

## CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Statement by Ms. Zarqa Yaftali**  
**UN Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security**  
**29 October 2020**

Mr. President, Excellencies, my civil society colleagues,

I am Zarqa Yaftali, Executive Director of the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation, which documents violence and discrimination against women and girls in Afghanistan. I deliver this statement on behalf of the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today on the historic occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Resolution 1325 (2000), and at this critical moment for Afghanistan, when the Taliban and Afghan government have begun peace talks to put an end to 41 years of war.

Bullets, bombs, tyranny and torture. Children crying for food, civilians struggling to survive, women unable to walk out of their homes freely. Every day, people leave their homes knowing that they might not come back. When we are not under siege from bombs and landmines, ordinary Afghans suffer from hunger, natural hazards and poverty. Every day is a war and every day people lose their lives. This is Afghanistan today.

Mr. President, we live in a situation that has been named one of the world's most lethal conflicts. More than 100,000 civilians have been killed over the past 10 years alone. And the deaths continue as we speak.

The conflict has taken a particular toll on women and girls. Over half the population lives below the poverty line and this has hit women the hardest. 70% of Afghan women are illiterate, 35% of girls are forced to marry before the age of 18, 87% of Afghan women have already experienced at least one form of gender-based violence, and women and girls are less likely to have access to quality health services and treatment, particularly in rural areas. Women and children make up the majority of four million internally displaced people. All these issues have only worsened with the spread of COVID-19, which is not only costing us our lives, particularly those of people with disabilities and those who have been displaced, but also wreaking havoc on our economy and society and pushing women back into their homes.

In addition, our civil society is threatened, harassed and attacked and no measures exist for their protection. In mid-September, the US Embassy in Kabul reported an increased risk for women, including human rights activists and women in government.

Despite these challenges, my people have also worked tirelessly to change this country for the better. Today, many of our girls can go to school without fear. We have heroes like Shamsia, the daughter of a coal miner, who came first in Afghanistan's national university entrance exam. We have a free media and a constitution that protects the rights of women and ethnic and religious minorities. Women are no longer publicly shot or stoned in Kabul stadiums, imprisoned in their homes or forced to wear burqas or shoes that make no noise, like they were 20 years ago.

Today, Afghan women are gaining respect and recognition as they begin to flourish in all walks of life, as doctors, taxi drivers and film-makers. Women in Afghanistan are also ministers, women who, under the Taliban regime, were deprived of the most basic rights to education, employment and freedom of movement. Today, they are in a position to influence policy and shape the future of our nation.

Much of this change is only due to the role women played in advocating for their rights over the past two decades. Women's increasing participation in public and political life has changed harmful social norms and expectations around our role in Afghanistan. Afghan society today is ready to see women lead this country into the future.

Mr. President, we do not take this progress for granted.

Despite the great strides we have made, we know our hard-won gains can be snatched away without warning. The bitter memories of Taliban rule haunt us daily. These experiences are still a reality for many women and girls living in areas controlled by the Taliban, where few girls are allowed to attend school past puberty, access to information is limited and freedom of expression is severely curtailed. The punishments meted out by Taliban courts for infractions of strict codes of conduct are so brutal that they deter women from leaving situations in which they face violence on a daily basis.

My generation is paying for a war we never planned for. The impact of this conflict reverberates beyond Afghanistan, affecting the region all the way to the shores of Europe, where many of your governments do all they can to keep us out. But we don't want to leave our homes. All Afghans fervently hope that the fighting will finally stop, so that our people can live in dignity, built on inclusive government, social and economic justice and respect for human rights.

Mr. President, peace cannot come at the cost of women's rights. All we have achieved hangs in the balance in the current negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

After extensive delays to the Intra-Afghan talks, the official start in September is indeed a milestone. The presence of four women on the government's negotiation team is a positive development, but it is not enough. Afghanistan's track record for including women is dismal — between 2005 and 2020, women were excluded from almost 80% of peace process meetings and negotiations. Given the deep-rooted resistance by the Taliban to women's formal inclusion in past processes, and the recent attack targeting one of the women on the government's negotiating team, we are deeply concerned that women's rights will be used as a bargaining chip between the Taliban and the Government of Afghanistan. This would undermine our fundamental rights and ignore our important contributions to the future of this country.

