

Statement by the Umbrella of Afghan Women Leaders on the Taliban's ban to women's work in the humanitarian NGO sector:

Women's Rights must NOT be a bargaining chip between the Taliban and the International Community

20 January 2023

"After the meeting¹ with Amina Mohammed, the DSG of the United Nations, women cried"

Since August 2021 the Taliban have been engaged in a power play with the United Nations (UN) and the international community. The bargaining chip they have used throughout has been the rights and lives of women and girls.

A series of bans violating women's and girls' rights started in 2021, and in recent months, the Taliban have issued edicts banning female students' access to [higher education](#) and on women from [working in the humanitarian NGO sector](#). Women and girls can no longer even take walks in parks, and dependence on male accompaniment means that women are now virtually prisoners in their own homes. If, as is likely, these edicts continue, the misogynistic and systematic patriarchal practices of the Taliban will, as they intend, utterly erase women and girls from Afghan society. The ban on women's work in humanitarian NGOs also comes against a backdrop of increased attacks and harassment of female activists and women-led NGOs, which were already struggling due to lack of funding and increased repression. If the ban continues, Afghan women-led humanitarian organisations will disappear as well as their female staff. Donors and organisations should continue to pay their Afghan female staff and to fund their organisations and should not bow to the pressure of replacing them with male staff.

As underlined by [ten UN Special Procedures](#) of the Human Rights Council, through the order barring women from working in the NGO sector the Taliban "are instrumentalising and victimising women and the recipients of critical aid." Addressing the UN Security Council on 12 January 2023, the UN Secretary-General [stated](#) that "in Afghanistan, unprecedented, systemic attacks on women's and girls' rights and the flouting of international obligations are creating gender-based apartheid." This should be recognised as gender persecution, a crime against humanity, and prosecuted as such.

The Taliban claim that these edicts about women's work and education are a matter of religious propriety. This claim has been challenged by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in the [Final Communiqué](#) from the Extraordinary Meeting of the OIC Executive Committee on "The Recent Developments and the Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan", held on 13 January 2023, which urged "the de facto Afghan authorities to allow women and girls to exercise their rights and contribute to the social and economic development of the Afghan society in accordance with the rights and responsibilities as guaranteed to them by Islam and international human rights law". In previous statements, the OIC and International Islamic Fiqh Academy

¹ On January 17, a UN delegation arrived in Kabul headed by Deputy Secretary-General (DSG) Amina Mohammed, executive director of UN Women, Sima Bahous and Assistant Secretary General for political affairs Khaled Khiari, as well as the U.N. deputy spokesman Farhan Haq. Ahead of her visit, DSG, Amina Mohammed organised a **meeting** with Afghan women where they shared their demands and recommendations.

(IIFA) [have described](#) the bans on education and on women working in the NGO sector as contrary to the purposes of Islamic law and the consensus of the ummah. The UN and the international community should coordinate with the OIC and speak with one voice to exert pressure on the Taliban, while reflecting the demands of Afghan women and girls.

Many I/NGOs suspended or paused their programs inside Afghanistan. [Several UN agencies and INGOs](#) denounced the ban, considering it as a “major blow for vulnerable communities, for women, children, and for the entire country”. Despite acknowledging that principled humanitarian assistance cannot be delivered without female aid workers, they continued to deliver lifesaving activities. On 30 December 2022, the UN stated that they and their humanitarian partners are “committed to the delivery of life-saving services to the people of Afghanistan” - [according to](#) the UN Resident Coordinator in Afghanistan, Ramiz Alakbarov.

There is no question that aid is needed. Afghanistan is devastated. According to the Secretary General of the [Norwegian Refugee Council](#), Jan Egeland, without aid, six million people will fall into famine, 600,000 children will be without education, 13.5 million people will be without safe water supply, and 14.1 million people will not have access to protection services. The ban on women from working in humanitarian NGOs is not only an issue of employment for 15,000 female workers in NGOs, as it is being portrayed in some discussions. To be clear: barring women from working in the NGO sector will have devastating consequences in the immediate and the long term in Afghanistan society, many more will die as a result. Because of Taliban edicts, 20 million women are effectively imprisoned in their houses, living fully dependent on humanitarian aid for survival. Strict gender segregation means that aid cannot be taken to them by men. In a [press statement](#) delivered by 11 members of the UNSC on 13 January, they stated that "Women are central and critical to operations to relieve the dire humanitarian situation. They have unique expertise and access to populations their male colleagues cannot reach, providing critical life-saving support to women and girls. Without their participation in aid delivery in Afghanistan and essential expertise NGOs will be unable to reach those most in need, in particular women and girls to provide lifesaving materials and services. We reiterate the Council's demand on all parties to allow full safe and unhindered access for humanitarian actors regardless of gender."

