



# Taliban's War Against Women: The UN's Moral Obligation to Stand with Women of Afghanistan

Since regaining power, the Taliban has been waging a war against women in Afghanistan. In their initial weeks in power, they dismantled the Ministry of Women's Affairs and replaced it with the Ministry of Vice and Virtue, charged with enforcing oppressive policies against women such as the mandatory observance of hijab and the "male minder" rule, which requires women to have a man accompany them into public spaces. The Taliban has issued nearly 40 decrees, both formal and informal, that severely limit women's rights, including the rights of women and girls to education, employment, access to public spaces like parks and public baths, and even their use of basic healthcare services.

The Taliban's [ban on women's employment in national and international NGOs](#) instituted in December 2022 was a major intensification of their ongoing assault on women's rights. The ban has further constrained the already limited opportunities available to Afghan women, leaving them with limited access to critical resources such as access to humanitarian aid and basic health services they desperately need. The regressive measure is also a further step toward erasing women from the public space while preventing them from receiving vital humanitarian aid in the midst of a deepening humanitarian crisis.

The responses of aid organizations to the ban have been mixed. While some organizations [chose to temporarily suspend](#) their activities, hoping to exert pressure on the Taliban to reverse their policy, others, such as the World Food Program, decided to [continue with their operations](#). While many aid organizations which have chosen to continue working in Afghanistan despite the ban on women's employment, may have offset immediate harm by allowing women to work from home, this arrangement will not be possible in the long run and will eventually bolster the Taliban's efforts to push women out of employment and almost entirely out of the public space and sphere.

The lack of a strong unified stance from international aid agencies has emboldened the Taliban, leading to their most recent decision to impose a [ban on women's employment within the UN](#) system in April 2023. The UN initially issued a statement expressing that it was forced into

making an ["appalling choice"](#) due to the ban. However, contrary to the [expectations of Afghan human rights activists and national and international civil society groups](#), that the UN suspend activities until women are allowed to return to work, the UN once again complied with the Taliban's demands. An internal UNCT communication [circulated on social media](#) earlier this month indicated that the UN had permitted its agencies to comply with the Taliban's ban on women's employment and continue operations.

In its meeting on 4 May 2023, the UNCT has decided to discontinue the system wide alternative work modalities (AWM) arrangement, which was put in place as an immediate initial response to the ban on national women staff working at UN offices.

Moving forward, decisions on new work modalities will be taken at the agency level and will reflect the commonly agreed aims to ensure 1) consistent, harmonized and coherent ways of working that (2) allow the UN to stay and deliver to the people of Afghanistan, (3) to save lives at scale, taking into account the (4) need to ensure operational/business continuity and reflecting (5) the shared commitment to ensure that work for all staff is undertaken in principled and ethical ways that reflects our accountability to all for the benefit of women, girls, boys and men (6) WHILST respecting the paramount importance of staff safety and security and (7) recognizing the constraints and conditions imposed the UN by the de facto authorities. The UNCT members in Afghanistan acknowledge the difficulty of operationalizing these conditions and will work together to better define common and coherent approaches in the near future.

UNCT members will continue to consult and coordinate continuously under the overall leadership of the DSRSG/RC/HC in country in order to ensure the consistency and coherence described above, as well as continue to heed guidance and recommendations from the IASC Principals, as well as the UN system in its entirety.

The UN will review the situation with regard to the seven conditions described as the situation evolves.

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The Afghanistan Women's Protester Movements Coalition [condemned the UN compliance with gender apartheid](#) while reiterating their demand that the UN suspend all its activities until women can resume work. The statement stressed that:

*“The situation in Afghanistan is not just a humanitarian catastrophe but a human rights crisis. We implore the international community to prioritize women's human rights and take action to demonstrate their commitment to these values in practice. Failure to do so is a tacit endorsement of the Taliban's gender apartheid and an affront to human dignity.”*

The deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan has compelled the UN and international aid agencies to remain in the country with the aim of providing aid, but in doing so, the UN and international aid organizations have disregarded their own principles and values of gender inclusivity and equality, but the worsening humanitarian situation is not a justification for the

abandonment of these values. The situation in Afghanistan is not solely a humanitarian crisis but also a human rights crisis. As such, women's voices and demands must be included in decision-making processes and conversations about the future of the country. Thus far, the UN and many international aid agencies have failed to meaningfully engage with Afghan women and the emerging Afghan women's groups still in the country.

## **Perspective of WHRDs and Civil Society Activists in Afghanistan**

In an effort to better understand the perspectives of women and women human rights defenders about the UN's response to the ban, women's access to humanitarian aid and their expectations from the international community, Femena interviewed women human rights defenders, civic activists, UN staff and Afghan women, throughout Afghanistan. All those interviewed found the UN's compliance with the Taliban ban on women's work, even if framed as necessary for aid delivery, unprincipled and in contradiction to their expectations and international norms. They expressed concern about the equal and fair distribution of aid to communities in need and pointed to some serious challenges in accessing the most vulnerable communities. Those interviewed also expressed great frustration and concern about the long-term negative impact these bans will have on women's social, political and economic participation, women's mental health and sense of dignity as well as their livelihoods. One aid worker explained:

*“In April, my organization informed us that we can no longer report to work. We had hoped that they would negotiate with the Taliban to lift the ban on women's employment. They say they are still negotiating, but we haven't heard any positive news yet. This ban has had a serious impact on our mental health, and*



*with all public spaces closed for women, the office was the only place we could go. Now, that has been taken away from us too. We urge all international organizations to be united and pressure the Taliban to lift the ban and not give in. Erasing women from the workforce will have grave consequences for the future of Afghanistan." **WFP Staff member***

Those interviewed expressed deep concern regarding the existing lack of accessibility to aid in many communities, which is likely to be further exacerbated by the exclusion of women from the workforce. Women now out of the workforce will be in need of aid. But the critical role women played as employees of aid agencies in identifying communities in need, will contribute to the ongoing humanitarian crisis and the appropriate delivery of aid.

