

Update on women, peace and security in Afghanistan 26 January 2023

The Informal Expert Group (IEG) of the Security Council on Women and Peace and Security discussed the situation in Afghanistan in July 2016 ([S/2016/673](#)), November 2016 ([S/2016/1059](#)), December 2017 ([S/2018/11](#)), July 2019, August 2021 ([S/2021/770](#)) and February 2022 ([S/2022/171](#)). The last two meetings took place only four days after the Taliban took over Kabul, and in the lead up to negotiating the UNAMA mandate, respectively. This update summarizes relevant developments since the last meeting in February 2022.

Developments in the Security Council

On 17 March 2022, the Security Council adopted **resolution 2626 (2022)** extending the mandate of UNAMA for 12 months. The resolution included strong instructions for the Mission to support and promote gender equality, the full protection of women's human rights, and women's equal and meaningful participation in governance, public affairs, and all levels of decision-making. On 16 December 2022, the Security Council also adopted **resolution 2665 (2022)** extending the mandate of the team monitoring sanctions against individuals and entities associated with the Taliban, reiterating the importance of full, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access for all humanitarian personnel, including women, and recalling that women, girls, and minorities have been disproportionately affected by the economic and humanitarian situation, as well as the erosion of their rights. In August 2022, the **sanctions' exemptions on 13 Taliban leaders** to allow for travel for diplomatic reasons **expired**. Two former ministers responsible for education had already been removed from the exemptions list in June as a reaction to the Taliban's ban on girls' secondary education, and the exemptions ended for the rest of them when they expired in August. Finally, two **press statements** adopted by the Security Council in this period directly addressed announcements of further restrictions on women's rights in Afghanistan. The first one, adopted in May 2022, was issued a few weeks after the Taliban extended their ban on girls' secondary education, announced the day they returned to class after a seven-month hiatus, and shortly after the Taliban decreed more restrictions on women's freedom of movement and mandated women to cover their face in public and media broadcasts. The second one was issued in December 2022, after the announcements of the ban on women's tertiary education and the ban on women working for domestic and international NGOs. The relevant text of these two resolutions and press statements is compiled in an **annex** below.

In Security Council debates on Afghanistan, women's rights have been the main focus for several Council Members, and all fifteen Council Members have, at a minimum, mentioned the importance of protecting women's rights. On 13 January 2023, ahead of a closed meeting to discuss the recent decisions by the Taliban and their impact on humanitarian aid, 11 Security Council Members¹ held a **press stakeout** to urge the Taliban to immediately reverse all oppressive measures against women and girls, respect the rights of women and girls, and ensure their full, equal, and meaningful participation and inclusion across all aspects of society in Afghanistan, from political and economic, to education and the public sphere.

¹ Albania, Brazil, Ecuador, France, Gabon, Japan, Malta, Switzerland, the UAE, the UK, and the United States. Out of these, all but the United States have signed the Statement of Shared Commitments on WPS, which many Council Members have adopted in the last year and a half when holding the presidency of the Security Council.

Since February 2022, the Security Council has invited **six Afghan women** to address the Security Council. In March 2022, [Ms. Mariam Safi](#) noted that 72 percent of journalists who had lost their jobs are women, and argued that given the collective shutdown of independent media and civil society, UNAMA would not just need a strong mandate to monitor women's rights, but adequate resources and capacity. Less than four weeks before the reversal on allowing girls to go back to secondary school, she warned that the Taliban should be judged on their actions and not their promises. In June 2022, **Ms. Yalda Hakim**, who tweets every day with the latest count on days since the Taliban banned teenage girls from school – approaching 500 days now – shared reports from women at protests being pepper sprayed, threatened with death and, in some cases, detained and even disappeared. She praised the men journalists who wore masks on television in solidarity with their colleagues after the decree for women to cover their faces. In the same meeting, [Ms. Yalda Royan](#) from VOICE focused on the need to remove more Taliban leaders from the sanctions' exemptions list if conditions were not met, singling out Abdul-Haq Wassiq, de facto General Director of Intelligence, and Fazl Mohammad Mazloom, de facto Deputy Minister of Defense. She called on UNAMA to step up its monitoring of women's rights violations. In September 2022, **Ms. Fawzia Koofi**, former Deputy Speaker of Parliament, spoke of a 'gender apartheid' where women who represented 30 percent of the civil service, and were often the sole breadwinner of their families, can no longer report to work. She noted that out of 2,756 women journalists in Afghanistan, only approximately 600 remain, and called on UNAMA to facilitate a stronger mechanism for political dialogue. During the Security Council's Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security in October, [Ms. Zahra Nader](#) argued that the Taliban go to such lengths to silence women because, to date, Afghan women have mobilized the most consistent and peaceful opposition to Taliban policies and are their main obstacle to recognition by the international community. Speaking also on behalf of the Hazara community, her speech took place just weeks after a suicide bombing at the Kaaj education center that killed at least 55 people, including 51 Hazara women and girls, and injured at least 124 others. She called for an additional UN mechanism to provide accountability for human rights violations, beyond the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan. Finally, in December 2022, **Ms. Mahboubia Seraj** estimated there to be around three dozen edicts by the Taliban targeting women, and warned that the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K), Al-Qaida, and Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, are now emboldened, and enjoy free rein while more than half of the working age population of Afghanistan – women – are now jobless and confined to their homes.

