



Security Council

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Letter dated 1 March 2022 from the Permanent Representatives of Ireland, Mexico and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

Ireland and Mexico, 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 Informal Expert 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.

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Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the United Nations



Annex to the letter dated 1 March 2022 from the Permanent Representatives of Ireland, Mexico and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security of the Security Council

Summary of the meeting on Afghanistan held on 18 February 2022

On 18 February 2022, the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security held a meeting on the situation in Afghanistan. The group was briefed by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Deborah Lyons, both of her deputies, and several representatives of the Mission 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 shared by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

Questions from Council members

Members of the Security Council asked questions about the new mandate for the Mission, which will be negotiated over the coming days, and especially about potential language on women's rights monitoring; the conditions and curriculum that girls will find if they are able to return to school in March; current trends on violence against women and girls and reprisals against women activists and protesters; the status of the gender equality architecture and women's involvement in the justice and security sectors; the impact of the humanitarian situation on women and girls; the role of regional actors in engaging with the Taliban leadership on women's rights issues; any steps taken to ensure compliance with the Constitution of Afghanistan and international treaties to which Afghanistan is already a party, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; and whether there are mechanisms in place to ensure that the United Nations and the international community engage systematically with women's organizations.

Other questions were focused on the dilemmas of engaging women activists without further endangering them, and on the receptiveness by the Taliban to the demands of Afghan women's organizations or of the international community. Several Member States reiterated that the Taliban will only be judged by their actions and not their promises or announcements, and that the erasing of women from public life cannot be tolerated. Others emphasized the importance of ensuring stability and food security and noted that freezing the assets of the Afghan Central Bank under the control of other countries will only punish regular Afghans and hinder the exercise of any rights. One Council member recommended that the Informal Expert Group organize a visit to Afghanistan, with a focus on women and peace and security.

Main points raised in the meeting

- It is critical that the next mandate for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reflects strong language on women's rights and gender equality, especially on women's rights monitoring and women's inclusion. All pillars of the women and peace and security agenda should be seen as interlinked. A setback for Afghan women would be a setback for women across the world and for the international community's commitments to uphold women's rights.

- Since the Taliban took control, women have been erased from public life. All 25 members of the de facto cabinet and all 34 provincial governors are men. Women's rights have been drastically reversed and the Taliban have imposed new restrictions on their activities and freedom of movement, including a new guideline banning women from travelling long-distance by road without a *mahram*.
- Women have continued to protest these new restrictions, but their protests are repressed by a wave of beatings and detentions. Four women activists and their relatives were recently released. The United Nations has been informed that the Taliban has issued an internal directive that arrests of activists, journalists and non-governmental organization workers will require authorization at the highest level.
- There is no longer press freedom or a functional independent commission on human rights, and the gender equality architecture has been dismantled. The premises of the Ministry of Women's Affairs are now occupied by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Ministry of Women's Affairs departments in the provinces and the specialized courts dedicated to violence against women are no longer operational. In Oslo, in January 2022, a delegation of the Taliban announced their intention of reactivating the Ministry of Women's Affairs, but so far there is only a report of one department, in one province, where female staff have been able to return to work.
- Several universities have opened to female students, but there are reports from Kandahar that women have to cover their faces and hands while in class. The Taliban announced that girls would be allowed to return to secondary education in the third week of March. The United Nations has been told that the curriculum will remain the same as before the takeover by the Taliban, but the Organization will continue to monitor this. The European Union has contributed funds to pay teachers directly through the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and more will be needed in the coming months.
- Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the humanitarian and economic crises. Women's employment has plummeted since August 2021. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates that this could result in an immediate economic loss of between \$600 million and \$1 billion, or between 3 and 5 per cent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product.
- The agriculture sector – the largest for women's employment – has been particularly affected by the economic crisis and the inability of the international community to engage in development activities. There are still women working in the health and education sectors, as well as in non-governmental organizations. The private sector is expected to be a strong partner for the United Nations in advocating women's return to work across the board.
- Every two hours, a mother dies from pregnancy-related complications, and it is estimated that, by 2025, an additional 51,000 Afghan mothers will die from such complications because of lack of access to health care, exacerbating an already high maternal mortality rate.
- There is an urgent need to provide flexible funding for women's civil society organizations. The special trust fund for Afghanistan has set targets and earmarks to prioritize at least 30 per cent of funding for gender equality and there are plans to distribute institutional grants to 10 women's organizations per province, a rescue package that would help pay for salaries and operational costs.
- The United Nations is committed to ensuring that all its work in this area is guided by the advice of women's organizations inside and outside Afghanistan. While there have been many formal and informal interactions, there is still a

need to find a more systematic platform for engagement, as well as a safe mechanism for direct engagement with the Taliban. The United Nations organizes virtual policy spaces for women's civil society organizations and will work for women's meaningful participation in local dialogues. The Organization has set up a women's advisory board that is guiding the delivery of humanitarian aid and the transitional engagement framework.

