



# “IT’S NOT JUST A GAME. IT’S PART OF WHO I AM”

Afghan Women Footballers’ Fight for the Right to Play



Report by the Sport & Rights Alliance



**Athletes  
Network**

FOR SAFER SPORTS



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## **Sport & Rights Alliance**

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### **Main Researcher**

Sarah Tofte

### **Reviewed by**

Andrea Florence (Executive Director)

Joanna Maranhão (Network Coordinator)

Rachel Causey (Communications Coordinator)

### **Network Advisory Council**

Ahmar Maiga (Mali)

Gabriela Garton (Argentina)

Jessica Shuran Yu (Singapore)

Kaiya McCullough (United States)

Mary Cain (United States)

### **Photography credits**

Hummel International

Girl Power

### **Graphic Design**

Victoria Andreoli

A young woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a black Adidas tracksuit, is dribbling a soccer ball on an indoor court. She is looking down at the ball. In the background, other people are visible, some in similar tracksuits, suggesting a team practice or game. The court floor has colorful markings.

**“IT’S NOT JUST A GAME.  
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# About the Sport & Rights Alliance

The Sport & Rights Alliance's mission is to promote the rights and well-being of those most affected by human rights risks associated with the delivery of sport. Our partners include **Amnesty International, The Army of Survivors, Committee to Protect Journalists, Football Supporters Europe, Human Rights Watch, ILGA World (The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association), the International Trade Union Confederation, Transparency International, and World Players Association, UNI Global Union**. As a global coalition of leading NGOs and trade unions, the Sport & Rights Alliance works together to ensure sports bodies, governments and other relevant stakeholders give rise to a world of sport that protects, respects, and fulfills international standards for human rights, labor rights, child rights and wellbeing and safeguarding, and anti-corruption.

## About the Athletes Network for Safer Sports

The Athletes Network for Safer Sports is an international network of people and organizations connected by their lived experience of abuse in sport. A program of the Sport & Rights Alliance, the Network brings together athletes, allies, survivors, victims and whistleblowers with a mission to create and strengthen safe spaces for people affected by abuse in sport – promoting healing, amplifying each other's voices, and advocating for systemic change. The Network is guided by an Advisory Council composed of athletes and allies impacted by abuse in sport, who are responsible for providing the Network with overall programmatic guidance and strategic support.



## About Girl Power

Girl Power, a Strategic Partner of the Sport & Rights Alliance, is a non-profit grassroots sports entity, established in 2014 to use sports and education as tools to empower women and girls from all cultures and social backgrounds. Girl Power provides meaningful ways for women and girls to connect and thrive across Europe, the Middle East & South Asia, using sports and education. In order to bring social change and empower women and girls to actively participate in their interests and achieve their goals, Girl Power identifies, empowers and facilitates young leaders and role models who can take the initiative and use sports as a tool for social good, through local events and positive storytelling about ethnic minority women. Through its work in refugee settings in Europe and vulnerable, rural areas in the Middle East and South Asia, Girl Power puts the most deprived and marginalized women and girls first, helping them learn, empower and reach their full potential through sports.

## Acknowledgments

This report was written in support of the campaign of the Afghan Women's National Football Team (AWNT) to obtain recognition and financial support from the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). The heart of this report is informed by interviews with 29 current and former AWNT players, and consultations with sports rights experts. We are very grateful for everyone who shared their stories with us. We stand with the AWNT and all Afghan women and girls who are fighting for their right to participate in sport and society.

## CONTENT WARNING

This report contains details of incidents of sexual harassment and abuse in the context of sport. The raw and honest accounts from athletes can be hard to read, especially for those who have suffered similar abuses.

## LOCAL SUPPORT

If you or someone you know has been affected by athlete abuse and are seeking support, please use the map at this link to find the nearest local resource available:

<https://sportandrightsalliance.org/athletes-network/resources/>

## Definitions and Types of Abuse

For the purpose of this report, the following definitions of types of maltreatment in sports have been adopted:

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### Sexual Abuse

Actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions.

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### Sexual Harassment

Any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

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### Safe Sport

An athletic environment that is respectful, equitable and free from all forms of non-accidental violence to athletes.<sup>1</sup>

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### Sextortion

The abuse of power to obtain a sexual benefit or advantage.<sup>2</sup>

## Executive Summary

“The story of the Afghanistan Women’s National Football Team was always one of a movement of equality for women and by women.”

