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Rights of women and girls with disabilities in Afghanistan

Submission to the UN CEDAW Committee
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I. Introduction

Throughout Afghanistan's history, women have experienced systemic discrimination. Since 15 August 2021, when the Taliban assumed control of the country, these inequalities have deepened dramatically and are taking place in the context of an institutionalised framework of gender apartheid.¹ The system of entrenched gender-based discrimination, segregation, and oppression has led to the widespread and systematic exclusion of women and girls in all their diversity from public, political, social, and economic life.

A so-called Law on the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice,² adopted in August 2024, codifies and consolidates the many misogynistic decrees, edicts and policies imposed by the Taliban since seizing power in 2021. This law came against the backdrop of continued severe human rights violations, including of economic and social rights, due to the Taliban's restrictions on humanitarian aid, including the ban on women's work in the aid sector. These restrictions directly aggravate soaring needs for food, hygiene, and health services, particularly for women and girls who need access to female nurses and who face additional barriers in accessing aid. Taliban threats and pressure have also resulted in the systematic closure of humanitarian NGOs, as well as in increasing corruption in the delivery of aid.

This submission highlights the situation of women and girls with disabilities, who now face heightened, multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, leading to the severe restriction of their rights across all areas of life. These include access to humanitarian assistance, employment, education, healthcare, and freedom of movement.

This submission draws from the findings from a study conducted by a partner organisation of WILPF, in which 80 women and girls aged 16 to 60, representing all major ethnic groups (Tajik, Hazara, Pashtun, Uzbek, and Imaq), were consulted through structured questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, and focus group discussions. Twenty percent of participants were persons with physical disabilities, 50 percent were persons with visual impairments, and 30 percent were persons with hearing and/or speech-related disabilities. Information collected through these consultations supplemented with relevant information available from other sources.

Overall, the study found that **women and girls with disabilities in Afghanistan are experiencing a severe protection crisis** characterized by economic exclusion, social isolation, and the systemic neglect of disability rights. These structural inequalities and rights violations are exacerbated by the erosion of legal protections and the absence of disability-inclusive policies within the current governance framework.

Urgent and coordinated action by humanitarian actors, UN agencies, and donors is essential to uphold the rights of women and girls with disabilities and to ensure their full and meaningful inclusion in all aspects of humanitarian response and development programming.

¹ See, for example, CEDAW Committee's statement "Gender persecution: Institutionalized violations of women's human rights in Afghanistan" (15 February 2024).

² For more information, see UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, "Study on the so-called law on the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice", A/HRC/58/74 (12 March 2025).

II. Context

In March 2021, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) estimated that about 14 percent of the population—approximately 4.4 million people— were living with some form of disability, with conflict-related injuries cited as a significant contributing factor.³ While this figure is consistent with the WHO’s global disability prevalence estimate of 15 percent,⁴ it is likely to significantly underrepresent the true scale of disability in Afghanistan, since conflict, natural disasters, and limited access to healthcare have likely contributed to underreporting. A 2023 report by UNICEF highlights significant challenges in addressing data gaps for women and children with disabilities in Afghanistan.⁵

Since August 2021, the situation for persons with disabilities has deteriorated significantly. Unemployment has risen sharply, and many individuals with disabilities who were previously employed have lost their livelihoods.⁶ Those who relied on family members for financial support are now struggling, as these relatives are also out of work. In addition, financial assistance from the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled has been severely reduced or, in many cases, entirely discontinued.

In February 2024, Human Rights Watch highlighted that persons with disabilities were among those most affected by Afghanistan’s economic crisis. It noted that “due to decades of conflict and poor maternal health, Afghanistan has one of the largest populations in the world of people with disabilities. Because of aid shortfalls, some NGOs that had provided services for people with disabilities no longer do. Some Afghans who had served in the previous government’s armed forces and who acquired disabilities from the war have lost access to the financial benefits they previously received. The Taliban’s policies banning women from traveling and in some cases working without a *mahram* have also had a particularly detrimental impact on women with disabilities and on women caring for others with disabilities, including on their ability to access services and benefits.”⁷

III. Overview of findings

The findings from the study carried out by WILPF’s partner organisation confirm that **women and girls with disabilities are among the most marginalised and underserved groups** in the population of Afghanistan.

