

Obstacles to the Path to Safety

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The situation for women in Afghanistan has become increasingly dangerous. Over the past twenty years, Afghan women built up civil society, gained hard-won roles with the government, and forged peacebuilding initiatives in the country. Now, the reality for most women in Afghanistan is that they have been completely cut off from political and social life. All progress made towards advancing gender equality has been reversed with 98.2% of women now reporting loss of economic opportunity based on their gender. Women have lost their jobs and have been barred from receiving education. Domestic violence has increased exponentially, depression is widespread, and reports of suicide are rising. Thousands have been forced to flee their homes and many more are looking for ways to get out and get to safety. Unfortunately, the path to safety is riddled with obstacles that do not appear to be improving. These obstacles include poor mobility throughout the country, an inability to obtain visas and other necessary documentation, the requirement of biometric data, and a lack of communication and coordination with Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

Restricted Mobility

The Taliban has severely restricted movement for women throughout the country. In most provinces, women are not allowed to travel unless accompanied by a male relative. Those that do make the journey to travel to the border do so at a very high risk.

One report described the journey as such:

It's a harrowing journey for people to make, knowing that they are on hit lists, that they are being hunted and that if they are identified they can be killed.¹

Many other women have been moving between different safe houses in order to evade the Taliban.² **The reality for most women is that their individual and physical freedoms are so restricted that the physical act of getting out of the country is very difficult and highly risky.** When addressing Canada's Special Committee on Afghanistan, Minister Fraser noted that there are roughly 10,000 people that have been through the eligibility and approval process for a special visa, but because of the logistical difficulty of leaving Afghanistan

they are still stuck in the country.³ This leads into another major obstacle to safety which is the immigration and asylum processes currently in place.

Immigration Policies and Processes

Processes in place to grant visas and refugee status to these women are not sufficient and have been slow moving.

Canada pledged to accept 40,000 Afghan refugees into their country and as of now have only accepted roughly 16,370.⁴ This number is alarmingly low. There are programs in place to assist and accept those fleeing the country, but these processes are inefficient and are not coordinated enough therefore their efforts are falling flat. One such program is Canada's humanitarian program which seeks to resettle vulnerable Afghan nationals outside of Afghanistan. The difficulty with this particular program is that people are not able to apply directly to Canada's humanitarian program. In order for individuals to be eligible for this program, individuals must be outside of Afghanistan and only then can they register with the UNHCR and be referred by a partner agency or by the UNHCR themselves.⁵

Documentation

Obtaining necessary exit and entry documentation is another challenge faced by Afghans trying to flee. Every neighboring country is tasked with setting its own entry and exit requirements, however all require specific forms of documentation and passports. **Many Afghans however, have had no choice but to destroy their identifying documentation in order to avoid reprisals from the Taliban.** Obtaining a new passport and identifying information would require visiting a government office and because the Taliban is the de facto government this is not an option. Afghans who are unable to obtain proper documentation have ended up "trapped in makeshift camps at border zones, or detained while they await deportation to an uncertain fate."⁶

Biometric Data

The Special Committee on Afghanistan recognized that the requirement of biometric data in order to receive proper passports and documentation is another obstacle for those trying to



flee Afghanistan. Presently, the Canadian Government requires applicants for their special programs to provide photographs and fingerprints in order to confirm their identity. However, there are no biometric collections sites in Afghanistan which makes this process next to impossible for those trying to flee to Canada. A potential solution for this problem posed is to bring people to Canada without biometric verification and to do that verification upon arrival in Canada.

International Community

Neighboring countries have proved to be unable and unwilling to provide the necessary support to get Afghan refugees to safety. For a period of time Pakistan was accepting undocumented refugees, but after November 2021 their requirements changed. Afghans who do manage to have a valid visa and get to Pakistan must renew those visas every 60 days. Without a valid visa they cannot rent a place to live, work, or send their children to school. Those living in Pakistan without valid visas also cannot get an exit visa from Pakistan.⁷ What's more, the Afghans who are registered as asylum claimants do not receive legal status in Pakistan and they run the risk of being arrested and deported at any time.

This is a pattern that was also seen with a number of other neighboring countries. **Countries across Europe and Central Asia have pushed back on Afghan refugees resulting in detention and deportation.** Amnesty International reported that Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have all closed their borders to Afghans traveling without the proper documentation. Not only have neighboring countries closed their borders to Afghans, but countries such as Croatia, Bulgaria, and Greece have also pushed back on Afghan refugees. Poland implemented measures ensuring that those who make an irregular border crossing will not be granted asylum.⁸ In July 2021 with the increase in Afghan refugees, Turkey also tightened its stance on accepting undocumented Afghans by extending its border wall with Iran and rounding up undocumented Afghans for deportation.

There is an international imperative and obligation under the principle of non-refoulement to accept refugees who will be returned to a country where they are subject to persecution and human rights violations. Amnesty International points out

that this principle applies not only to countries sharing a land border with Afghanistan, but it extends to countries that can be reached from Afghanistan by air or sea.⁹

Canada can and must do better at resettling Afghan refugees and getting them to safety. Their pledge to accept 40,000 refugees is an important one and is one that is crucial at a time where other countries are closing their borders. A potential action that Canada could take in this regard would be to **issue single journey travel documents to Afghan nationals that are eligible for Canadian humanitarian programs and ensure that those nationals have a safe passage to Canada including their travels through third countries.**

Lack of Communication and Coordination

A last obstacle identified is the lack of communication and coordination among agencies that are trying to help Afghans. The processing time for applications is alarmingly inefficient and is riddled with mixed communication or no communication at all with applicants. It has been reported that **roughly 52% of the 10,000 Afghans who have applied to the Canadian special program have not had their applications acknowledged or reviewed.**¹⁰ The IRCC has not effectively communicated with applicants leaving many uncertain of the status of their application. As of May 2022 the IRCC has still not been in communication with interpreters' families. A number of testimony briefs note that the IRCC has not been communicating promptly, regularly, or in an individualized manner which has left many Afghans with a great deal of uncertainty and a lack of confidence in their ability to get to Canada.

Each of the obstacles listed above represent a lack of urgency when it comes to getting those in Afghanistan to safety. The Afghanistan people have largely been left on their own without adequate support from Canada, the United States, or neighboring countries. In particular, the combination of **economic crisis, potential famine, and daily human rights abuses at the hands of the Taliban has made Afghanistan unsafe for most of the population.** Canada has an obligation to increase its efforts to ensure that they fulfill their promise of accepting 40,000 Afghan refugees which they can do with a more streamlined, coordinated, and humanitarian approach.

Endnotes

- 1 AFGH, Evidence, (March 2022), 1925 (Katherine Moloney, Representative for Afghan Families, Tenth Church).
- 2 See Evidence Presented by Mr. Djawid Taheri, speaking to the Special Committee on Afghanistan as an individual
- 3 Dhaliwal, Sukh, (2022) Honouring Canada's Legacy in Afghanistan
- 4 Government of Canada, #WelcomeAfghans, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/afghanistan.html>

- 5 Dhaliwal, Sukh, (2022) Honouring Canada's Legacy in Afghanistan
- 6 Amnesty International Advocacy Briefing (2021), *Like an Obstacle Course: Few Routes for Afghans trying to Flee their Country*
- 7 Dhaliwal, Sukh, (2022) Honouring Canada's Legacy in Afghanistan
- 8 Amnesty International Advocacy Briefing (2021)
- 9 Ibid
- 10 AFGH, Evidence, (Feb. 2022), 1910 (Eleanor Taylor)