

ARTICLE 7

State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- a. To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies
- b. To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government
- c. To participate in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country



“Afghanistan under the Taliban remains the most repressive country in the world regarding women’s rights.”

—Roza Isakovna Otunbayeva, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan¹

“They told me that the regime has changed. You are not allowed, go home.”

—Afghan woman journalist speaking about women reporters’ job loss following the Taliban’s adoption of new guidelines for media outlets²

Introduction

Article 7 of CEDAW affirms the obligation of State Parties to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life. It requires that women be guaranteed equal rights with men to participate fully in all aspects of political and public affairs. This includes the right to vote in all elections and public referenda, the right to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies, and the right to take part in the formulation and implementation of government policy.

Furthermore, Article 7 recognizes women’s entitlement to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government. It also extends to participation in non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) and associations that engage in public and political discourse. The Article underscores the importance of ensuring women’s representation and active involvement not only in national political systems but also in international decision-making bodies. In doing so, it promotes substantive equality in the political sphere, aiming to dismantle systemic barriers and foster inclusive governance.³

Afghan women have played significant roles in national and international spheres, contributing to governance, diplomacy, civil society, and the private sector. Within the formal political and judicial structures, women have served as judges, cabinet ministers, provincial governors,

senators, and members of parliament. These appointments marked important, though often contested, milestones in Afghanistan's efforts to institutionalize gender inclusion in state structures. Afghan women have also represented the country in key diplomatic positions, including serving as Permanent Representative to the United Nations and Ambassador to the United States, reflecting their increasing visibility in international affairs.

Beyond official appointments, Afghan women have demonstrated leadership in areas of governance reform and civic engagement. They have directed national anti-corruption initiatives, mobilized voters in national elections, and managed large-scale humanitarian and development programs, particularly those targeting women and marginalized communities. In the field of journalism, Afghan women have contributed both domestically and internationally, at times reporting under challenging and risky conditions, and shaping public discourse on human rights, governance, and gender equality.

In the private sector and civil society, Afghan women have founded and led businesses, established influential non-governmental organizations, and directed major media outlets. These efforts have played a critical role in promoting social change, advocating for legal reform, and expanding educational and economic opportunities for women and girls. Despite persistent structural and cultural barriers, Afghan women have continued to assert their agency across multiple domains, contributing meaningfully to Afghanistan's socio-political development.⁴

Disbanding Key Governmental Offices and Removal of Women in Civil and Political Positions

Upon seizing power, the Taliban dissolved the Parliament of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, turning all legislative power over to the Taliban's Leadership Council, which advises the Supreme Leader of Afghanistan, Hibatullah Akhundzada, at his discretion. The Taliban established an interim government with women and minority groups notably absent from all the cabinets and advisory roles.⁵ Further exacerbating these policies, within their first month in power, the Taliban ordered the majority of women civil servants to stay home, with some exceptions afforded to women working in

healthcare, education, and the security sector; these exceptions were then largely erased over time, resulting in only a few areas where Afghan women are allowed to work in the formal sector.⁶ The Taliban replaced the Ministry of Women's Affairs with the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, a new governmental body tasked with overseeing and enforcing the establishment of the Taliban's version of Islamic law throughout Afghanistan.⁷

The Taliban have continued to dissolve key governmental offices, strategically abolishing all institutional bodies that can credibly challenge their rule. For example, in December 2021, the Taliban disbanded the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaint Commission, the two election commissions responsible for ensuring free and fair elections across Afghanistan.⁸ Within the same month, the Taliban abolished the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs, which served as a liaison between the executive and legislative branches in Afghanistan.⁹ A few months later, in May 2022, the Taliban terminated the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), the national independent human rights body devoted to promoting and protecting human rights in the country.¹⁰ In July 2023, the Taliban replaced the Attorney General's Office with the Directorate of Supervision and Prosecution of Decrees and Orders, a new government body without prosecutorial authority.¹¹ With this last action, the Taliban replaced one of the only remaining judicial mechanisms capable of challenging their rulings with a government body lacking prosecutorial authority.

In tandem, the Taliban adopted edicts that curtailed the rights and freedoms of the few Afghan women who remained in government. For example, in July 2022, the Taliban mandated women employees of the Ministry of Finance to appoint a male relative to take up their position within the ministry.¹² In July 2024, in a move widely condemned by women's rights activists, the Taliban's Directorate General of Administrative Affairs instructed provincial departments to standardize the salaries of female civil servants to 5,000 Afghanis per month, irrespective of grade.¹³ 5,000 Afghanis are approximately equal to \$70 USD, a meager monthly salary that has forced many women civil servants to locate alternative income sources to effectively provide for themselves and their families.¹⁴ In wielding these discriminatory edicts and systematically weakening federal institutions, the

Taliban has effectively eliminated Afghan women from government and removed the institutional mechanisms once created to confront violations by state authority.