- **Discriminatory Aid Distribution:** Participants described unequal access to humanitarian assistance due to nepotism, lack of disability-inclusive planning, and exclusion from beneficiary lists. They reported that local authorities exclude them from aid distribution lists, prioritising the needs of family members over those of individuals with disabilities. Disability is frequently overlooked in aid distribution schemes, exacerbating their economic disadvantage.
- **Denial of Independent Access to Humanitarian Aid Due to Male Guardian Restrictions:** Under current policies imposed by the de facto authorities, women and girls are prohibited from appearing at public sites, including humanitarian aid distribution centres, without a

³ Khaled Nikzad, ‘14% of Afghans Live with Disabilities: AIHRC’ (TOLO News, 28 March 2021)

⁴ WHO, World Report on Disability 2011.

⁵ UNICEF, Afghanistan Country Office Annual Report 2023, (2024).

⁶ ICRC, Afghanistan: Unemployment Leaves People with Disabilities Struggling to Survive (25 April 2024).

⁷ HRW, ‘A Disaster for the Foreseeable Future. Afghanistan’s Healthcare Crisis’ (12 February 2024).

male guardian (*mahram*). As a result, many women and girls with disabilities, particularly those who have lost male family members due to conflict, are effectively prevented from accessing life-saving assistance.

- **Discriminatory Distribution of Humanitarian Aid.** The distribution of humanitarian aid remains inequitable and influenced by informal networks and connections to de facto authorities or local distributors. Women and girls with disabilities, particularly those in socially and economically marginalised situations, are frequently excluded from beneficiary lists and denied direct access to aid.⁸
- **Economic Hardship:** Women and girls with disabilities in Afghanistan face severe and growing economic hardship. Many participants reported extreme poverty due to the loss of employment, limited income-generating opportunities, and the collapse of small businesses. Many women with disabilities who previously engaged in home-based or artisanal work now lack access to markets, livelihood support, or inclusive economic initiatives. As a result, many have been confined to unpaid domestic roles, further deepening their financial dependency.
- **Exclusion from Government Entitlements:** Under the previous government, civilians who had acquired a disability due to conflict-related incidents were entitled to a monthly stipend of 5,000 Afghanis (AFN), as provided for in the Law on the Rights and Privileges for Persons with Disabilities. However, this law has been revoked by the Taliban de facto authorities and replaced with new regulations that significantly limit eligibility. The new regulation provides a reduced allowance (up to 3,000 Afghanis per month) only to families of so-called “common martyrs” and individuals with severe physical impairments, such as full paralysis or multiple limb loss. Other categories of disabilities are excluded entirely. Women with disabilities are particularly disadvantaged under these criteria, especially when male guardians are alive, as their needs are deprioritised. Meanwhile, Taliban fighters receive special benefits and pensions, while financial support for veterans of the former government has been drastically cut.
- **Barriers to Accessing Healthcare:** Women and girls with disabilities face additional significant and systemic barriers to accessing health services. They are unable to obtain necessary medications, rehabilitation services such as physiotherapy, or mental health consultations, all of which negatively impact their physical and psychological well-being.
- **Barriers to Social and Public Life:** Movement restrictions, enforced dress codes, and the closure of recreational facilities, parks, sports clubs, and other communal spaces have significantly deepened the isolation of women and girls with disabilities. These compounded restrictions have taken a severe psychological toll, leaving many feeling trapped, excluded, and unable to participate in public life.
- **Restricted Access to Education:** The closure of schools has left girls with disabilities in a state of despair. Prior to the closure, girls with visual and physical disabilities had access to special education and employment programs that enabled them to acquire knowledge and skills. Now, these opportunities have been curtailed. Eighty percent of girls with disabilities are estimated to be unable to attend school.⁹

⁸ See also: OCHA, Challenges Facing Afghans with Disabilities (5 March 2024).

⁹ UN Women, Gender Country Profile: Afghanistan (June 2024), page 46.

Furthermore, the following elements also emerged during the focus-group discussions organised as part of the study:

- **Lack of a Gender Perspective in Humanitarian Aid Planning:** Humanitarian aid planning in Afghanistan lacks a gender perspective due to the complete exclusion of Afghan women from political participation and decision-making processes under the de facto authorities. As a result, humanitarian distribution mechanisms fail to account for gender-specific needs and dynamics. This has disproportionately impacted women and girls with disabilities, who are among the most marginalised and are consistently left behind in aid delivery.¹⁰
- **Inaccessibility of UN Humanitarian Aid Distribution Sites for Women and Girls with Disabilities:** The accessibility of UN humanitarian aid distribution sites for persons with disabilities in Afghanistan remains limited, inconsistent, and often inadequate, especially for women and girls with disabilities. Barriers exist at every level—physical, procedural, and attitudinal—leading to exclusion, especially of women and girls with disabilities. While some UN agencies have adopted disability inclusion policies, their implementation on the ground faces serious barriers. A few partners have piloted home delivery of aid or prioritised lines for people with disabilities, but this is rare and not widespread. The 2023 OCHA Humanitarian Response Plan includes disability indicators but monitoring and enforcement remain weak.

