

The Role of UN Women in Addressing Women's Rights in Afghanistan under Taliban

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Abstract

The current condition of Afghanistan under the Taliban government creates considerable humanitarian problems, especially concerning the rights of women and girls. The Taliban threatens Afghan women by implementing several detrimental policies prohibiting them from going to school, working, and leaving the house. The Taliban restricted the movement of women workers and created an insecure space. This research aims to explain the role of UN Women in responding to humanitarian issues in Afghanistan, especially those related to women. This study used a descriptive method with literature sources such as books, journals, notes, and related reports. The findings indicated that UN Women is committed to assisting Afghan women in restoring their rights under Taliban rule. UN Women, as an International Organization, plays a role as an arena for Afghan women by facilitating women to speak, one of which is in a series of events at the UN Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace, and Security, which was held at the UN Headquarters in New York. UN Women also works as a donor by providing financial assistance, which will be allocated to the needs of Afghan women. In addition, UN Women acts as an advocate through various activities.

Keywords: UN Women, United Nations, Afghanistan, Taliban

Abstrak

Kondisi Afghanistan di bawah pemerintahan Taliban saat ini menciptakan persoalan kemanusiaan yang cukup besar, terutama terkait dengan hak-hak perempuan dan anak perempuan di Afghanistan. Taliban memberikan ancaman yang kuat kepada perempuan Afghanistan dengan menerapkan beberapa kebijakan yang merugikan seperti kebijakan larangan untuk bersekolah, bekerja, dan meninggalkan rumah. Taliban membatasi pergerakan pekerja perempuan dan menciptakan ruang yang tidak aman bagi perempuan. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menjelaskan bagaimana peran UN Women dalam menanggapi isu kemanusiaan yang terjadi di Afghanistan khususnya terkait dengan perempuan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif yaitu menggunakan sumber literatur seperti buku, jurnal, catatan, serta laporan yang berkaitan. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa UN Women berkomitmen untuk membantu perempuan Afghanistan dalam pengembalian hak-hak di bawah pemerintahan Taliban. UN Women sebagai Organisasi Internasional berperan sebagai forum bagi perempuan Afghanistan dengan memfasilitasi perempuan untuk berbicara salah satunya dalam rangkaian acara Debat Terbuka Dewan Keamanan PBB mengenai Perempuan, Perdamaian, dan Keamanan yang dilaksanakan pada Markas Besar PBB di New York. UN Women juga berperan sebagai pendonor dengan memberikan bantuan dana yang akan dialokasikan untuk kebutuhan perempuan Afghanistan. Selain itu, UN Women juga menjalankan tugasnya dengan berperan sebagai advokator melalui berbagai kegiatan advokasi yang dijalankan.

Kata Kunci: UN Women, Perserikatan Bangsa-Bangsa, Afghanistan, Taliban

Introduction

In 2021, the Taliban succeeded in occupying the Afghan government again, starting from the capital, Kabul, to several other areas in Afghanistan. The Taliban succeeded in taking control of the Afghan government, marked by taking over the Presidential Palace in Kabul and several strategic areas such as Kandahar and Ghazni. Since the Taliban rule, women in Afghanistan have experienced difficulties in obtaining their rights in various areas, such as the right to work, to get proper education, to get healthcare, and to participate in politics. Over the past two years, the Taliban took control, and crimes against women and girls have gradually increased. The Taliban have consistently kept their commitment to keeping women and girls out of public life, despite initial assurances that they would exercise their rights under Sharia law, including the ability to work and study. The de facto government has disbanded the Ministry of Women's Affairs and does not have any female cabinet members, essentially ending women's political participation.

