

*Royal Holloway, University of London and  
the Afghanistan and Central Asian  
Association : new partnerships and  
challenges during Covid-19 in the clinical  
legal world*

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ROYAL HOLLOWAY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON AND THE AFGHANISTAN  
AND CENTRAL ASIAN ASSOCIATION: NEW PARTNERSHIPS AND  
CHALLENGES DURING COVID-19 IN THE CLINICAL LEGAL WORLD

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***Abstract***

In January 2020, Royal Holloway, University of London set up a new Legal Advice Centre offering free legal advice to the local community, including building upon key partnerships to address unmet legal needs. This practice-paper discusses Royal Holloway's Legal Advice Centre (LAC) and the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association's (ACCA) collaborative approach and response to the global pandemic since March 2020. It will highlight the unprecedented challenges that they have faced, and their efforts to overcome them. In addition, the paper will discuss their research project, which provides Royal Holloway's student volunteers with the opportunity to gain unique multidisciplinary understandings of the effect of the pandemic in

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Afghanistan, and a chance to put their legal skills into practice by producing legal information to support local users of both Royal Holloway's LAC and the Law Clinic at the ACAA.

This practice-paper includes a road map to Royal Holloway's long-term goal, namely, to work with ACAA to research the legal vulnerabilities of women in Afghanistan, with the aid of a research grant supporting international collaboration. Recent reports highlight that lockdown and quarantine measures will have a long-term impact on the basic rights and freedoms of Afghan women, who already face hardship.

### *Introduction*

Royal Holloway, University of London's LAC was set up from scratch by its current Director and it opened its doors to the public in January 2020 for a three-month pilot phase. The LAC offered a mixture of both on-campus and remote services. The location of the campus was a potential barrier to some clients, and so the LAC wanted to have some flexibility by offering telephone conferences. The telephone conferences that were scheduled took place on campus. During the last week of the LAC's advertised sessions, the Government announced the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions in response to the current global pandemic.

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The LAC had clients booked-in, was unequipped to deal with off-campus telephone conferences, and had clients who lacked access to smartphones. As a result, the LAC resorted to the basics of using a mobile phone to call the clients. Whilst the last session went relatively smoothly, there was an absence of the student advisers involved, and so there would need to be innovative solutions and adaptations to the clinical programme to remedy this. With Royal Holloway's alternative assessments being written for external approval and other online teaching commitments, the LAC was somewhat isolated. The LAC closed its doors for the student examination period and decided to offer to students, who could not take part in the last session, an opportunity to take part in a summer vacation placement. Part of the summer scheme involved a collaboration with the ACAA. The ACAA continued to operate during the height of Covid-19, and this practice-paper will explore the challenges and needs that their users faced. Royal Holloway's LAC students are working on a joint project that aims to address some of these unmet needs.

### ***1. Royal Holloway's LAC Summer Placement***

#### *1.1 Legal Clinics*

During the LAC's summer placement, in addition to running sessions for members of the public, limited to family law, they carried out a pilot phase for a new clinic, called

the HMP Coldingley Law Clinic<sup>5</sup>. The LAC recognised the need for prisoners to seek family law advice, particularly around issues of child contact and the challenges that Covid-19 amplified. The biggest challenge for the LAC was to ensure that their remote sessions did not affect the quality. Clinics such as this provide for the continuation of advice to those in need, as well as forming new partnerships and strengthen existing relationships which may provide resilience for future lockdowns. By expanding the breadth of the LAC's practice to incorporate existing contacts and partnerships that staff at Royal Holloway have generated over the years, they can improve the stature of the department while providing more options for LAC students.

### *1.2 Technology*

After having time to reflect on the sudden closure of their main Legal Advice Clinic, the LAC at Royal Holloway spent time thinking and liaising with their College's IT department about how they could best implement a service that enabled all users free access and that was secure and safe to use. The initial suggestion was Microsoft Teams as this was an approved method of communication for learning. Although Teams appeared to be most suitable for internal use, or where others had accessibility to download the appropriate software the LAC encountered difficulties. For example,

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<sup>5</sup> This is a partnership between Royal Holloway's Legal Advice Centre, Creighton and Partners and HMP Coldingley/The Forward Trust.

where clients did not have access to smartphones or email, this was an ineffective way to communicate. In addition, the College had limited capacity to make 'external' calls.

