

Welcome Speech on behalf of the civil society organizations that requested the People's Tribunal for Women of Afghanistan

Members of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal, courageous survivors, esteemed judges, dedicated prosecutors, allies from around the world, Salaams and greetings. Warm greetings also to the Afghan women and girls who have joined us online today from Afghanistan and from exile. We are grateful to gather here in the beautiful city of Madrid for this historic occasion. I want to thank our local partner the Madrid Bar Association for hosting us in this remarkable venue. Thank you. I also know that for all of the Afghans in this room, we wish with every fibre of our being that we could hold this tribunal in Kabul.

First and foremost, I express deepest gratitude to the survivors. Without their courage, there would be no People's Tribunal for Women of Afghanistan. Without their voices, we would not be here today in this room.

We are here to honour the unwavering courage of the women of Afghanistan, to illustrate once again their relentless pursuit for justice, dignity and their equal rights. Today, we will bear witness, seek accountability, and challenge tyranny and its normalization. We are here to raise awareness and demand solidarity from women and men around the world, for we know that the true power lies with the people.

We want this tribunal to be a platform to share the struggle of Afghan women as well as to highlight their inspiring resistance. This tribunal will enable them to claim their right to be seen, to speak, and to demand justice in the face of the world's most extreme system of gender-based oppression.

Women of Afghanistan have not and will not give up. When one door is closed, we build another. We are the descendants of generations of women who have challenged misogyny and pursued rights and equality in face of decades of war, of forced displacement, and years of gender persecution.

The Taliban, for now, make themselves untouchable through brutality. They maintain their violent patriarchal dystopia through the stolen lives of our mothers, our sisters, our daughters. We will not relinquish those lives. We will not relinquish hope. This tribunal puts on record the suffering of our sisters. It is a form of resistance and remembrance.

We also demand the world pays attention. Where Taliban destroy lives and freedoms, we create hope and strength. This tribunal will not bring down their tyrannical regime, but it is a marker, a record of injustice, the voices of witnesses in these hearings will never be lost.

This Tribunal comes after years of research and months of consultation and deliberation with the Afghan civic community inside and outside Afghanistan. The Tribunal is the direct result of a request submitted in December 2024 by four Afghan civil society organizations: Rawadari, Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO), Organization for Policy

Research and Development Studies (DROPS), and Human Rights Defenders Plus. We are deeply grateful to the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal for formally approving our petition in February 2025 and prioritizing the horrific women's rights situation in Afghanistan.

The legal foundation of this Tribunal is built by a team of Afghan prosecutors who have deep expertise in international criminal law, human rights law, gender-based violence and Afghanistan's history and social and political context. Our prosecutors, Dr Benafsha Yaqoobi, a human rights leader and former Commissioner with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Dr. Orzala Nemat, prominent researcher, activist and scholar, Azada Raz Mohammad, an international criminal law expert and Dr Moheb Mudassir with expertise in International Human Rights Law and a focus on minority and marginalized groups bring a wealth of experience to this important process. This team comes from different corners of Afghanistan, speak different local languages and are trained in various disciplines. They bring diversity and strength. Their work ensures that the evidence and survivor testimonies presented here today are woven into a clear and robust indictment. They are the vital bridge between the horrific facts on the ground and the path to future accountability. They have been supported by a team of international and Afghan experts who have provided critical guidance to this process.

On behalf of the Afghan civil society coalition, I now want to express our deepest gratitude to the survivors. This Tribunal would not happen without their incredible courage, conviction and generosity. Despite immense risks to their security inside and even outside Afghanistan, they have decided to share their testimonies, in writing, in audio, in video or in person. As we were making the final rounds of preparation for the Tribunal, the Taliban shut down the internet in Afghanistan and we lost touch with family, colleagues, sources as well as survivors and witnesses for this tribunal. We witnessed incredible acts of commitment and courage from the witnesses to ensure their testimony is heard on this platform and by the Panel of Judges. We learned of one survivor who travelled for 1.5 hours to the border of a neighbouring country to find access to the Internet to connect with the prosecutors. We have survivors speaking from the region or from here in Europe who had to remain anonymous for safety of their extended family members in Afghanistan, and yet, this did not deter them from sharing their story. We have had survivors who will not be presenting in person today because despite being outside Afghanistan they are unable to travel due to being refugees and lacking the necessary documents. We had to overcome multiple hurdles with visas to even bring the prosecutors and experts to this tribunal. We collectively, the Afghan civil society coalition behind this initiative, prosecutors and survivors, represent the story of Afghanistan: a story of war, of repression, of displacement and uprootedness, and yet also a story of courage, relentless rebuilding and unwavering commitment to preserving and expanding hope.

