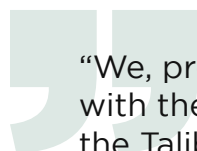


ARTICLE 8

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure to women, on equal terms with men and without any discrimination, the opportunity to represent their Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations.



“We, protesting women, ask the United Nations to stop negotiating with the Taliban about the fate of the Afghan people; because the Taliban are not representatives of the Afghan people, and no person or organization has the right to deal with the fate of the Afghan people, especially women.”¹

—A coalition of Afghan and international women’s rights movements protesting the Doha 3 meetings hosted by the United Nations in which the Taliban agreed to participate only if Afghan women and civil society groups were barred from attending

“They banned me as an Afghan woman, saying female aid workers in Afghanistan aren’t necessary. I was shocked. Outraged. Heartbroken... The ban on female aid workers is effectively cutting off women and children from vital support at a time when we’re facing our biggest food and economic crisis on record. I’m calling on the world to stand with us, advocate for us, be our voice and demand that the ban be reversed. Our lives depend on it.”

—Afghan woman educator working for a humanitarian aid organization

Introduction

Article 8 of CEDAW addresses the necessity of ensuring women’s equal participation in international affairs. It obliges States Parties to take appropriate measures to guarantee women the opportunity, on equal terms with men and free from discrimination, to represent their governments at the international level and to engage in the work of international organizations.

This provision encompasses women’s right to participate in international conferences, diplomatic negotiations, and official missions, as well as their involvement in the operations of international

organizations, such as the United Nations, and regional organizations, such as the African Union, the Organization of American States, and the Council of Europe. Article 8 builds upon the principles outlined in Article 7, which focuses on domestic political and public life, by extending gender equality obligations into the realm of international representation and diplomacy.

Importantly, Article 8 calls for more than formal equality by emphasizing the need for substantive equality. It requires States Parties not only to remove legal barriers but also to adopt proactive strategies to address structural inequalities, including gender bias in recruitment, appointment, and nomination

processes. This involves challenging stereotypes and institutional practices that have historically limited women's participation in international decision-making and leadership roles.²

In 2001, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was created to help secure women's social, political, and legal rights.³ In 2002, Dr. Sima Samar, serving as Afghanistan's first Minister of Women's Affairs, addressed the United Nations Security Council and other international forums to underscore the critical need for global support in promoting women's rights and facilitating national reconstruction. Throughout its mandate, the Ministry for Women's Affairs actively partnered with United Nations agencies and foreign governments to advance its objectives of safeguarding and improving the legal, social, and political status of Afghan women and girls. In its international advocacy, the Ministry emphasized the essential role of women in all phases of peacebuilding, political transition, and institutional development, while also urging the implementation of global commitments such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

Afghanistan's accession to CEDAW in 2003 played a significant role in shaping the gender equality provisions of its 2004 Constitution. The Constitution enshrines the principle of equal rights and responsibilities for women and men under the law, explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender, and affirms women's rights to full participation in political and public spheres. Notably, Article 83 of the Constitution establishes a quota system aimed at promoting women's representation in the national legislature, reflecting a commitment to enhancing gender inclusivity in governance.⁴ By 2021, women held 69 out of the 249 seats in parliament.⁵ Also in 2021, women occupied 6.5 percent of the ministerial positions, with nine women in the minister or deputy minister positions.⁶

Afghan women have held prominent positions across various sectors, serving on the Supreme Court, as government ministers, provincial governors, members of parliament, and senators. Afghan women held high-ranking international positions, including as Permanent Representative to the United Nations and Ambassador to the United States. In addition to their formal political roles, Afghan women have led national anti-corruption initiatives, organized widespread voter mobilization efforts, managed large-scale humanitarian operations, and contributed to both national and

international journalism with notable impact. They have also played significant leadership roles in the private sector, founding and managing businesses, establishing civil society organizations, and directing major media outlets.⁷

Afghan women in government and civil society participated in international conferences, decision-making forums, and peace negotiations around the world. For example, they participated in the Afghan Women Leaders' Peace Summit 2020 in Dubai, where they advocated for women's perspectives and representation in peace negotiations with the Taliban. They demanded a ceasefire and strove to ensure that both ethnic and gender minority voices were present in these negotiations.⁸ Afghan women were also present at the International Donors' Conference for Afghanistan 2020 in Geneva to advocate for gender inclusive aid to Afghanistan.⁹

Outside of politics, Afghan women represented their country in international competitions in basketball, wheelchair basketball, soccer, handball, cricket, track and field, cycling, martial arts, and volleyball. Afghan women musicians, fine artists, street artists, calligraphers, embroiders, weavers, performers, photographers, performance artists, and entertainers have exhibited, performed, presented, and lectured around the world, winning international audiences and acclaim.¹⁰