The LAC then tried Skype for Business. They quickly realised that whilst all staff and student advisers could connect, if they wanted to add a facility to call out to clients without smartphones, and that was toll free, they needed a subscription. This was not possible to do through the College-based account. The LAC entered into a discussion with the College's Audio Visuals team who suggested a telephone conference facility that allows all users to dial in, or alternatively the LAC could dial out to multiple people toll-free. Whilst this appeared to be a simple but effective option, the cost was extensive, and so the LAC decided to open a College account ready for use as a last resort.

Finally, the LAC decided to use Skype (non-business). To test the function, they created a new dedicated LAC account. The LAC added 'credit' and did a few dry runs. The problems they encountered were that their student volunteers could not join the Skype session using their Skype-Business accounts. They therefore had to join each session as 'guests'. After seeking confirmation from the College's IT and data protection teams that they could proceed with this, the LAC decided to use this method to communicate with all clients and ordered a subscription service. The service is free for everyone to use. The student volunteers and Supervisor could connect via Skype and then 'phoned' the clients.

*1.3 Simulated practice: preparing for our new virtual world*

To fully prepare the student advisers to deal with the new online procedure, the LAC carried out simulated exercises using their new Skype account. The Director of the LAC implemented role-play for the fact-finding interview. The feedback provided by the LAC Director demonstrated that allowing the student advisers to practice increased their confidence in carrying these out online, which achieved the learning outcome of the activity. Whilst it is acknowledged that some simulations are “not a substitute for live-client interactions”<sup>6</sup>, the students were fully engaged in this activity and it provoked an effective response.<sup>7</sup>

During the LAC’s live-client sessions, they found the use of Skype to Phone relatively easy to use. The LAC encountered no real issues, and the connectivity and quality of the calls remained good. The LAC, by trial and error, learned that “[t]he big game changer is the power of technology to pull back the curtain of mystique”<sup>8</sup>. The LAC have remote case management software, and the ‘virtual’ office element was already

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6 Weigold, U.H, ‘The Attorney-Client Privilege as an Obstacle to the Professional and Ethical Development of Law Students’ (2006) 33 (3) *Pepperdine Law Review*, pp 676-722 at 691

7 Grimes, R. and Gibbons, J, ‘Assessing experiential learning – us, them and the others’ (2016) 23(1) *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education*, available at [https://pure.york.ac.uk/portal/files/44272535/492\\_1472\\_1\\_PB.pdf](https://pure.york.ac.uk/portal/files/44272535/492_1472_1_PB.pdf) (last accessed 23.9.20).

8 Langan, M., (June 2013) in ‘Legal innovation 2013 - New developments in an old profession’, Baker Tilly publications cited in Thanaraj, A & Sales, M, ‘Lawyering in a digital age: A practice report introducing the virtual law clinic at Cumbria’ (2015) 22(3), *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education*, available at: <https://www.northumbriajournals.co.uk/index.php/ijcle/article/view/471/863> (last accessed 30.9.20).



in place, using Intralinks and Clio. This also enabled their student volunteers to participate effectively.<sup>9</sup>

The student volunteers still found the experience of providing advice virtually rewarding and it gave them a chance to gain practical legal experience during a challenging time when most vacation placements were either cancelled or postponed due to Covid-19. The services also assisted the LAC's users during a time of uncertainty and stress.

## ***2. The Afghanistan and Central Asian Association (ACAA)***

### *2.1 Background*

In addition to the above, Royal Holloway collaborated with the Afghanistan & Central Asian Association (ACAA). The ACAA supports and promotes the social and economic integration of the increasing number of Afghan and other central Asian refugees arriving in London. The ACAA use a community development ethos to support the development of their potential within a mutually supportive framework and work with a wide range of partners to reach vulnerable and isolated individuals and families. The ACAA's core services include:

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<sup>9</sup> McCrimmon, Vickers, R, Parish, K, 'Online Clinical Legal Education: Challenging the traditional model', (2016) 23(5), *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education*, available at: <https://www.northumbriajournals.co.uk/index.php/ijcle/article/view/565> (last accessed 30.9.20).