Responses of those interviewed point to **inadequate distribution of aid or lack thereof** in many parts of Afghanistan. Numerous local activists explained to Femena that for nearly two years and since the takeover of the country by the Taliban, their communities have been without access to humanitarian aid, despite grappling with extreme poverty. This situation is particularly alarming as the country is already facing a severe humanitarian crisis, with millions of Afghans in need of assistance due to years of conflict, displacement, and natural disasters:

*"The women who work with me have not received any support so far, and they are struggling financially. They do not even have a small amount of money to purchase internet data so that I can communicate with them. None of them have received any humanitarian assistance distributed by aid agencies."*

***D. Farhmand, Head of a women's civic group that advocates for women's employment with members in Mazar, Baghlan, Parwan, and Kunduz provinces.***

Another woman activist from Takhar province shared her account of how her community has not received any aid since the Taliban's return to power.

*"In Takhar province, there has been no aid distribution by the UN or any other international aid agency for almost two years. We have not received any food aid despite the growing hunger and poverty in our community" **Local Activist***

Many of those interviewed have also raised concerns about the **interference of the Taliban with aid distribution**. A woman activist from Balkh province explained that aid distribution has been limited to families associated with the Taliban:

*"Members of the Taliban have been given multiple ID cards, allowing them to receive aid several times, while the rest of the community has been excluded from these distributions. Those who are not affiliated with the Taliban are struggling to access basic necessities." **Activist from Balkh***



According to another local activist who spoke to Femena on the condition of anonymity, the Taliban has a list of its own members and officials to whom provision of aid should be prioritized over communities in need. This practice not only raises **concerns about corruption**, but also highlights **the deepening divide between the Taliban and the Afghan citizens**:

*"Aid organizations comply with the demands of the Taliban. For the past two months, there was no aid distribution in my province. Only two weeks ago, WFP in collaboration with a local organization distributed some aid in my neighborhood. The food items distributed included two sacks of flour, one sack of lentils, one 5-liter can of oil, and supplementary food for malnourished children. Unfortunately, only some of the aid was delivered to the people who really needed it. The Taliban assigned the first day of distribution to their own members, during which most of the aid went to themselves. The Taliban's governor provides his own list to aid organizations, which excludes the people who are in actual need of aid." **Local Activist, Daikundi***

Women activists interviewed explained that complaints in predominantly Hazara provinces of Afghanistan indicate that residents are not receiving adequate aid or are facing interference from the Taliban during the distribution process because of their ethnicity. The Hazara community, which is predominantly Shia Muslim, has been subjected to discrimination, persecution and violence by the Taliban. The **Hazara community** has also been **marginalized and discriminated against** in terms of access to resources and services, including aid:

*"While poverty and economic needs are increasing in my province (predominantly Hazara province), the distribution of humanitarian aid has been halted. Since the end of 2022, we have not seen any distribution of aid happen. During the winter, people had a very difficult time with the cold and poverty, but no one provided any support to us. In the past, when there was any distribution, Taliban members intervened in the process and distributed aid to those they prioritized themselves and to their own members." **Roqia R., Activist.***

The issue of low-quality and contaminated food aid has been another ongoing concern in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, people have frequently reported receiving moldy and insect-infested food distributions by aid organizations in [central provinces](#) in Afghanistan.

Given the ongoing concerns about the unequal distribution of aid in Afghanistan and the increasingly hostile humanitarian situation, those interviewed explained that the decision of the UN and other aid agencies to comply with the Taliban's demand to exclude women from the workforce will only exacerbate the struggles of marginalized groups in accessing aid they desperately need.



This compliance has also undermined the confidence and trust Afghans have in the international system and the UN system is losing credibility with many Afghans, as it fails to protect them. According to Munisa Mubariz, a woman human rights defender and member of the Afghanistan Women Protester Movements Coalition:

*"If the UN cannot defend the rights of their women employees, how can we expect them to stand with the people of Afghanistan in their transition to sustainable peace? The UN's appeasement has only emboldened the Taliban, and we are disappointed." **Munisa Mubariz, WHRD***

It is imperative that the UN and other aid organizations understand that the people of Afghanistan need more than just aid; they need jobs, income sources, dignity and rights and they are looking to the international community to help them in achieving these demands. As such the UN must prioritize women's rights and freedoms in all their operations and stand by their principles by refusing to unconditionally engage with the Taliban. They must also pressure the Taliban to respect universally recognized human rights values. UN and other international agencies must meaningfully include the people of Afghanistan in decisions about their future and their country.

The UN and other international aid organizations must also be transparent and accountable to the people of Afghanistan and should engage in regular evaluation and reporting on their work, particularly with respect to aid distribution efforts, in order to ensure that the aid is reaching its intended recipients in a fair and transparent manner.

Failing to do so will only empower the Taliban to continue depriving women of their basic rights, resulting in a worsening of the already dire situation for Afghan women. This will inevitably lead to an increase in poverty and instability in the country and will have long-term consequences for the future of Afghanistan.