Women and Work in NGOs, INGOs, and the United Nations

Since taking power in 2021, the Taliban have carried out actions to restrict Afghan women's participation in NGO activities. Initially, in March 2022, the Taliban barred girls and women from employment in offices, a measure that impeded female NGO workers from fulfilling their day-to-day responsibilities and impeded access to humanitarian assistance for the 23.7 million Afghans in need. The 23.7 million Afghans in need represent the highest level of humanitarian distress in two decades, surpassing previous crises.¹⁵ In response, NGOs transitioned women staff to remote positions where possible, released statements that asserted the importance of women staff to their operations, and called for the reversal of the Taliban's measure barring women from working in NGOs.¹⁶ For example, leading INGOs, like the Norwegian Refugee Council and the International Rescue Committee, described the integral role that women staff members play in liaising between the organization and female beneficiaries, many of whom do not interact with men outside of their natal family or marriage without their *mahram* (male guardian) present.¹⁷

Without women staff members in the field, INGOs and NGOs struggled to access the 11.6 million girls and women in Afghanistan who rely upon humanitarian assistance.¹⁸ Rather than heed these warnings, the Taliban made their intentions to curtail women's involvement with NGOs increasingly explicit and, in December 2022, banned women from working for national and international NGOs in Afghanistan.¹⁹

UN and INGO officials met with Taliban leadership to advocate against the new edict in early 2023.²⁰ Women comprised more than 30 percent of the 55,000 Afghan nationals working for INGOs in the country. UN and INGO executives advised Taliban leadership that a unilateral ban on women aid workers threatened to significantly disrupt humanitarian operations across Afghanistan.²¹ However, the Taliban reiterated the necessity of the measure, citing instances of women aid workers wearing improper hijab and their opposition to the

strategic role NGOs have played in disseminating Western values across Afghan society.²² Seeing no feasible way forward without women staff, prominent INGOs—including Save the Children, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee, and CARE International—made the difficult decision to suspend their operations in Afghanistan, leaving behind more than 20 million individuals facing acute hunger, six million individuals on the verge of famine, and five million malnourished children under the age of five.²³

Four months later, in April 2023, the Taliban banned Afghan women from working for the UN, forcing the UN to scale back its operations across Afghanistan.²⁴ In an attempt to rectify the situation, the UN replaced women employees with male counterparts. However, this solution did not address challenges with access to female beneficiaries historically experienced by NGOs operating in Afghanistan.²⁵ UN employees in Afghanistan estimated that the prohibition against women UN personnel decreased the organization's reach and productivity by more than 50 percent. Afghans face the highest prevalence of insufficient food consumption globally, with 92 percent of households struggling to meet their basic needs.²⁶ According to an Afghan woman interviewed by the *New York Times* about the suspension of women in aid services in Afghanistan, "If they are not allowed, we will die of hunger. We are starving."²⁷

The Taliban issued edicts and carried out official acts—at both the national and provincial levels—that infringed upon Afghan women's right to participate in NGO functions. In June 2023, the Taliban banned NGOs from providing educational programming in Afghanistan.²⁸ In September 2023, the Taliban Governor of Uruzgan, an Afghan province, broadcast a message barring women from working remotely for NGOs.²⁹ The next month, in October 2023, the Taliban's Ministry of Economy prohibited NGOs operating in Afghanistan from appointing women to leadership roles within the organization.³⁰ In December 2023, the Taliban's Ministry of Economy directed local and international NGOs to submit the names of current employees for government background checks and approval. Within the same month, the Taliban's Ministry of Economy issued a letter instructing local and international NGOs to cut projects related to peace, conflict resolution, advocacy, and public awareness, which the Taliban described as "unnecessary."³¹ Building on the Taliban edicts adopted in March and December 2022 barring

women from employment in NGOs and the UN, these successive edicts demonstrate the Taliban's prevailing commitment to obstructing women's participation in NGO activities across Afghanistan.

In February 2024, the Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence prohibited NGOs operating in Afghanistan from taking photographs of women participating in their meetings and aid distribution events.³² In May 2024, the Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence shuttered a women-led NGO for continuing to allow women employees to report to work in person against Taliban rules.³³ That same month, the Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence permitted the NGO to reopen, but only after the NGO leadership signed a letter pledging to abide by Taliban guidelines on women's employment moving forward.³⁴ Today, Afghan women are barred from working for national and international NGOs or the UN.