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- Education, training and development opportunities: ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) for Integration, Supplementary Schools, British citizenship test preparation, business and employment advice and support
- Women's outreach and women-only projects: empowerment, development, advice and support
- Legal and advice clinics with OISC accreditation, using volunteers and pro bono solicitors, focusing mainly on immigration, housing, business and employment issues
- Social and cultural activities and events promoting community cohesion, music and fitness, volunteering

All of these are underpinned by a dedicated team of paid staff and volunteers offering mentoring, support, assistance, translation and interpretation where needed. The ACAA's grassroots and frontline services and activities are vital in supporting vulnerable refugees and migrants in some of the most disadvantaged areas of London to improve their wellbeing, independence, aspirations and integration. The ACAA aim to break down language and cultural barriers and give their community a voice. The ACAA's work resulted in being awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Services in 2018.

The ACAA works primarily within the Afghan, Syrian and central Asian communities in London - specifically in Hounslow (where their main centre is based); Lewisham

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(where they started), Croydon, Merton, Greenwich, Epsom, Hillingdon, Brent and Ealing, Wiltshire, Leicestershire, Berkshire, Cambridge, Doncaster, Mansfield, Worcestershire, Staffordshire, Kent, East London, Newham, Staffordshire, Sutton, Brighton and Hove, Southwark, Birmingham and Wales - where they have outreach operations and particular projects. The ACAA provide services and activities for all ages but are primarily focused on working age adults, families, and children. Recently, ACAA has been trialling telephone support for refugees and recent arrivals in five areas outside London.

Across the services and activities ACAA now reaches over 10,000 people annually, with around 5000 accessing direct support. Approximately 75% of their service users are refugees and recent arrivals into the UK, and the rest are predominantly Muslim BAME people of Afghan, central Asian, south Asian and Middle Eastern heritage. The ACAA provides services to some specific vulnerable groups – children and young people, women, the elderly and recent migrants of all ages seeking support to learn English and understand UK systems. In 2018-19 the ACAA provided ESOL to 450 people, 300 children attended their Supplementary Schools, and 250 women attended a weekly women's project. The ACAA's social media platforms extend their reach across the UK and almost doubles their audience.

## *2.2 Impact of Covid-19 on the ACAA*

During the Covid-19 pandemic, ACAA shifted its regular London-focused enquiry and support service to online and phone only to comply with social distancing. The ACAA closed their premises for an indeterminate length of time and suspended delivery of their main face-to-face services across London. However, they found that numbers of people were attending their office in person because they are finding it difficult to understand and observe social distancing rules; the ACAA have agreed to see these people if there is an advisor available.

Enquiries for support and advice have surged; they are receiving around 30 calls per day from vulnerable, elderly, sick and disabled people. They are still supporting victims of domestic violence and asylum seekers on a range of topics including support with citizenship applications, Universal Credit, financial issues, tenancy support and domestic violence. Issues often centre on language and cultural barriers. They provide a vital translation and interpretation service particularly for recent arrivals with very limited English. Enquiries coming to the ACAA are driven by misunderstandings, different cultural expectations, and a mistrust of public services.

The ACAA's capacity to respond has substantially reduced as staff and volunteers self-isolate or have been furloughed; some because they are unable to provide their usual services and some to reduce costs. During the height of the lockdown restrictions, the ACAA were having to turn people away, which raised concerns about

the negative impact for community members and the possible reputational risks to the organisation. The shift to online and phone support has now highlighted weaknesses in their IT and phone systems and they have identified training and equipment needs for volunteers and staff in order to operate a satisfactory remote service.

In September last year they took on a 10-year lease on a two-storey building in Feltham, west London, which they are developing as a multi-use community centre. The ACAA has been using its facilities, particularly a ground-floor hall, community kitchen and spare offices to host events, other small local organisations and activities generating a steady and secure unrestricted income source to meet gaps in other grant funding for services. Since the lockdown was announced in March, the ACAA has had to close their premises causing a significant fall in income and resultant risk in their ability to cover their own rental bill. The ACAA believe the closure of their building is costing around £20,000 per month. The ACAA has also had to cancel a number of external events, such as their flagship annual Refugee Week Summer Festival in June, an event that has generated up to £16,000 in previous years.

