*“We are hungry. We live our lives in poverty. We have no flour, rice, oil and other stuff at home. Even now, while coming here [to this interview], I borrowed the shoes from someone else. I have no shoes to wear.”*
***-* Zahra, mother of three and IRC client**.

**CONTEXT**

**24.4 million Afghans, more than half the population, are in need of humanitarian assistance.** This is nearly [four times](https://www.rescue-uk.org/report/humanitarian-response-economic-recovery-recommendations-addressing-acute-needs-and-root) the number of people in need compared to just three years ago. 95% of households no longer have enough food to eat, and GDP is expected to decline by 34% by the end of this year – reversing all progress since 2007. Without substantial international support and efforts to address the collapse of Afghanistan’s economy resulting from policies of economic isolation, the current crisis could kill more Afghans than the past 20 years of war.

**We welcome the UK Government’s efforts so far to support the humanitarian response, but humanitarian aid alone will not address the root causes of this crisis, nor can it replace functioning state services**. The allocation of £286 million for the 2021 Flash Appeal and 2022 Humanitarian Response have been vital towards addressing immediate needs. However, the appeal remains $3.8 billion under-funded. The UN’s Emergency Relief Coordinator warned that if insufficient action is taken now, next year’s humanitarian funding needs could [double to USD$10 billion](https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1109492).

**The** [**22 June earthquake**](https://www.rescue.org/press-release/irc-launches-emergency-response-khost-province-afghanistan-where-deadly-earthquake-has?edme=true) **demonstrates the catastrophic risks of not appropriately funding public services in Afghanistan.** TheIRC’s teams deployed to the affected region reported scenes of devastation, with under-funded and under-supplied local hospitals struggling to meet the needs of communities. The [release of nearly $800m](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/06/03/afghanistan-reconstruction-trust-fund-approves-three-emergency-projects-for-afghanistan) from the World Bank to support public services was welcome but this amount remains insufficient and many public servants – including doctors and nurses – continue to go unpaid because of the non-dispersal of funds like the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). Furthermore, health facilities around the country remain unable to function following the end of development funding in August 2021.

**We are seeing widespread backsliding on women and girl’s rights.** This includes the decision in March to shut girls’ secondary schools, leaving millions of girls out of vital secondary school education**.** Recent decrees of women’s dress and the need for male chaperones (mahram) have further curtailed women’s ability to move freely. This has led to many women-owned businesses being forcibly closed and women are also more likely to have lost their jobs, while tens of thousands of women who worked in government offices have been told to stay home since August. This, combined with women being disproportionately affected by the food security crisis triggered by the current approach of economic isolation, risks girls and women paying twice for the Taliban’s actions.

**CHALLENGES**

**Afghanistan’s economic collapse is driving record humanitarian needs and extreme hunger**.

* Economic isolation of Afghanistan by western donors, including the freezing of assets, reduction in development funding and pre-existing sanctions on Taliban figures, is driving the collapse of Afghanistan’s economy and undermining the role of the central bank. This is pushing humanitarian needs to record levels.
* There has been a reduction of public spending from around 55% of GDP in 2020 to around 11% today, this has drastically undermined public service provision. The sudden loss of civil servant incomes and private sector jobs has also affected wider income putting pressure on sectors dependent on consumer spending.
* Increasing poverty is further reducing demand for goods, forcing Afghan companies out of business, and contributing to rising unemployment, despite markets regularly containing enough food for their local areas.

**The current approach by the international community is not working.**

* The Taliban’s decision on girls’ education is having a chilling effect on international engagement and is ensuring all Afghans, but particularly women and girls, pay twice for the Taliban’s actions.
* Without engagement with the de-facto authorities on the economy, the economic crisis and humanitarian needs will continue to deteriorate, outpacing the humanitarian response.

**Women and girls are among the most affected by the crisis.**

* Afghan women who could previously support themselves are now dependent on aid. More families are forced to make unimaginable choices, including selling young daughters into marriage and sending children to work.
* The Taliban’s dismantling of government institutions such as the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and limited international support for women-led civil society organisations (CSOs) leaves women with fewer sources of protection and advice. Levels of gender-based violence (GBV) have risen since August, with more than 7.4 million women and girls needing GBV services.
* Women and women’s organisations are essential for bringing their contextual knowledge, skills, resources, and experiences to emergency preparedness, response, and resilience building and ensuring that women are able to access the humanitarian and public services they require. However, [research supported by the IRC](https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/research-challenges-barriers-and-opportunities-women-led-csos-afghanistans-humanitarian-crisis) found that 77% of women led CSOs have had no projects this year, partially due to lack of funding.

**Taliban requirements are increasingly restricting female humanitarian staff.**

* Requirements for female staff to have a male chaperone – or mahram – while traveling in many parts of Afghanistan are preventing staff from accessing people in need. IRC’s female staff without a mahram are increasingly reporting harassment at checkpoints.
* The Taliban Ministry of Public Health now requests that images of women and girls no longer be used in educational materials. Should this be followed, education on vitally important health procedures such as breastfeeding will be severely impaired.
* The IRC’s staff is 41% female out of a total 6,000 staff members (with more than 50% hired since August). However, hiring and retaining female staff is increasingly difficult due to Taliban demands and constraints.

 **WHAT CAN THE UK GOVERNMENT DO?**

1. **Encourage the full funding of the humanitarian response by all donors.**
* The UK should identify moments such as UNGA to rally other donors to rapidly pledge and disburse funding.
1. **Support women led CSOs through flexible, multi-year and appropriately sized grants through partners.**
* Flexible, small sized and regularly available grants for grassroots CSOs on provincial levels are the best route to overcoming complex funding challenges and ensure financial support goes to women led organisations.
* Funding that is flexible and can meet their needs will be essential in addressing the humanitarian situation in country and ensuring the greatest efforts are made to protect, empower, and support women and girls.
1. **Push for the dispersal of Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) funds immediately to support critical service delivery, especially health services.**
* Given the severity of the crisis, the UK should push for further dispersal of ARTF funding for all non-education programmes. Funding for the health system is of particular concern - women and girls will be, once again, disproportionately affected as clinics shut.
* The UK should similarly ensure mechanisms are ready for the disbursement of stipends for teachers once girls’ access to education is ensured and chart a roadmap to facilitate further economic engagement.
1. **Lead global efforts to establish a roadmap for solutions to Afghanistan’s wider economic crisis by:**
* Convening key stakeholders, including financial institutions and the UN, to establish a clear picture of the current economic situation.
* Offering guidance to the private and banking sectors to encourage engagement with Afghanistan.
* Providing technical assistance to Afghanistan’s Central Bank.
* Once the above measures have been taken, begin the phased, monitored and needs-based release of Afghanistan’s frozen foreign assets.

**The IRC in Afghanistan**

The IRC has operated in Afghanistan for over three decades throughout waves of conflict. Today our staff is over 95% Afghan and we work across 11 governorates, reaching over one million people each year through programmes spanning emergency response, education, protection, water and sanitation, and economic recovery programs.

For more information, contact Lydia Rollinson, Parliamentary and Advocacy Officer, IRC-UK: Lydia.rollinson@rescue.org