Restrictions and violations of the rights of women and girls

Since March 2022, the Taliban have imposed **further restrictions on the rights of women and girls**. This is a non-exhaustive list:

- Extending the ban on girls' secondary education, reversing a previous decision to allow them back into the classroom after a seven-month hiatus, affecting 1.1 million Afghan girls.
- Forbidding women and girls from traveling beyond 72 kilometers (including air travel) without a *mahram* (male relative chaperone), in practice often enforced, either by local authorities or community members (as male relatives are punished if these restrictions are not enforced), for any distance outside the home.
- Forbidding women from driving and banning the issuing or renewal of driving licenses for women.
- Banning women from accessing public parks, baths, stadiums, and gymnasiums, after initially segregating access to these public spaces by gender.
- Forced face covering in public (with the exception of the eyes), including on television.
- Application of public corporal punishments for perceived moral or religious infractions, such as accusations of adultery or unlawful sexual relations, or traveling without a male relative chaperone (including simply going to the market to buy food, in some reported cases), or failing to wear a face-covering hijab. The UN has reported several extrajudicial killings of individuals accused of extramarital relations, most of them women.

- Exclusion of women from working in the public sector, with few exceptions in the health and education sectors, and to some extent at Kabul airport and prisons to assist with body searches.
- Gender segregation in health facilities, coupled with the lack of women healthcare personnel, resulting in limits to women's access to health services.
- Suspending women's enrolment in universities, following several decrees on gender segregation at universities.
- Banning Afghan women from working in domestic and international non-governmental organizations.

In addition, **women's total exclusion from decision-making** and all sectors of public life continues. The abolition of the Ministry for Women's Affairs -replaced by the de facto Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice- was followed by the abolition of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission. The entire institutional architecture that was in place for over a decade to protect women survivors of violence, from special courts with women judges and prosecutors to shelters for survivors has been dismantled by the de facto authorities. The Taliban also abolished the post of Deputy Provincial Governor for Social Affairs in all provinces, which had been earmarked for women by the former Government. There used to be an estimated 270 women **judges** in Afghanistan. While all of them have been dismissed from their jobs, more than 200 remain in Afghanistan, many of them under threat and in hiding, as they often oversaw the convictions of men who have now been released. Before August 2021, there were more than 1500 women that were practicing **defence lawyers**, but women are now excluded from obtaining licenses from the de facto Ministry of Justice. Instead, there are reports of judges refusing to consider women's complaints, with instructions to resolve family law issues through mediation or traditional dispute resolution mechanisms. In August, the office of the de facto Attorney General also abolished a specialized directorate established in 2018 to investigate harassment of women in the workplace and higher education.

In spite of the harassment, threats, and detention of women participating in **protests**, these have continued, often under the slogan "Bread, Work, Freedom." In the last three months of 2022, over half of the 20 peaceful protests recorded in Kabul and other cities were dispersed by disproportionate use of force. As detailed by CIVICUS, UN Women, OHCHR and others, freedom of assembly, association, and expression, remains heavily constrained, with acts of intimidation, harassment, detention and retaliatory killings of **women human rights defenders** and **civil society activists**.

In August and September 2022, UNAMA and UN Women convened 15 in-country and online **consultations** in 12 provinces with 207 Afghan women leaders of diverse personal and professional backgrounds. They unanimously emphasized the reopening of secondary girls' schools as the most immediate priority, followed by safety and security (flagged by 71 per cent of participants), and asked the international community to focus on reinstating the full spectrum of rights for women and girls, beyond education. The women consulted argued that a narrow focus on education would set a path to lowering the threshold for the restoration of all women's rights and requested UNAMA to facilitate their participation in different forms of negotiations and dialogue with the de facto authorities, including through the establishment of a mechanism for women's direct engagement. More recent consultations have shown that, in spite of increasing protection concerns, participation, voice, and agency continue to be a priority for women in Afghanistan.

