



## **The Taliban ban on female NGO workers & dilemmas for humanitarian NGOs**

Expert-meeting, 12 January 2023, The Hague (Chatham House Rule)  
*Summary report*

On 24 December, the Taliban's Ministry of Economy announced a ban on female NGO workers in Afghanistan. This has huge implications for female colleagues in Afghanistan, the people they help and the NGOs they work for. Moreover, it is another violation of women's rights and human rights by the Taliban. The impact of this decision is enormous as the country is going through an economic crisis, winter is in its grip and more than two-thirds of the population needs humanitarian assistance.

This new situation raises fundamental questions and dilemmas for humanitarian organisations and NGOs: should they stay or leave? Where do they draw red lines and (how) can they push back? And how can they ensure that the most vulnerable people are still reached?

On 12 January humanitarian professionals from the constituency of KUNO discussed these dilemmas. Humanitarian organisations and NGOs have reacted differently to the ban. Some were able to continue their work in Afghanistan, some decided or were forced to pause all activities or a part of them. This depended on the way organisations are registered in Afghanistan, on their level of influence at local, district, provincial and national levels and on the way they could 'work around' the ban. Organisations registered under the Ministry of Economy are affected by the ban, while international organisations like the Red Cross and MSF can continue their work with female staff since they're registered at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Furthermore, there are quite some regional differences in how strictly the ban is controlled by the authorities. Finally, some international NGOs were able to work creatively around the female ban or managed to negotiate the ban at the local level.

### **The humanitarian imperative in conflict with humanitarian principles**

Most NGOs represented at the meeting partly, or completely, paused their activities after the ban was announced. Within and among organisations there were collective sentiments of a red line being crossed as the ban violates human rights and is in conflict with humanitarian principle of impartiality (as the most vulnerable people in Afghanistan are women and children and to reach these women and children female staff is indispensable). On top of that, the ban endangers the safety of female staff members. However, internal discussions are running on what suspension or a pause of activities would mean for the more than 28 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, and in this current winter and the enormous economic crisis in Afghanistan the needs are very high – and on the rise. Additionally, (I)NGOs are worried this

ban results in more and more donors pulling back from Afghanistan, reducing the capacity to provide humanitarian assistance at all.

Each organisation carefully made their considerations before deciding to pause their activities in Afghanistan, and all of them are still in discussion on how to proceed. Some organisations have already continued some programs (partly or fully) wherever possible. Others refuse to make compromises and are still completely on hold. The conditions for continuing activities revolve around the safety of female staff members and maintaining the capacity to access beneficiaries, which are mostly women and children.

### **Compromising with and working around Taliban rulers**

Colleagues with close contacts in Afghanistan indicated that within the Taliban regime there are differences of opinion and that they should not be perceived as a homogenous group. Not every Taliban member or political leader supports the decisions being made, as goes for the ban on female humanitarian workers. It appears that the Afghan Minister of Health encouraged NGOs to keep up with their normal activities, and to keep female staff working. Of course, how this turns out in reality is a different matter. Moreover, as indicated above, not in every district the Taliban's control is as strict. The situation can be different in more rural areas than in urban areas of Afghanistan.

To be able to navigate between the possibilities, NGOs are sometimes forced to make compromises. But this is almost inherent to humanitarian work. Discussion and negotiating with the ruling authorities, and with that, often making concessions, is part of the job. Without negotiation, there is often limited space to provide humanitarian assistance for the people who need it. Also in Afghanistan, NGOs are making compromises to be able to continue their work. They have been during the first Taliban rule, and they will now.

### **Red lines and red flags**

Nevertheless, the situation in Afghanistan is exceptionally alarming and colleagues worry that the ban is a push into the direction of a slippery slope that is the misogynistic trend of the Taliban's rule. Violations of (women) human rights were expected, but not this soon. And the further restrictions go, the more women will be slowly erased from society. How far are humanitarian organisations willing to go? At what point will they quit everything and actually retreat?

At the meeting it was suggested to adopt the terminology of 'red flags' rather than red lines. There is the need to push back whenever human rights or humanitarian principles are being violated, but drawing a red line might push you as an international NGO out of a country or region. If local authorities violate your red line and are not willing to step back, the logical step is to leave. Raising a red flag on the other hand, gives the option to protest – and to stay at the same time. Raising a series of red flags is an indication of how a situation evolves negatively and can be a tool to keep track of worrying developments. One NGO developed a "ladder" describing potential red flags, the possible options for the organisation to deal with

this red flag, and the consequences of these reactions for the NGO and recipients. A suitable tool to consciously and thoroughly analyse the situation, perhaps coordinate with partners a suitable response.

Most of the organisations, however, indicated to fully stop activities in Afghanistan, if Taliban regulations would exclude women from aid. At that point the Taliban truly eliminates women from society, and this is for many organisations a point of no return.

### **Takeaways**

One take away from this session was this 'ladder of red flags'. For Humanitarian NGOs it seems a suitable tool to map out the standards of the organisation, to identify potential red flags, and to describe options to respond when situations exacerbate.

Another take away is to keep communicating with each other, keep each other informed, and perhaps take a united position. A united front could place the humanitarian sector in a stronger position vis-à-vis the Taliban than if organisations negotiate separately with the Taliban.