The Taliban adheres to a conservative Deobandi ideology, and often, the policies or regulations issued by the Taliban are opposed by Afghan society or even the international community. The Taliban pose a strong threat to Afghans, especially children and women. The Taliban began to limit the mobilization of children and women in Afghanistan by closing existing schools. In addition, the Taliban restrict female workers' movement by creating an unsafe environment for women to leave the house. Afghanistan then became one of the most dangerous countries for women because of the many acts of discrimination given to women. Apart from the limited mobility or movement of women in Afghanistan, they also often experience bad treatment, such as torture and rape.

Before the Taliban in Afghanistan, women had a fairly free life and also had rights protected by Afghan law at that time. One of the San Jose State University lecturers who was also born in Afghanistan, Mohammad Humayon Qayoumi, released a book entitled *Once Upon a Time in Afghanistan*, which describes the situation of Afghan women before the Taliban arrived.

Mohammad Humayon attached several photos from 1950 to 1970 depicting Afghan women's freedom through this book. In these photos, Afghan women seem to have a free life, like getting the highest education possible, having freedom to dress, and traveling and visiting various public places in Afghanistan. Through the 2004 Afghan Constitution, Afghan women were allowed to contribute to elections and in parliament. The 2004 Afghan Constitution contains regulations regarding women's representation in parliament, namely that women fill a minimum of 25 percent of the parliamentary quota. Based on these regulations, Afghan women are allowed to participate in politics. Afghanistan has even become the country with the highest number of female parliamentarians, almost 28 percent, due to the 2004 Afghan Constitution.

This success cannot be separated from international organizations operating in Afghanistan, including UN Women. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, or UN Women, aims to promote gender equality globally. UN Women has helped Afghanistan to eliminate discrimination against women and helped women in Afghanistan gain their rights since 2010 through women's empowerment programs.

In dealing with humanitarian problems in Afghanistan, especially regarding women, UN Women acts as a facilitator who facilitates Afghan women's forums to speak to international parties so that the international community gets an idea of the current condition of Afghanistan. Apart from that, UN Women also advocates for overcoming humanitarian problems in Afghanistan by continuing to utilize its strength in voicing women's rights in Afghanistan. As an advocate, UN Women also takes advantage of technological advances by using social media to approach the international community by providing understanding regarding women in Afghanistan and carrying out campaigns to support Afghan women.

The current deterioration of women in Afghanistan is a threat to the existence and dignity of women as social creatures. Women in Afghanistan who have lost their rights are a challenge for UN Women in advancing women's

empowerment in Afghanistan. The various prohibitions imposed on women make UN Women's position challenging. Seventy percent of UN Women staff are women, and 55 percent are Afghan women. However, UN Women continues to survive and continue to exist in Afghanistan, continuously seeking breakthroughs and innovations to continue carrying out its mission to fight for women's rights in Afghanistan.

The loss of women's rights in various aspects such as education, employment, politics, and the economy due to Taliban policies has caused a decline in women's conditions, which UN Women has been fighting for together with Afghan women. In several articles, they generally discuss Afghan women before the Taliban succeeded in taking over the government in 2021. This article then becomes important to show the role of UN Women as an international organization tasked with gender equality and women's empowerment in Afghanistan after the takeover of power by the Taliban.

Theoretical Framework and Research Method

This article will review Clive Archer's research to explain the role of UN Women in overcoming humanitarian issues in Afghanistan, stating that an international organization is a formal and sustainable structure formed based on the agreement of both government and non-government members. In his book *International Organizations*, Clive Archer explains that International Organizations have three main roles (Archer, 2001). The first is that the International Organization is described as an instrument its members use to achieve certain goals or interests. International organizations also act as an arena for members to conduct meetings, discuss, or implement agreements. As an arena, International Organizations not only facilitate a forum for conveying the views of each member but can also strengthen diplomatic policies for each member. The United Nations is an international organization that has long served as an arena for its members to discuss various topics. One example was in 1970 when Third World countries used the United Nations

to discuss the New International Economic Order. Then, finally, International Organizations act as actors in the international system. International organizations that act as independent actors can act in the international world without being affected by external forces. Their ability to operate as international or transnational actors can be traced to identifying themselves and their interests with corporate bodies other than nation-states.

