

Forum: *Human Rights Council (HRC)*

Issue: *Ensuring gender equality in Afghanistan*

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Introduction

With American president Joe Biden's earlier-than-anticipated move to pull all US troops out of Afghanistan in late August, the little progress that had been made towards gender equality during the twenty-year occupation was completely reversed. Now that the Taliban have regained control, numerous questions were raised regarding the competency of Taliban leadership in ruling a country, the stability of an already fragile economy dependent on international aid, and a potential resurgence of Al-Qaeda, a terrorist group with close ties to the Taliban. However, one of the most important questions regarding the American withdrawal is the place that women will hold in their new society; even with the successful steps taken towards gender equality leading up to and throughout the US occupation of Afghanistan, the Taliban's historical trend of keeping women away from opportunities seems to be continuing with their resurgence to power. Thus, the issue to be debated in committee should not so much be about ensuring gender equality in Afghanistan as about establishing some semblance of gender parity in the region to begin with.

Definition of Key Terms

Gender equality

Gender equality is the concept that people of all sexes should have equal rights, conditions, treatments, and opportunities to pursue their full potential, and is achieved when a person's responsibilities and opportunities do not depend on their sex. The deeply patriarchal society of Afghanistan has prevented gender equality to women by restricting their freedoms and limiting their opportunities.

Gender parity

Gender parity is a numerical concept in which ratios and proportions are used to compare the relative gender equality of men and women. Afghanistan has some of the worst numbers in the world when it comes to gender parity: with only 51.8% of its educational gender gap and 18% of its economic gender gap covered, its long-standing issues with gender inequality have caused it to be ranked dead last by the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index.

Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination is the exclusion or restriction of any one person from pursuing enjoyment or opportunity on the basis of gender or sex. Many women in Afghanistan experience gender discrimination, holding them back from pursuing opportunities and careers.

Structural discrimination

Structural discrimination is the discrimination of any one person as a result of policies that, despite appearing neutral, actually affect one sex more significantly than the other. With the lack of political representation for women in the Taliban government, legislators are able to pass laws restricting the rights and freedoms of women without much opposition, thus further entrenching gender inequality in Afghan society.

Sexual and reproductive rights

Sexual and reproductive rights are the rights of any one person to make their own decisions regarding their sexuality and reproductive activities regardless of sex. These rights give women autonomy over their own life and protect them from sexual assault and discrimination. Women in Afghanistan have very little control over their own sexual and reproductive rights due to a lack of knowledge regarding such topics and the emphasis of the patriarchal society in Afghanistan to stigmatize any discussion relating to reproductive rights. Securing sexual and reproductive rights for women and educating them about the topic would thus be crucial to achieving gender equality.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a societal structure in which men hold the greatest political, social, and economic power. A patriarchal society like Afghanistan has men in a majority or all of its

leadership roles, favors men in opportunity seeking, gives men moral authority over women, and disproportionately distributes resources and materials into the possession of men. The patriarchal construction of Afghan societal and familial structures contribute largely to the denial of opportunities to women and the continuation of gender inequality in the country.

Sharia Law

Sharia law is a broad term that typically refers to the application of Islamic religious principles in a political setting in the form of legislation and governance. Though it's unrealistic for the Taliban to base their rule on religious foundations in the modern world, a notion the Taliban seem to be aware of with the policies they have put forward in public announcements, their continual denial of opportunities to women and strict adherence to their religious ideologies strongly suggest their intent to create a society ruled with a religious ideology interpreted to be discriminatory towards women.

Gender Effect

UNICEF defines the Gender Effect as “the understanding that when a society invests in girls, the effects are deep for the girls, multiple for society and a driver of sustainable development”. This goes against the Taliban’s ideology of restricting women’s freedoms and rights as a central pillar for their governance.

Background Information & Key Issues

Reasons for Discrimination

The fact that the Taliban are against women having freedoms is relatively well-known, and has been for the last few decades. However, in order to address an issue such as this, an understanding of the origins of the Taliban’s discrimination is crucial to developing solutions that will hold up in the long term.

Islamist Fundamentalist Ideology

The Taliban follow an ideology widely known as Islamic Fundamentalism, meaning they believe in following the practices and principles laid out in the foundational texts of the Islamic faith. It is important to note that the Taliban follow their own

interpretation of the Islamic texts and are not representative of the Muslim population or the ideas written in the Islamic texts. Their interpretation leads them to believe that women belong in the domestic sphere and should not be involved in politics or society; as the Taliban want to rule by Sharia law, their leading figures saw it fit to restrict the freedoms and opportunities of women with tools of government, thus enshrining a highly patriarchal society within Afghanistan.

