

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by Ms. Zahra Nader
UN Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security
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President, Excellencies and civil society colleagues,

My name is Zahra Nader. I am editor-in-chief of Zan Times, a women-led newsroom that covers human rights violations in Afghanistan with a focus on women, LGBTQI people and environmental issues.

It is both an honor, and a responsibility, to discuss the devastating situation of Afghan women and girls with you today. I am here because I can be. However, it is critical that you continue to hear directly from diverse Afghan women, including those still living in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, who daily risk their lives to speak truth to power.

Just weeks ago, the suicide bombing of the Kaaj education center killed at least 55 people, including 51 Hazara girls and women, and injured at least 124 others. As a Hazara woman myself, what makes this incident especially painful is that it was both an attack on my community as well as on girls' education. Those Hazara girls were there to take entrance exams to go to college, and become journalists, doctors, engineers. They dreamed of lives that today seem more out of reach than ever.

This attack is a potent symbol of the assault on the rights of women and girls, ethnic groups such as the Hazara and other marginalized groups under Taliban rule, the focus of my statement today.

Situation of women's rights

Experts are warning the international community that my country has descended into authoritarianism and gender apartheid.

Today, an estimated 20 million women and girls who grew up in Afghanistan going to school, to work, who grew up being able to go where they liked and to speak their minds, are, under the Taliban, deprived of these fundamental human rights because of their gender. Women have been ordered to stay home. Girls have been banned from attending school above sixth grade. Women and girls have been banned from traveling alone — even riding in a taxi — without a male chaperone. And male relatives who fail to enforce the Taliban's misogynist policies are punished. The Taliban are arresting and imprisoning women for so-called "moral crimes." The return of the Taliban has also led to a dramatic increase in forced and child marriages, not only because of lack of access to education and abject poverty compelling families to sell their daughters into marriage, but also because members of the Taliban are, themselves, forcing girls and women to marry them.

One shocking case involved Elaha Dilawarzai, an Afghan medical student who released a series of videos begging for help because a former spokesperson for the Taliban's Ministry of Interior Affairs forced her into marriage, raped and tortured her. "Please help me!" she pleaded. "After publishing this video, it's possible that no one will see me again, I might die." Her current whereabouts are unknown. Other Afghan women have similarly vanished — it has now been a year since the disappearance of prison director Alia Azizi.

There are new violations every day. The truth is that we don't know — and will probably never know — the full extent of violations taking place because UN monitoring is thin on the ground, the Afghan media, especially women journalists, have been crushed by the Taliban, and the international media has mostly left. And the Taliban have terrorized into silence anyone who dares to oppose them.

Repression of women protestors

Women are, of course, the Taliban's main target, and in the past year, we have witnessed violent crackdowns on anyone protesting against their misogynist policies.

We interviewed people involved in the September 2021 anti-Taliban protests in Mazar-e-Sharif, who shared shocking accounts of how the Taliban have beaten, abducted, tortured, imprisoned, and killed women, like 29-year-old activist Frozan Safi, for their roles in peaceful protests — and afterward threatened their families to stop them from speaking out. The decomposing body of Safi was found days after she went missing in Mazar-e-Sharif last October. “We recognized her by her clothes. Bullets had destroyed her face,” Safi's sister told me. One woman who spent 11 days in Taliban custody for protesting, told us that she witnessed Taliban members slapping children and putting guns to their heads in order to pressure their mothers, and forcing women to confess at gunpoint.

Why are the Taliban going to such lengths to silence women?

Because, to date, Afghan women have mobilized the most consistent and peaceful opposition to Taliban policies. Women have taken to the streets, as recently as this week, chanting “Bread, Work, Freedom,” a call that encapsulates our key demands. We need bread, but survival alone is not enough. We demand independence, including economic independence and the right to work, to participate fully and equally in society, and to take control of our own lives. And we insist on freedom, the non-negotiable lifeblood and right of every person as decreed by the United Nations (UN) and its Member States.

The Taliban view women protestors — indeed any Afghan women who speak out — as the enemy, because they are exposing the depth and breadth of the Taliban's abuse of the Afghan people. By speaking out, Afghan women have become the main obstacle to what the Taliban crave most: recognition by the international community.

Situation of ethnic and religious groups and LGBTQI people

The Taliban are also targeting marginalized communities, such as ethnic and religious groups and LGBTQI people, putting some women at even greater risk.

