



## SECURITY COUNCIL INFORMAL EXPERT GROUP ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

### Summary of the meeting on the situation in Afghanistan, held on January 26<sup>th</sup> 2023

On 26 January 2023, the Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security (IEG) convened a meeting on the situation in Afghanistan. The members were briefed by the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Mr. Markus Potzel, accompanied by colleagues from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the UN Country Team. The meeting concluded with an overview of key recommendations provided by UN Women and additional observations provided 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 whether there were signs or 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 to the Taliban, or possibilities to engage at the sub-national level in certain provinces to mitigate the negative impact of the restrictions. Council Members inquired about the UN's level of consultation with Afghan women and their 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 UN or diplomatic missions, and whether women in NGOs could continue working by having access to communications technology.

#### Main points raised in the meeting:

- The situation for women and girls has significantly deteriorated over the last year. The Taliban have issued many more restrictions that affect their rights, of increasing severity, and while some exemptions have been secured, none of these restrictions have been reversed to date.
- These restrictions have ranged from the continued "suspension" of secondary education for girls in March 2022, despite earlier assurances that schools would open for the new school year, to dress codes and gender segregation in government premises, requirements to travel with a male chaperone or *mahram*, recommendations that women avoid leaving the house altogether, disciplinary actions against husbands, fathers and brothers of women deemed to be not in compliance with such instructions, and prohibitions to access public parks, gyms, and bathhouses, which are essential for women without bathrooms in their homes. In some localities, like 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's Ministry of Economy issued a letter addressed to the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR) 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, WHO informed that there are about 4200 health facilities and that all but 37 are functioning as before the ban, with women comprising about 35 to 40 percent of the workforce. According to their survey, 97 percent of women health workers are still reporting to work, and nine of the fourteen NGOs that suspended operations in December have now fully resumed their operations in the health sector.
- However, in many other sectors the impact of these restrictions has been immediate and hampering aid operations, and if the ban is not reversed it will lead to further population displacement into 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 six percent of respondents were still operating fully, and 34 percent 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 UN will continue advocating for a full reversal of the ban.
- For example, as sent in writing after the meeting, OCHA reports that nearly half of all mine action clearance and awareness operations in the eastern region have been halted due 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 the access to 36,000 women identified for consultation and surveys.
- 30 percent of the direct beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance in the agriculture sector are women, and that assistance requires women delivering to women or it will not reach them. This is especially critical in the third year of drought in a country where 70 percent of the population live in rural areas living off agriculture.
- On education, the situation varies from province to province and district from province. Out of 34 provinces, approximately ten had kept schools for girls open before the winter break, but mostly 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 wide 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 these restrictions is repeatedly demanded by the UN in their engagements with the Taliban. This was a point of emphasis of the recent visit by a delegation formed by the Deputy Secretary-General, the Executive Director of UN Women, and the Assistant Secretary-General of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, who visited Kabul, Herat, and Kandahar from January 17<sup>th</sup> to January 20<sup>th</sup>. According to participants, some members of the Taliban are more open to discussing some of these 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 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 UN 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 UN national staff, the office is often the only place they can go to 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 UN is heavily dependent on working with the NGOs that have been affected by the ban. 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 – will impact women's rights beyond Afghanistan's borders.
- With regards to the UN's engagement with women in Afghanistan, participants noted that consultations with diverse women are 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 also been set up to advise the Humanitarian Country Team. At the national level, the UN 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 UN to step up and sustain these engagements, not only to hear directly from Afghan women how they are impacted 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.
- In additional information sent in writing after the meeting, the findings from a survey by DROPS (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 their mandate in 2010, noted that data on sexual violence in Afghanistan has always been very difficult to obtain, and this is now much harder by the exclusion of women from the justice and security sectors. Women lawyers are prohibited from obtaining licenses, and have many restrictions to access court, resulting in higher use of informal justice mechanisms presided 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 that much 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 on the Taliban to enable full access for human rights monitors, ensure the meaningful participation of women in the justice and security sectors, and hold perpetrators accountable, and request UNAMA to continue monitoring and reporting on women’s rights violations and sexual violence.

### **Recommendations:**

*The following recommendations are proposed by UN Women, as the secretariat of the IEG.<sup>1</sup>*

- 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 Taliban, 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, 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.
- 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

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<sup>1</sup> These recommendations are suggestions from UN participants in this meeting or the background note prepared by UN Women as 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.

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