Political Legitimacy

Though improvements to conditions for women have been promised with the Taliban's reinstatement in power, not much action has been taken as of yet. Women are still not allowed in schools, public universities, and workplaces. In fact, a recent decree made by the Taliban explicitly omitted any mention of a timeline for the return of women to schools and workplaces, emphasizing the Taliban's opposition to giving women their freedoms. A reason for this might be political; the Taliban, as an insurgent group wresting power from an internationally recognized government, needs to prove that they can govern Afghanistan effectively in order to win public support. With their lack of funds and experience in governing, the Taliban have chosen to gain public recognition in another way, by turning to shows of force and violence as a display of their power. In effect, the restriction of and disregard for women's rights act as a demonstration of the Taliban's power; combined with the fundamentalist views of many in Afghan society, the actions taken against women by the Taliban can be seen as a political tool for them to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Denial of Opportunities for Women

The lack of opportunities available for women in Afghanistan, although improved upon in the 20 years of US occupation, is an issue that remains central in obstructing gender equality within the country, especially with the complete reversal of any progress with the Taliban's success in insurgency. Afghanistan ranked 156th out of 156 countries in the World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Gap Index report, and the denial of opportunities for Afghan women plays a large role in preventing gender equality within Afghanistan.

Discrimination in Government

It should come as no surprise that the Taliban government has very little representation of women. However, there should be less reason to exclude women from

office: in terms of political expertise, Afghan women have slowly gained experience and credibility in civil offices with the improvements towards gender equality made before the insurgency: 21% of Afghan civil servants were women in 2020, with many holding prominent positions in the previous government. However, these improvements for women were highly biased towards urban areas instead of a widespread change, and the Taliban, having announced all-male political leadership, don't seem intent on including women in politics.

The exclusion of women in the political sphere has devastating effects. With the help of Afghan women in government, the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law was passed in 2009 as a piece of legislation that would address the violent discrimination women in Afghanistan face. However, due to a lack of representation of women in government, the law was not strongly enforced and continues to be ineffective at preventing violence against women. Additionally, many laws have been passed to restrict the freedoms of women, creating structural discrimination that makes it even more difficult for women to gain their rights and opportunities.

Education and Literacy for Women

Preventing access to education for Afghan girls has been a key way in which patriarchal societies like Afghanistan have obstructed gender equality. According to the Global Gender Gap Index of 2020, even after the steps taken by the US-backed government previous to the insurgency, only 53.7% of Afghanistan's regional gender gap in educational attainment has been closed. In addition, with the Taliban's return to power, women have been denied access to schools and public universities. Women's education is critical to achieving gender equality: being educated allows women to better argue for their spots in workplaces and civil office, while understanding the female reproductive system and personal health is crucial for dispelling stigmas against women and eliminating unfounded criticisms against giving opportunities to women.

Societal Discrimination

Oppression of women often comes from places other than the government. In a systematically patriarchal society such as Afghanistan, where arranged marriages and domestic abuse are commonplace, many men are given a sense of authority and control over the women in their households. Husbands often discourage or even forcibly prevent

their wives from pursuing careers and many fathers do not favor sending their daughters to school, believing them to be more fit for the domestic sphere. These deeply rooted beliefs stem from long periods of male-dominated rule and must be addressed before any solution can be seen as truly successful.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Taliban

At its core, the Taliban are an Islamist fundamentalist group who are now back in power after a twenty year insurgency against US occupying forces. With their return to governance, the Taliban have publicly stated that they will be more committed to improving gender equality and the status of women, but so far their actions, including the appointment of all-male leadership and preventing girls from getting to schools, have suggested otherwise. Historically, the Taliban have kept women from the public sphere, preventing education, work opportunities, and other types of freedoms. They've continued their trend with their recent return to power, closing schools and workplaces to women and forcing them to stay at home. The Taliban have also been tracking down women who previously held jobs and abducting them from their workplaces. As a result, many women have been burning their certificates and degrees in acts of self-defense, with some even being too afraid to leave their homes in fear of being taken.

Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

The government in place before the Taliban insurgency was relatively neutral on matters regarding gender equality. Although they never explicitly championed the cause, they did implement reforms in line with the US and allowed steps to be made towards gender equality, taking gradual steps to open schools to women and opening opportunities for women in the political and economic spheres. Although the government is still technically legitimate in the eyes of the international community, they have very little political influence within Afghanistan due to their leaders escaping during the insurgency; however, their experience with implementing past measures for gender equality, knowledge of local customs, and political legitimacy in the eyes of the international world can offer assistance in coming up with solutions to gender inequality in Afghanistan.

United States of America (USA)

Many of the advances made towards gender equality in Afghanistan occurred with the help of the US during their 20-year occupation of the country. Many positions in the US-backed government, including translators and coordinators, were held by women, and many more job opportunities were opened up to women with direct Western influence within the country. Another huge advancement was made in terms of women's education, where girls were encouraged to attend schools and the number of women enrolled in Kabul University increased year by year. However, with US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the women of Afghanistan were essentially abandoned, with a lack of support channels and fugitive aid given.

Greece

Although Greece has not been able to handle its refugee crisis well and has drawn a lot of criticism for their setting up of refugee camps, they have made significant efforts towards accepting refugees, especially the Afghan women who would have the largest targets on their backs. Athens has become a center for Afghan women who held positions of political significance, such as lawyers, judges, and journalists, and were thus targeted by the Taliban to be exiled or arrested. Greece has declared their commitment to bringing in refugees from Afghanistan through safe and legal channels and providing asylum for people like Afghan lawmakers to continue their operations remotely.

European Union (EU)

The European Union has repeatedly condemned Taliban actions in violation to human rights and the rights of women. They have frozen assets of the Taliban and cut off economic ties with Afghanistan, looking to apply pressure on the group until they make changes to their policies. However, not much significant action has been taken in the form of accepting many Afghan women as refugees or supporting efforts to push for the rights of women within Afghan communities.

UNICEF

UNICEF Afghanistan has committed themselves to ensure gender equality for the future generations of Afghanistan. With their blueprint being the UNICEF Gender Action Plan, the organization aims to eliminate gender inequality by facilitating an increase in girls' education, preventing child marriage and violence against women, and supporting employed female workers. Additionally, they have worked extensively to report on and combat child marriage in Afghanistan, helping to bring the issue to an international audience.

Women for Afghan Women (WAW)

Women for Afghan Women is a local organization dedicated to provide support services to women and girls. They have provided Afghan women with programs for support, education, and vocational training and provide aid to those who have experienced human rights abuses. They largely operate with local volunteers who have extensive knowledge of the culture, tradition, and customs of Afghanistan. WAW was the country's largest safehouse for marginalized and abused women, providing care packages and temporary housing to those in need, but with its operations forcibly halted due to the Taliban's occupation of its main offices, international intervention will be needed to allow them to continue to support Afghan women.

Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Reintroduction of Initiatives for Women's Rights

Nov. 1933 - Jul. 1973 Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan, decided to slowly reimplement the "modernization" initiatives of his predecessor, King Amanullah Khan, throughout the time of his rule. These initiatives included banning child marriages and allowing women to not wear veils.

Women Assisted in Drafting a Constitution for Afghanistan

March 1964 A constitution for Afghanistan was drafted in 1964 with the help of women. This document not only created a constitutional monarchy and bicameral legislature, but also granted women the right to vote and seek political office.

Charter of the Convention On the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

December 18, 1979 A document from the UN Convention in New York that addresses the civil rights and legal status of women as well as their reproductive freedoms and the impact of cultural factors on gender relations. Over a hundred countries, including the Taliban, signed onto it.

January 2004 **Approval of a New Constitution**

With the Taliban replaced by US leadership, a new constitution was drafted in 2004 that contained portions guaranteeing women's rights and quotas to ensure political participation by women.

Appointment of First Female Governor

Mar. 2005 - Oct. 2013

Habiba Sarabi was appointed Governor of Bamyan Province in 2005, becoming the first woman to serve as a governor in Afghanistan. She was also Minister of Women's Affairs from 2002 to 2004 and has played a crucial role in promoting women's rights and environmental preservation in Afghanistan.

Elimination of Violence Against Women Law Passed

August 1, 2009

One of the most significant legal actions taken by the Afghan government to address the issue of gender equality. The law has increased security of women in Afghanistan with the creation of a specialized police force and increasing convictions of perpetrators responsible. However, this law is not well enforced and can be improved upon.

Taliban Announce New Cabinet

September 6th, 2021

The Taliban announced their new cabinet following a successful insurgency with US withdrawal from the country. Notably, the members are all male and include military leaders from the Taliban's previous term in power that were charged with human rights abuses and war crimes.