### *2.3 Impact of Covid-19 on the people ACAA supports*

Refugees and migrants from Afghanistan, and central Asian countries are a small but growing community and comparatively new to the UK. Ongoing conflicts in the countries of origin often result in trauma and health issues affecting settlement and

integration in the UK. They are one of the most vulnerable communities in the UK. Support networks and organisations are few and relatively underdeveloped.

Even before the lockdown, refugee communities experienced a range of issues of which language and cultural barriers and a lack of access to mainstream services are the most important. Many experience poverty, loneliness, social isolation, hate crime, and some may risk radicalisation. Resulting from the trauma of experiencing conflict in their countries of origin and displacement, many of ACAA's service users suffer with mental health problems and lack a sense of identity and belonging. A high proportion of Afghan and Central Asian immigrants to the UK (refugees and migrants) are self-employed (e.g. as taxi drivers) or work in low-paid long-hours sectors such as catering, hospitality, and small retail. Patriarchal attitudes mean that women rarely socialise outside the family and some are actively prevented from going out alone or into mixed sex environments. Many women face barriers to accessing services due to the multiple disadvantages of poor English language skills, lack of literacy in their home languages and hence in English and having the men of their families speaking for them.

Many people are low paid, work in the 'gig' economy or are self-employed. Many work at Heathrow Airport or for businesses that serve the airport and they are being affected by the reduction of activity at the airport. Many operate micro-businesses with turnovers below the thresholds for Government intervention. The ACAA report that around 80% of their service users suffer from mental ill health. Social distancing

and self-isolation measures have therefore had a huge impact on many families reliant on these low and intermittent incomes. Children are now isolated at home with parents struggling with home schooling, lack of facilities and in poor housing stock. Many people have been furloughed or laid off and many are now finding themselves having to apply for Universal Credit. ACAA is already aware that social isolation and distancing puts pressures on households and causes an increase in domestic violence. Many are experiencing exacerbated mental health issues due to loss of jobs, emotional stress, loneliness, and bereavement of relatives and friends. Many users of the ACAA are frightened of the impact of the disease itself especially given that over a third of COVID-19 deaths are amongst BAME communities across the UK.

ACAA has found that public information circulates in English, which is not the first language of clients, which leads to confusion and uncertainty. Many community members rely on Afghan media which focuses on the situation in Afghanistan not the UK. Poverty, poor literacy (in mother tongue and English) and poor oral English language skills mean there is no real digital alternative, which leads to further isolation and barriers to accessing services. Consequently, many community members do not access information in mainstream ways and can be misled by misinformation, misunderstanding online information, and relying on hearsay. Community members are reliant on community organisations such as ACAA for accurate and timely information and advice. Afghan and Central Asian communities are hard to reach for mainstream and statutory service providers and ACAA are the only Afghan charity

operating in West London supporting some of the most vulnerable communities in the city.

### ***3. The power of public legal education: Collaborative project***

In these uncertain times, and with limited resources, the LAC at Royal Holloway and ACAA are working together on a project, which formed part of the summer vacation placements. The aim of this project is to increase access to both users of the LAC at Royal Holloway and ACAA to legal information and guidance, that is presented in a way that deals specifically with COVID-19 related legal issues. Both the ACAA and LAC at Royal Holloway wanted to empower their users by creating ‘accessible’ information to help them assert their rights.<sup>10</sup>

With COVID-19 social distancing and self-isolation measures now in place, the student volunteers at Royal Holloway’s first mission was to research and produce legal and rights-based factsheets.

The following areas of law were selected as the main areas of concern:

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<sup>10</sup> See newsletters as an example at the Student Law Office at Northumbria University: Bengtsson, L. ‘Client Newsletters within Clinical Legal Education and their value to the student participants’, (2020) 27(2), *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* – available at: <https://www.northumbriajournals.co.uk/index.php/ijcle/issue/view/90>

(last accessed 28.9.20).