- The United Nations will strengthen its engagement with religious scholars, neighbouring countries and regional organizations, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, on women's rights in the context of Muslim-majority countries, and hopes that they will play an important role in advocacy with the Taliban on these matters.
- It is crucial that women are strongly represented in any interaction between the international community and the Taliban. The United Nations aims to set a good example in this regard with the leadership of the Mission and several important agencies in the country team.
- Afghan women have gone from being trapped in men's wars to being trapped at home, where they are also not safe. Before the pandemic, a large majority of women had experienced at least one form of intimate partner violence, and these rates went up with the pandemic and spiked in recent months with the economic crisis and loss of livelihoods. Access to services that address gender-based violence has decreased significantly. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN-Women continue to operate protection centres, but some have had to shut. The United Nations is engaging with the de facto authorities to ensure that the Organization can continue its work.
- The Taliban have been recorded as perpetrators in the annual reports of the Secretary-General on conflict-related sexual violence every year since 2012, in relation to patterns of sexual violence in detention, forced marriage to Taliban and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) fighters, child marriage as a negative coping strategy, and the practice of *bacha bazi* in a context of prevailing impunity. Without a strong mandate and capacity on women's rights monitoring, there will be an information blackout. This will be compounded by the release of prisoners incarcerated by specialized courts working on violence against women, while simultaneously shutting the doors of women's organizations and the institutions that defended them.
- The de facto authorities are keenly aware of the importance that the international community places on women's rights and know that recognition by other governments will depend on their actions on these matters. There is a segment of the leadership that is more responsive to the message that Afghanistan's recovery and stability hinges on mobilizing the energies and talents of all its citizens, although this is typically limited to women's access to and participation in education, health or humanitarian aid, rather than the full spectrum of rights.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made by UN-Women, as the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group.¹

In the upcoming negotiations on Afghanistan in the Security Council, the Security Council should retain the references to women's participation and women's

¹ The recommendations are suggestions from United Nations participants in the meeting, such as the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, or from the background note prepared by the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group ahead of the meeting, and not recommendations from the Informal Expert Group as a whole or Council members.

rights in recent resolutions, and ensure that women's participation and the protection and promotion of the human rights of women and girls are both stand-alone strategic objectives and priorities of the Mission and mainstreamed through all its functions and activities. The Security Council could consider the following language in operational paragraphs:

- Requests the Mission to take fully into account gender considerations as part of priority tasks and as a cross-cutting issue throughout the implementation of its mandate and to meaningfully support, engage and consult with a wide range of diverse women's civil society organizations, networks and women-led organizations, community groups, women human rights defenders and women in diaspora in all areas of its work.
- Requests the Mission to facilitate dialogue between women and the de facto authorities and enhance women's full, equal and meaningful participation in any political dialogue and promote their general inclusion in political life.
- Requests the Mission to monitor and report on the human rights situation in the country with a particular focus on the human rights of women and girls.
- Recognizes the importance of ensuring that the Mission has adequate gender-related expertise, capacity and resources to protect and promote women's rights and participation.
- Urges all actors to ensure the full, equal and meaningful participation of women, including displaced and refugee women, in any negotiations about the future of Afghanistan.
- Condemns threats and attacks aimed at women, and enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention and killing of women, including women human rights defenders, peacebuilders, journalists and women in the public sector, and requests the Mission to monitor and report these violations.
- Stresses the importance of integrating gender considerations across humanitarian programming, including access to the full range of medical, legal, psychosocial and livelihood services, without discrimination, ensuring women and women's groups can participate meaningfully and are supported to be leaders in humanitarian action, and demands that all parties allow full, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access for the personnel of United Nations humanitarian agencies and other humanitarian actors regardless of gender.
- Encourages the adoption a survivor-centred approach in preventing and responding to gender-based violence, ensuring that prevention and response are non-discriminatory and specific, and respect the rights and prioritize the needs of survivors, including groups that are particularly vulnerable or may be specifically targeted.

With regard to sanctions, the recommendations made at the previous meeting of the Informal Expert Group on Afghanistan remain relevant: the inclusion of listing criteria related to the restriction and violations of human rights, in particular women's rights, and conflict-related sexual violence; the integration of gender as a cross-cutting issue across the investigations and reporting of the Monitoring Team; and the inclusion of gender expertise in the Monitoring Team. In addition, the Council should consider inviting women from civil society to brief the sanctions committee, and gender analysis should be part of any decisions taken by the sanctions committee, whether on humanitarian carve-outs or on listings.

The recommendations made at the previous meeting of the Informal Expert Group on Afghanistan remain relevant, namely on practical support to women at risk, advocacy in support of women's participation, direct financial support to women's

organizations and the condemnation of violence against women human rights defenders. In addition, the Co-Chairs of the Informal Expert Group and other Council members should:

(a) Ensure that all delegations engaging with the Taliban have a strong representation of women at a senior level and support direct negotiation opportunities between Afghan women leaders and the Taliban;

(b) Support the establishment of an independent human rights monitoring mechanism to conduct investigations and gather evidence on violations of women's and girls' rights and sexual and gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence;

(c) Continue to advocate and support the prioritization of gender equality and the systematic consultation of women's civil society organizations in the operations and allocation of resources of the special trust fund for Afghanistan;

(d) Support and advocate the full, equal and meaningful participation of women, without any restrictions, and the consultation of women civil society organizations on the design, delivery and monitoring of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan;

(e) Advocate with all countries to allow civilians fleeing Afghanistan access to their territories, guarantee the right to seek asylum, ensure respect for the principle of non-refoulement at all times, suspend forcible returns and support targeted and life-saving initiatives to prevent and respond to gender-based violence and empower and build the resilience of Afghan refugee women and girls in host countries, in line with the 2022 regional refugee response plan.

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