The political situation is as follows:

- The Taliban are exerting pressure on the UN and the international community by banning women's rights to work and education under the false pretence of Sharia.
- The UN and some INGOs are now compelled to negotiate with the de facto authorities by compromising women's fundamental rights for the sake of life-saving and critical humanitarian aid.
- These tactics of the UN and of the international community have continuously failed. The compromises made with the Taliban have not led to any improvements in the lives of women and girls, instead the situation has become worse with every compromise made. The UN has leverage because of the crisis. It must use it.

Only uncompromising, coordinated efforts and pressure will be effective

In the past weeks, UN officials met several times with the Afghan authorities to try to resolve the crisis caused by the bans. The UN and its humanitarian partners are engaging in intense side-negotiations with the Taliban to exempt certain sectors and regions from the ban to provide aid for these sectors. On 18 January, [some INGOs](#) resumed some of their activities after receiving assurances from Taliban officials that female workers will be allowed to carry out their duties.

Though well-intended, case-by-case temporary compromises afforded by the Taliban to the UN or INGOs will close any window of opportunity to structurally reverse the ban against Afghan women's right to work. While UN agencies and INGOs endeavour to continue to deliver critical life-saving aid, they must also, as a matter of human rights principle, solidarity and aid effectiveness, forcefully advocate for an immediate, full and permanent reversal of the ban. Afghan women must be allowed to work without conditions.

The UN Deputy Secretary General (DSG) Amina Mohammed headed a UN delegation to Afghanistan on 17 January. Ahead of the visit, the DSG held a consultation meeting with Afghan women. One woman noted: *"We, Afghan sisters, believe that the DSG visit to Afghanistan is our last hope! She said that she will meet with the DfA authorities to reverse the ban. She stood in solidarity with us, and said that as a woman, she understands the plights Afghan women are facing. We cried! We cried out of frustration from the inaction of UNAMA - She is our last hope"*.

The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Martin Griffiths will also visit Afghanistan soon. His position on women's and girls' rights has to be clear. The UN cannot negotiate away women's rights.

All humanitarian activities by the UN and other humanitarian actors (save for those that are critical and life-saving²) should be paused until Afghan women staff can resume work, including women staff of local NGOs. Additionally, there should be no piecemeal negotiation of exemptions with the Taliban, such piecemeal arrangements secure the structures of oppression. **Humanitarian aid should resume when Afghan women employees are able to work and when women and girls can have effective access to aid.**

Members of the Umbrella of Afghan Women Leaders*

**The Umbrella of Afghan Women Leaders is a platform led by Afghan women both inside Afghanistan and in the diaspora. One of the Umbrella's objectives is to foster solidarity and coordination amongst Afghan women activists, networks and coalitions inside and outside of Afghanistan to sustain the women movement under Taliban, and to improve the situation for Afghan women by ensuring their meaningful contribution to the social, economic and political life of the country.*

² Life-saving support should be approached from a more comprehensive way. Women's and childrens' lives will be threatened and at risk, if female staff continue to be banned from working in the NGO sectors. According to OCHA, if the ban on national NGO female aid workers remains in effect, it is estimated that by the end of the year, that the number of additional maternal deaths will increase from 4,020 to 4,131 (+ 111); the number of neonatal deaths will increase from 22,588 to 23,031 (+ 441); and the number of additional unwanted pregnancies will rise from 274,631 to 285,140 (+ 10,509), 2 million people will have no or limited access to essential, life-saving health services, and maternal mortality rate (MMR) will increase from 638 deaths per 100,000 live births to 651/100,000.

