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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Human Rights Research League, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 May 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Women’s Rights Abuses and the Impact of Mental Health on Afghanistan’s Future

Following the capture of Kabul as the final stepping-stone of their seizure of power, the Taliban de facto re-established the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”. Despite promises to the contrary, including the announcement of an inclusive government, a general amnesty for former Afghan security forces who had laid down their weapons, and initial reassurances that women and girls would not be permanently excluded from education beyond 6th grade, or from meaningful work opportunities outside their home, the current situation in Afghanistan speaks for itself.

In this context, Human Rights Research League (HRRL) conducted a research project (‘Those We Left Behind: Revenge Killings and Other Serious Human Rights Violations in Afghanistan in the Aftermath of the Taliban’s Seizure of Power’ 1) over the past two years documenting revenge killings and other serious human rights abuses in Afghanistan, and also pointing to the resulting dire humanitarian situation, exacerbated by recurring droughts, continuing economic decline, and the added negative economic and humanitarian impact of policies severely restricting women’s rights, mobility and access to work.

In May 2024, we hosted the UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan in Oslo, for discussions with Afghan human rights activists and members of civil society based in Norway 2.

We acknowledge that “crimes and (armed) conflicts do not exist in a vacuum. Evidently, serious crimes have taken place before, in Afghanistan, as well as elsewhere. But Afghanistan in particular has had a several decades long history of grave abuses of human rights and humanitarian law, which did neither start with the current de facto government, nor with the previous Taliban reign. Some crimes have been committed by competing armed groups, others also by allied and Afghan armed, security, and special forces under the previous administration(s)”. 3 And, arguably, all armed conflict and crisis situations of some magnitude have a negative impact on the mental health of the population affected by it.

But what unfortunately is unique to the Taliban de facto government is the level and extent of their disrespect for the fundamental rights of women and girls, further underscored by the Taliban’s restrictive policies – which are indicative of the crime against humanity of gender persecution – and their impact on the mental health of women and girls.

Collective and Trauma and Mental Health

Human Rights Research League is currently conducting a research project on ‘Collective Trauma and Mental Health’ in Lebanon, the preliminary findings of which are instructive for the situation in Afghanistan as well.

Research indicates that growing up in a war and conflict torn country, renders a person significantly more likely to experience or develop lasting mental health conditions, and even more so, where a person has barely known anything other than armed conflict, bombings, assassinations, lack of accountability, political instability and generally a state that fails its citizens. Such conditions are likely to generate cumulative trauma, which in turn negatively impacts the mental health of the population forced to live in failing states and ultimately the state itself.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development.” 4 Despite its forming part of the seven interconnected components of Human Security 5 (economic, food, health, environment, personal, community and political) necessary to protect people’s fundamental freedoms: freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom from indignity, mental health still tends to be neglected, in any case in a development (foreign aid) perspective.

This is even more concerning, considering the negative impact mental health conditions may have precisely on the development of a society.

According to the American Psychological Association, trauma may be defined as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms”.⁶ In connection with war-induced trauma, known long-term reactions include PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and heightened levels of suicide.⁷

On the one hand, such trauma exists on the individual level, such as a person experiencing overwhelming personal harm. On the other hand, if the trauma experienced pertains not only to an individual, but to a large group of people or even an entire population, as is typically the case with a country in times of enduring war, the harm experienced becomes a collective trauma, which is more than the sum of its constituting, individual parts. Trauma that reinforces itself, consisting of the individual’s traumatic experience in addition to the shared trauma of the larger group.

Both Lebanon and Afghanistan have had a more than four decades long history of sustained conflict, though the intensity level of armed conflict in Afghanistan arguably has been on a higher scale. All such conflict affects the mental health of the entire population. However, the women and girls of Afghanistan have to endure multiple trauma: On top of the individual and collective trauma caused by the long-term armed conflict, their condition is even further exacerbated by the loss of all hope for their future. This is particularly true for those who have seen their previous degree of relative freedom, the right to education, work, and taking part in public life entirely reversed.

Mental Health and the Toll on Afghanistan’s Future

The words of a young woman representative of an entire (lost) generation of educated women illustrate what is at stake: “Women are not allowed to start or complete their education. Two years ago I graduated from Kabul University, but now the university door is closed to all female students-Afghan women have no rights today. They are all walking dead.”⁸

And what makes this statement even worse is that these words of despair were uttered more than 25 years ago, after the Taliban’s first seizure of power. Today, a new generation of young women and girls is denied the right to education and work, with all the tragic, negative impact this has on their mental health and enjoyment of life, but also, by extension, on the development of their country.

According to UNOCHA, in 2024, “an estimated 23.7 million people—more than half of Afghanistan’s population—are projected to require humanitarian assistance. The fragile Afghan economy, heavily reliant on humanitarian aid and remittances, faces challenges exacerbated by the exclusion of women from economic activities”⁸ and restrictions on the participation of Afghan women staff, even in humanitarian operations.

The right to education, work, and taking part in public life are fundamental freedoms that need to be protected for all. Denying these freedoms to half the population ultimately takes a toll on the future of the entire population, which Afghanistan cannot afford, and which the international community should not support.

Recommendations

The international community should respond to the need for socio-psychological support and acknowledge the extraordinarily negative impact of the Taliban’s restrictive policies on the mental health of women and girls, on their personal development and enjoyment of rights and, by extension, on the development of the country. This insight must guide the stance taken in regard to all engagement with the de facto regime.

Women's rights must be at the center of all interaction with the de facto regime and any international delegation needs to include women and insist on women's participation, ideally also as heads of delegations, not just regarding women's rights, but on all issues.

The international community, including other Muslim countries, must not cease to insist on the anomaly and illegality of the Taliban's institutionalized system of discrimination, segregation, disrespect for human dignity and exclusion of women and girls, as also detailed in the UN Special Rapporteur's report to the 56th Session of the Human Rights Council.

1 'Those We Left Behind: Revenge Killings and Other Serious Human Rights Violations in Afghanistan in the Aftermath of the Taliban's Seizure of Power', Human Rights Research League (Nov. 2023), available at: [https://www.hrrleague.org/gallery/HRRL-APG%20Report%20\(Those%20We%20Left%20Behind\)%20\(FINAL\).pdf](https://www.hrrleague.org/gallery/HRRL-APG%20Report%20(Those%20We%20Left%20Behind)%20(FINAL).pdf).

2 Cf. 'UN Special Rapporteur Meets Afghan Activists in Norway', Afghanistan International, available at: <https://www.afintl.com/en/202405151702>.

3 Cf. note 1, 'Those We Left Behind', p. 16.

4 World Health Organization, (June 17, 2022), 'Mental Health', available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>.

5 As initially outlined in the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report.

7 Elie G. Karam et al., 'War and First Onset of Suicidality: The Role of Mental Disorders', pp. 2109-2118 in *Psychological Medicine*, Vol. 42, Issue 10, (Oct. 2012).

8 'The Taliban's War on Women: A Health and Human Rights Crisis in Afghanistan', Physicians for Human Rights, August 1998, p. 76.

9 Cf. Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan Afghanistan 2024, UNOCHA (December 2023), p. 3. Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2024-december-2023>.