

Background Briefing: Afghan women human rights defenders

What is Amnesty International UK calling for?

Amnesty is calling for the UK government to increase support and protection for Afghan human rights defenders.

The UK government provides funding to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and women's organisations and contributes to a working group of EU member states in Kabul. These are welcome measures but given the gravity of the situation and the vital role that defenders will play in upholding women's rights post transition there is much more the UK government and EU member states could and should be doing. There are significant gaps in provision of support and protection: for instance the EU does not systematically monitor violations and does not have a mechanism for offering protection to human rights defenders at risk.

We are calling on the UK government to develop a country-specific plan – as recommended in the EU Guidelines* – to enhance support and protection for human rights defenders. A plan should increase the effectiveness of UK action by bringing together existing practice (such as the funding initiatives already being carried out) and providing impetus and direction for further practical actions. It should outline all the ways in which the UK government can help foster a better environment for defenders (including through discrete advocacy) and include interventions that it will take bi-laterally and those that it will undertake with its EU partners.

The starting point for creating a plan should be **wide consultation** with human rights defenders from across Afghanistan to identify how best for the UK diplomatic mission in Afghanistan, together with other missions, to support and enable them to carry out their work.

** The UK and all EU member states have a responsibility, outlined in the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, to provide support and protection to human rights defenders. These Guidelines recognise the vital role of human rights defenders in promoting fundamental human rights and the risks they face because of this. They require EU member states multi-laterally and independently to take measures to support and protect defenders in third countries. A recommendation of the guidelines is for member states to develop **country specific plans**.*

Why?

Afghanistan is at a critical juncture. There is a risk that fragile human rights gains made in recent years will be lost post-transition. There are signs of a backlash against women's rights already beginning - insecurity has been increasing with no less than nine attacks on high-profile Afghan women in the last 6 months:

- Islam Bibi, Senior Policewoman from Helmand province, was murdered in July 2013
- A few months later, Lieutenant Negar, Senior Policewoman from Helmand province was also murdered
- Parliamentarian Rooh Gul survived an attack in which her driver and 8 year old daughter were killed in August 2013
- Parliamentarian Fariba Kakar was kidnapped by insurgents and held for ransom, before fortunately being released in September 2013
- In September 2013, Sushmita Banerjee, a well-known author who had written about life under the Taliban, was dragged out of her home and shot 15 times
- In December 2013, a deadly month for Afghan women, a policewoman – Masooma – from Nimruz was shot on the 5th, on the 19th a policewoman and pregnant teacher were found hanged in Uruzgan
- In January 2014, Yalda Waziri, a senior government official in Herat, was murdered by unknown attackers who shot her from a motorbike.

As international troops withdraw and the role and influence of the international community changes, human rights defenders will be ever more instrumental in pressing for respect for human rights and holding the Afghan government to account. Women human rights defenders are doing all they can to

protect gains in women's rights and to ensure the Afghan government meets its human rights commitments, but their ability to do this work will be seriously compromised if their security continues to remain fragile.

Why should the UK do more?

The UK government is one of Afghanistan's key international partners and amongst its largest bilateral donors. It plays a key role in supporting the peace and reconciliation process and has commitments to tackling violence against women, promoting women's participation and protecting gains for women's rights in Afghanistan. Defending and supporting those advocating for women's participation and providing frontline services should be part of their longer term strategy to achieve this.

The UK already supports human rights defenders through the EU; wouldn't a UK plan risk duplicating established mechanisms and strategies?

Action by individual member states should complement the work being carried out through the EU. Amnesty recommends that the UK government develop a holistic plan to support and protect human rights defenders which incorporates both initiatives coordinated through the EU and independent efforts. A plan would make it clear to human rights defenders what they can and can't expect from UK and clarify the relationship between UK role and EU in supporting and protecting defenders.

It is important to recognise that there is a lot that individual states can do, especially in respect to the speed and creativity in which a single state can act, in comparison to the EU as a whole (for example Amnesty understands the German Embassy has provided individual defenders at risk in Afghanistan with access to an armoured car and short-term visas). Diverse responses can be most effective. Action can be escalated starting with the actions of one member state. It is also of note that there are currently significant gaps in provision of support and protection for defenders. The EU Human Rights and Gender Working group, which the UK contributes to, whilst facilitating collaboration does not provide direct support or protection or systematically monitor violations and the group itself does not have a strategy for working with human rights defenders.

Don't the security considerations limit what the UK can do as the risks are so great for HRDs?

It is essential to be guided by human rights defenders themselves as to when, how, and what kind of contact would offer the most protection. However in our experience even in countries like China and Iran, human rights defenders consistently insist they need more visible contact with the EU, such as invitations to receptions at missions and prison visits. Chinese human rights defenders often want more contact with EU missions because, while it may raise immediate risk, in the longer term it will contribute to their protection. In Zimbabwe, one activist insisted that human rights defenders are going to be targeted anyway, whether they have contact with EU missions or not.

What about the Afghan government. Shouldn't they be doing more to protect and support human rights defenders?

Yes. Primary responsibility to guarantee the right to defend human rights lies with the Afghan government and Amnesty recommends that the government should:

- ensure that threats and attacks on women human rights defenders are swiftly and fully investigated with effective remedies provided
- strengthen the independence and capacity of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission to reports of threats and attacks on defenders;
- promote awareness, including through training and guidelines among law enforcement officials, of the valuable role and work of women human rights defenders
- provide adequate political, financial and technical support to defenders of women's human rights.
- fully implement the Elimination of Violence against Women Law and other relevant legislation aimed at protecting and promoting women's human rights.