- Employment (e.g. those affected by furlough and Universal Credit)
- Social isolation and domestic abuse
- Housing vulnerabilities

In addition, the student volunteers at Royal Holloway's LAC, together with the ACAA are looking into how legal factsheets can be used to improve the transformation of the online space and resilience among their users. The student volunteers will work with external practitioners who will provide pro bono support. The collective aim is to provide accurate and timely information and advice, which is free from legal jargon.<sup>11</sup>

The student volunteers have been engaged in research on a variety of issues while recognising the vital need for Afghan and central Asian communities to have accessible information. For instance, Charlotte Cowdery (LLB Law) has been researching housing issues for homeowners, landlords and tenants and appreciates how these communities are disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Aliyah Spacey-Smith (LLB Law) has been focusing on domestic abuse and how cases have risen during the pandemic and a variety of helplines for victims to access. Aliyah notes "[t]here are further difficulties for people in minority groups, such as those from Afghanistan and Central Asia, in accessing the help they need due to language

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<sup>11</sup> Roper, V. 'Blogs as a Teaching Tool and Method of Public Legal Education: A Case Study' (2018) 2(1), *International Journal of Public Legal Education* available at: <https://www.northumbriajournals.co.uk/index.php/ijple/article/view/707> (last accessed 30.9.30).

barriers and lack of knowledge on their rights in the UK, therefore it is important to provide these leaflets in order to help them access relevant services.”

Student volunteers are developing deeper understandings of the inequalities and hardships faced by minorities in the UK which will be invaluable for when they graduate and begin their careers. In addition, the student volunteers are from various disciplines of study, and thereby have an opportunity to learn from each other as they draw on their conclusions together:<sup>12</sup>

*“This research has allowed me to delve deeper into the financial consequences of the pandemic in England and has developed my understanding of not just the basic economic impacts of Covid-19, such as job losses, but also how this has led to greater struggle in the lives of the public. These struggles causing devastation specifically within the refugee population within England, a group that society seems to massively overlook when it considers those most effected by the pandemic.” Jasmine Urry (BSc Sociology and Criminology).*

*“I’m currently in the process of investigating the mental health implications for the Afghan community during the global pandemic. Prior to Covid-19, this minority have faced hardship when dealing with mental health; often excluded from their local*

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12 Hyams, R. and Sadique, D, ‘The Value of Incidental Learning in a Multidisciplinary Setting’ (2014) 20(1) International Journal of Clinical Legal Education, Vol 20 (1). Available at: <https://www.northumbriajournals.co.uk/index.php/ijcle/article/view/16> (last accessed 30.9.20).

*communities, victims of racism and xenophobia mean they're more likely to suffer from anxiety and PTSD. Unfortunately, the pandemic has only served to exacerbate these experiences and research indicates that little is being done nationally to ease these struggles. This has been particularly eye-opening and frustrating to research as minority demographics within the UK are so frequently side-lined and their struggles ignored."* Rosie Cannon (BSc Sociology and Criminology).

*"I have been responsible for looking into the effects coronavirus has had on the psychological and societal resilience of the Afghan and Central Asian community. So far, the area has been very interesting to research as psychologists have scrambled to identify factors that may be affected by the current pandemic, which has produced some fascinating papers. I hope to be able to use this present research to formulate a useful insight into the effect the coronavirus is having on this community."* Will Rawson (MSc Forensic Psychology).

The student volunteers are investigating topics not typically covered in their modules and issues that are experienced differently by minorities compared to some other LAC service users. This gives the student volunteers a unique opportunity to both enhance their studies, engage with an organisation such as ACAA, and improve their understanding of the law in the 'real world'.<sup>13</sup>

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13 McNamara, J. and Campbell, C., 'Community Projects: Extending the Community Lawyering Model' (2014) 21(2) International Journal of Clinical Legal Education, Vol 21(2). Available at: <https://www.northumbriajournals.co.uk/index.php/ijcle/article/view/385> (last accessed 30.9.30).

Student volunteers are also looking at the effects COVID-19 is having in Afghanistan. In particular, the student volunteers are focusing on how this global pandemic is impacting women's access to rights in Afghanistan, including disabled women, as well as others with disabilities. Recent reports have suggested that lockdown and quarantine measures will have a long-term impact on the basic rights and freedoms of Afghan women, who already face hardship. The recent Oxfam Briefing Note<sup>14</sup> highlights that Covid-19 is "exacerbating the inequalities Afghan women face", and that it is vital that responses are adapted to deal with the implications this outbreak has for women. As the project progresses the LAC intends to work more closely with the ACAA's partners in Afghanistan.

