



Left Behind: Afghan Women Face Severe Economic Insecurity and Poverty as the World Deals with Newest International Crisis

By: Nina Ganti

International Women's Day is celebrated every year on March 8<sup>th</sup> after the United Nations Charter "became the first international agreement to affirm the principle of equality between women and men."<sup>1</sup> Since its inception in 1975, International Women's Day has served as a day to support women's rights globally, in developing and developed countries alike, and empower women to participate in political, social, cultural, and economic arenas.<sup>2</sup> This year, the international community will have to confront the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan, where women and other marginalized groups have been facing discrimination due to their identities and transported back to the 1990s under Taliban Rule.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, the silence from the international community, especially North Atlantic Treaty Organization Allies, on the plight of Afghan women is deafening.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the United Nations (“UN”) has already declared the theme of this year’s International Women’s Day to be “[g]ender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow,” focusing on climate action and sustainability issues impacting women around the globe.<sup>5</sup> While climate and sustainability are, of course, important issues affecting women globally, Afghan women, in particular, are in the grave position of facing not only environmental abuse but also barriers to their health, education, freedom of movement, gender expression, freedom of association, and financial security.<sup>6</sup>

Sadly, as the world deals with the latest crisis in Ukraine, the spotlight dims on Afghan women who need support now more than ever. New research by the Human Rights Watch and the Human Rights Institute at San Jose State University describes a “dark” present and future, with Taliban policies turning Afghan women and girls into “virtual prisoners in their homes.”<sup>7</sup> Under Taliban rule, nearly all Afghan women who had previously held paid employment have lost their jobs and the only women who are allowed to still work are healthcare workers and teachers.<sup>8</sup> The report finds that Afghanistan’s financial crisis, which occurred following the Taliban’s takeover and foreign aid was halted to Afghanistan, has had the deepest impact on women.<sup>9</sup>

Afghan women are unable to provide for themselves or their families since they cannot work or access their money that has been frozen. In light of this development, the International Monetary Fund, at the United States’ request, blocked Afghanistan from accessing its credit and assets. Further, the Central Bank of Afghanistan was “cut off from the international banking system and access to the country’s foreign currency

reserves.”<sup>10</sup> Adding to Afghanistan’s worsening economic situation, the UN Security Council also imposed other sanctions preventing the Central Bank of Afghanistan from “receiving new paper Afghan currency.”<sup>11</sup>

In spite of the UN’s intentions to strongly rebuke the Taliban’s discriminatory and backwards policies and to provide humanitarian aid to Afghan women, sanctions by the international community have created legal uncertainties for humanitarians to obtain exemptions to do aid work in Afghanistan and help women and other marginalized people.<sup>12</sup> Fortunately, the UN Security Council (“UNSC”) unanimously adopted such a humanitarian exemption in December 2021, allowing for humanitarian aid to be given to Afghanistan during its financial collapse.<sup>13</sup> Notably, the UNSC’s resolution has promised to address the “basic needs” of at-risk populations in Afghanistan, including in areas of “shelter, food security, education, energy, water, sanitation, health, nutrition, and hygiene.”<sup>14</sup> By outlining accountability requirements in the resolution, the UNSC claims that it has ensured that there will be oversight over assistance providers in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

If the UNSC is successful in its efforts to establish sufficient oversight over these assistance providers then it will be more likely to be successful in ensuring that assistance has actually been provided to women-led households and women across Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> It cannot be overstated how critical it is for assistance providers to not divert, misuse, or appropriate any funds they receive from the UN and to follow proper reporting protocols as required by the UNSC resolution.<sup>17</sup> It remains to be seen whether Afghanistan’s poverty numbers will decline and if Afghan women, particularly, who are the most impacted by the current financial crisis<sup>18</sup>, will actually be at the receiving end of the humanitarian aid from the UN.

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<sup>1</sup> *International Women's Day*, UNESCO, <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/womenday/2018> [<https://perma.cc/5GWZ-ECVZ>] (last visited Mar. 10, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> *See id.*

<sup>3</sup> *See* Meri Melissi Hartley-Blecic, *The Invisible Women: The Taliban's Oppression of Women in Afghanistan*, 7 ILSA J. Int'l & Comp. L. 553, 556 (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Nazdana Soltanfar, *The Kashmir Conflict: How Did it Start?*, INDEPENDENT AUSTRALIA (Mar. 5, 2022), <https://independentaustralia.net/life/life-display/the-world-must-remember-the-suffering-of-afghan-women,16118> [<https://perma.cc/FE7G-28A3>].

<sup>5</sup> *In Focus: International Women's Day*, UN WOMEN, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/in-focus/2022/03/in-focus-international-womens-day> [<https://perma.cc/UAR6-RS6U>] (last visited Mar. 10, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> *Afghanistan: Taliban Deprive Women of Livelihoods, Identity*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (Jan. 18, 2022), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/18/afghanistan-taliban-deprive-women-livelihoods-identity#> [<https://perma.cc/HNM3-2J44>].

<sup>7</sup> *See id.*

<sup>8</sup> *See id.*

<sup>9</sup> *See id.*

<sup>10</sup> *See id.*

<sup>11</sup> *See id.*

<sup>12</sup> Sara Jerving et al., *Aid groups must navigate sanctions and Taliban to help Afghanistan*, DEVEX INTERNATIONAL (Aug. 30, 2021), <https://www.devex.com/news/aid-groups-must-navigate-sanctions-and-taliban-to-help-afghanistan-100664>.

<sup>13</sup> Press Release, Security Council, Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2615 (2021), Enabling Provision of Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan as Country Faces Economic Crisis, U.N. Press Release SC/14750 (Dec. 22, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> *See id.*

<sup>15</sup> *See id.*

<sup>16</sup> *See id.*

<sup>17</sup> *See id.*

<sup>18</sup> *See id.*