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SUMMARY OF SUBMISSION PROCESS ON AFGHANISTAN'S FUTURE

Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidell

Background

A core element of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda is putting women at the centre of national and international decision-making processes. In the context of Afghanistan, UN Women has been operationalizing the WPS agenda by facilitating multiple tracks of consultations and dialogues with a range of Afghan women to ensure their voices and policy perspectives on the future of Afghanistan and international policy making are heard.

Submission process

On 3 February 2024, UN Women launched a consultative process to gather the views of Afghan women, organizations, and networks for upcoming international policy windows between February and March 2024, including those discussing the Special Coordinator's [independent assessment](#) and UN Security Council [resolution 2721](#) (2023).

Between 3 and 11 February 2024, 75 submissions were processed – comprising over 50,000 words in English, Dari and Pashto – into over 1,650 data points. (*See Annex 1 for a full explanatory note on the methodology.*) Respondents shared their perspectives on current challenges and opportunities, and policy and programming recommendations related to the steps proposed in the Special Coordinator's 2023 independent assessment. This readout summarizes the initial round of submissions (those received before 11 February). This is intended only as a preliminary snapshot of the views received so far. A full report will be prepared in March 2024, following the closure of the submission process on 29 February 2024.

General requests of the international community

The independent assessment proposed a roadmap leading to an end state of full normalization of international relations with Afghanistan, contingent on steps by the Taliban (also referred to as the de facto authorities, DFA) demonstrating respect for the State of Afghanistan's international treaty obligations and commitments, including on the rights of women and girls. Respondents expressed heavy doubt on this, noting that the Taliban have not demonstrated any willingness to meet international treaty obligations. Instead, many respondents pointed out how the severity of the women's rights situation – including the recent uptick in enforcement of decrees restricting women's dress, movement, and other rights through use of force or threat of force – is compounding the lack of trust Afghans have in the Taliban.

Respondents unanimously expressed the need to secure guarantees before the international community takes any steps toward international recognition. Failure to obtain such guarantees was felt would result in the further subjugation of women in Afghanistan. Many also urged that the international community closely monitor DFA compliance with any elements of a roadmap agreed upon in the future. Women's civil society networks noted that they would be well-placed to support any such monitoring.

Two key priorities emerged out of the submission process for discussion amongst Member States: (1) restoring women's rights, including the rights to education and work, in addition to women's participation in public decision-making; and (2) supporting Afghan people through increased funding support, including support to livelihoods and longer-term assistance.

Building confidence by addressing the immediate needs of Afghans

The independent assessment recommended that donors take immediate measures related to certain types of development aid, technical assistance, modalities of aid, and other economic measures, with a view to both better addressing immediate Afghan needs and building confidence in the larger political process. The submissions underlined the urgency of many of these measures, and provided additional considerations for seeing them realized, in particular as relates to two of the proposed areas for further assistance and confidence-building measures:

1. Expanding international assistance that contributes to the basic needs of the Afghan people

Continuing **international assistance** to support basic needs and services was seen as a vital measure, particularly in the absence of DFA budgetary investment. Submissions highlighted the limits of short-term humanitarian aid, and the need to build systems for the fair and equitable distribution of resources, while equally ensuring that aid does not strengthen the DFA. In delivering international aid, the leadership and participation of Afghan women and girls was viewed as critical to all phases of interventions: several respondents emphasized the need for assistance that is designed to be “for women, by women.” Previous consultations with Afghan women have shown that the participation of women in the aid sector is critical.¹ Respondents also underscored the linkages between economic issues and women’s rights, stressing the importance of retracting all bans in order to enable women to freely work.

2. Encouraging and assisting activities that help Afghans to realize their political, economic, cultural and social rights

The independent assessment also recommended that international actors continue measures to support the **realization of economic, political, social and cultural rights**.

¹ The ban on women NGO workers directly impacts the more than 15,000 women employed in Afghanistan across 183 national and international NGOs, with a survey undertaken by UN Women in 2022 of 127 women’s organizations showing they reached 1 million women beneficiaries across 17 provinces: UN Women. 2023. [Summary report of country-wide women’s consultations](#). June 2023; Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA). 2023. [Afghanistan Rapid Gender Analysis 2023](#); GiHA. 2023. [Tracking Impact Report on the ban on women working with NGOs, INGOs and UN in Afghanistan: Fifth Snapshot](#) (May 2023); UN Women. 2023. [Out of jobs, into poverty](#). 13 January.

Respondents suggested several ways that donors or other external actors could help advance this: (1) allocating assistance that contributed to the support architecture for ending violence against women (EVAW); (2) providing technical assistance, capacity building and awareness raising activities to the Taliban as relates to human rights standards, including that which would help strengthen institutional capacity to uphold human rights and encourage participation and representative leadership; (3) giving international technical assistance and capacity building to develop expertise and capacity within the judicial system and increase access to justice including through legal aid; and (4) continuing to support civil society activities and other measures that preserved civic space, including direct funding to women-led/gender-focused organizations. Submissions emphasized the role that human rights defenders have in empowering Afghan citizens and ensuring a vibrant civic space.

A roadmap for reintegration of the state of Afghanistan into the international system

The independent assessment proposed a roadmap to enable the eventual reintegration of the State of Afghanistan into the international system, conditioned on a series of benchmarks. The two key benchmarks surrounded: 1) “a demonstration that the de facto authorities recognize and are able to carry out Afghanistan’s treaty obligations and commitments under international law;” and 2) steps toward more inclusive governance. Respondents generally ratified these as important conditions, while raising concerns that there is significant distance between the ambitions set out in the benchmarks and current realities on the ground in Afghanistan. These are discussed below, alongside respondents’ proposals for steps to take forward these key obligations.

