

Combating Gender Apartheid: The Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan

On September 22, the Afghanistan Policy Lab at Princeton School of Public and International Affairs and the Afghanistan Permanent Mission to the United Nations, in collaboration with the Permanent Missions of Dominican Republic, Malta, South African to the United Nations, and the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security hosted a side event during the 78th UN General Assembly entitled "Combating Gender Apartheid: The Situation of Women & Girls in Afghanistan" at Headquarters in New York.

Since regaining power, the Taliban subjected Afghan women to second-class citizens, confining them to their homes and systematically excluding them from various facets of social life. Afghan girls and women face increasing restrictions, with the Taliban issuing over 50 edicts and decrees violating fundamental women's rights, including education, employment, sports, travel, and access to recreational parks. Speakers at the side event described the situation in Afghanistan as a manifestation of gender apartheid. They urged the international community to recognize and codify these practices in international law. Based on this recognition, they called for holding the Taliban accountable for their actions. The session panel discussants were scholars and practitioners in the areas of human rights with a focus on Afghanistan.



Speakers of the Gender Apartheid event. Sept. 22, 2023, UN HQ, NY.

Richard Bennett, Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, acknowledged that existing tools to combat discrimination were not designed for state-sponsored

gender oppression. While recognizing the primary responsibility of national authorities, he pointed out that in Afghanistan, where those in power intentionally violate women and girls' rights, domestic remedies are unlikely to be effective. Thus, he argued that accountability at the international level is essential for Afghan women and girls to achieve justice.

Mr. Bennett explained that accountability goes beyond criminal justice measures and includes concepts like reparations, truth-seeking, and guarantees of non-recurrence. He highlighted the importance of accountability in the context of gender persecution and gender apartheid.

Heather Barr, the Associate Director of the Women's Rights Division at Human Rights Watch, expressed grave concern over the unprecedented assault on women's rights by the Taliban, drawing parallels to a similar period from 1996 to 2001 when the Taliban were previously in power.

Ms. Barr dismissed the notion that engagement and dialogue with the Taliban could lead to a positive change in their attitude towards women's rights. She argued that, after two years of increasing repression, such an approach is not just wishful thinking but akin to magical thinking. She underscored the unintended consequences of international engagement, which has contributed to the normalization and perceived legitimacy of the Taliban.

Naseer Ahmad Faiq, Afghanistan's Chargé d'Affaires to the UN, emphasized the need for additional reporting mechanisms to hold the Taliban accountable for human rights violations and crimes against humanity. He called for support for progressive forces, especially women-led movements.



Ms. Rina Amiri expressing her viewpoint. Sept. 22, 2023, UN HQ, NY.

Ambassador Vanessa Frazier, Permanent Representative of Malta to the U.N. acknowledged the courage of participants and the significance of UN Resolution 1325, emphasizing its relevance in the context of Afghanistan's systematic oppression of women. She stressed the importance of exploring how the concept of gender apartheid can promote accountability.

Zane Dangor, Director-General of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation of South Africa, commended Afghan, and global efforts against systemic oppression of Afghan women. He called for mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable.

Rina Amiri, U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights emphasized the need for tailored accountability tools to address the crisis in Afghanistan. She highlighted the strategic implications of the issue and the challenges of engaging with the Taliban.

Ambassador Melanne Verwee, Executive Director of the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security, who was moderating the discussion, highlighted the worsening gender-based discrimination in Afghanistan and the erasure of women's human rights. She underscored the importance of Afghan women's voices and urged the international community to uphold human rights treaties and seek accountability.

Yalda Royan, an Afghan Women's Rights Activist and Human Rights Defender, addressed the audience, urging them to move beyond mere listening and take concrete actions in solidarity with

women and girls in Afghanistan. She emphasized the need for collective action, transcending titles, affiliations, or positions, and urged it for the greater cause of humanity and womanhood. Ms. Royan painted a distressing picture of the plight of Afghan women over the past two years, describing it as a systematic gender apartheid marked by the denial of basic rights, psychological and physical harm, and brutal treatment such as public stoning, whippings, and beatings.

Maryam Rayed, a young Afghan Women's Rights Activist and Human Rights Defender, expressed concern about the impact on the younger generation in Afghanistan, particularly their mental health. She highlighted the demographic youthfulness of Afghanistan and the potential for positive contributions to the world.

Metra Mehran, a Human Rights Activist and Fellow at New York University discussed the legal implications of labeling the erasure of women's rights in Afghanistan as gender apartheid. She called for criminalizing these violations, highlighting the absence of international treaties directly condemning them.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) representative, Ms. Reem Al Falasi highlighted the critical situation in Afghanistan, expressed commitment to supporting Afghan women and girls, and emphasized the UAE's role in the UN Security Council. She called for stability and peace through the inclusion of Afghan women and girls.



United Arab Emirates Representative, Reem Al Falasi speaking at the event

Joan Cedano, Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative of the Dominican Republic, highlighted the deteriorating situation of Afghan women and girls, discussed the Women, Peace, and Security Index, and stressed the importance of solidarity and collective responsibility.

Overall, the speakers described the situation in Afghanistan as a manifestation of gender apartheid. They urged the international community to recognize and codify these practices in international law.

To watch the full event, click on the link below:

<https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1b/k1byqo7kna>