The Hazaras, who have faced discrimination and abuse for their ethnic and religious identity for over a century, are today under systematic attack and experts are warning of the risk of genocide. Since the Taliban took over, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (IS-K) has been responsible for killing and injuring at least 879 Hazaras. Members of the Hazara community have mobilized in countries around the world to demand urgent action. And disturbing reports of war crimes continue to emerge from Panjshir, Balkhab and wherever the Taliban face armed resistance. The Taliban's assault on human rights, particularly of women and girls, combined with their failure to provide security or necessary services to at-risk populations, exacerbates the harm these attacks cause. The Taliban's Pashtun leaders and their extremist interpretation of Islam have jeopardized the rights of not only Afghanistan's Shia Muslims, but also Sufis, Ahmadis, Hindus, and Sikhs, all of whom have been excluded from making decisions about their country's future.

LGBTQI people in Afghanistan must not only deal with discrimination and abuse within their communities, but are now being attacked, killed, sexually assaulted and directly threatened by members of the Taliban because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. A group of queer Afghans told us that the Taliban are hunting them down — adding a level of terror to their already dangerous existence.

The international community must act now

Since the takeover last August, the Security Council has met eleven times on Afghanistan, and issued two public statements and passed three resolutions reaffirming the importance of women's rights.

However, these efforts have so far failed to pressure the Taliban to change course. On the contrary, the Security Council's renewal of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's (UNAMA) mandate in March was followed by the Taliban's rollout of some of their most egregious policies, such as extending the ban on girls' secondary education, and enforcing full-face coverings and male chaperones for women. The UN has appeared

stumped about what to do next, and the Security Council seemingly unwilling to use its available tools to signal to the Taliban that violating women's rights is unacceptable.

When it comes to women, peace and security, there is a major gap here at the UN between words and action. And the Taliban have no respect for words.

Recommendations

This Council has before it overwhelming evidence that the Taliban are terrorizing women and girls, and excluding and discriminating against Afghanistan's diverse ethnic and religious groups. For the sake of all my sisters in Afghanistan, I urge you to take the following steps:

- Call on the Taliban to respect the human rights of all Afghans, including women, girls, LGBTQI people and others marginalized because of religion or ethnicity; end all restrictions on women's rights; dismantle the Ministry of Vice and Virtue; and reinstate the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. Call on the Taliban to end the targeting and abuse of protestors, human rights defenders, journalists and their families. In short, demand the Taliban fulfill the human rights obligations and standards that you, the Security Council, have been calling on them to respect for over a year now.
- Do not grant the Taliban formal recognition, and ensure that they face consequences for their violations of human rights. The Security Council must not renew any exemptions to existing travel bans on Taliban leaders, and should consider adding members of the Taliban leadership who have been responsible for rights violations to the UN sanctions list. The Taliban's abuses must not be normalized, and you cannot resign yourself to inaction.
- Call on all senior UN leaders, including the Secretary-General and the newly appointed Special Representative of the Secretary-General of UNAMA to press the Taliban at every opportunity to respect the rights of all women, girls and other marginalized groups. Hold UNAMA accountable for fulfilling its mandate to prioritize gender equality and the full spectrum of women's rights throughout the entirety of its work.
- Meaningful engagement with and robust support for Afghan women civil society is not only an act of solidarity with all the brave human rights defenders tirelessly fighting for the rights of their communities, but necessary if the UN is to fulfill its most basic functions in Afghanistan. The international community's engagement with the Taliban must reflect the concerns, priorities and recommendations of diverse Afghan women, ethnic groups, religious minorities and all other marginalized groups. The full, equal and meaningful participation of Afghan women civil society must be ensured in any decision-making regarding the future of Afghanistan, including your own.
- Support the establishment of an additional UN mechanism to provide accountability for human rights violations.

As a journalist, it is my job to bear witness. And what I can clearly see is that the Taliban have already done permanent harm to the women and girls of Afghanistan, and every day you fail to take action, that harm deepens.

People in Afghanistan, especially women, are watching this debate. But so are women in other conflict zones around the world. If you fail to act in Afghanistan, women in Ethiopia, in Myanmar, in Sudan, in Yemen, will know that in the hands of the UN Security Council, women, peace and security is nothing more than an empty promise.

Thank you.