



Security Council

Distr.: General
20 March 2023

Original: English

Letter dated 20 March 2023 from the Permanent Representatives of Switzerland, United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Switzerland and the United Arab Emirates, as Co-Chairs of the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security of the Security Council and in close cooperation with the United Kingdom, would like to share the summary note of the meeting of the Group on the situation in Afghanistan (see annex).

We would be grateful if the present letter and its annex could be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Pascale **Baeriswyl**
Permanent Representative of Switzerland
to the United Nations

(Signed) Lana Zaki **Nusseibeh**
Permanent Representative of the
United Arab Emirates to the United Nations

(Signed) Barbara **Woodward**
Permanent Representative of the
United Kingdom to the United Nations



Annex to the letter dated 20 March 2023 from the Permanent Representatives of Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security of the Security Council: summary of the meeting on the situation in Afghanistan, held on 26 January 2023

On 26 January 2023, the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security convened a meeting on the situation in Afghanistan. The members were briefed by the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Markus Potzel, accompanied by colleagues from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the United Nations country team. The meeting concluded with an overview of key recommendations provided by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and additional observations provided by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

Questions from members of the Security Council

Members of the Security Council asked whether there were signs of hope that any of the restrictions on women's rights, including the most recent ones affecting all aid operations, would be reversed and whether there were differences in implementation across different sectors or provinces. Council members also asked whether there were paths to restore a political track that would not confer any legitimacy or recognition on the Taliban or possibilities of engaging at the subnational level in certain provinces to mitigate the negative impact of the restrictions. Members inquired about the level of consultation by the United Nations with Afghan women and the request for mechanisms or platforms to ensure that women can safely and regularly engage with the Taliban and with international actors. Other questions revolved around the potential impact on Afghan women working for the United Nations or diplomatic missions and whether women in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) could continue to work by having access to communications technology.

Main points raised in the meeting

- The situation for women and girls has deteriorated significantly over the past year. The Taliban have issued many more restrictions, of increasing severity, that affect their rights, and while some exemptions have been secured, none of the restrictions have been reversed to date.
- The restrictions have ranged from the continued "suspension" of secondary education for girls since March 2022, despite earlier assurances that schools would open for the new school year, to dress codes and gender segregation in government premises, the requirement to travel with a male chaperone or *mahram*, the recommendation that women avoid leaving the house altogether, disciplinary actions against husbands, fathers and brothers of women deemed not to be in compliance with such instructions, and prohibitions on accessing public parks, gyms, and bathhouses, which are essential for women without bathrooms in their homes. In some localities, such as Kandahar, the Taliban closed women-operated shops and beauty salons. UNAMA has documented various incidents of women being beaten for being outside the house without a *mahram* or not wearing what is deemed as a proper hijab.

- In December 2022, the Taliban suspended university education for women, and a few days later, the Taliban Ministry of Economy issued a letter addressed to the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development banning women employees from working in national and international non-governmental organizations. Since then, the health sector and the primary education sector have been largely exempted from these restrictions. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that there were about 4,200 health facilities and that all but 37 were functioning as before the ban, with women comprising about 35 to 40 per cent of the workforce. According to the WHO survey, 97 per cent of women health workers are still reporting to work, and 9 of the 14 NGOs that suspended operations in December have now fully resumed their operations in the health sector.
- However, in many other sectors, the impact of the restrictions has been immediate and hampering aid operations, and if the ban is not reversed, it will lead to further population displacement into the Islamic Republic of Iran or Pakistan, as assistance will be inaccessible in Afghanistan. A UN-Women survey targeting mainly women-led civil society organizations and women working in national and international humanitarian agencies that was conducted shortly after the ban found that only 6 per cent of respondents were still operating fully and 34 per cent had stopped all activities. The impact of the ban in different sectors is being monitored regularly by the humanitarian country team. The Taliban is reportedly working on guidelines to enable women to continue to work under certain circumstances, but the United Nations will continue to advocate a full reversal of the ban.
- For example, as sent in writing after the meeting, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that nearly half of all mine action clearance and awareness operations in the eastern region have been halted owing to the ban on women humanitarian workers. Beyond the immediate impacts on safety, more than 150 mine action employees will lose their jobs, about 65,000 women and girls will not receive explosive ordnance risk education training as planned, and the ban will limit access to 36,000 women identified for consultation and surveys.
- Some 30 per cent of the direct beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance in the agriculture sector are women, and that assistance requires that women deliver to women or it will not reach them. This is especially critical in the third year of drought in a country where 70 per cent of the population live in rural areas and are living off agriculture.
- On education, the situation varies from province to province and from district to district. Of 34 provinces, approximately 10 had kept schools for girls open before the winter break, but most had to shut down because of the harsh conditions of the winter.
- These restrictions, including the most recent ones affecting aid operations, have been met with widespread condemnation from the international community, including the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, regional and Muslim-majority countries and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. A full reversal of the restrictions is repeatedly demanded by the United Nations in its engagements with the Taliban. This was a point of emphasis of the recent visit by a delegation consisting of the Deputy Secretary-General, the Executive Director of UN-Women, and the Assistant Secretary-General for Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations, who visited Kabul, Herat and Kandahar from 17 to 20 January. According to participants, some members of the Taliban are more open to discussing some of the restrictions, such as the bans on girls' education or women working in non-governmental organizations, but their position is unlikely to

influence the key decision makers among the Taliban. Similar messages were relayed during a subsequent visit by members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, led by the Emergency Relief Coordinator. Delegations engaged with the Taliban Cabinet members, including at the local level, and heard some receptiveness among some interlocutors regarding women's employment with non-governmental organizations and women's and girls' right to education but no assurance of forthcoming changes by decision makers in Kandahar.