At the regional level, countries have spoken against these restrictions, and after an emergency meeting of the **Organization of Islamic Cooperation** held on 11 January 2023, the OIC decided to dispatch a second team of *ulema* to Afghanistan to engage with the de facto authorities on the measures depriving Afghan girls and women of their basic rights to education, employment, or social justice. ‘

In January 2023, the United Nations' Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed, the Executive Director of UN Women, Sima Bahous, and the Assistant Secretary-General of DPPA, Khaled Khiari, completed a **four-day visit to Afghanistan** to appraise the situation and underscore UN's commitment and solidarity with women in Afghanistan. In meetings with the de facto authorities in both Kabul and Kandahar, the delegation directly conveyed the alarm over the recent decrees. The visit followed a series of high-level consultations on Afghanistan across the Gulf and Asia, which included engagements with the OIC, the Islamic Development Bank, Afghan women in the diaspora, and Ambassadors and Special Envoys to Afghanistan based in Doha.

Impact of these restrictions on women's security, economic well-being and humanitarian needs

The impact of the **ban on women working for domestic and international NGOs** has significantly affected the delivery of humanitarian aid, in a country where 11.6 million women and girls will need humanitarian assistance in 2023, right as the population is enduring an exceptionally cold winter and multiple crises. As of 12 January 2023, 68 percent of NGOs had significantly reduced their operations and 15 percent had paused them altogether. Some of them have since resumed their operations after receiving assurances from the de facto authorities that women could continue to work in some sectors, like health, nutrition, and primary education.

Findings from recent rapid surveys of NGOs, INGOs and UN agencies conducted by the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group and Humanitarian Access Group (HAG) in Afghanistan highlight that the ban has severely impacted women and girls in their ability to access critical humanitarian assistance, distribution sites, essential services, and life-saving information. The main sectors that have been affected by the ban include gender-based violence (GBV) and protection, social cohesion, education, and livelihood support. Women's access to aid was already extremely challenging even before the ban, not least due to the lack of women humanitarian workers in the field.

Two weeks after the directive was issued by the Taliban, UN Women consulted 165 Afghan women who had worked in national and international humanitarian NGOs, and conducted an online survey for 127 national NGOs, 79 percent of them led by women and staffed mainly by women. These were some of the results of their assessment:

- Only six percent of respondents have continued operating fully. 60 percent are only partially operating, and 34 percent have stopped altogether. 65 percent responded that women are now working from home.
- The impact of the ban will be felt immediately: women's needs will not be assessed, and women will not be able to access services across all humanitarian sectors. The risk of harassment and sexual exploitation and abuse will increase exponentially if women are only able to access aid through men humanitarian workers
- If they cannot operate for a year, INGOs and NGOs which have suspended their activities will lose their license.
- Although 73 percent of organizations reported that they are still paying the salaries of women staff, this will soon not be possible for 84 percent of them, and 95 percent of them reported that the women affected will not be able to find another job.
- The 127 surveyed organizations – a small fraction of the humanitarian community in Afghanistan – employ 6,165 women staff in Afghanistan, with 84 percent of these organizations reporting that the overwhelming majority of their women staff were the main breadwinners of their families. The ban risks putting tens of thousands of households at increased risk of poverty, and their sense of responsibility towards beneficiaries elevates their risk of mental health issues and even suicide.

Even before the ban, 42 incidents of threats and intimidation against women aid workers had been recorded since the start of 2022, and this is likely an undercount. According to UN Women, 77 percent of women's organizations had not received any funding in 2022.

The overall **economic losses** due to the sharp drop in women's employment was initially estimated at 1 billion dollars, equivalent to 5 percent of GDP. This estimate is now projected to reach 1.5 billion between 2022 and 2024 if the reduction in women's employment exceeds 50 percent, which is already likely the case. This has a profound effect in an economy that has contracted by an estimated 30 to 35 percent between 2021 and 2022, where 97 percent live in poverty, household debt has increased sixfold, and 20 million face acute hunger.

This extreme poverty is especially affecting women from ethnic minorities, women with disabilities, widows, and women heads of household. Ten percent of households in Afghanistan are **women-headed households**. For example, 29 percent of them have at least one child currently engaged in child labour, up ten points from 2021. By January 2022, 100 percent of women-headed households faced insufficient food consumption, and 85 percent reported limiting food intake and borrowing food, compared with 62 percent of households led by men. Compared to 2021, women-headed households face a ten-percent increase in restrictions in access to markets, water points, and health facilities, and discrimination is one of the main reasons limiting women's access to services. Approximately 28 percent of women in Afghanistan do not have a national identity card, limiting their access to services where identification is required.

