

# Press release: Patel: women are key to building post-conflict stability

Countries will only be able to fully recover from conflict if they involve women in building security and stability, International Development Secretary Priti Patel said today following a visit to Afghanistan.

Ms Patel welcomed the progress Afghanistan has made on women's rights and girls' education since the Taliban's repressive rule. But ahead of International Women's Day next month, she warned that countries like Afghanistan will only achieve security and prosperity if women have the opportunity to play a full and active role in business, politics, peacebuilding and shaping the future of their country.

During her visit, Ms Patel saw a HALO Trust training site where UK funding is helping staff learn to identify and safely remove mines and other unexploded ordnance, saving lives and reclaiming land that can be used for agriculture and building. She also met female HALO workers who identify and map the location of mines for disposal, as well as educating communities and children on the dangers of unexploded ordnance.

Ms Patel also met First Lady Rula Ghani, a champion of women's rights in Afghanistan. And she spoke to female students, teachers and community advocates who benefit from UK funding that has helped provide education to more than 300,000 girls from rural and impoverished communities, who would have had no opportunity to learn under Taliban rule.

Priti Patel said:

Afghanistan can only succeed in creating a secure and prosperous future if girls and women are put at the heart of its political and economic development.

Women and girls are key to delivering real and lasting peace and stability in countries like Afghanistan – and that is clearly in the UK's interests as well.

Together, the UK and Afghanistan have made huge progress so far. The inspirational girls and women I met during my visit will be instrumental in charting Afghanistan's path to prosperity.

Whilst in Afghanistan, the International Development Secretary also met President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah. She reaffirmed the UK's enduring commitment to working with the Afghan Government and civil society to improve rights for women and girls, and underlined that this was a critical part of the UK's pledge of up to £750 million, made at the Brussels Development Conference last year.

She also spent two days in Pakistan prior to visiting Afghanistan. Whilst there, she met Finance Minister Senator Ishaq Dar, the Chief Minister of Punjab, Shahbaz Sharif and Ahsan Iqbal, Minister of Planning and Development.

She visited a UK-funded health centre that provides primary healthcare services including delivering babies, treating child malnutrition, immunisations and family planning services. She also visited a tuberculosis and leprosy hospital to see how UK support is helping to provide state of the art facilities to diagnose and treat patients.

## **Notes to editors**

1. Today, more than seven million children in Afghanistan are attending school and 39% of them are girls; there has been significant progress in maternal healthcare; and women now hold 28% of parliamentary seats.
2. Legislatively, women's rights have been enshrined in the 2004 Constitution, recognising gender equality and women's right to education and to work.
3. Significant challenges remain, however. Afghanistan still ranks among the lowest in the world for gender equality. Female literacy rates are extremely low at 17%, only 19% of women are in work, and an estimated 87% of women experience violence, abuse and sexual harassment in private and public life.
4. UK funding has helped 2.5 million girls get an education, including the 300,000 under the Girls Education Challenge programme that supported the teachers and students that the International Development Secretary met during his visit.
5. The UK is also providing services and access to justice for women victims of violence and helping thousands of women access quality jobs and gain business skills. It is also helping to train security and police forces to provide better support on gender and violence issues.
6. International Women's Day takes place on 8th March and is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. The theme of International Women's Day 2017 is 'Be Bold for Change'.