We therefore urge the international community, including global and regional institutions, Member States and donor countries, to exercise your responsibility to ensure that none of the parties involved, including the Taliban, restrict women's human rights, civil liberties or citizenship in any way. The political pressure exerted by the international community on negotiating parties in the Intra-Afghan talks cannot be overstated—you provide essential financial support to our country and have the ability to use that position to promote the protection of women's rights and our formal and direct participation in the talks and the subsequent state-building processes. Up to this point, women have been relegated to the sidelines. Two years ago, we watched negotiations between the US and the Taliban not only exclude women, but also the Afghan government entirely. The widespread and meaningful participation of women in the peace process is essential both for peace and for the fate of Afghan women.

The Security Council has repeatedly emphasized the importance of protecting women's rights and ensuring women's equal participation in Afghanistan for over 20 years.<sup>1</sup> At this critical juncture, we urge you to use your influence to:

- Demand an immediate ceasefire: In order for the Intra-Afghan peace talks to be successful, all actors must drop their weapons and stop fighting.
- Insist on women's rights and participation as preconditions for support for inclusive peace talks: Inclusive peace talks must be structured to allow sufficient time to discuss human rights and consult with a broad range of Afghan civil society in formal roles. The international community must make women's rights and women's full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership in formal, substantive and specific roles at every level of the peace process a precondition for any continued economic assistance or political support for the post-peace government. We must be included at all stages and all levels of decision-making — in the pre-negotiation phase, in ceasefires, in the peace process and in implementing and monitoring

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<sup>1</sup> S/RES/1333 (2000), S/RES/1386 (2001), S/RES/1419 (2002), S/RES/1536 (2004), S/RES/1589 (2005), S/RES/1662 (2006), S/RES/1806 (2008), S/RES/1833 (2008), S/RES/1868 (2009), S/RES/1890 (2009), S/RES/1917 (2010), S/RES/1943 (2010), S/RES/1974 (2011), S/RES/2011 (2011), S/RES/2041 (2012), S/RES/2069 (2012), S/RES/2096 (2013), S/RES/2120 (2013), S/RES/2145 (2014), S/RES/2189 (2014), S/RES/2210 (2015), S/RES/2274 (2016), S/RES/2344 (2017), S/RES/2405 (2018), S/RES/2489 (2019), S/RES/2513 (2020)

any resulting peace agreement. There should be financial support to ensure that diverse women from across the spectrum of Afghan society can participate. Women's direct and formal participation should be a requirement in all UN-supported peace processes, and you should begin this new era with the Afghan peace process.

- Preserve all constitutional protections for women's rights: The human rights protections, including all political, economic and social rights, as provided for in Chapter 2 of the Afghan Constitution must be protected unreservedly and be fully upheld in any eventual outcome. Critically, negotiators should not postpone decisions on critical human rights issues for the sake of expediency in reaching a hasty settlement.
- Ensure inclusive monitoring of progress: It is critical to establish a joint committee of the United Nations, countries involved in Afghanistan, civil society and the media to monitor the implementation of any peace agreement and report on violations, including those of women's rights, by both parties.
- Ground all peace and security policymaking in international human rights and humanitarian law and mandate inclusion of women in leadership and decision-making roles: All statebuilding and peacebuilding processes must include diverse women and youth, minorities, displaced persons and women and girls with disabilities, and guarantee the full scope of all fundamental human rights. International actors should use their influence to ensure these core standards are met, and that there is continued financial support for advancing human rights protections, including ensuring women and girls' access to education.
- Ensure safety of women leaders, peacebuilders, human rights defenders and activists: Prevent threats and violence aimed at deterring our participation in peace and security processes, including by elevating our role in promoting peace and human rights. This includes a political settlement with the Taliban that protects women's rights.

In October 2005, Sweeta Noori, the first Afghan woman to address this Council, described women's decisions to exercise their right to participate in public life in my country as "a life-or-death choice," and warned that the international community must not abandon Afghanistan until a stable and just peace had been established. Just last year, [Jamila Afghani](#) called upon the international community again to stand with Afghan women and ensure that their rights would not be traded away for a peace deal. Today, as the tenth Afghan woman to brief this Council on behalf of civil society, I am here to tell you that your role in Afghanistan matters now more than ever.

20 years of commitments and resolutions by this Council have not changed the reality for women in Afghanistan. We are not the only ones demanding action. Women in Yemen, Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan — in fact, in every country on the Security Council's agenda — will view your actions in Afghanistan as the true test of this Council's commitment to Resolution 1325 and an indication of what they too can expect as they encounter similar challenges to equality and inclusion in their own countries.

Although Afghan women have for too long suffered from war, we are not victims — we have fought back for decades for our rights, and we will not sit by and watch our achievements be thrown away. It is your responsibility as the international community to ensure that you do not either.

Thank you.