

8 August 2025

Submission to the Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan

Understanding the impacts of funding cuts on civil society and NGOs working in and on Afghanistan

Introduction

Afghan women activists, feminist groups, and women-led and women's rights organizations have been among the hardest hit by the drastic cuts to international aid -despite already operating with minimal resources and under immense pressure.¹ These cuts have further isolated women at the forefront, stripping them of essential support and silencing critical voices that have long championed equality, safety, and peace in Afghanistan.

Just a few weeks ago, the CEDAW Committee, in its concluding observations² called upon the de facto authorities to dismantle the systematic pattern of gender persecution that has resulted in the enforced disappearance of women from public life. It urged them to cease all practices that may constitute gender persecution under international criminal law, as well as gender apartheid—as outlined in the Committee's General Recommendation No. 40 (2024) on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems. The Committee

¹ See for instance: UN Women 'At a breaking point: the impact of foreign aid cuts on women's organizations in humanitarian crises worldwide' (April 2025) page 16. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/at-a-breaking-point-the-impact-of-foreign-aid-cuts-on-womens-organizations-in-humanitarian-crises-worldwide-en.pdf>

² UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women 'Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Afghanistan' (7 July 2025) UN Doc CEDAW/C/AFG/CO/4, para 14.

also emphasised that individuals within the hierarchical Taliban structure bear command responsibility and must be held accountable for crimes against women and girls.

As the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan has emphasized, “an ‘all tools’ approach to challenge and dismantle the Taliban’s institutionalised system of gender oppression and to hold those responsible to account” is necessary.³ We agree that such an approach must include a strategy for resourcing the first responders to the system of gender apartheid - namely, Afghan women, feminist groups and women’s rights organizations.

Feminist and women-led organizations continue to play a vital role in documenting gender-based violations and holding the de facto authorities accountable. They continue to resist and organize under direct threat. However, without urgent and flexible funding adapted to their now largely clandestine operations, these groups risk being persecuted, suppressed or dismantled.

Gender-focused cuts to aid - combined with the ban on women working for NGOs - have led to a dramatic reduction in services, including life-saving legal aid, access to justice, access to health and protection from gender-based violence (GBV), in a society already severely impacted by institutionalized gender apartheid.

Feminist groups and women’s rights organizations in Afghanistan operate under severe operational, legal, and financial restrictions imposed by the Taliban, including strict banking controls, mandatory project approvals, and leadership requirements. Donor practices that offer only small, short-term grants with minimal core or institutional funding, prioritize humanitarian aid over rights-based and community-led work, and maintain opaque processes without diplomatic support for project approvals actively block grassroots and informal groups from securing resources. International transfer restrictions, Taliban diversion of aid, and the risks of cash-based payments further obstruct funding flows. Unregistered and small feminist groups - often the only actors reaching the most marginalized, including women and girls with disabilities⁴, members of historically excluded ethnic and religious communities,

³ UN Human Rights Council, ‘The phenomenon of an institutionalized system of discrimination, segregation, disrespect for human dignity and exclusion of women and girls – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan.’ (13 May 2024) UN Doc A/HRC/56/25. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/56/25>.

⁴ See our report: WILPF ‘Rights of women and girls with disabilities in Afghanistan: Submission to the UN CEDAW Committee 91st session’ (19 May 2025). Available at:

refugees, IDPs, widows, single mothers, and rural women - are systematically excluded. Donors' preference for large, well-established organizations with significant budgets entrenches inequalities, sidelines diverse feminist voices, and denies essential resources to those best placed to support local communities, confront gender apartheid and deliver transformative change.

As was the case in South Africa prior to the fall of the apartheid regime, supporting anti-apartheid legal, social, and community-based services is essential to holding the de facto authorities accountable. Recognizing Afghan women's agency, listening to their anti-apartheid narratives, and directly supporting their initiatives - both politically and financially - are essential political interventions.

Only by centring Afghan women in policy, funding, and diplomatic strategies can the international community help create alternative spaces for reclaiming rights, dismantling gender apartheid, and rebuilding peace.

Recommendations

We therefore urge international actors, including UN Member States and donors, to support, strengthen, and sustain the work of women's rights organisations (WROs) women-led and feminist informal groups by:

- **Supporting the grassroots, women-led response to gender apartheid** by providing WROs with emergency, core, flexible, and long-term funding⁵ as they adapt to and resist the Taliban's system of gender apartheid.
- **Providing equitable access to funding and information** by publishing calls, guidelines, and application materials in multiple local languages and accessible formats, ensuring small, rural, and unregistered groups serving the most marginalised women and girls can compete fairly for resources.
- **Transforming donor practices** to include inclusive, accessible mechanisms for feedback and adaptive programming that respond to the evolving constraints faced by local WROs and activists.
- **Creating more flexible and less risk-averse grant and application processes-** covering both urgent service provision and long-term anti-apartheid legal and advocacy efforts, as well as work on GBV, gender justice, and systemic discrimination.
- **Covering the cost of safe online tools**, remote work IT equipment, and digital security to help retain female staff and ensure continued operations in a repressive environment.
- Making any political process with the de facto authorities, or engagement, development aid, or sanctions relief, **conditional on the restoration of women's rights and the dismantling of the gender apartheid system.**

⁵ See also WILPF, ICAN, GNWP and GPPAC 'Fund us like you want us to win: Feminist solutions for more impactful financing for peacebuilding' (20 December 2021), available at: <https://icanpeacework.org/2021/12/fund-us-like-you-want-us-to-win/>