### *3.1 ACAA's Citizens' Advice Centres in Kabul and Pul-e Khumri*

In 2013, two Citizens' Advice Centres were funded in Kabul and Pul-e Khumri by the UK government (DFID) for three years starting in July 2013. They opened in September 2013 and aimed to give free, impartial legal and other advice to the most

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14 A New Scourge to Afghan Women: Covid-19, Oxfam Briefing Note, available at: [https://oi-files-cng-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/asia.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file\\_attachments/COVID%2019.%20A%20New%20Scourge%20to%20Afghan%20Women\\_OXFAM.pdf](https://oi-files-cng-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/asia.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/COVID%2019.%20A%20New%20Scourge%20to%20Afghan%20Women_OXFAM.pdf) (last accessed 23.9.20); Afghanistan Coronavirus Socio-Economic Impact Assessment (July 2020), United Nations development Programme, available at: <file:///C:/Users/Nicola/Downloads/UNDP-socio-economic%20impact%20assessment-afghanistan-Brief2.pdf> (last accessed 23.9.20).

vulnerable people in Afghan society in order to help them improve their quality of life, access their rights and help them escape poverty.

Over the three years of the project until July 2016, over 7,500 people used the Centres' services including 2,000 people who received individual legal advice. The biggest single issue that they were asked for advice about was domestic violence, followed by unemployment, divorce, poverty and murder. 28% of cases were related to family problems, 16% concerned poverty, health and other social issues, whilst 15% were criminal cases. Over the three-year period 65% of clients were women, 56% were illiterate, and 79% were unemployed. Numbers of women, illiterate and unemployed people using the services increased every year reflecting both their success in reaching out to these groups and the worsening situation for employment for many Afghan citizens.

An example case was that of 'Gulmay'. Gulmay had been a widow for more than three years. Her daughter's uncle was planning to get Gulmay's daughter married by force to a man who was 10 years older than her. The girl was completely opposed to the plan. Gulmay and her daughter came to the Citizens' Advice Centre in Kabul for help. The adviser informed Gulmay that marriage is something that can only be carried out if the person consents to be married; forced marriage is illegal. The adviser also told the girl to bring her uncle and other family members to the office so that the adviser could act as a mediator, first to convince her uncle that forced marriage is illegal and, therefore, not a possible option. The adviser told her that if the uncle was still

unwilling to change his mind, he would be introduced to the attorney general at the Ministry of Women's Affairs and would face legal implications. Following the consultation, the case was resolved, and all parties agreed to cancel the marriage plan because of the illegality of the matter.

The centres ran family mediation services by themselves or with local elders and took cases to court where settlement was not possible. The centres also referred clients to other non-governmental organisations, the local authorities, ministries, and health services, where specialist services were available. The centres were partnered with the Ministry of Women's Affairs as well as with the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation. The centres were members of the Afghan Women's Network, the Afghan Civil Society Forum and worked with over 50 organisations for referrals for specialist advice.

Over 90% of mediation cases were resolved successfully, as were 60% of the cases in court. 20% of court cases were unsuccessful and 20% of court cases experienced long delays. Over 7,500 people attended outreach sessions. Sessions were run on rights (women's rights, disabled peoples' rights, widows' rights, rights for returning refugees and IDPs [internally displaced people]); promoting education for girls and boys; health (maternal health, nutrition, diabetes, depression, winter health checks for IDPs, sports); and the environment.

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ACAA received a small grant to extend outreach to women's prisons from the Evans Cornish Foundation. This meant an extra female lawyer working in each centre to increase the capacity to visit prisons and help women there understand their cases and rights, many of whom were imprisoned with their children due to so-called 'moral crimes'.<sup>15</sup>

Based on ACAA's experiences in providing legal advice in Afghanistan there is certainly a need for accessible and free legal advice in many areas of law. However, contracting funding environments could limit ACAA's future effectiveness internationally. By working with the LAC at Royal Holloway, ACAA has access to student volunteers and supervising solicitors who can provide free advice on programme development. Future projects will consider what other contributions the LAC can make to ACAA's activities in Afghanistan.

