

## How do humanitarian NGOs deal with the Taliban ban on female workers?

22 February 2023, The Hague

### *Summary report*

On 24 December 2022, the Taliban's Ministry of Economy announced a ban on female NGO workers in Afghanistan. This has huge implications for female worker in Afghanistan, the people they help and the NGOs they work for. Moreover, it is yet another violation of women's rights and human rights by the Taliban. The implications of this decision are 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.

On Wednesday 22 February, ISS (International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University) and KUNO (the Platform for Humanitarian Knowledge Exchange in the Netherlands) organised a panel discussion on the challenges for humanitarian NGOs in Afghanistan. The session was part of the course on humanitarian action and disaster action by professor Thea Hilhorst and assistant professor Rodrigo Mena.

An extra incentive to organise a panel discussion on this topic was the blog of Hugo Slim posted on the website of Oxfam UK – and the exchanges it provoked: [Humanitarians Must Reject the Taliban's Misogyny](#) (10 January 2023).

#### Panellists:

- **Nasr Muflahi**, Country Director of Intersos Afghanistan.
- **Norah Niland**, Co-Founder of United Against Inhumanity (UAI) and chair of UAI's internal task team on Afghanistan.
- **Shagofa Obaidi**, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Afghanistan.
- **Leande Grezel**, Deputy Head of Mission of Premiere Urgence.

#### **Contextualising the ban on female workers**

To better comprehend the challenges listed below, it is important to consider that the ban on female NGO staff did not affect most organisations in the health sector. This depended on the way organisations are registered in Afghanistan, on their level of influence at local, district, provincial and national levels and or on the way they could 'work around' the ban. While organisations registered under the Ministry of Economy are affected by the ban, most international organisations working in the health sector are exempted from it and their female staff can continue to work.

Providing further context, the structural and severe discrimination of women, including a ban on female workers, imposed by local leaders, is not a unique situation. For example, Yemen is going through a similar situation where humanitarian access is severely limited, or years ago in Saudi Arabia it was impossible for female NGO staff to work there. Besides, the position of

women in Afghanistan was also severely restricted about 20 years ago, before the former Taliban regime was partially pushed aside by an international coalition led by the USA (2001). And even in the years 2001-2021 it has always been a challenge to engage and reach women as they often did not have cell phones and a male chaperone was a requirement in many areas of the country. Discrimination against women has always been a significant problem in Afghanistan and is embedded in the country's cultural and social context. The challenges humanitarians face in Afghanistan are, therefore, neither new nor unique: What are appropriate humanitarian policies in the face of the restrictions on women working for aid agencies? What is the way forward in dealing with the government? And what relations or negotiation can be established and what does that mean for resuming more structural aid relations?

### **What are the current challenges?**

First and foremost, the main challenge is that currently more than two-third of the Afghan population needs humanitarian assistance. Reaching all these people requires female NGO staff as often only female staff are able to work with women. The situation in Afghanistan is one of the worst humanitarian crises at the moment in the world, with the difficulty of addressing humanitarian needs not only because of their magnitude, but also given the lack of access both politically and territorially. Besides, as one of the panellists stressed, this ban on female humanitarian workers should not be narrowed as a Islamic ideology, as it represents only a stems from a very traditional approach of it. As someone commented, "it is not inherent in Islamic beliefs to ban women from education and the workplace. We have to keep these things in mind while dealing with this situation".

Another challenge echoed by a few of the panellists is the relationship with the government. As one of the panellists emphasized, there is no alternative to the Taliban, which is why we need to find a way to engage with them. Moreover, it is important to note that the Taliban cannot be considered a single entity, as it is a diverse group, with multiple voices and approaches within it, as is visible in Taliban policies across the country. Thus, to address the situation of the ban on female NGO workers, the challenge is to negotiate at different levels with different actors and on the basis of policies that are dynamic and change over time.

Another challenge identified in the panel is the division within the humanitarian sector. There is a dichotomy between organizations suspending their activities and those continuing their activities in Afghanistan, trying to negotiate with the government, and find alternatives arrangements (e.g., having female staff working only at the office). The idea of issuing ultimatums and demanding the Taliban's withdrawal of the policy, however, is viewed with caution by some participants, adding that it may be counterproductive for some NGOs. At its place, it is important for humanitarian organisations to keep in touch with the views of women in this context and to find ways forward in unity to continue to assist those most in need.