Nonetheless, research conducted by the United States Institute for Peace with Afghan men and women revealed a broad consensus that opportunities for Afghan women's leadership and women's international participation remain constrained. These leadership roles are often concentrated in urban areas, heavily reliant on international donor support, and lack widespread integration into rural and conservative, patriarchal contexts.¹¹

International Participation and Representation

Since regaining control of Afghanistan, the Taliban have effectively removed and excluded Afghan women from all formal political processes, including those involving international diplomacy or multilateral forums. The Taliban have instituted a series of measures that drastically curtail the participation of Afghan women in public and political spheres, both within the country and on the international stage. One of the regime's

initial actions was the dissolution of government bodies dedicated to women's affairs, notably the Ministry of Women's Affairs, thereby eradicating institutional representation and avenues for women's political engagement.

The Taliban have imposed stringent limitations on women's mobility, making it increasingly difficult and costly for women to obtain passports, mandating the presence of a male guardian or mahram for domestic and international travel, and enforcing strict dress codes, such as the requirement to cover their faces in public.¹² These policies severely inhibit women's capacity to travel abroad or participate in international conferences and negotiations. Furthermore, the prohibition of girls and women from accessing secondary and higher education, combined with heavy restrictions on female employment, deprives them of the qualifications and experience necessary for meaningful involvement in global political dialogue.

In addition, the dismantling of human rights institutions and justice systems, especially those tasked with safeguarding women's and girls' rights, has eroded accountability mechanisms and left a substantial void in the enforcement of international human rights standards. Public expression of dissent, including peaceful protests, has been met with repression and violence, fostering an environment in which women and girls are deterred from voicing their perspectives. This climate of fear further marginalizes women and girls and obstructs their participation in political processes at both national and international levels.¹³

The Taliban have systematically excluded Afghan girls and women from national and international diplomatic meetings, policy negotiations, and humanitarian coordination efforts. In November of 2023, the Taliban convened their first de facto cabinet meeting.¹⁴ Under the new de facto Prime Minister, numerous policies were drafted and passed, including the Taliban's approach to domestic and foreign policy.¹⁵ In implementing these new measures, the Taliban allegedly conducted outreach to the Afghan population, although girls and women were excluded from this process.¹⁶

The Taliban have systematically excluded Afghan girls and women at the international level. Most notably, Afghan girls and women and issues of their concern were absent during regional meetings when the Special Representative of the

Secretary-General of Afghanistan and the Head of United Nations Assistance met and discussed the forced return of Afghans from Pakistan back into Afghanistan.¹⁷ How the forced returns would affect Afghan girls and women, and key considerations regarding Afghan girls and women, were not discussed during these meetings, leaving them excluded from international conversation.¹⁸

Only in some international meetings without the Taliban present have Afghan girls and women been able to engage in participation and representation internationally. In a study conducted by the IOM, UNAMA, and UN Women, both men and women respondents stated a need for women's representation in the dialogue surrounding Afghanistan's future.¹⁹ Additionally, they expressed a desire for a women-only delegation to represent Afghan women's needs in international decision-making.²⁰ The respondents also stressed the importance of Afghan women's meaningful representation in international affairs, expressing frustration that there had been few instances of women's participation in national and international affairs. Importantly, respondents were critical of some of the women who had been hand-picked by political leaders and felt that Afghan women were being left without a say in who represents them. In one of the few opportunities for women to share their voices in a national consultation undertaken by IOM, Afghan women made clear the importance of actual and meaningful representation in international affairs, citing the numerous ways in which they have been systematically shut out of international affairs.²¹

Women NGO and INGO Employees

The Taliban prevented women's international participation with direct restrictions on women employed by NGOs and INGOs in Afghanistan. They ordered that female humanitarian aid workers must wear hijabs following the Taliban's new dress laws.²² Initially, this did not include women working within the UN agencies. However, in May 2022, the Taliban declared that this decree was now applicable to all women, including those associated with the UN.²³ The Taliban then ordered over 400 Afghan women who worked for the UN in Afghanistan out of their jobs, comprising 12 percent of all UN staff in the country.²⁴ Added regulations included the mahram rule, stating that Afghan male relatives needed to accompany Afghan women employees to and from work and

for the duration of their shifts. By April 2023, Afghan girls and women were completely banned from all participation in international aid groups.²⁵

This ban caused many international organizations to significantly scale back or suspend operations.²⁶ As a result, many Afghan women and children are no longer able to access aid due to discriminatory cultural beliefs and restrictions by the Taliban that there can be no male-female interaction. Female-headed households and individuals experiencing disabilities are among the most at-risk groups in need of aid.²⁷