### *3.2 Future work*

Royal Holloway and the ACAA will continue to work together to provide free legal support to those whose needs are often unmet in the community. With the aid of a research grant supporting international collaboration, the long-term goal of the ACAA and Royal Holloway is to set up a Legal Advice Centre in Afghanistan that provides free legal advice and support to women and those with disabilities. They hope that

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<sup>15</sup> See Reports: <https://acaa.org.uk/reports/>

<https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/acaa-uploads2/Afghanistan+Work+.pdf>

the literature review and research that is currently being undertaken will help identify the most pressing issues that need addressing amongst these community groups so that legal provisions can be set up. The recommendations set out in the Oxfam Briefing Note<sup>16</sup> highlight the need for gender-based violence responses and programming, as well as providing safe spaces for women and girls at risk. In addition, a key recommendation is:

*“Direct funding must be accessible to subnational and local organisations, especially women’s rights organisations. UN agencies and INGOs should use existing mechanisms that reach local and national partners to flexibly channel international funding, ensuring that local partners are designing and delivering assistance and support that is most suited to their communities right now. This especially concerns gender-focused funding, as less than 1% of gender-focused funding goes to women’s rights organizations globally.”*

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the UK’s Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) repeatedly highlight priority is to be given to alleviate disadvantages experienced by women, to empower women, and help realise gender equality and gender justice.<sup>17</sup> Royal Holloway and ACAA hope that a legal advice

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16 A New Scourge to Afghan Women: Covid-19, Oxfam Briefing Note, available at: [https://oi-files-cng-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/asia.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file\\_attachments/COVID%2019.%20A%20New%20Scourge%20to%20Afghan%20Women\\_OXFAM.pdf](https://oi-files-cng-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/asia.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/COVID%2019.%20A%20New%20Scourge%20to%20Afghan%20Women_OXFAM.pdf) (last accessed 23.9.20)

17 See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>. See also <https://www.ukri.org/our-work/collaborating-internationally/global-challenges-research-fund/>



centre that replicates, builds on, and develops the services ACAA set up in 2013 will provide a 'gender sensitive' space to protect the legal rights and safety of women in Afghanistan.

In early September, Royal Holloway and ACAA successfully applied and were selected to host a Being Human café as part of the Being Human: a Festival of Humanities programme organised and set up annually by the School of Advanced Study, University of London and funded through the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy. The café "Afghan Women Small Spaces Café: Sewing Pathways to Human Rights" will take place in ACAA's community hub, by phone and on Zoom. Meeting over Afghan tea and cake during English and sewing classes, Afghan diaspora women and researchers will use mixed participatory methods including artwork, sewing and conversation to explore what everyday habits and material objects tell us about ourselves and each other. These and other particular culturally specific lived experiences will be connected to human rights law's purpose of ensuring universal dignity, equality and rights. This is one example of a short-term project that will contribute to the wider goal of pursuing funding to both the Afghan and central Asian community in the UK and communities in Afghanistan.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Both Royal Holloway's LAC and ACAA have found that Covid-19 has magnified pre-existing inequalities amongst its users and its services. Covid-19 has also forced many charities and organisations to work together to reach those who need continuing legal help. By developing an existing relationship with ACAA, Royal Holloway has been able to provide both support to communities and enhance the experience of their student volunteers in the LAC. Student volunteers have researched a multitude of legal issues that adversely impact Afghan and central Asian communities in the UK. The next step is to have the student volunteers begin research on the impact of Covid-19 in Afghanistan to lay the groundwork for future LAC and ACAA work in the country. The global pandemic has harmed countless individual and families but has successfully brought together organisations who can pool resources to provide assistance. The experience of the LAC with the remote summer placements will allow them to be resilient to future unexpected events and has created a fruitful partnership with ACAA, which they can build on to pursue funding to assist ACAA's communities<sup>18</sup>.

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18 Curran, L., 'University Law Clinics and their value in undertaking client-centred law reform to provide a voice for clients' experiences' (2007) 12 *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education*. Available at: <https://www.northumbriajournals.co.uk/index.php/ijcle/article/view/73> (last accessed 30.9.20).