Child, early, and forced marriage rates are increasing, not just because of extreme poverty and the lack of educational and professional prospects for girls, but because of the reported practice among Taliban officials of forcibly marrying women and girls themselves. **Maternal mortality** rates are expected to rise due to restricted mobility for pregnant women and midwives and the rise of child marriage, and suicide rates among women have reportedly increased too. In some districts, there are no women nurses in 86 percent of health centers, and no women doctors in 71 percent of health centers, and the UN has received reports from provinces where women have been prevented from entering health facilities when they do not have a *mahram* (a male guardian) accompanying them.

Incidents of **violence against women and girls** continue to be reported. A June 2022 report from the UN documented 87 reported cases of murder, rape, suicide, forced marriage, assault, and honor killings since the Taliban takeover. Videos of Elaha Dilawarzai, an Afghan medical student begging for help because a former spokesperson for the Taliban's Ministry of Interior forced her into marriage, raped her, and tortured her, were shared on social media. Like her, other women and girls have vanished, such as prison director Alia Azizi. Most recently, gunmen killed former Member of Parliament Ms. Mursal Nabizada, along with her bodyguard, at her home in Kabul.

Women from ethnic minorities, such as the **Hazaras**, are targeted both by ISIL-K and the Taliban. Hazaras have been subjected to a series of attacks, targeting wedding halls, hospitals, sports centers, schools, education centers, and mosques. ISIL-K is estimated to have killed hundreds of Hazaras, including the women and girls killed at the Kaaj education center in Kabul in September 2022.

Among the minority groups at risk under the Taliban is the **LGBTIQ** community, who faced extra-judicial executions and the death penalty under the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia law. Advocates have called on governments and humanitarian agencies to direct more efforts to ensure in-country protection, humanitarian assistance and safe passage for resettlement of the community.

Recommendations:²

- 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 on by the Security Council on 27 December 2022. This resolution should clearly demand the Taliban to guarantee the rights of Afghan women to work in domestic and international non-governmental organizations and demand guarantees for the full enjoyment of women and girls' right to education.
- In view of the Security Council's upcoming consideration of the mandate of UNAMA, the Security Council should retain all of the gender-related language from resolution 2626, and press for its full implementation, including by providing adequate resources. The Security Council could also update the mandate to address the additional restrictions to the rights of women and girls since the mandate was enacted, and to strengthen language on UNAMA facilitating women's systematic participation in political dialogue, both with men and women in local communities and the de facto authorities, whenever safe, as well as to continue engaging with international and regional partners.
- The Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) should convene a dedicated session on the role the committee can play to respond to violations of women's rights in Afghanistan, including hearing from Afghan women directly, broadening the listing criteria to include women's rights violations, and considering using all the tools at the committee's disposal.
- Council Members should support all diplomatic efforts by the UN, 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.
- Council Members, in their role as donors, should maintain direct funding to women-led organizations for salary payments and institutional costs while continuing to advocate for the full resumption of their activities

² These recommendations are prepared by UN Women as the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group, in consultation with other UN entities.

ANNEX

Relevant language in resolution 2626 (2022) extending the mandate of UNAMA

Emphasizing the importance of the establishment of an inclusive and representative government, further emphasizing the importance of the full, equal and meaningful participation of women, and upholding human rights, including for women, children and minorities,

Expressing its deep concern regarding the dire economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, including food insecurity, and recalling that women, children, and minorities have been disproportionately affected (...) and emphasizing that the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance requires all actors to allow full, safe and unhindered humanitarian access for all humanitarian personnel, including women, for United Nations agencies, international and national non-governmental organizations, and other humanitarian actors,

Expressing its serious concern about the situation of women and girls, the imposition of restrictions on their participation in public life, and the erosion of respect for their rights, in particular through their lack of equal access to education, economic opportunities, justice and other services,

Further expressing its deep concern about the security situation in Afghanistan, particularly the situation for civilians, including women, children, displaced persons, minorities, and humanitarian workers (...)