a. **Examples of Barriers to Inclusive Humanitarian Aid**

Physical Inaccessibility

- Most humanitarian aid distribution points are not physically accessible. Common barriers include the absence of ramps, uneven terrain, crowded conditions, and long waiting lines.
- Women with mobility or visual disabilities often cannot reach or navigate these sites safely.
- Distribution centres in rural and conflict-affected areas are even less likely to have inclusive infrastructure.

Lack of Inclusive Planning

- Many UN implementing partners and local actors do not carry out disability-sensitive needs assessments or site designs.
- Persons with disabilities are rarely consulted in the planning of aid delivery models or the selection of distribution sites.

Exclusion from Beneficiary Lists

- Persons with disabilities, particularly women, are frequently left off distribution lists due to:
 - Lack of disability data in the aid registration systems.
 - Patriarchal and discriminatory norms, where family members collect aid on behalf of women with disabilities or deprioritize their needs.
 - Lack of national disability ID cards or supporting documentation required for registration.

¹⁰ See also, Ground Truth Solutions, *Engaging Women in the Humanitarian Response in Afghanistan: Perspectives from People with Disabilities* (January 2024).

Limited Staff Awareness and Training

- Humanitarian staff and volunteers at distribution sites often lack basic training on disability inclusion, appropriate communication methods (such as sign language), or disability etiquette.
- Persons with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities are sometimes mistreated or misunderstood during aid distribution.

b. Lack of Accessibility Standards and Inclusive Infrastructure

There are no enforced building codes or accessibility standards under the current de facto authorities to ensure inclusive infrastructure such as ramps, elevators, wide doorways, or tactile signage in public buildings. As the Law on the Rights and Privileges of Persons with Disabilities—which included some accessibility standards—has been suspended, construction practices have reverted to traditional, exclusionary designs. This reinforces systemic exclusion of persons with disabilities from public services, aid centres, mosques, clinics, and schools.

The Taliban’s construction priorities appear focused on control, religious and military infrastructure, and government buildings—without transparency, public consultation, or accountability. Women and girls with disabilities are entirely excluded from planning processes, and their mobility needs are not considered in any stage of infrastructure design or implementation. Even where limited structural features exist, women—particularly those with disabilities—are often banned or restricted from entering public spaces, rendering physical accessibility irrelevant unless social and gender-based restrictions are addressed in tandem.

IV. Summary of Evidence and Patterns of Exclusion

Key findings from the WILPF’s partner organisation’s study revealed that the aid distribution system is marked by discriminatory practices, including nepotism, exclusion from beneficiary lists, and a lack of disability- and gender-sensitive planning. Many women cannot access distribution sites due to the absence of male escorts, restrictive mobility norms, and inaccessible physical infrastructure.

Economic marginalisation is acute: participants reported the collapse of small home-based enterprises, lack of access to markets, and ineligibility for governmental financial assistance. The dismantling of the Law on the Rights and Privileges for Persons with Disabilities has stripped women with disabilities of legal entitlements. Monthly allowances, if given at all, are negligible and inconsistently distributed, often withheld from women with male guardians. These findings underscore a triple burden of gender, disability, and economic exclusion, compounded by the lack of inclusive infrastructure and planning in aid delivery.

It is imperative to ensure urgent, inclusive reforms in humanitarian assistance design and delivery, prioritising the voices and needs of women and girls with disabilities.

V. Afghanistan's human rights obligations

The 2004 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (the last internationally recognized constitution prior to the Taliban's return to power in 2021) includes explicit protections and rights for persons with disabilities in Article 53. In accordance with Articles 2 and 3 of the CEDAW, and the Committee's General Recommendations Nos. 18 and 37, the State party must eliminate all forms of discrimination in the distribution of humanitarian aid and access to essential services. It must also adopt and implement disability- and gender-inclusive policies across all sectors, ensuring the full and equal participation of women and girls with disabilities in public, economic, and social life.

Furthermore, Afghanistan must fulfil its international legal obligations under the CRPD, the ICESCR, and the CRC, all of which require the protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls with disabilities without discrimination.

