

## Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Consultative Status with United Nations ECOSOC, UNCTAD and UNESCO  
Consultative Relations with FAO, ILO, and UNICEF

### Australian Section



## Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade References Committee, October 2021

### Introduction to WILPF

WILPF is an international feminist organisation established in opposition to World War 1 in the Hague in 1915. We work in 37 countries to bring together women of different political, cultural and religious beliefs and advocate for peace and security based on the tragic evidence from more than a century of militarism, which has failed to eliminate disputes between nations.

WILPF Australia has a vision of a world free of violence and conflict in which human rights are protected and where women and men are equally empowered and involved in leadership positions at local, national and international levels. Research presented on behalf of the World Bank in 2018 demonstrated that countries with higher levels of gender equity have lower levels of conflict, so all political leaders should strive to end their reliance on military options and work more strategically with women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

This submission reflects our belief that military responses cannot end historic, religious and cultural conflict between or within nations. In fact, reliance on the threat or reality of war creates further fear and division, so it becomes even more difficult to resolve conflict. It is essential our political leaders learn from Australia's past war experiences and commit to an independent foreign policy that develops international relationships based on respect and understanding.

In this submission we present the perspective of women....Afghani women who continue to experience violence and the loss of their rights as citizens. We also want to identify the experience of those Australian women who are grieving the loss of a family member or one who has suffered physically or mentally from the experience of this war.

### Terms of Reference

#### A. Australia's twenty-year military, diplomatic and development engagement in Afghanistan, with reference to:

##### 1. Our success in achieving the Australian Governments stated objectives

**WILPF totally rejects the concept of "Australian success".** The Federal Government joined the U.S led war into Afghanistan and Iraq, because it was the American response to September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. The "war on terrorism" was launched and the Australian Government followed. The government's key objective was to prevent terrorism, yet there was no explanation about how an overseas military effort would achieve this. In reality the invasion of both nations was a catalyst for the development of several Islamist terrorist groups, which continue to threaten civilians in many parts of the world.

## **2. The collapse of the Afghan Government and National Army and the Taliban's resurgence and takeover of Kabul following the withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan .**

WILPF recognises that war and military occupation led to local resistance and denial of the need for political change . While some social reforms were introduced in Afghanistan ,the occupying forces lacked the political understanding and cultural awareness to be able to effectively communicate with many local people, especially in rural areas where it was difficult to relate to community leaders and assess how to negotiate with them.

### **3. The costs of Australia's engagement in Afghanistan**

It has been reported that Australia has committed at least 10 billion dollars to the military cost of supporting the U.S war in Afghanistan. More than 30,000 Australian Defence Force personnel served during that 20-year period, so taxpayers funded food ,housing, salaries and all military hardware. Now the Australian Government must face the consequences of such expenditure both by assisting to rebuild Afghanistan and supporting Australian veterans of that war .

In 2013 the Lowy Institute surveyed the attitudes of Australians to the cost of war in Afghanistan

“Considering the cost to Australia versus the benefits do you personally think the war in Afghanistan has been worth fighting ?”

61% answered Not Worth Fighting, 35% answered Worth Fighting and 5% were Unsure.

## **B. The adequacy of Australia's preparation for withdrawal from Afghanistan including**

### **1. Closure of the embassy**

The focus for the Australian Government was military, so diplomatic and development responsibilities were not prioritised . Most Australians sent in Afghanistan were ill prepared for the challenges they faced, because they were not given comprehensive training in the history ,religions, languages and culture of Afghanistan . While the Department of Defence is well resourced and trained for war ,the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade struggles to prepare staff with only very limited knowledge about the society they expect to influence. Diplomacy and conflict resolution skills are undervalued, and language training very limited. Therefore, the capacity of the Australian Embassy in Kabul was constrained and, once it closed there, was no structure for an Australian presence.

### **2. The evacuation pf Australian citizens, permanent residents, and visa holders**

Some priority was given to this group of Australians, and, with the assistance of other nations , it would seem the Australian Government was able to meet its responsibilities.