A final challenge addressed was how to reconcile acting on humanitarian principles and at the same time have a position and statement on the ban. In particular, how to deal with neutrality versus gender equality, or how to weigh the principle of humanity versus the possibility of no longer providing assistance. For instance, on the one hand, the principle of neutrality stipulates that one should not take sides in a political debate. On the other hand, however, the principle of impartiality stipulates that there should be no discrimination on the

basis of sex. In this respect, the panel underlined that there are many principles beyond these two, that in general almost all actors base their actions on principles, even if their principles may differ. Moreover, for some panellists there is actually no major conflict between these humanitarian principles and how to approach this situation, since in real life these principles are meant to assist the ultimate goal of humanitarian aid to save lives, and that means that they must be taken reflexively in each case and context.

### **What is the way forward?**

Firstly, as most panellists noted, it is vital to continue engaging with the government to negotiate access. An important notion is that Afghanistan depends on the humanitarian assistance and, therefore, is not in the best interest of the Taliban that NGOs leave the country. Some participants would say that Taliban seek to address the political statements and representation of international NGOs and how their female staff work but not the presence of NGOs themselves. Engagement is seen as the main viable option going forward, and that requires to talk with people at different levels and moments, as also indicated before. In fact, at the local and national levels the spaces for negotiation are also different, with local actors being more flexible due to their proximity to the community and changing needs. Keeping this in mind is seen as key to move forward.

Furthermore, it was underlined in the panel that over the past 20 years we have been learning how to cooperate with the Taliban, although the current scenario -with them in power- presents new challenges. Furthermore, the situation is oftentimes approached from a Western perspective, which invites to recognise cultural differences that can be hindering dialogue and negotiations. In this line, it was highlighted that without open dialogue with and recognition of the Taliban, accountability is limited. To advance this dialogue, was mentioned that is important not to see this ban as permanent, but that the ban on female NGO workers has been set as a suspension by Taliban until they see female workers complying with Sharia law.

All in all, the panellists regarded engagement as the main way forward. It is no longer possible to separate humanitarianism from the political context because this ban on female NGO workers compromises the very basis of humanitarianism: saving the most lives in the most effective way. In this case, humanitarian diplomacy is necessary to ensure access to provide humanitarian assistance. By contrast, it would be counterproductive to take a more moral stand of 'we do not engage with the Taliban', which would likely further worsen the situation in the country. Humanitarian organization should find a way to continue supporting the people in need in Afghanistan, which includes engaging with the government on this ban, as female NGO workers are crucial in reaching female beneficiaries. In addition, it is vital to consult with the affective Afghan women and articulate what they need.

Finally, it recognises the importance of continuing this kind of dialogue on the challenges of delivering humanitarian assistance beyond the Afghanistan case, as similar situations can be seen in other parts of the world. In the same vein, it is important to bring to this case lessons learned in other scenarios and at other times, in order to advance solutions to support those most in need.

Further reading:

- Norah Niland, [With women the battleground, Engagement is the only Answer](#), United Against Inhumanity (25 February, 2023)
- Hilhorst, D (2023) *Dilemmas for aid agencies working in Afghanistan under Taliban's gender apartheid rule* (<https://www.issblog.nl/2023/01/12/dilemmas-for-aid-agencies-working-in-afghanistan-under-talibans-gender-apartheid-rule/>[https://issblog.nl/2023/01/12/dilemmas-for-aid-agencies-working-in-afghanistan-under-talibans-gender-apartheid-rule/Links to an external site.](https://issblog.nl/2023/01/12/dilemmas-for-aid-agencies-working-in-afghanistan-under-talibans-gender-apartheid-rule/Links%20to%20an%20external%20site.))
- [The Taliban ban on female NGO workers in Afghanistan](#), report of a KUNO expert meeting (23 January 2023)
- Hugo Slim, [Humanitarians Must Reject the Taliban's Misogyny](#), Blog Oxfam (10 January 2023)
- *Explained: How Taliban's move to bar women from NGOs worsens the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan* (<https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/explained-how-talibans-move-to-bar-women-from-ngos-worsens-the-humanitarian-crisis-in-afghanistan-11871351.html>[Links to an external site.](https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/explained-how-talibans-move-to-bar-women-from-ngos-worsens-the-humanitarian-crisis-in-afghanistan-11871351.htmlLinks%20to%20an%20external%20site.))
- *We need women to help women: Afghan women cut off from aid following Taliban ban on female NGO worker* (<https://www.savethechildren.net/news/we-need-women-help-women-afghan-women-cut-aid-following-taliban-ban-female-ngo-workers>)
- *Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023 -- January 2023* (<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-january-2023>)