1. Obligations of the State of Afghanistan

The Afghan women who responded to the submission universally urged that the DFA must lift *all* restrictions on women and girls as they violate basic rights and fundamental freedoms enshrined under the international human rights treaties Afghanistan has ratified.² While some submissions suggested that a dialogue process was one option to work toward reversing restrictions on human rights, such a dialogue was suggested to be held *among Afghans*, namely Afghan women, civil society, and the Taliban.

² Afghanistan has ratified fourteen international human rights treaties and optional protocols, for the full list see the [Ratification Status for Afghanistan](#) in the UN Treaty Body Database of OHCHR.

To further support the full realization of women's rights, several respondents flagged the need to invest in institutions for women, including re-establishing the Ministry for Women's Affairs and reinforcing any existing legal structures or enforcement architecture that could help end violence against women.

In addition to issues of women's rights, the independent assessment also recommended benchmarks related to other international human rights and rule of law obligations. Respondents most commonly highlighted that the Taliban undertake legal reform, including a constitution-building process to create a robust legal framework to ensure rule of law, enshrine human rights and promote access to justice. Some responses urged the international community to ensure rule of law frameworks and justice considerations apply first to the Taliban themselves, to end impunity for past crimes as well as current violations of human rights and dignity.

2. Pursuing intra-Afghan dialogue to achieve more inclusive governance

Inclusive dialogue that builds trust, resolves the root causes of issues and, in this way, reaches common ground among Afghans were seen as essential steps toward building an inclusive governance system. Respondents articulated different elements of inclusive governance, but diversity in representation was foundational to the concept of inclusion across submissions. Understanding of diversity extended to including all segments of the population – women, youth, ethnic and religious minorities. Respondents also emphasized women's crucial role in achieving long-term solutions, and called for more women's participation in political discussions and decision-making processes. To operationalize this, some suggested establishing permanent structures that allow women to select their own representatives, build networks, and strengthen capacities for political engagement, such as a national council of women.

Another common theme in the submissions was transparency and accountability, which were viewed as vital to the legitimacy of any governance structure. Active involvement of citizens in selection of representatives and decision-making processes were among the most common areas of concern. Respondents put forward several suggestions to enhance citizen engagement, such as the use of digital

technology to expand reach (while noting access inequity issues) and nationwide consultations through town halls and citizens forums. Some suggested a national dialogue – reminiscent of the 2002 Bonn conference – as an inclusive way to build representative state structures.

Systems of government were discussed in the context of inclusive governance with some submissions viewing federalist and decentralized systems as ways to enhance opportunities for participation and local representation in decision-making. Among those who commented on such issues in detail, there were diverging opinions with regard to how to ensure inclusion, with some arguing for quotas to ensure diversity while others promoted merit-based representation models.

Overall views on normalization of the state of Afghanistan, and future political processes

This consultation process was initiated to offer Afghan women's views of future political processes, including those proposed in the Special Coordinator's independent assessment and UN Security Council resolution 2721 (2023). Overall, although women favored engagement with the Taliban, there were strong concerns that without a clear guiding strategy and principled approach, normalization of the Taliban would abandon Afghan women to a dire position. Although no respondent provided a detailed strategy for how to go about this principled engagement, there was an overall trend toward retaining some limits on engagement and constraints on normalization until measurable progress was made on women's rights.

Progress on women's rights was articulated as based on an assessment of the Taliban's actions on the ground and not in verbal commitments.³ Notably, no submissions included suggestions for unfreezing assets or removing sanctions. To the contrary, many described the importance of making full use of diplomatic, political and financial tools to pressure the Taliban to reconstitute the rights and freedoms of women and girls.

³ In a January 2024 survey, only 6 per cent of Afghan women consulted believed that international recognition should occur solely based on Taliban promises (without needing to first see action taken): UN Women, IOM, UNAMA. Forthcoming. Summary report of country-wide women's consultations.

Respondents generally demonstrated a low level of trust in the Taliban, and did not view them as representing the interests of Afghan women.⁴ This mirrors extremely high levels of social distrust reported by Afghan women. For this reason, many argued that the international community should consistently ensure Afghan women's structural representation at the international level, for example, by guaranteeing Afghan women the opportunity to

participate in all international meetings and conferences on Afghanistan.

Overall, respondents expressed the need for urgent, coherent and continued commitments from the international community to remain focused on the situation in Afghanistan, and for international stakeholders to work toward a durable and systemic end to violations of the rights of Afghan women and girls.

⁴ Ninety-six per cent of Afghan women surveyed felt that others could not be trusted: Ibid.

Annex 1: methodological note

This written survey-based consultation was based on primary research using well-established, human-centered design principles. The analysis was conducted by a diverse team consisting of both Afghan and non-Afghan individuals.

Between 3 and 11 February 2024, 75 submissions were processed – comprising over 50,000 words in English, Dari and Pashto – into over 1,650 data points. Every submission was read and coded into data points by at least two team members with a focus on identifying: (1) current realities, (2) opinions, values and beliefs, (3) policy-oriented recommendations, (4) programming-related recommendations, (5) insights, (6) questions, and (7) ideas.

Data points were synchronously and asynchronously analyzed collaboratively using visual collaboration software, and insights, patterns, and visualizations were developed

from this process. Every pattern, insight, or recommendation described in this document is composed of multiple data points from multiple sources. Each data point is traceable to its original submission and linked to voluntarily provided, confidential demographic data.

The methodology was guided by the value of data rigor, and thus data, methodological, investigator, and theoretical triangulation were considered and applied at various points in the process. The team relied on researcher triangulation, by having multiple team members code, analyze, and write-up, in order to increase the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the research insights.

During this process, the main constraint was time-pressure. Previously collected data that was used to triangulate was not as processed or organized in the same form as this current data set, in this way reducing efficiency.