Taliban Decree on Women's Rights

December 4, 2021

The Taliban released a decree regarding women's rights that leaves out discussion of women's access to education or workplaces. The decree acts as a clear indicator that the Taliban are not interested in restoring rights to women as they have stated in the past.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- [Charter of the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, Nov. 7 1962 \(A/RES/1763 \(XVII\)\)](#)

- Charter of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Dec. 18th 1979 (**A/RES/34/180**)
- Optional Protocol to the Convention, Oct. 9th 1999 (**A/RES/54/4**)
- Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace, and Security, Oct. 31, 2000 (**S/RES/1325**)
- Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, Dec. 25th 2003 (**A/RES/55/25**)
- Renewal of the Mandate of the UN Assistance Mission Mandate to Afghanistan, Sep. 17th 2021 (**S/RES/2596**)
- Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, Oct. 7th 2021, (**A/HRC/RES/48/1**)

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

In 1964, with the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment Act in the Constitution of Afghanistan, a new movement for women's liberation began to emerge. Afghan women began to protest for their rights, including the right to unveil in public. Subsequently, the Afghan government began to ease restrictions, which was a major victory for women's rights groups. After US intervention, women began to participate in professional and educational spheres by attending university, holding jobs, and traveling abroad. By 2003, the US and a United Nations mandate required Afghanistan's Parliament to be comprised of 25% women, and for Afghan female professionals to occupy lead roles in ministries, governorships, and head positions.

After the Taliban overthrew the Afghan government, countries attempted to negotiate terms for their takeover and discuss their legitimacy. The Taliban's chief spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, has stated during negotiation talks that the Taliban promises "no prejudice against women will be allowed," and said that they could participate in society — "within the bounds of Islamic law." The Taliban have tried to downplay the issue, ceding that they do, to some extent, respect women and will allow them to continue to work. However, their statements do not align with their actions, as women are still being ejected from the workplace and persecuted for their previous work affiliations.

Afghan women have taken to the streets to protest their rights after the Taliban takeover, and have been backed by many international humanitarian aid organizations, such as the Human Rights Watch. However, women are finding it harder and harder to hold impromptu demonstrations as previous rallies have been broken up with violence, including beatings and gunfire. Fear of identification on social media has also become a major deterrent for women protesting, so the number of demonstrations has declined drastically due to security risk concerns.

Possible Solutions

The international community should **withhold financial aid as leverage** in order to pressure the Taliban to provide human rights for women. Although the Biden administration has warned the Taliban that financial aid will be rescinded if they do not recognize the rights of women, financial aid in the form of donations is still flowing into the government in attempts to mitigate the humanitarian crisis in the country. However, due to lack of transparency, it is unclear where the money is being directed or how it has helped Afghans. The Taliban desperately needs funds to stabilize Afghanistan's economy, so by using financial aid as a leverage, this could potentially force the Taliban to concede and halt their persecution of women. For this to work, however, agreements would need to be reached with countries like China and Russia that see an opportunity to gain a foothold in the region by funding the Taliban.

Establishing routes of escape and evacuation for female workers being persecuted for their previous working experience is imperative. Many women who worked under the US or other international organizations are frantically trying to erase traces of their experiences, since the Taliban is persecuting women who were in the workforce. Although the Biden administration has made efforts to establish evacuation programs for Afghan women who have worked for the US, the path to evacuation is still too dangerous, as many women are stopped at the Kabul airport before they manage to gain contact with a US official. Furthermore, Afghan women who have worked for international nonprofit organizations are being persecuted equally, but have even less of a chance at escaping due to the lack of evacuation programs provided to them. The international community must work together to identify women most at risk of persecution because of their previous prominent work positions, and put together reliable, discreet evacuation routes to move Afghan women and their families out of high-risk situations.

Human rights aid groups such as UN Women for Afghanistan should focus their efforts on **outreach in rural areas to support Afghan women** living in the countryside. Rural women suffer the most from gender inequality, as they lack the resources, education, and opportunities their urban counterparts receive. Additionally, women are at the highest risk of being killed by the Taliban, and often suffer the worst human rights abuses in the country since the Taliban had occupied swathes of the countryside long before their successful insurgency. Aid groups should support rural Afghan women by providing them with basic medical care and supplies, food and shelter, and means of transportation to leave the countryside and evacuate.

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