14 March 2013

Dr Kathleen Dermody
Secretary
Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Dr Dermody,

Committee inquiry into the administration, management and objectives of Australia's overseas development programs in Afghanistan in the context of the 'Transition Decade'

Amnesty International, Oxfam Australia and the Afghan Australian Development Organisation (AADO) make this contribution to the inquiry specifically in relation to Australia's role in promoting and protecting the rights of Afghan women through transition and post-2014. Advancements in gender equality, the empowerment of women and safety of women and girls are critical foundations for the achievement of all of the Millennium Development Goals in Afghanistan. As such this contribution particularly relates to the third term of reference for this inquiry.

Since the 2001 fall of the Taliban, there has been significant progress in advancing women's rights including in a rise in the enrolment of girls in school, life expectancy and women's political participation with women holding 27 percent of parliamentary seats, albeit largely due to the 25 per cent quota. These fragile gains are threatened by the ongoing peace and reconciliation talks between the Taliban, Afghan and US governments, in the context of the planned withdrawal from Afghanistan of the majority of the international security forces. Girls' schools are frequently attacked, several high-profile women's rights activists have frequently been targeted and killed and violence against girls and women continues to be a major problem. Human rights advocates are fearful that women's and girls' rights will be traded away during these negotiations with the Taliban.

A primary objective of the work of Australia and the international community in Afghanistan must be to ensure that women in Afghanistan have a meaningful place in peace and reconciliation processes, have genuine political representation, have strengthened capacity in public life and have their safety and human rights protected.

In the context of the transition and the peace talks, AADO, supported by Oxfam and Amnesty International held a roundtable on 12-13 Feb to analyse Australia's role in promoting and protecting the rights of Afghan women through transition and post 2014. The roundtable comprised 50 participants including a key delegation of eight MPs and civil society members from Afghanistan.

The recommendations arising from the roundtable are unanimous proposals which reflect the particular priorities identified by the Afghan delegation for how Australia can best support the rights of women in Afghanistan during and post the transition period. The recommendations offer pathways for Australia to build on and develop current commitments to protect Afghan women's rights. We commend these recommendations to the Committee for your deliberations in this inquiry.

Drawing on and complementing these recommendations, the undersigned organisations have identified immediate opportunities for Australia to demonstrate its commitment to protecting the rights of women in Afghanistan during and post transition. The Australian Government should:

1. Provide funding to ensure Afghan women's meaningful participation at peace-related international summits, such as the upcoming NATO conference on Afghanistan, as well as champion women's representation at the High and Provincial Peace Councils by 2013-14 in line with the minimum 25% quota set out in the Afghan Constitution for female parliamentarians;

2. Improve protection of women and women leaders in public life in Afghanistan – through ensuring practical, high quality training of gender sensitivity, human rights, humanitarian law, rule of law and literacy is integrated into Australia's training to Afghan National Security Forces during 2013-2014 and beyond.

3. Release the details of the implementation plan for the Afghan component of Australia's National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security, that clearly sets out Australia's plan to uphold UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and other resolutions under the United Nations Women, Peace and Security agenda (which highlights the essential role of women in the prevention and management of conflict and as full participants in post-conflict peace building and reconstruction efforts);

4. Support the development of the Afghanistan National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and its full funding and implementation, to ensure the plan actually contributes to the promotion and protection of women's rights and is not left unfulfilled.

5. Ensure the increasing pool of official development assistance managed by the Australian Federal Police for training and mentoring Afghan National Police is monitored and evaluated against gender sensitive criteria and incorporates benchmarks for women's participation, consistent with Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security and principles of development effectiveness.

6. Ensure Australia's $17 million funding commitment to address violence against women in Afghanistan incorporates a substantial focus on enhancing implementation of Elimination of Violence Against Women Law, including through targeted long-term programmatic support to women's rights organisations working on the ground in Afghanistan.

7. Improve access to education and training for illiterate rural women by prioritising funding for: accelerated learning programs that address interrupted schooling; community based education initiatives run by local organisations; and establishing rural and remote vocational training centres for training in basic health, midwifery, paramedics, social work, small business enterprise and agricultural production.

8. Improve access to higher education for rural women by funding the building of facilities for women at existing tertiary institutions, including accommodation, sanitation and establishing rural and remote technological institutes in the areas of nursing, teaching and information technology with a focus to enrol at least 50% women by 2016.

9. Ensure the protection and security of women at the local level by conducting community based training sessions for men and women on Justice, including women's rights within the law and legal system, how to access these rights and men's responsibilities towards their families, with a special focus on reaching religious elders.

10. Ensure Australia's aid reaches both national and local women's organisations.

The undersigned organisations have welcomed Australia's long-term commitments to aid and development in Afghanistan including its commitment to increase aid from $200 million per year to $250 million per year by 2015/2016 announced by Australia at the Chicago NATO Summit, and the July 2012 commitment of $17.7 million to combat violence against women in Afghanistan. The 2012 Comprehensive Long-term Partnership between Australia and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan includes a commitment from both governments to protect the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. Programming decisions made under this agreement, and other supportive measures to Afghanistan, must demonstrate Australia's commitment to women's human rights outcomes and support to Afghan women's groups.

The undersigned organisations hope that these above areas are included in AusAID's upcoming new country strategy for Afghanistan, and reflected in the Committee's recommendations.

Amnesty International, Oxfam and AADO welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee to discuss in greater detail the necessity to hold women rights at the centre of Australia's role in Afghanistan in the context of the transition decade.

For further information relating to this letter, please contact Sophie Nicolle, Amnesty International on 02 83967698 or via sophie.nicolle@amnesty.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

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Encl.