5. *Decides further that UNAMA and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General will continue to carry out their mandate in close consultations with all relevant Afghan political actors and stakeholders, including relevant authorities as needed (...):*

(a) *coordinate and facilitate, in accordance with international law, including international humanitarian law, and consistent with humanitarian principles, the provision of humanitarian assistance and financial resources to support humanitarian activities (...), work towards improving the accessibility of the full spectrum of activities by humanitarian and development agencies and personnel, both women and men, across all ethnic groups, in all areas of the country, in support of all people in need, including women, children, displaced persons, minorities and persons with disabilities (...)*

(c) *provide outreach and good offices, including to facilitate dialogue between all relevant Afghan political actors and stakeholders, the region and the wider international community, with a focus on promoting inclusive, representative, participatory and responsive governance at the national and subnational levels, without any discrimination based on gender, religion or ethnicity, with the full, equal and meaningful participation of women (...)*

(e) *engage with all stakeholders at the national and subnational levels and civil society and international non-governmental organizations in the protection and promotion of the human rights of all Afghans, monitor, report and advocate with regard to the situation for civilians, the prevention and elimination of violence, including a survivor-centered approach to preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence (...), promote, support and advise on Afghanistan's implementation of the provisions of instruments concerning human rights and fundamental freedoms to which Afghanistan is a State party and by which it is bound, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (...),*

(f) *integrate gender mainstreaming as a cross-cutting issue throughout the implementation of its mandate, support and promote gender equality, women's and girls' empowerment and the full protection of their human rights, including education, and the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation, engagement and leadership of women in all levels and stages of decision-making, in line with resolution 1325 (2000) and related resolutions, and engage with diverse Afghan women's organizations and networks, as well as monitor and report specifically on violations, abuses and reprisals committed against women, including against those who protect and promote human rights, journalists, health-care and humanitarian workers, as well as those previously associated with the government, police, justice and security sector;*

Relevant language in resolution 2665 (2022) extending the mandate of the sanctions monitoring team.

Emphasizing its deep concern regarding the dire economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, including food insecurity, recalling that women, children, and minorities have been disproportionately affected,

Emphasizing the importance of strengthened efforts to provide humanitarian assistance and other activities that support basic human needs in Afghanistan (...) and emphasizing that the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance requires all actors to allow full, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access for all humanitarian personnel, including women, for United Nations agencies, international and national non-governmental organizations, and for other humanitarian actors

Emphasizing the importance of the establishment of a truly inclusive and representative government, (...) reaffirming the importance of upholding human rights including those of women, children, minorities, persons in vulnerable situations, and forcibly displaced peoples, expressing its serious concern about the situation of women, girls, marginalized communities and minorities, the erosion of respect for their rights, in particular women and girls' lack of equal access to education, economic opportunities, participation in public life, freedom of movement, justice, and basic services, the absence of which make peace, stability, and prosperity in the country unattainable, expressing deep concern over persistent violence against women and girls, including sexual and gender-based violence, ensuring safe and secure departure for those wanting to leave, and recalling the importance of the principle of nonrefoulement.

Relevant language in the press statement issued on May 24th 2022:

The members of the Security Council expressed deep concern regarding the increasing erosion of respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls in Afghanistan by the Taliban, including through imposition of restrictions that limit access to education, employment, freedom of movement, and women's full, equal and meaningful participation in public life, and emphasized that these restrictions contradict the expectations of the international community and the commitments made by the Taliban to the Afghan people.

The members of the Security Council further expressed deep concern regarding the announcements by the Taliban that all women must cover their faces in public spaces and in media broadcasts, only leave home in cases of necessity, and that violations of this directive will lead to the punishment of their male relatives. They also expressed concern regarding the decision by the Taliban to dissolve several key national institutions.

The members of the Security Council called on the Taliban to swiftly reverse the policies and practices which are currently restricting the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Afghan women and girls. They also reiterated their call on the Taliban to adhere to their commitments to reopen schools for all female students without further delay.

The members of the Security Council further expressed deep concern regarding the dire humanitarian and economic situation in Afghanistan, recognized the need for strengthened efforts to provide humanitarian assistance and other activities that support basic human needs in Afghanistan, emphasizes that the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance requires all actors to allow full, safe and unhindered humanitarian access for all humanitarian personnel, including women, and further recognizes the need to help address the substantial challenges facing Afghanistan's economy, including through efforts to restore the banking and financial systems and efforts to enable the use of assets belonging to Afghanistan's Central Bank for the benefit of the Afghan people (...).

Relevant language in the press statement issued on December 27th 2022:

The members of the Security Council are deeply alarmed by reports that the Taliban have suspended access to universities for women and girls, and reiterated their deep concern of the suspension of school beyond the sixth grade, and their call for the full, equal and meaningful participation of women and girls in Afghanistan, and called on the Taliban to reopen schools and swiftly reverse these policies and practices, which represent an increasing erosion of the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The members of the Security Council are furthermore profoundly concerned by reports that the Taliban have banned female employees of non-governmental organizations and international organizations from going to work, which would have a significant and immediate impact for humanitarian operations in the country, including those of

the United Nations, and the delivery of aid and health work, and that these restrictions contradict the commitments made by the Taliban to the Afghan people, as well as the expectations of the international community (...).