



Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

29 November 2011

Dr Jane Baker
President
Australian Federation for Graduate Women Inc
PO Box 224
EnmoreNSW 2042

Dear Dr Baker

Thank you for your letter dated 2 November 2011 about participation by Afghan women in the International Conference on Afghanistan which will be held in Germany in early December. I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Kevin Rudd.

The German government, which is organising the International Conference on Afghanistan, anticipates that the event will be an opportunity for members of the international community to discuss their long-term commitments towards Afghanistan. As you note in your letter, a two-day civil society meeting is being convened before the Conference. This meeting will elect representatives from Afghan civil society to report to the Conference, to ensure that civil society has a clear and strong role at the discussion. Australia will be represented at the Conference by the Director General of AusAID, Peter Baxter, and I have forwarded your letter to AusAID so the agency is aware of your concerns regarding representation of Afghan women at the Conference.

The Australian Government recognises the serious challenges facing Afghanistan. There remains much to do to support peace, stability and the conditions in which the rights of all Afghan people – including women – can be advanced and protected. Furthermore, the Government recognises that women and girls account for the vast majority of persons adversely affected by armed conflict and that women play a critical role in preventing, managing and resolving conflict.

Internationally and at home, Australia is a proud and long-time supporter of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. We continue to encourage all States to fulfil our collective commitment to implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, including by developing robust national action plans, a process which, as you noted, Australia is actively pursuing. UNSCR 1325 recognises that the

experiences and needs of women and girls differ from those of men and boys in conflict and post-conflict situations, and underlines the essential role of women in conflict prevention, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

The Australian Government has made the task of helping improve the lives of Afghan women one of its priorities for our civilian engagement in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world, with almost half of the population living in abject poverty. While the situation for women in Afghanistan remains very difficult, the Government believes there have been significant improvements since the fall of the Taliban regime. An increasing number of girls now have access to education – over two and a half million primary school children in Afghanistan today are girls, whereas in 2001 there were no girls attending primary school. There is now no barrier to women working under Afghan law. Women are now elected as members of parliament and a minimum requirement for the number of female MPs of one-third of members in both houses of parliament is part of the constitution. Women are represented on the High Peace Council, created by President Karzai in September 2010, and will be represented in any future negotiations. These are important steps forward.

Australia's diplomatic and development efforts are having a positive impact across a range of sectors to improve the lives of women and girls in Afghanistan. The Australian Government places a high priority on supporting women's rights in Afghanistan. Enhancing gender equality is a key component of Australia's aid program in Afghanistan, as it is globally, including through the increased participation of women in decision-making and peace building processes. Australia has provided \$2.5 million to date (with another \$2 million pledged over the next two years) to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, which promotes and protects women's rights through advocacy, training and education. In addition, Australia is supporting The Asia Foundation to provide training to home-bound women on electoral processes and the legal rights of women, as well as to train female electoral observers. Australia has also offered scholarships for twenty Afghan women to study at tertiary institutions in Australia.

Thank you once again for your letter. I look forward to being in contact with the Australian Federation of Graduate Women in coming months and to working with you to promote the rights and interests of women and girls internationally.

Yours sincerely



Penny Williams
Global Ambassador for Women and Girls