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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by The Next Century Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



The Urgent Need for International Cooperation to Restore Women's Rights in Afghanistan

Over a year after the United States of America's withdrawal and Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the Next Century Foundation urges that women's rights be wholly respected and their post-primary education reinstated. This should come from increased engagement by the United Nations and its member states with the de facto government of Afghanistan.

We call for more action by all concerned, both the de facto government of Afghanistan and the United Nations Human Rights Council as well as the international community as a whole to ensure Afghan women have full access to education and employment.

We call for the international community to provide targeted funding programs, prioritise listening to Afghan women, and facilitating women's meaningful participation in stakeholder engagement in Afghanistan. We support the UN's adoption of Resolution 2626 that extends the UN Mission in Afghanistan until March 2023.

However, Afghan women and minorities are yet to receive sufficient targeted aid. Targeted aid is vital to preserve women's remaining rights in Afghanistan.

We urge that the UN and its member states exhaust all options and alter existing methods and mechanisms to ensure the restoration of women's rights by the de facto government of Afghanistan. We urge this with caution that it is not the only issue that is challenged by the UN and its member states so that the de facto government of Afghanistan do not resist it and use it as a political negotiations pawn.

We also acknowledge that the entire population, not only women, are in need of international support. Therefore, we urge that the UN and its member states go beyond delivering humanitarian aid to provide sustainable solutions to remove sanctions on Afghanistan's banking system, the freezing of its central bank funds by the United States of America treasury, and the sudden and complete halt of donor aid such that the serious economic challenges that the whole population suffer.

Women's Employment and Economic Situation

Since the establishment of the de facto government of Afghanistan in 2021, women's employment rights have been restricted to a small number of industries. In some cases, women have been told to forward male relatives' resumes to replace them. This loss of income, coupled with the famine and drought faced by the country, means that families go hungry, and children become malnourished. This is compounded by a lack of aid, which used to form over 75% of Afghanistan's budget, and the sanctions that isolate Afghanistan from the world banking system. Women are uniquely affected by firstly their loss of income and the right to work, and secondly the economic crisis fuelled by a reduction in levels of aid, the de facto introduction of sanctions, and freezing of assets. The consequences include a spike in forced and child marriages because families at times resort to selling their daughters, to buy food. Women also forgo food disproportionately to male counterparts to ensure their children are fed.

Because of the economic crisis in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of aid, former donors such as the United States of America have the largest amount of leverage in negotiating with the de facto government of Afghanistan by placing conditions on the provision of further aid such as restoring women's rights. The Next Century Foundation urges the United Nations, the international community, and particularly former significant donors to exert the political will to achieve this.

To restore women's employment rights and lessen the effects of that economic deprivation has on them, humanitarian aid must not be wholly halted – this needs to be targeted. Firstly, it needs to be targeted to essential public services such as healthcare and education, and to subsidising food and fuel. Secondly, it needs to target specific recipients: women, minorities, and rural communities. Thirdly, aid needs to target the recipients' needs. Humanitarian actors should contact intended recipients before delivering aid to adapt it to their specific needs.

Finally, aid needs to target accessible locations, especially given that women now require a male relative as chaperone if travelling over 45 miles.

We also recommend ensuring that women, particularly those from rural areas and lower socioeconomic classes, are involved at every stage of delivering humanitarian aid – at decision-making and delivery stages. This will better ensure the aid not only reaches those in most need, but that it is also monitored and legitimised, and improves the status of women as employees and active members of public life. The UN and its member states need to encourage involvement of women at all stages, or risk compromising their legitimacy. This extends to all UN and member state programs and aid in Afghanistan, not only those explicitly regarding women's rights.

Women's Education

Without the UN and the international community engaging in talks and cooperation, and opening avenues to diplomacy with the de facto government of Afghanistan, girls' post-primary education will effectively remain illegal. The de facto government of Afghanistan has claimed it will reinstate girls' education should the international community engage in talks with it. This is a responsibility of the UN and its member states.

The de facto government of Afghanistan also claims the cessation of girls' education is temporary, and that once there is a safe environment for girls, their education will resume. The UN and its member states need to engage in talks with the de facto government of Afghanistan to understand what a safe environment entails, and what needs to be done to secure it.

Member states such as the United States of America claim that they will support education in Afghanistan if schooling for women was allowed, through paying the salaries of all teachers in Afghanistan, with similar promises made by the World Bank. However, these promises are effectively empty should the UN and member states not engage and cooperate with the de facto government of Afghanistan to restore girls' education.

We also urge the UN and its member states to cooperate to deliver security for girls' travel to and from school and hold the de facto government of Afghanistan to their pledge to restore women's rights as they are granted international recognition. The UN and its member states bear responsibility to ensure girls' post primary education is not only allowed, but is also accessible. This includes sufficient provision of food programmes, including the UN's World Food Programme, and other targeted provision and subsidy by the UN's member states, to ensure girls are not denied access to education because of responsibilities to earn income and find food for their households. They must also ensure the curricula do not significantly differ between girls and boys such that girls receive inadequate education in comparison to their male counterparts.

The United States of America and other North Atlantic Treaty Organisation members bear a particularly great responsibility to aid the restoration of girls' post-primary education in Afghanistan after using women's rights to partly justify their military engagement in the state.

Protection of Remaining Women's Rights: Prevention Over Reaction

Other rights that women have had reversed since the Taliban takeover in 2021 include the right to travel distances over 45 miles, access to healthcare without a male chaperone in certain provinces such as Ghanzi, and political participation. This means women are being taken out of public life and are severely restricted in their ability to reinstate their rights – there is an urgent need for the international community to step in.

The Next Century Foundation calls on the UN and its member states to not only aid the restoration of rights already lost, but also to take address other rights that may be under threat. Rights at risk include being in public without a male chaperone and accessing healthcare delivered by men. It is imperative that any further rights which women in Afghanistan fought for decades to gain are not lost due to international inaction.

Women's rights can only be restored by the UN and the international community where they understand which rights and everyday freedoms have been withdrawn, and how these restrictions are enforced. Therefore, the Next Century Foundation recommends increased on the ground reporting and surveying of Afghan women's situation. Methods may include interviews and focus groups.

Conclusion

The frequent practice of female suicide in Afghanistan is a frightening indicator of the consequences of reversing the rights that women have fought tirelessly for over decades. It is imperative to restore aid to these women through targeted methods and means as well as negotiating directly with the de facto government of Afghanistan. The UN and the wider international community bear a great responsibility in protecting women in Afghanistan, and more needs to be done to do so.