The remaining NGOs in Afghanistan struggle to function fully without women staff. While many INGOs have already pulled out of the country, if the Taliban continues to restrict women aid workers, the organizations left may have to dramatically reduce and or cease their operations, leading to a loss of billions of dollars in humanitarian aid and worsening an already dire humanitarian crisis.³⁵ The prospective withdrawal of aid organizations will undoubtedly exacerbate food insecurity across the nation, which has a population that includes 2.9 million people on the brink of famine, and aggravate the economic crisis.³⁶

Women and Female-focused Content, Female Faces or Voices in Media Outlets

Since August 2021, the Taliban have carried out official acts and adopted a swath of edicts to tighten control over Afghanistan's public media outlets, devoting particular attention to censoring—and silencing—female voices and content. Within their first month in power, Taliban authorities conducted a door-to-door manhunt for journalists with real or perceived ties to the former republic or Western forces, vowing to arrest and detain all those captured.³⁷

Beginning in May 2022, the Taliban rolled out a series of orders directed at women journalists and

broadcasters, including requiring women news anchors to cover their faces on air. In September 2022, the Taliban required female television guests to cover their faces.³⁸ In October 2022, the Taliban eliminated the Women's Seat from the Commission of Media Violations, a move that sparked considerable criticism from journalists and advocates for press freedom in Afghanistan and abroad.³⁹

Throughout 2023, the Taliban censored female voices and content in Afghan public media. In May 2023, the Taliban instructed media outlets to cease producing radio or television content related to female hygiene.⁴⁰ In June 2023, the Taliban banned Afghan women from starring in radio or television programs alongside men.⁴¹ In July 2023, Taliban authorities in Helmand province instructed local media outlets to stop airing girls' and women's voices and reporting on girls' and women's rights and instances of violence against girls and women.⁴² In September 2023, the Department of Information and Culture in Helmand required media outlets to have the content of any radio or television program featuring women pre-approved by Taliban authorities.⁴³ In October 2023, the Taliban Religious Police in Kunduz implemented a similar restriction for press publications.⁴⁴

In 2024, the Taliban continued to restrict Afghan women's participation in public media.

In February 2024, Abdul Rashid Omari, the Taliban Police Chief in Khost, banned women from contacting local radio stations and television channels, citing the potential for 'spreading immorality.'⁴⁵ In August 2024, the Taliban imposed a unilateral ban on older girls' and women's voices and exposed faces in public, a new law that set the groundwork for the elimination of girls and women from public media altogether.⁴⁶

The implications of Taliban restrictions on public media have been vast. By the end of 2024, only 220 out of the 642 Afghan media outlets that existed before Taliban rule remain active.⁴⁷ During the Republic Period (2004–2021), approximately 9,067 men and 2,833 women worked in public media, but by the end of 2024, only an estimated 4,064 men and 700 women remained.⁴⁸ Approximately 5,000 men and 2,100 women journalists have been forced out of their jobs or chosen to leave the profession, citing the risks associated with journalistic practice in Afghanistan.⁴⁹ Women journalists who continue to work in Afghanistan face credible threats

of intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, and even torture, as evidenced by the 85 recorded cases of Taliban violence against women journalists in Afghanistan in 2023.⁵⁰

The censorship and silencing of female voices in Afghan public media have broader impacts on Afghan society. Journalists and press freedom advocates in Afghanistan and abroad describe that the quantity and quality of the news in and about Afghanistan has significantly declined since the Taliban's takeover. A woman journalist, speaking to the South Asia Press Freedom Report about the restrictions affecting female journalists under Taliban rule reported, "When I went to government institutions to gather information, they would tell me to leave and send a male journalist to get the information."⁵¹ Another women reporter, discussing the ramifications of new Taliban restrictions upon women's journalistic practice in Afghanistan said, "Government sources are less responsive to female reporters than to men, and public sources, due to fear of reprisal by the Taliban for being interviewed by a female journalist, refrain from interviews and conversations, or suggest that female journalists should speak with female source."⁵²

As media outlets in Afghanistan are no longer able to operate without Taliban oversight, journalists are unable to report on the range of subjects once permitted under the previous administration or produce content that may be interpreted as critical of the Taliban.⁵³ Due to the fear of reprisals by the Taliban, many journalists have expressed challenges interviewing sources on record, and low-level Taliban officials have been reluctant to provide requested information to journalists.⁵⁴

A Future Without Girls and Women in Political and Civil Life

In addition to the direct impacts on Afghan women in government, NGOs, and public media, the Taliban continued their efforts to eliminate women from political and public life. The potential consequences raise concerns for Afghanistan's future. For example, the Taliban's failure to include women in government negatively impacts the nation's ability to receive funding from institutions like the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank that take into account human rights and women's rights in their financial decision-making.⁵⁵ Similarly, without women in government, historically friendly nations are rejecting a partnership with Taliban-run Afghanistan for fear of being added to the United States' secondary sanctions list.⁵⁶ These plausible ramifications from the Taliban's policy and practice are troubling for a nation already in an acute economic and human rights crisis.

The Taliban's crackdown on women's and girls' voices in public media has led to a demonstrated decline in the quantity and quality of news in and about Afghanistan. Without women journalists and broadcasters, the Afghan people are unable to realize their right to information included in multiple international human rights instruments like Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 19.2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.⁵⁷

The ramifications of Taliban efforts to drive girls and women from political and public life reach far beyond the women directly impacted. While Taliban policy violates the rights and freedoms granted to girls and women in Article 7 of CEDAW, their efforts contribute to human rights violations against Afghan society more broadly.

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