Then, to help explain the role of UN Women in overcoming humanitarian issues in Afghanistan, this article will also discuss women's rights. Women's rights have become part of a series of international activities that have resulted in significant political commitment to human rights and gender equality. Women's rights themselves are often associated with reproductive rights, sexual violence, and discrimination against women. However, it has many aspects, such as the right to health services, social security rights, criminal justice rights, and rights as citizens. Nevertheless, the gender gap is still wide, and discrimination against women continues to emerge. Some groups of women face additional forms of discrimination based on age, ethnicity, nationality, religion, health status, marital status, education, disability, socioeconomic status, and more. These intersecting forms of discrimination must be considered when applying women's rights to combat discrimination and humanitarian issues against women.

Feminism is a thought that explicitly recognizes that women are subordinated to men and tries to find a way to overcome this problem (Azizah, 2017). Feminism is a women's movement that demands full equality of rights between women and men. The emergence of the feminist movement was motivated by several things, such as education, culture, customs, and social class (Gustiarti, n.d.). Feminism was born because of inequality or unequal relations between men and women in various aspects of society, so there is awareness from feminists to eliminate this inequality.

Establishing UN Women aims to improve and fight for gender equality and empower women in their respective fields and expertise,

which aligns with the goal of feminism, which is to fight for gender equality in various spheres, such as politics, the economy, and social life. UN Women works with governments and civil society to shape laws, policies, and programs that can be implemented effectively and benefit women worldwide. Feminism is an approach that focuses on inequality between men and women and the consequences of this inequality on world political conditions (Jackson & Sorensen, 2005). This situation is relevant to what UN Women is doing in responding to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan to eliminate gender inequality and realize equal rights between Afghan men and women.

Results and Discussion

UN Women and Taliban Policy in Afghanistan

UN Women has worked and been present in Afghanistan since 2002 as UNIFEM. Then, it officially worked in Afghanistan under UN Women in 2010 (Shamimi et al., 2022). UN Women in Afghanistan supports developing, monitoring, and implementing policies and programs that protect and promote women's rights. The program, run by UN Women in Afghanistan, encourages gender equality and empowers women in various sectors. The program run by UN Women is based on three pillars, namely eliminating violence against women, political and economic empowerment, as well as coordination and advocacy.

Currently, the policies issued by the Taliban are based on the Deobandi ideology, which is conservative and contrary to the current social conditions of Afghan society. Deobandi itself is an ideology that originated and developed in India. The first appearance of Deobandi was a form of resistance by Muslim communities in India against British colonialism, which later developed into an Islamic movement to eradicate the threat and influence of Western colonialism and Hinduism (Sa'diyah, 2021). The current Taliban policy towards Afghanistan has several focuses, such as education, health, freedom of movement, work, and politics.

In education, the Taliban implemented several policies related to the education system

of the Afghan people, especially those related to women and girls. One of them is making a policy of prohibiting girls from attending elementary schools, which indirectly means giving a total ban on girls' education in Afghanistan (Kohsar & Rasmussen, 2022).

The Taliban also implemented a policy of restricting Afghan women from pursuing higher education. In September 2022, the Taliban allowed Afghan women to take university entrance exams in most provinces nationwide (Limaye, 2022). However, this policy still makes it difficult for women because there are limitations to the subjects they can take. The Taliban severely restrict subjects such as journalism severely restricts subjects such as journalism. In addition, other policies make it difficult for women, such as they can only be taught by women. Afghan women are also barred from attending classes where Afghan male students also attend (Mallapaty, 2022). The Taliban's policy towards the education of women and girls has drawn criticism from the international community because it is considered to violate human rights by depriving women of the right to education.

