

Dear Minister Fraser:

November 2, 2021

Congratulations on your new portfolio as Minister of Immigration. You bring to this complex position your expertise in international law, including studies with the International Court of Justice and with the Office of the NATO Secretary-General, as well as your experience with the rights of marginalized groups in developing countries.

Minister, the signatories to this letter have all dedicated countless personal hours in trying to ensure that Afghan women human rights defenders get safely away from the Taliban. We are writing with great urgency about the extreme risk to female athletes in Afghanistan to simply stay alive. In our considered collective opinion, these young women must be evacuated immediately, with documentation allowing them to come to Canada - given the danger they face.

Please carefully consider the following message to you, Minister, from signatory Friba Rezayee (a member of the Afghanistan women's judo team sent to the 2004 Olympics) who now lives in Vancouver and is the founder and Executive Director of Women Leaders of Tomorrow and Girls Of Afghanistan Lead (GOAL):

It's just a matter of time before the Taliban execute these women athletes. Just by being athletes, these young women are human rights defenders; they are terrified and in hiding—but they will be found. Canada, with other countries if necessary, needs to keep its promise to protect them by evacuating these athletes immediately.

While Canada and your predecessor promised to prioritize highly vulnerable women—and specifically female athletes—in fact, very few women athletes from Afghanistan have been allowed into Canada, despite signatories to this letter having tried since August to clear IRCC barriers to get them safely here. Yet we count only 8 soccer players and 2 female soccer coaches, 3 runners, 1 snowboarder and 1 cricketer. If there are more, and we hope there are, we do not know about them. Here is our best estimate of comparative numbers as shared among the advocates with whom we liaise:

CANADA: 15 in total

PORTUGAL: 22 female soccer players

SWITZERLAND: 30 female cyclists

U.K: 35 female soccer players

AUSTRALIA: 45 female soccer players, **4** female soccer coaches, **2** female soccer referees, **8** taekwondo athletes, **2** para-athletes and **1** karate athlete

Minister Fraser, not often does someone in your position hear directly from asylum seekers like these young women. Signatory Laura Robinson worked with volunteers and the Canadian embassy in Washington to ensure that Selsela (a soccer player beaten badly by the Taliban at the Kabul airport), who was able to make it to Canada, could send this message to you:

As a female footballer, I am grateful to Canada and ask you to help my teammates and all the athletes who are trapped in Afghanistan so that they can live with the kind of freedom that I now have. I believe that female Afghan athletes in Canada will make the world proud that we are here and that we will contribute a great deal.

Shima, another athlete who endured terrible beatings trying to get into the Kabul airport, who arrived in Canada with Selsela asked us to convey her message to you:

We are a very small group of women athletes that got out of Afghanistan. We are safe and happy for ourselves, but we worry about other athletes and activists. We worry so much, we do not tell them that we are out, because they are still there. The women athletes tried to bring change in society through girls' sport. Even their families fought against them. Please help them get out to have a good life in the future. We are thinking of humanity, and Canada will be more beautiful and powerful with these women.

Many other women athletes either could not get into the airport, because they were turned away by Canadian soldiers or had to go back into hiding because of the extreme violence of the Taliban. For security reasons we cannot name the sports, but there are at least **100** that we know of in extreme danger. To give you a specific example, we know that one group of **28** female athletes, **13** applied to the IRCC under the emergency special measures program in August and September, while another **12** applied in October. We have been tracking their applications and are frustrated to have to report that, despite being at the highest of threat levels, these young athletes have heard nothing back, or at best received only "auto-reply" from Canada.

Minister, we do not believe that this lack of response is due to any ill will on the part of those who are tasked with fulfilling Canada's promises to the world, but we do believe that somehow, some way – perhaps by staffing up at IRCC – it has to be possible to improve. Please be assured that we all stand ready to do whatever we can reasonably do to support the improvements urgently needed in IRCC follow-through for these at-risk women. If Canada does not evacuate them in a faster and better way, we fear many will have a horrible, but preventable fate under the Taliban regime.

With appreciation and sincere concern,

Friba Rezayee, Afghanistan judo team, 2004 Athens Olympics, Founder and ED of womenleaders.ca and Girls Of Afghanistan Lead (GOAL) executivedirector@womenleaders.ca

Khalida Popal, Former Captain, Afghanistan Women's Football Team, Founder and Director of Girl Power kp@girlpowerorg.com

Laura Robinson, Canadian women's sport advocate and former national team cyclist laura.robinson@sympatico.ca

Nikki Dryden, Former Canadian Olympian, present human-rights lawyer, Australia nikkidryden@gmail.com