- Women working for the United Nations have not yet been directly affected by the new restrictions. There are weekly meetings with Afghan women working for the United Nations on how to keep them safe and enable them to work, from supporting them with transport to the office to providing them with equipment to work from home to installing solar panels to mitigate the impact of electricity cuts. For many women among United Nations national staff, the office is often the only place where they can go and find community. To work from home, communications technology helps, but there are electricity and internet outages and sometimes only electricity for three hours of the day. This technology is often monitored or controlled by the men in the household, and it is hard for women to even get a SIM card for themselves. Furthermore, the United Nations is heavily dependent on working with the NGOs that have been affected by the ban. Some 70 per cent of the humanitarian response is implemented by NGOs.
- Participants recalled that the Emergency Relief Coordinator had recently expressed concern to the Security Council that the imposition by the Houthis in Yemen of strict *mahram* requirements on women humanitarian workers was a sign that the Taliban's actions – and the international community's response to them – would affect women's rights beyond Afghanistan's borders.
- With regards to the engagement of the United Nations with women in Afghanistan, participants noted that consultations with diverse women were currently the only path to keep women's agency and leadership alive and active. UN-Women is constantly consulting with women in Afghanistan, and jointly with UNAMA on a quarterly basis, and a women's advisory board comprised of 24 women from 21 provinces has been set up to advise the humanitarian country team. At the national level, the United Nations has been able to facilitate engagement with the Taliban on certain matters, such as between women entrepreneurs and the Taliban Minister of Commerce and Industry, but there are also some opportunities to facilitate such engagement in some of the provinces within reasonable bounds for staff safety. It is important for the United Nations to step up and sustain these engagements, not only to hear directly from Afghan women how they are affected by these restrictions and how they would like international actors to respond but also to signal to the Taliban the importance of women's voices and perspectives in public decision-making.
- According to additional information sent in writing after the meeting, the findings from a survey conducted by the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies in August 2022 show that women's rights remain the highest priority for women in Afghanistan, ahead of even their most basic security or humanitarian needs, and similar prioritization was found in consultations with UNAMA and UN-Women.
- The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, which has covered Afghanistan since the inception of its mandate in 2010, noted that data on sexual violence in Afghanistan had always been very difficult to obtain and that that was now made much harder by the exclusion of women from the justice and security sectors. Women lawyers are prohibited from obtaining licences and have many restrictions on accessing court,

resulting in higher use of informal justice mechanisms presided over by local religious scholars and community elders. This exclusion, coupled with the abolition of many institutions that used to monitor and document human rights violations – including the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission – makes it all the more difficult to prevent or respond to violence against women and girls. For that reason, when extending the UNAMA mandate, the Security Council should call upon the Taliban to enable full access for human rights monitors, ensure the meaningful participation of women in the justice and security sectors, hold perpetrators accountable and request UNAMA to continue to monitor and report on women’s rights violations and sexual violence.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed by UN-Women, as the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group:¹

- The Security Council should urgently consider issuing a resolution addressing the most recent decisions affecting the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan, along the lines of the press statement agreed upon by the Council on 27 December 2022. The resolution should clearly demand that the Taliban guarantee the rights of Afghan women to work in domestic and international non-governmental organizations and demand guarantees for the full enjoyment of women’s and girls’ right to education.
- In view of the Security Council’s upcoming consideration of the mandate of UNAMA, the Council should retain all of the gender-related language from resolution [2626 \(2022\)](#) and press for its full implementation, including by providing adequate resources. The Council could also update the mandate to address the additional restrictions on the rights of women and girls introduced since the mandate was enacted and to strengthen language on the facilitation by UNAMA of women’s systematic participation in political dialogue, both with men and women in local communities and with the Taliban, whenever safe, as well as on UNAMA continuing to engage with international and regional partners.
- The Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution [1988 \(2011\)](#) should convene a dedicated session on the role that the committee can play in responding to violations of women’s rights in Afghanistan, including hearing from Afghan women directly, especially those inside the country, broadening the listing criteria to include women’s rights violations, and considering using all the tools at the Committee’s disposal.
- Members of the Security Council should support all diplomatic efforts by the United Nations, regional organizations and international non-governmental organizations to lift all restrictions on women’s rights and ensure that women play an active and central role in those engagements and negotiations.
- Members of the Security Council, in their role as donors, should maintain direct funding to women-led organizations for salary payments and institutional costs while continuing to advocate the full resumption of their activities.

The Co-Chairs thanked all participants and committed to following up on the important issues raised at the meeting.

¹ The recommendations are suggestions made by United Nations representatives participating in the meeting or were contained in the background note prepared by UN-Women, as the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group, ahead of the meeting; they are not recommendations made by the Informal Expert Group as a whole or by members of the Security Council.