Under Taliban rule, Afghan women's right to access healthcare is also threatened. So far, the Afghan health system has relied on the SEHATMANDI program, initially known as the System Enhancement for Health Action in Transition (SEHAT) Project, from 2013 to 2018. However, since 2018, this program has changed its name to the SEHATMANDI program. It is a multi-donor-sponsored project with the backing of the World Bank, the European Union (EU), and the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). It offers access to family planning, nutrition, and primary and secondary health care at reasonable prices, aiming to expand access to health services, particularly for rural communities. It covers 64% of all public health institutions and offers millions of people access to inexpensive healthcare through 2,331 medical facilities spread throughout 34 provinces. The program employs more than 24,000 health professionals. Major funding for the program has been cut since the Taliban took over. Without sufficient funding,

SEHATMANDI's medical facilities are deteriorating, limiting access to basic and life-saving healthcare across the country, as well as humanitarian aid and polio eradication operations. The clinic is experiencing a shortage of medicine and supplies, staff members have not received their paychecks in months, and patients cannot obtain the critical healthcare services they require.

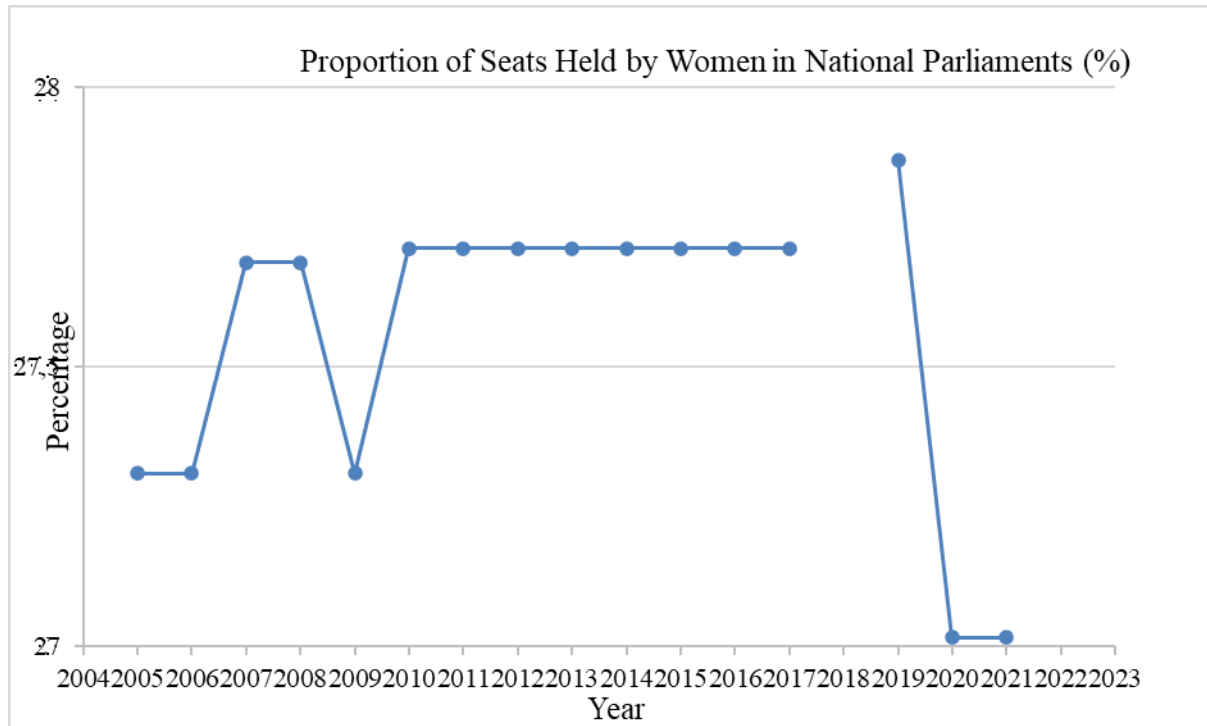
Hospitals or health services only provide health assistance at the lowest level for Afghan women. Male doctors are only allowed to provide medical care to women if the woman is wearing a burqa or clothing that covers the entire body except for the eyes (Pangestika & Putranti, 2022). Women also experience acts of discrimination in terms of health rights, such as the use of medical devices and the use of drugs that are of a different quality than those given to male Afghan patients. This act of discrimination against women's health rights has resulted in a high death rate for women in Afghanistan. Not a few Afghan women experience failure in the delivery process due to inadequate hospital services. Some of these women even had to face death. A report issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) states that there are around 638 out of 10,000 women who die in childbirth (Jung & Maroof, 2021).