We know that there are so many more voices that are missing from this Tribunal today. After decades of conflict and human rights violations in Afghanistan, we have a variety of victims and survivors. We have a long list of perpetrators including foreign militaries. For practical reasons, we had to limit the focus of our petition to the Permanent People's Tribunal to the ongoing gender persecution by the Taliban. Even with this limited scope, we have important

voices and testimonies missing from these hearings. The limitations on time, resources and security and travel restrictions have reduced the number of testimonies. We will continue to record testimonies and seek justice for all victims through every possible avenue. This is not the end of our journey; it is just the beginning.

I also want to convey our immense gratitude and respect to the esteemed panel of judges. We are honoured by your participation in this historic process and your attention to this important cause. We call on you to deliberate on the allegations of crimes and violations in Afghanistan as well as the generational impact of the current situation, and its implications for women's rights beyond Afghanistan.

The devastating human rights and women's rights situation in Afghanistan is apparent and well-documented and yet, it is being normalized by governments around the world despite its severity. Since August 15, 2021, the de facto authorities (DFA) have implemented at least 134 edicts, policies and rules targeting women that amount to an institutionalized system of gender persecution, a system that the Afghan women have also called Gender Apartheid. They have assumed control over every aspect of life for Afghan women and girls, from freedom of movement to the right to employment and education and access to healthcare, as well as access to justice and protection for victims of gender-based violence. This constitutes a profound affront to human dignity of women. For women who peacefully protest these oppressive measures, the response is often brutal suppression, including arbitrary detention, torture, and murder.

This is the context—a national system of persecution—that brings us here today.

We did not come here by choice; we came here by necessity. We launched this Tribunal to give survivors, the courageous women of Afghanistan a day in court and to mobilize the global public opinion. While there are multiple efforts at international accountability from the International Criminal Court's Afghanistan investigation, to a potential case at the International Court of Justice, the existing mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, a campaign to codify gender apartheid and now a new, independent investigate mechanism which will collect and safeguard evidence for future prosecutions, there is no near prospect of a trial. Meanwhile, the women of Afghanistan continue to face increasing restrictions and the de facto authorities, the Taliban, are being normalized at the regional and international level. The international response to the relentless attacks on Afghan women's rights has been marked by an abject lack of meaningful global action. The violations go on, the victims are left with a life sentence of silence and invisibility and the perpetrators are gaining recognition, their crimes minimized and normalized. The violations are described as specific to Afghanistan, often justified as driven by "cultural or religious norms", not named as the Crimes Against Humanity that they are. This is not only a betrayal of international commitments to women of Afghanistan; it is also naïve and wishful thinking that assumes severe attacks on women's rights and dignity will be contained by borders.

This is why we approached the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal:

- It stops the crime of silence. It resists the crime of silence. It makes visible the invisible.
- It puts victims and survivors centre stage and at the heart of the process.
- It Fights Impunity. Impunity has driven Afghanistan through endless cycles of war, and today that same impunity sees the perpetrators of crimes against humanity normalised by diplomats around the world. This Tribunal can counter the crime of silence and normalization and resist the long-standing culture of impunity.
- The hearings and the verdict will provide a permanent record of women's testimony for future prosecutions, it will hold states to account who are trying to normalise the Taliban's regime and deter others for whom normalization would be convenient, and it can provide judicial findings that can be referenced in future cases.

The goal of this Tribunal extends beyond a legal finding; it is a profound political and moral statement.

We maintain that the Taliban's systematic oppression risks normalizing a degree of misogyny globally that must be challenged. Each year the Taliban have been in power their oppressive rule has deepened. We refuse to allow the world to look away or to accept the premise that normalization is possible without the swift and full reversal of all restrictions on women's rights.

The Tribunal's final judgment will serve as a vital advocacy tool for Afghan civil society, demonstrating to Afghans in the country and outside that they are not forgotten. It will combat Taliban misinformation and sustain global attention. It can shore up support for Afghan human rights defenders and civil society—the brave activists who remain in the country and those forced into exile.

We are here because we believe Afghanistan is not a lost cause. We believe and will continue to fight for the vision of Afghanistan as an equal, peaceful, and prosperous country that respects the human rights of all Afghans. The choice before the world is clear: to normalize the misogynist and oppressive vision of the Taliban, or to stand with the vision of Afghan women for a democratic and rights-respecting future for Afghanistan and beyond.

The existence of this People's Tribunal for the Women of Afghanistan is an act of resistance and hope. We ask you, the esteemed judges, to ensure this Tribunal calls on people everywhere to stand with women of Afghanistan in their demand for dignity, justice and rights.

Thank you