supporting their work and cases with refugees)..." - Sophie Kloos, [Asylos](#)*

### Recommendations

- The non-legal specialists and research organizations can support legal-aid work by conducting background, case-specific, and top-up research to complement the work of legal aid providers.
- The governments of EU countries and EU should support individuals and firms working on providing support on legal pathways and complementary pathways by directing resources to the ones who can support Legal-Aid mechanisms as non-legal specialists. The background information collected through research and knowledge repositories will synergize efforts directed towards provision of legal-aid.

- The International donors must make resources available for research work in neighboring countries, in order to map the needs and to collect information and data to inform policy decisions. One way could be to expand on tools such as the Country of Origin Information (COI) repository (Asylos 2021) focused on neighboring countries.

## 3. Amplifying Advocacy

A number of organizations and initiatives are working in silos to address the emerging needs and challenges of the newly arrived refugees and to support their resettlement. There is a need to have a platform to coordinate their actions and share learnings amongst these organizations so that the efforts are not duplicated, but complement each other.

*"There is a need to figure out a way so that all these different actors and the initiatives complement each other rather than duplicate the efforts, and try to streamline it into a more comprehensive response that really allows for solutions in a meaningful way" - Anna Davis, [UNHCR](#)*

*"One, we need to collaborate and coordinate between us, and two, connect the many initiatives with the needs of Afghan people, to provide access to legal pathways. The platforms like this (today) are exactly the right kind of things we 'must' continue, essentially." - Jasmine Simperingham, [PiLNet](#)*

### Recommendations

- Advocacy initiatives must be amplified through coordinated and concerted focus to prepare effective and sustainable models.
- Platforms for collaboration should be provided to ensure the efforts of civil society to support the refugees complement each other and to encourage lesson sharing amongst the organizations.
- The ground realities and lessons learned from similar experiences in the past must be researched and analyzed to inform evidence-based advocacy goals.

## 4. Connecting and Counselling

Afghans who have made it to host countries have undergone the trauma that has deeply affected their lives in multiple ways: financially, emotionally, and psychologically. Additionally, concerns for the family and relatives left behind in unsafe conditions, adds to the emotional challenges of the already burdened refugees. There is crucial need for psychological and emotional counseling of the affected as it impedes return to normalcy and productive life in host countries.

While International community has initiated efforts to provide some counseling support, connecting the ones in need, to available sources of support remains a major challenge. There remains the unmet need for more spaces and resources.

***“When I heard of a takeover, I was frozen for a moment, then I felt the fear running very prominently through my veins for every “right” that I have lost” - Zahra Karimi, Her Afghanistan.***

## Recommendations

- The EU must prioritize efforts and direct resources for mapping psychological needs and providing safe spaces for support, to ensure the refugees resume everyday life and work activities in host countries asap.
- The United Nations Organization and EU entities must engage on an urgent basis with the actors who have outreach and can join efforts such as civil society organizations to support efforts for connecting the service providers with those who need the services.

## Conclusions

After decades of the lived experience of war and persecution, people in Afghanistan, particularly women are stronger and resilient. But now, they are pushed to increased vulnerabilities and concerns for safety. The EU should take the lead to build a European-led initiative for providing legal pathways to those who are the most at-risk, including refugees, asylum seekers, and those left behind. The legal-aid experts and non-legal specialists including research institutes, civil society organisations, and humanitarian advocates and groups can play a major role in these efforts and must be included. At this juncture, advocacy and diplomatic dialog are crucial to bring actors together and find sustainable solutions that work for the stranded people of Afghanistan.

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- Ms. Anila Noor (Founder and Managing Director, New Women Connectors)
- Ms. Umbreen Salim (Founder and Managing Director, SEEK)
- Ms. Anna Gekht Davis (Senior Resettlement Officer, UNHCR)
- Ms. Zahra Karimi (Executive director, HerAfghanistan)
- Ms. Nassim Majidi, (Founder/Director, Samuel Hall)
- Ms. Jasmine Simperingham (Global Project Coordinator Forced Displacement, PiLNet)
- Ms. Sophie Kloos (Director, Asylös)

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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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