The Taliban government has further implemented policies that threaten women's rights to freedom of association and movement. The Taliban implemented policies related to prohibiting women from traveling both inside and outside the country without being accompanied by men. The Taliban argue that women should remain at home as housewives whose job is to serve their husbands (Lestari, 2021). The relationship between Afghan women and the social community continues to worsen every day. Through research conducted by UN

Women, around 48% or half of respondents who were Afghan women felt that relations between them and other women in the community were in a deteriorating situation. Then, 15% of Afghan women have not met women from their community other than their immediate family members in recent months, and 31% of respondents revealed that they can meet women from their social group at least once a month.

The Taliban also implements policies that violate women's rights at work by prohibiting women from working, especially jobs that require women to leave the house. The Taliban government also strictly prohibits Afghan women from working in the government and civil society institutions or organizations. If a woman has a job outside the home that cannot be abandoned, the Taliban will force and accompany the woman to return home. The Taliban government recommends that only Afghan men work outside the home (Lestari, 2021). The Taliban's policy of limiting women's work has made it difficult for Afghan women to find decent jobs with a commensurate income. Many Afghan women's professional work licenses were forcibly revoked by the Taliban government (Argenti et al., 2023). Policies related to women's work also have an impact on poverty in Afghanistan because of the loss of many people's livelihoods, especially women. In 2022, 18.9 million people were experiencing a food crisis, which led to hunger, malnutrition, and diseases caused by poor nutrition.

The decision not to include women in the government system is also seen as depriving women of their rights to work and participate in politics. Currently, the freedom of women in politics is limited by the Taliban because women are considered not to have the capability to participate in the decision-making process (Nurfahirah et al., 2022).



Source: The World Bank

UN Women's Role as a Forum

UN Women, as an international organization, can act as a forum for the Afghan people, especially for Afghan women who face various discrimination under the current Taliban government. UN Women acts as a forum by facilitating the Afghan women's delegation to speak in international forums and by continuing to help voice Afghan women's rights in every available opportunity. UN Women also provides a forum for member countries to carry out a discussion related to the condition of Afghanistan and negotiate decisions that do not harm the people of Afghanistan, especially women. The various international forums organized by UN Women aim to get special attention from member countries and the international community regarding humanitarian issues that are happening to Afghan women under the current Taliban administration.

On October 21, 2021, UN Women provided an opportunity for representatives of Afghan women to speak at a series of events at the UN Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace, and Security held at the UN Headquarters in New York (UN Women, 2021c).

Parliamentarians, women's rights defenders, journalists, civil society leaders, and researchers attended the meeting. Meanwhile, the speakers representing Afghanistan at the event were Naheed Farid, Asila Wardak, Mariam Safi, Anisa Shaheed, Sofia Ramyar, and Fawzia Koofi, who is a former Republican Peace Negotiator and the first female Deputy Speaker of the Afghan Parliament.

In the meeting, which raised the main topic of ensuring international cooperation in supporting Afghan women and girls, the Afghan delegation conveyed issues related to women's rights and how the contributions of international organizations and external parties can help overcome these problems. Through the meeting, the Afghan women's delegation demanded international assistance related to humanitarian assistance, peace efforts, and a diverse government inclusive of all parties. Asila Wardak, who is a former Ministerial Advisor at the Afghanistan Permanent Mission to the United Nations and Director General of Women's Human Rights and International Affairs at the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also conveyed several Taliban policies that were considered detrimental to women and

had to be stopped immediately, such as policies not to involve women in the Afghan government (UN Women, 2021c). Through these various events, UN Women has carried out its role as an arena for its members to hold an international forum that aims to resolve certain problems, which in this case are humanitarian issues in Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban.

