An Open Letter from Iranian and Afghan Women, International Lawyers and Global Women Leaders Urging Countries to Recognize the Crime of Gender Apartheid

As a diverse coalition of Iranian and Afghan women leaders, international legal practitioners, activists and other stakeholders, we are calling on states to recognize the crime of gender apartheid to counteract and eventually end the systems of gender apartheid currently in place in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban in Afghanistan are often described as “gender apartheid” regimes for their treatment of women as second-class citizens under law and policy. However, apartheid standards in international law, developed primarily in the 20th century, were designed to address racial apartheid.

Apartheid comes from the Afrikaans word for “apart.” The term was born out of apartheid South Africa, and its system of institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination, which sought to establish and maintain dominance by white South Africans over black South Africans. That system eventually came to an end, in part because of decades of pressure and isolation from international actors through shaming and severing diplomatic and economic relations.

While representing a distinct form of apartheid from that in South Africa, the components of systematic segregation and subjugation that make up apartheid are also present in Afghanistan and Iran today. Under the Taliban, women in Afghanistan are banned from education, employment in NGOs and in government, and from traveling long distances without a male guardian, all while having to abide by a severe dress code. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, women are banned from many fields of study, sporting events, and from obtaining a passport and traveling outside the country without their husband’s permission. Women’s lives and their testimony are worth half a man under the law and they are forced to wear compulsory hijab. These bans, and the broader legal systems they belong to, seek to establish and maintain women’s subjugation to men, and the State. Violation of these laws can lead to violence, imprisonment, and death.

Looking to the example of the international community’s condemnation of apartheid South Africa, women living in Iran and Afghanistan are requesting similarly internationalized responses to end the gender apartheid regimes they are subject to. In order to fully realize the goals of the woman-led revolution in Iran and to support the courageous defiance of Afghan women who have had their rights brutally stripped away, the international community must properly recognize the harms of a legally enshrined system in which women are treated as second-class citizens and acknowledge this not only through condemnation but through effective, concerted action.

The situations in the Islamic Republic of Iran and under the Taliban in Afghanistan are not simply cases of gender discrimination. Rather, these systems are perpetuating a more extreme, systematic and structural war against women designed to dehumanize and repress them for purposes of entrenching power.

Our chief demands to governments:

i)           amplify and center the experiences of women in Iran and Afghanistan living under gender apartheid,

ii)          make statements, issue resolutions and shape other policy responses to condemn the gender apartheid regimes in Iran and Afghanistan, and

iii)        interpret and/or expand the legal definition of apartheid under international and national laws to include severe forms of institutionalized gender-based discrimination.