

Dear Ambassadors,

We, women from sixteen provinces across Afghanistan, write to you from inside the country at great personal risk to explain what the Taliban's ban on Afghan women employed by the UN, first introduced in April 2023, and enforced through the de facto Ministry of Defence over the past three months, means for our lives and our future.¹

For nearly four years, women and girls in Afghanistan have endured an unrelenting stream of decrees – often unwritten and contradictory – designed to erase us from public life. The ban on Afghan women working for the UN is one more step in the Taliban's wider project of gender persecution. Its effects reach far beyond UN personnel: it further erodes women's access to essential services and our presence in society.

Across provinces, Afghan women staff in UN-supported health facilities enabled safe childbirth, reproductive care, and basic treatment— services many cannot seek from male providers due to Taliban imposed restrictions. Without female staff, women delay or forgo care; some die at hospital gates because they cannot meet new requirements for dress or male accompaniment. These deaths are preventable.

Women staff are the only reliable bridge ensuring safe access for women and girls. Without them, women cannot register for aid, report violence, or participate in community processes. Aid is channeled through male intermediaries or local authorities, cutting women off entirely and increasing the risk of diversion.

Excellencies, Afghan women are losing trust in the UN to defend their rights. When the ban was introduced, we expected a united, firm response. The UN's silence has left women asking: ***How can we, the women of Afghanistan, expect the United Nations to stand up for us when it has not defended its own female staff?*** This is the question women are asking today, and the UN must confront it with urgency and rectitude.

We are gravely concerned that the UN and the international community have not used the leverage they still possess. While we welcomed the temporary suspension of UN activities in Herat on 4 November, its reversal just ten days later reflected weakness, resolve, and a lack of coherence.

Afghan women have never called for lifesaving assistance to stop. We ask only that humanitarian work not justify compliance with discriminatory practices that exclude and endanger women. We urge the UN to publicly disclose the unwritten orders and pressures imposed on national staff, rather than quietly adapting to them. The UN's own guidance,² affirms that humanitarian action must not reinforce discrimination. Compliance with these restrictions weakens the UN's credibility.

International assistance and engagement with the de facto authorities must carry clear conditionalities. This is the only way to incentivize change. Conditionality does not punish civilians or hurt women. It holds those who impose discriminatory policies accountable. The UN's responsibility is not to absorb the cost of persecution by sending women home, but to ensure that its operations do not reinforce a system built on their exclusion.

Excellencies, there is no simple solution. Afghan women may hold different views on the path forward, but we are united on two truths: this situation is intolerable and must change, and any response must protect, not punish, civilians. What is needed now is principled, coordinated, and enforceable action.

Continued silence by the UN will destroy the organization's credibility as a defender of human rights, erode its political leverage, and embolden the Taliban to expand restrictions with impunity.

We, therefore, urge Member States to prioritize five critical points for action:

1. **Support Afghan women employed by the United Nations.** Restrictions on Afghan women working for the UN violate the UN Charter, the privileges and immunities of UN staff, host country agreements, CEDAW, UNSCR 2681, and basic human rights. Secure a formal, written reversal of the bans on Afghan women working for the UN. Put in place mechanisms to ensure Afghan women

¹ This letter was prepared in consultation with 31 women from 16 provinces (Badakhshan, Badghis, Baghlan, Balkh, Bamyan, Daikundi, Faryab, Ghazni, Helmand, Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, Nangarhar, Nuristan, and Paktia) who joined a meeting on 20 November 2025, held by the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS) to document the impact of the Taliban's decision to bar Afghan women working for the United Nations from their workplaces.

² [Joint Background Paper](#) by OHCHR and UNHCR, IASC Principals, 8 May 2013

staff are not replaced by male or international staff. Require regular public reporting on all written and unwritten restrictions, including analysis of their enforcement.

2. **Make engagement and financial flows conditional on respect for women's rights.** No authority that excludes women from public life should receive unconditional support. Condition political engagements and financial transfers to verifiable, time-bound benchmarks on women's rights. Link shipments and budgetary support to measurable progress on women's rights. Establish clear operational red lines that trigger posture shifts or protective measures.
3. **Safeguard lifesaving assistance while ensuring women's access.** Humanitarian aid must continue, but not in ways that normalize and entrench the exclusion of women. Ensure Afghan women's full participation in the design, delivery, and monitoring. Suspend or redesign programs that cannot guarantee women's access and participation. Prioritize assistance for women and children, especially for those who are cutoff when aid is channeled through male intermediaries.
4. **Apply diplomatic pressure to those responsible, not civilians:** International measures must target perpetrators of gender persecution. Enforce targeted travel restrictions and limits on international engagement for officials responsible for violating women's rights. Limit programming strictly to lifesaving assistance and halt any engagement that could confer legitimacy on a system built on women's exclusion. Strengthen protection mechanisms, relocation pathways, and emergency support for Afghan women human rights defenders, including former UN staff.
5. **Give Afghan women a seat at all decision-making tables.** Afghan women are indispensable experts on the conditions created by current policies. Integrate regular consultations with Afghan women into all planning and reporting processes, including for the Security Council and the UN-led Doha process. Ensure Afghan women's perspectives inform operational posture, risk analysis, and engagement decisions. Assess future strategies for Afghanistan through their impact on Afghan women.

We remain steadfast and resilient, and so should you.

Afghan women are not asking for sympathy or solidarity, we are asking for action anchored in the UN's own principles. The Security Council has the authority and responsibility to ensure that the UN does not become complicit, even inadvertently, in a system built on our exclusion. The choices made in the coming weeks will determine whether the UN stands with its local staff and with Afghan women, or whether it stands alone. The Security Council's decisions and posture vis-à-vis Afghanistan set a precedent for other contexts. We urge you to act with urgency, coherence, and conviction, so that the rights and dignity of Afghan women are upheld in practice, not only in words.

Sincerely,

Afghan women from sixteen provinces,

Consultation convened by the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS) and Window for Hope