UN Women's Role as a Donor

UN Women also performs its duties as a donor. UN Women acts as a donor by providing financial assistance to encourage innovative and effective programs to be carried out by government agencies and civil society organizations. Through the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women, which has been managed since 2010, UN Women provides financial assistance to help overcome women affected by the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. The UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women is a program that focuses on preventing violence against women and girls, increasing access to legal services, care, and counseling, and strengthening laws and policies related to violence against women and girls.

In 2020, the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women has assisted 242,569 women, including women living with HIV/AIDS, women victims of violence, women and girls with disabilities, as well as refugee women and girls, through the provision of financial assistance of 72.8 million USD (UN Women, 2021a). Then, in 2021, the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women provides funding assistance of USD 74.7 million allocated to prevent violence against women and girls, improve service delivery, and increase the effectiveness of laws, policies, national action plans, and systems accountability (UN Women, 2021).

Through the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women, UN Women also shows its commitment to helping Afghan women by investing in civil society organizations, especially women's organizations in Afghanistan. One of them is the Women for Afghan Women (WAW) organization, which is an Afghan civil society organization dedicated

to protecting and promoting the rights of Afghan women and girls.

Women for Afghan Women, together with the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women, successfully launched a project entitled Prevention and Response to Gender Based Violence in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Returnee Communities (PARGIRC), which specifically aims to improve overall access to safe multi-sectoral services and to address gender-based violence (Women for Afghan Women, 2020).

UN Women as donors in humanitarian cases in Afghanistan are also bridging the United States Agency for Development or the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in providing financial assistance to the people of Afghanistan, especially women and girls (USAID, 2022). This funding will directly support civil society organizations, especially those led by Afghan women, which have been part of the movement to restore or realize women's rights in Afghanistan. The funding assistance will also provide women and girls access to social protection services, health care assistance, psycho-social support, and counseling (USAID, 2022).

UN Women's Role as an Advocate

In addition, UN Women is an advocate in Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis by advocating for the international community to restore, protect, and promote the full spectrum of women's and girls' rights. Advocacy is a form of democratic process by citizens or an institution to change or demand changes in the legal system in a country (Azizah, 2013). UN Women carries out its role as an advocate by holding various meetings, recommending strategies, and voicing Afghan women's rights to the international community.

One form of advocacy by UN Women is demanding the involvement of international parties in restoring women's rights in Afghanistan. On every occasion at international forums, UN Women always tries to convey the current condition of women in Afghanistan and how the parties attending the meeting should be able to utilize their strengths in helping the people of Afghanistan.

The Executive Director of UN Women, Sima Bahous, said that UN Women demands the involvement of G20 members to participate in fighting for the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan by using their strength and expertise to explain the consequences of non-compliance with international law (Bahous, 2021). UN Women's commitment is also shown by its willingness to gather G20 members and Afghan women leaders to be then able to exchange opinions and provide strategic advice regarding the assistance needed by Afghan women. UN Women considers that advocacy assistance carried out by many parties, such as the G20 countries, can help clarify that women's rights are an aspect of peace and a factor in stability in Afghanistan.

