**Statement
Richard Bennett**

**Enhance Interactive Dialogue
Human Rights Council 51st session**

Mr President,
Excellencies,
Afghan women (and girls online I hope!)

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honour to share this space with you today and I thank the Council for creating this opportunity to have a dialogue with Afghan women following the Urgent Debate at the 51st session.

The dialogue is much needed because it is important to create multiple platforms for Afghan women to make their voices heard. As I have said repeatedly, my role is not to speak for Afghan women but to support opportunities for them to speak to policymakers and where possible to amplify their concerns and their calls to action. So, I very much welcome this opportunity to speak alongside and in support not only of the women on this podium, also all the Afghan women and men speaking and otherwise participating today.

On 1 July I had the privilege of speaking at the Urgent Debate on behalf of the coordinating committee of the UN Special Procedures and I noted that the current rollback of the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan reflects previous experience during the 1996-2001 period and in parts of the country controlled by the Taliban before August 2021. We cannot allow history to repeat itself.

Mr. President,

The denial of women’s and girls’ rights is central to the Taliban’s ideology, which includes women’s exclusion from public and political life. If the Taliban were in charge of this Council, would there be a single woman in this room, let alone speaking?

While the human rights of women and girls have never been fully respected in Afghanistan, nowhere else globally has there been as widespread and all-encompassing a roll back as since the Taliban seized power in August 2021.

Step by step, with one exception, edicts have been imposed that not only restrict women and girls’ daily lives, they rob them of their futures and strip them of their identity and dignity, including for example the suspension of girls’ secondary education, mandatory face covering, the injunction to stay at home except when necessary, requirement for a male chaperone (mahram) and the punishment of men for the so called misdemeanours of their female relatives.

Women and girls belonging to ethnic and religious minority groups, and those with disabilities, face further discrimination and complications. And single mothers, older women, women who are the sole income earners in their family face unprecedented difficulty to sustain themselves and their families.

Let me be clear, Afghanistan must comply with its international obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (CPRW); such compliance is not optional.

The *de facto* authorities must change their policies and uphold women’s human rights. If they don’t change, they must be held to account. In this regard, all forms of gender justice including considerations of gender persecution may be warranted, as is further exploration of the concept gender apartheid.

Mr. President,

I could continue to list the ways in which the human rights of Afghan women and girls have been curtailed. Instead, I would like to celebrate the strength and resilience of Afghan women and girls, who continue to lead the nonviolent campaign for human rights and an inclusive, stable society. As we are hearing today, Afghan women are articulate, determined, organised, courageous. The international community should listen to their demands, work with them, support them, help them to transform aspirations into concrete plans and support those plans politically and with resources, all while ensuring the safety and protection of the women and girls concerned. I would like to conclude my presentation by offering some recommendations to the international community and to the de facto authorities:

I urge the de facto authority to:

* Urgently reverse the discriminatory policies and directives that unduly restrict the rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls, including freedom of movement and the rights to work and public participation;
* Engage directly with women and jointly develop and implement concrete action plans with clear timelines to ensure women’s equal participation in education, employment, governance and all other aspects of public life and legal or policy measures affecting their lives.
* Immediately and unconditionally reopen all girls’ secondary schools, and ensure equal and quality education for girls and boys at all levels.

International community:

* Take necessary measures to strengthen accountability for human rights violations and abuses, including through this mandate and others, including potential mechanisms to address impunity, provide redress for survivors and victims, and bring perpetrators to justice.
* Explore incentives as well as penalties to convince the *de facto* authorities to ensure the rights and freedoms of women and girls are respected, protected and promoted; take all measures necessary to support and protect women and girls, especially women’s rights defenders;
* Ensure that equal and quality education is provided in line with international human rights standards, including prioritizing adequate funding allocation for adolescent girls’ education.
* Make all efforts necessary to protect human rights defenders and to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations to protect and promote human rights, including through political support and by providing flexible and accessible funding arrangements to those inside and outside Afghanistan, especially women-led organisations.

In conclusion, to all the Afghan women and men, in the room and online, I am committed to continue to fight for the fundamental freedoms of all Afghans, including women and girls. I offer you my solidarity. I thank you for your trust.

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