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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.

[6 February 2023]

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



Women's Education In Afghanistan

Afghanistan has become the only country in the world where women and girls' access to education has been officially suspended. Despite initial claims that women and girls would be allowed to participate in education equally, since their accession to power in August 2021, the new de facto government of Afghanistan has increasingly reduced women and girls' rights to education. After months of enforcing harsh gender segregation within universities and instilling widespread fear among girls with access to secondary education, December 2022 saw the de facto government of Afghanistan ban women from all higher education and prohibit most girls from attending secondary school. Considering the agreements laid out in the 2020 United States of America deal with the Taliban and the promises the Taliban made to us directly, The Next Century Foundation (NCF) is deeply saddened by these decisions as we believe all women and girls should be entitled to secondary and higher education.

Moreover, with three million girls out of school, these restrictions are further contributing to harsh social and economic impacts. While Afghanistan is facing international sanctions and a devastating humanitarian crisis after forty years of war, the lack of opportunities for women and girls' has become the biggest driving force behind migration out of Afghanistan, with a mass desire for migration among families with young girls. Not only is this causing a devastating 'brain drain' to Afghan society and economy, but the prohibition on learning and working for half the population is further losing the economy \$5.4 billion in contributions that women's labour provides. In view of the continued incursion on women and girls' rights, we believe that action from the international community is needed immediately.

The state of international engagement

Following the events of August 2021, the international community acknowledged the current de facto government of Afghanistan's historical record with regard to women's rights, and it seemed like diplomatic engagement would happen. The G7 made a statement noting they would "bring the international community together to address the critical questions facing Afghanistan", that the "Taliban will be held accountable for their actions on human rights, those of women, girls and minorities...", and the United Nations (UN) said it was actively looking for a lasting solution.

However, influential member states currently seem disengaged and alarmingly silent. After the events of August 2021, most states, including the United States of America, closed their diplomatic offices in Kabul. Since then, no UN member state has officially recognised the current de facto government. Despite a handful of states such as the China and the Russian Federation accrediting diplomats, all have refused to establish full diplomatic ties with the current de facto government of Afghanistan.

The international community remains similarly disengaged on the issue of aid. Most states have refused to commit to long-term funding without a guarantee that women's rights, particularly girls' right to return to school, will be restored.

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is intensifying, education policies are becoming more restrictive, and women in Afghanistan state that sanctions and a lack of diplomacy are making it harder for them. Resultantly, The NCF implores influential member states to adopt an engaged and actionable diplomatic strategy. We have outlined our suggestions for such below.

Targeted Donor Funding

Firstly, The Next Century Foundation calls on member states to adopt methods of targeted donor funding with the aim of boosting education for women and girls.

In the past, donor funding has contributed to a majority of the education budget in Afghanistan and has subsidised teacher's salaries and other operational costs. However, following the events of August 2021, a substantial portion of funding was cut over worries of legitimising the current de facto government.

We suggest targeted funding can be applied, without offering legitimacy, as a way to help alleviate the humanitarian and education crisis while simultaneously making a political statement about women's education. Instead of wholly funding education in Afghanistan, we suggest donors cautiously select where and what they fund, considering the political implications, and ensure this money is received through careful tracking. Such funding could be directed to less-extreme regions that permit education for girls; to particular girls' secondary schools that have resisted closures; to primary schools that support and maintain girls' education; and to community-based education classes that encourage education for all children. In terms of higher education, we propose the option of learning from home and suggest funding be targeted to international universities to increase the availability of virtual learning and scholarships for women in Afghanistan. We also suggest targeting funding towards non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and individual activists who continue to challenge restrictions on education and fight for women's rights in Afghanistan.

Through only funding regions, NGOs, and schools that support women's education, donors would be politically highlighting their support for women and girls' education while also demonstrating the economic rewards of supporting girls' education. Such financial support could tempt more extreme individuals or organisations and persuade a change of position. Furthermore, through funding individual advocates and NGOs, donors have the power to strengthen civic action, amplify the message and encourage mass resistance within civil society.

Instead of stopping all funding due to worries surrounding legitimacy, we suggest that targeting donor funding can make the same political statement while alleviating the humanitarian crisis, persuading a reduction in extremism and encouraging domestic resistance.

International Engagement

Alongside offering targeted donor funding, The NCF suggests that influential member states should begin to engage, recognise and form relationships with the de facto government of Afghanistan in an effort to negotiate for women's access to education and demonstrate the benefits of international inclusion.

The UN, for its part, is at least attempting to engage with the new de facto government of Afghanistan. We note the recent meetings Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed held across the Gulf, Asia and Europe to find a revitalised and realistic solution to ensure women and girls' rights to public life, and her subsequent visit to Afghanistan. Though we are saddened to see a failure on the UN's part to engage in targeted donor funding, or indeed to do anything substantive to challenge the Afghan de facto government's position on women's rights despite being ideally placed to do so. The UN argues that it is wrong to use access to lifesaving aid to be used as a bargaining chip. We would argue that, whilst the international community continues to ignore this issue, the onus falls on the UN and that its current actions are complicit in promoting misery for the women of Afghanistan.

Following her recent visit, Amina Mohammed did at least highlight that the de facto government of Afghanistan's desire for recognition remains very strong and explained how it would be used as leverage by the UN. We suggest that member states do the same and further engage diplomatically with the de facto government of Afghanistan, offering international recognition, inclusion and full untargeted, yet still tracked, donor funding. In exchange for this proposition, member states can negotiate a commitment from the Afghan de facto government to upholding women's access to education.

The rationale behind the de facto government of Afghanistan's aspiration for international recognition, and the likelihood that they want international inclusion, has to be considered. With the above proposition, it becomes more likely that the de facto government of Afghanistan will see the diplomatic, economic and political benefits of international inclusion. Thus the prospect of the Afghan de facto government adapting, integrating and following international law, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Afghanistan ratified under the 2001 and the current de facto government inherits under the convention, becomes more of a possibility.

The alternative option of the Afghan de facto government rejecting these benefits and turning back to international isolation may be so dire that they capitulate into affirming women's participation in wider society.

Conclusion

The NCF notes that the restrictions enacted on women's access to education, have now become the main driver of the new wave of migration from Afghanistan. The NCF is deeply saddened by these decisions and we urge the de facto government of Afghanistan to imminently reconsider the restrictions and make the necessary changes to their policy to ensure women and girls' access to education.

Furthermore, we encourage international donors, including the United Nations as well as its member states, to listen to this urgency and immediately act on our suggestions. Through targeting and tracking funding, international donors can make political statements surrounding legitimacy while also influencing the current de facto government's views and encouraging civil resistance. Through also diplomatically engaging with the de facto government of Afghanistan, member states can negotiate a commitment to upholding women's access to education, potentially demonstrate the benefits of international integration and persuade an adherence to international law.

Overall, we argue that the education of women is essential for the social, political and economic recovery of Afghanistan and the international community must engage to find a solution as a matter of urgency. That the international community should continue to ignore this core issue is palpably shameful.