UN Women also held a meeting with the Taliban government for four days in January 2023 in the Kabul and Kandahar regions (United Nations, 2023). The Executive Director of UN Women, Sima Bahous, the Deputy Secretary General, Amina Mohammed, and the Assistant Secretary-General for political and UN peace operations, Khaled Khiari, were represented at the meeting. During the meeting with the Taliban, the delegates conveyed a warning about the recently issued regulations by the Taliban regarding the prohibition against women working in national and international non-governmental organizations. The delegates said that the Taliban's decision undermined the working system of organizations that have been helping millions of Afghans. The delegation also conveyed directly to the Taliban to prioritize the good of Afghanistan and stop all forms of regulations that harm women and girls (United Nations, 2023). Apart from holding meetings with the Taliban, the delegates also visited communities affected by the rule of the Taliban, humanitarian workers, and civil society in Kabul. The visit received a response from the Taliban, who said they would exclude female health workers from the ban on work.

Another form of advocacy by UN Women is utilizing technological advances and social media to advocate for women's rights in Afghanistan. One of the social media used by UN Women is Twitter social media. Through the @unwomenafghanistan account, UN Women

often shares the latest information about the condition of women and girls in Afghanistan (Nurfahirah et al., 2022). Through this account, UN Women approaches the international community by conducting various campaigns to support restoring Afghan women's rights. One is using the hashtag #StayandDeliver as a form of UN Women's commitment and the international community in fully supporting the restoration of Afghan women's rights. UN Women also regularly shares information about the impact of the Taliban's policies and how these policies can deprive women of rights in Afghanistan. In conducting advocacy, UN Women also collaborates with Afghan women leaders to make data-based analysis by releasing monthly survey results regarding the impact of policies implemented by the Taliban on women and girls (Davidian, 2021).

Conclusion

Human Rights are basic rights inherent in every human being and are natural, so any force cannot take them away. Human Rights are rights given by God to every human being since birth. Human Rights cannot be separated into equal rights and freedom rights in which there is interaction between individuals. Human Rights began when the Magna Carta was born in England in 1215. The Magna Carta was a charter explaining that if a king violated the rules he had set, the king would also be tried according to applicable law. The Magna Carta Charter encourages the highlight of human rights, also supported by the question of equality before the law, which means all human beings are equal in the eyes of the law.

Afghanistan is one country that still cannot guarantee the fulfillment of the human rights of its citizens, especially women. Since the Taliban took over the Afghan government in 2021, the Taliban government has issued several policies that violate the human rights of the Afghan people. Policies issued by the Taliban often come under fire from the people of Afghanistan or even the international community. This policy is considered to have taken away the rights of the community, especially the rights of Afghan women and girls. These policies include a ban on going to school, a ban on visiting sports

centers and public baths, a ban on traveling, a ban on working, and a ban on participating in parliament or politics.

In the humanitarian crisis and discrimination experienced by the people of Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban, International Organizations have an important role in helping overcome the crisis. UN Women is one of the international organizations that has responded to humanitarian issues in Afghanistan, particularly those related to women and girls. In this case, UN Women is a forum for the Afghan people, especially women, by allowing the Afghan women's delegation to speak at international forums. In addition, UN Women also plays a role as a donor in the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, one of which is by bridging the United States Agency for Development or the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in providing financial assistance to the people of Afghanistan, especially women, and girls in the amount of 30 million dollars. In addition, in helping overcome discrimination in Afghanistan, UN Women acts as an advocate. UN Women carried out its role as an advocate by holding a joint meeting with the Taliban to discuss the Taliban's policies, which were considered detrimental to Afghan women. Apart from that, UN Women also acts as an advocate by continuing to advocate to demand a change in the legal system in force in Afghanistan. UN Women also conducts advocacy by utilizing technology and social media through the UN Women's Twitter account, @unwomenafghanistan.

UN Women, as an organization engaged in gender equality and women's empowerment, has resulted in humanitarian issues occurring in Afghanistan, especially those related to women. UN Women's meetings with the Taliban have produced quite important results in terms of the status or role of women in Afghanistan. The Taliban responded to the meeting by issuing a decision to exclude female health workers from being banned from work. This decision was driven by UN Women's advocacy, which conveyed the impact of prohibitions or restrictions on working female health workers.

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