The UN's 2024 appeal for Afghanistan is \$3.06 billion to provide humanitarian assistance to 23.7 million people. As of November 2024, only 37.5 percent of the funds had been secured.²⁸ Many countries are withholding aid due to the Taliban's extreme discrimination and violence towards girls and women. As of December 2024, Afghanistan was the lowest-funded UN aid operation in the world, despite being one of the countries with the highest need.²⁹

In 2025, nearly 14.5 million people in Afghanistan are facing acute hunger, over 1 in every 3 Afghans, and those numbers expected to rise.³⁰ The Afghan government has historically heavily depended on international development and aid for essential services. With the significant decrease in access, funding, and ability to accurately report, essential services are on the verge of collapse.³¹ Individuals experiencing disabilities remain at great risk, and Afghanistan has one of the highest percentages of individuals with disabilities in the world. Without humanitarian aid, many services for disabled Afghans no longer exist.³²

From humanitarian reporting undertaken, 37 percent of Afghans stated that since the beginning of 2023, their ability to access humanitarian aid had decreased. By the end of 2023, this figure rose to 51.21 percent of Afghans surveyed, many of them citing the Taliban banning female employees as the primary reason their access was reduced or stopped.³³ For example, during the May 2024 floods in northern Afghanistan, the absence of female staff hindered NGOs from adequately addressing the needs of women and children during the crisis. Due to the lack of women employees and existing Taliban gender and mahram rules, women-headed households were not reached. Additionally, specific female needs, such as menstrual hygiene kits, were not adequately distributed, as distribution relied

heavily on the Afghan men seeking, giving assistance to, identifying, and advocating for women's and girls' specific needs.³⁴ Because of the Taliban's ban on girls' and women's participation in NGOs and INGO's, Afghan girls and women are denied the ability to directly work in the humanitarian sector or often to directly receive humanitarian aid. Girls and women are also denied the ability to participate and be represented in international humanitarian data, reporting, and response.

Women's International Participation in Sports

Afghanistan had numerous women athletes and women's athletic teams that competed in national, regional, and international sports events. The Taliban banned women and girls from participating in sports, disbanded their sports teams, and barred them from athletic facilities. The Taliban only sent male athletes and ignored the existence of Afghan female athletes who qualified and went on to participate in the Paris 2024 Olympics.³⁵ While six Afghan athletes represented Afghanistan during the Olympics, the three female Afghan athletes who participated all reside outside of Afghanistan.³⁶ The female athletes' participation was coordinated with agencies outside of Afghanistan, while the male athletes were under the responsibility of the Taliban.³⁷ The spokesman for the Taliban sports directorate stated, "Only three athletes are representing Afghanistan," indicating that the three Afghan female athletes did not exist in the eyes of the Taliban.³⁸

Intergovernmental Meetings Focused on Afghanistan

A significant denial of women's right to meaningful international participation and representation was evidenced in the high-level intergovernmental Doha 3 meeting. The Taliban refused to participate in the meeting if Afghan women were present. The international community did little to support Afghan women's right to participation, as they valued Taliban participation in the conference and hoped for agreements with the Taliban on curbing drug trafficking over human rights and girls' and women's rights. Coming into the Doha 3 conference, civil society and girls and women's rights were not on the agenda, as the UN sidelined these topics and let the Taliban dictate the agenda to the environment and counter-narcotics.³⁹⁴⁰ In

response to Afghan women's exclusion, an optional third day was added to the two-day conference, and a small side event was held regarding civil society and women's rights, to which the Taliban agreed.⁴¹ However, as this third day was added on at short notice, many country delegates had already left, the meetings that they had were closed-door, and the few women who were chosen to represent Afghanistan in the conversation were hand-picked by the UN.⁴² The limited conversation about the future of girls' and women's rights in Afghanistan was held without the full quorum of country delegates and manufactured without the meaningful participation and representation of Afghan girls and women.⁴³ The Doha 3 conference comes as a double blow for Afghan women, as the UN Security Council Assessment for Afghan Reintegration was already conducted without transparency or inclusivity, and produced a result that significantly downplayed the widespread and systematic denial of the rights and freedom of girls and women.⁴⁴

The Taliban have presented an international agenda that denies girls' and women's meaningful participation and representation in international affairs. They are denied the ability to participate in national proceedings, denied the existence of representing their country at the Olympics, and denied a space in which to articulate an unfiltered voice in the international community.

Following the Doha 3 conference, the Taliban escalated restrictions on women's rights by barring the Special Rapporteur from entering Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Shortly after, the Taliban published one of their most severe laws, "The Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice."⁴⁶ Under this law, older girls' and women's voices are banned from being heard in public or heard from within their own homes.⁴⁷ As girls and women are systemically erased from Afghan society, they are also being erased from the world, as they cannot participate in any form of public or, in some cases, private life if they cannot speak.

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