### **3. Decisions relating to evacuation of at-risk Afghan nationals and partners and family members of Australian citizens and permanent residents.**

There was public advocacy in Australia for at risk Afghan colleagues some months before evacuation became essential. Several Australian military personnel identified the urgent need to plan ahead and process visas for those they had worked alongside . Yet delays and overall failure to predict how the Taliban would take control led to confusion and chaotic evacuations . This inquiry will reveal how many former Afghan staff were able to depart Kabul and how many are still waiting for visa processing and related support .

## **C How the Australian Government should respond to recent developments in Afghanistan in order to**

### **1. Protect Australia's national security.**

WILPF wants to emphasise that our future national security is best assured by Australia becoming a respected and reliable international partner working closely with our Asian and Pacific neighbours.

For more than a century Australia has chosen to rely on first the former British Empire and then the United States to direct our military priorities. This has restricted our capacity to promote an independent foreign policy in our region.

Protecting Australia's national security into the future will increasingly depend on training more young Australians from a range of ethnic backgrounds in international diplomacy. World tensions are increasing as we face the climate crisis, a pandemic, extreme disparity between rich and poor and conflict within and between nations. Australia can only contribute to negotiating these challenges if the Federal Government makes a major commitment to training young diplomats who are well prepared to lead dialogue and conflict resolution.

### **2. Prevent or mitigate damage to Australia's international reputation**

Our international reputation will be best enhanced by demonstrating our independence and commitment to work effectively within the United Nations.

Australia has an ongoing responsibility to assist the Afghani people and restore the country's essential services. Our 20-year military commitment has failed, but we have a moral obligation to work with the international community to rebuild and support this nation.

Furthermore, the Federal Government cannot ignore the reality that its international reputation has been damaged by a number of reports that detail abuse and murder of Afghani civilians by a group of Australian Special Forces soldiers. Failure to fully respond to these allegations of war crimes will only confirm that Australia is not committed to international law.

### **3. Extend immediate mental health support to Australian Defence personnel and veterans while the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide remains ongoing**

The human cost of war is not calculated when governments announce their military campaigns and there is little Australian research available for leaders to consider the cost/benefit of their decisions. Indeed, the Defence Budget is the only area of public expenditure which is automatically assumed to be in the "national interest". There is no serious Cabinet debate about the social consequences of war, yet it is these unknown outcomes that future generations will have to manage and finance.

If Australia continues to increase its commitment to militarisation, the Veterans Affairs Budget will need to reflect greater expenditure on pensions and health services as more soldiers experience the damaging effects of war. Political leaders are eager to announce the latest acquisitions in military hardware, but they turn away from facing the physical and mental impacts on Australian defence personnel and their families. Just as Australia has a responsibility to restore civilian life in Afghanistan, it must also ensure that all military personnel receive their entitlements in rehabilitating to civilian life

#### **4. Protect Australian citizens, visa holders and Afghani nationals who supported Australian forces where they remain in Afghanistan**

Australia's withdrawal from Afghanistan presents the government with clear priorities to now act in the best interests of the Afghani people.

**Firstly, Australia must increase the number of humanitarian visas from 3,000 to 20,000.**

**Secondly , all Afghanis living in Australia on temporary protection visas , as well as those in offshore detention must be offered permanency.**

It is not the time for Australians to argue about past refugee policy, but instead to recognise the reality that we must now make a major effort to assist those Afghani people who left their war-torn country so now can be permanently settled in Australia.

**Finally, Australia cannot abandon the people of Afghanistan . We must respond to the United Nations Secretary General's urgent call on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021, when he said**

“The people of Afghanistan need a lifeline.

After decades of war, suffering and insecurity they face perhaps their most perilous hour

Now is the time for the international community to stand with them.

Let us be clear-it is not simply about what we will give to the people of Afghanistan it is about what we owe “

Australia must face this responsibility and immediately announce its response to the United Nations Flash Appeal for \$606 million to get urgent assistance to 11 million people in the next four months .

On behalf of WILPF Australia we submit our response to this inquiry into the 20-year war in Afghanistan. We wish to commend the submission of the Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan because it is a very important impact statement of significant relevance to this inquiry.

**We urge this inquiry to make major recommendations for immediate action by the Australian Government to alleviate the suffering of the Afghani people.**

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Submitted on behalf of the Board of WILPF Australia, October 2021