VI. Recommendations

Dismantle systemic oppression and implement UN human rights recommendations:

- Call on the de facto authorities to immediately repeal all their misogynistic edicts, regulations, and practices that institutionalise discrimination, dehumanise, and segregate women and girls in both public and private life, including those that violate their rights to education, employment, movement, health, and participation in public affairs.
- Urge full and immediate implementation of the recommendations issued by UN human rights mechanisms, including the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, as set out, for example, in his report on "The phenomenon of an institutionalized system of discrimination, segregation, disrespect for human dignity and exclusion of women and girls" (A/HRC/56/25) and in his "Study on the so-called law on the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice" (A/HRC/58/74). These reports document a system amounting to gender apartheid and provide urgent legal and policy guidance for reversing such violations.

Reinstate and uphold legal protections:

- Reinstate the Law on the Rights and Privileges of Persons with Disabilities, ensuring full alignment with CEDAW, CRPD, and other international human rights obligations.
- Ensure the application of anti-discrimination protections to women and girls with all types of disabilities, regardless of family members' status.
- Reinstate the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women¹¹ and take urgent steps to guarantee accessible reporting mechanisms, survivor-centered support services, and accountability measures that are inclusive of women and girls with disabilities.

Guarantee equal and non-discriminatory access to humanitarian aid:

- Eliminate all barriers (including the requirement of a *mahram*) that prevent women and girls with disabilities from independently accessing humanitarian aid.

¹¹ The Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women (2009) has been abolished, while specialized courts, prosecution offices and family response units have been dismantled.

- Require humanitarian actors and UN agencies to integrate disability and gender perspectives into all phases of aid programming. This includes:
 - developing and implementing transparent, inclusive beneficiary selection criteria that ensure the systematic inclusion of women and girls with disabilities, particularly those in marginalised situations and those without male guardians or official documentation.
 - ensuring that aid distribution sites are physically accessible, and that transport assistance is provided when needed.
 - establishing female-led mobile or home delivery mechanisms for women and girls with disabilities who cannot access public distribution centres.
 - creating formal disability and gender advisory councils, including women with disabilities as core members, to serve as required stakeholders in all stages of humanitarian and development programming, from planning and implementation to monitoring and evaluation.

Ensure enjoyment of economic rights and livelihoods:

- Reinstate and expand financial entitlements and social protection schemes for persons with disabilities, ensuring that women and girls with disabilities are not excluded on the basis of gender, type of disability, or the presence of a male guardian.
- Repeal all policies and practices that restrict the right of women and girls with disabilities to engage in income-generating activities. These include bans on women’s employment, movement restrictions requiring a male guardian, and segregationist policies that exclude women from public life.
- Ensure that all economic recovery, humanitarian, and development initiatives include targeted support for women and girls with disabilities, particularly those living in poverty or who have been excluded from traditional support networks.
- Support gender- and disability-specific economic support programs such as at-home income generation kits, vocational training, and market linkages for women with disabilities.

Guarantee Equal Access to Health:

- Ensure accessible healthcare services, including physical and mental health services, especially for women and girls with disabilities who face compounded barriers. Ensure that they are able to obtain necessary medications, rehabilitation services such as physiotherapy and mental health consultations.
- Provide disability-inclusive healthcare training for medical professionals.
- Ensure physical accessibility of health facilities, including through ramps, and inclusive signage or restrooms.

Guarantee Equal Access to Education:

- Repeal all policies and practices that deny access to education based on gender. Immediately lift the ban on girls’ and women’s education beyond the sixth grade, including in secondary schools, universities, and vocational institutions. These bans have disproportionately harmed girls with disabilities, for whom education is a critical lifeline to autonomy, dignity, and social participation.

- Remove the ban on medical education for women and girls,¹² which prevents them from becoming healthcare providers and undermines access to gender-sensitive healthcare for the wider population, such as women and girls with disabilities.
- Reinstate inclusive and disability-sensitive education systems, ensuring that girls with disabilities are prioritised in efforts to rebuild access to education at all levels.
- Reopen and expand inclusive education programs, including remote, community-based, or home-based learning models tailored to the needs of girls with sensory, physical, and intellectual disabilities.

Support local women-led and disability organisations:

- Ensure support, including funding, to women-led disability advocacy groups, enabling them to safely continue outreach, psychosocial support, and rights awareness programs.

¹² Sahar Fetrat, Afghanistan's Taliban Ban Medical Training for Women (Human Rights Watch, 3 December 2024)