**Khalida Popal**, the team’s first captain<sup>3</sup>





Established in 2007 after the fall of the first Taliban regime, the Afghanistan Women's National Football Team (AWNT) was a powerful symbol of women's empowerment in a post-Taliban Afghanistan. It was no surprise then, when the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, the AWNT was an early target. The very existence of the AWNT was a direct challenge to the Taliban's oppression of women and girls.<sup>4</sup>

Within days of the Taliban's 2021 takeover, the new government singled out AWNT players for reprisals. As they scrambled to find an escape from their country, players were forced to burn all evidence of their football careers and go into hiding. Facing death threats and other harms, hundreds of players and their families were eventually evacuated to Australia, Portugal, Albania, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Today, dozens of the best Afghan female footballers are living in exile. Since 2021, they have been seeking to represent Afghanistan again in international competition. "We want to show our Afghan sisters that women belong everywhere, including on the football pitch," said AWNT player Mursal Sadat.<sup>5</sup>

The Afghanistan Football Federation (AFF) is controlled by the Taliban and will not recognize a women's football team. For nearly four years, AWNT players and their supporters have campaigned for the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) to intervene and provide them with the official recognition and financial support denied to them by the AFF. The campaign has garnered global attention and support, including nearly 200,000 people who have signed a Change.org petition urging FIFA to recognize the AWNT in exile.<sup>6</sup> After more than three years of advocacy and mobilization by AWNT players and allies, very recently FIFA has

started to communicate and dialogue with AWNT team members to work together and find a solution. However, the draw for the AFC Women's Asian Cup Australia 2026 Qualifiers – which selects the teams eventually able to compete for a berth in the 2027 Women's World Cup – is set for 27 March 2025.<sup>7</sup> This will mark the second World Cup-qualifying process from which the AWNT has been excluded since the Taliban takeover.

Under the second Taliban rule, women and girls in Afghanistan have experienced gender-based violence and severe restrictions to their fundamental rights. Women and girls are banned from participating in nearly all aspects of public life, including secondary and higher education, many types of work, and sport.<sup>8</sup> The restrictions are so severe that the United Nations,<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch,<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International,<sup>11</sup> and other human rights organizations have called for the Taliban's gender discrimination regime and gender persecution to be investigated as crimes against humanity.

These calls were answered in January 2025, when the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants against the Taliban Supreme Leader and Chief Justice, for their suspected responsibility for the crime against humanity of gender persecution in Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> The Taliban is also being taken to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for gender discrimination in violation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>13</sup>

Amnesty,<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch,<sup>15</sup> and other human rights organizations have also called for the recognition of gender apartheid as a crime under international law to fill a major gap in the global legal framework, in concert with the calls from women of Afghanistan, Iran and beyond.<sup>16</sup>

Within these extreme circumstances, there is no scenario within which the Taliban-controlled AFF will recognize a women's football team. The AWNT's ability to play internationally therefore depends entirely on intervention from the FIFA.

The global football governing body should also allocate financial support to the AWNT, as it does with every other member association, via the FIFA Forward Development Programme and/or other programmes.<sup>17</sup> As Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai said in 2023, "It is time for FIFA to decide that they are not standing on the Taliban's side. It is time for FIFA to recognise that they are standing with the women of Afghanistan."<sup>18</sup> FIFA has a unique opportunity to reinforce its commitment to gender equity and anti-discrimination by adapting its rules to recognize and support the AWNT in exile.

FIFA's failure to recognize and support the AWNT inadvertently contributes to the ongoing discrimination against and exclusion of Afghan women from international competition and violates FIFA's own policies against gender discrimination and for human rights protections. The dozens of Afghan female players in exile are ready to play. Indeed,

those in Melbourne have kept playing together since fleeing Afghanistan in 2021, and have been competing for over three years in the Women's State League 3 East competition with support from the professional club, Melbourne Victory FC.<sup>19</sup> Team leaders are working to find sponsors to fund week-long training camps to bring together the top Afghan players in exile from around the world. FIFA recognition and financial support will allow the AWNT access to international competitions and unlock funding and other infrastructure to support the team's continued development.

Even before the return of Taliban rule in 2021, playing football as a female in Afghanistan required a tremendous amount of courage and determination in a deeply conservative society – even then, AWNT players received disdain, criticism and even death threats for daring to play sports. Then, as now, the players kept focused on showing the world that women are equal to men and to provide hope for the many Afghan women and girls dreaming of a future of opportunity and safety. The AWNT's ability to compete on the international stage would remind the world that the Taliban cannot extinguish the power of sport to promote equal and just societies – nor the power of women. "When we compete on the international stage," said Maryam Karimyar, who played on Afghanistan's Under-15 National Women's Football Team, we show the Taliban that they are wrong and we are right."<sup>20</sup>

## Correspondence with FIFA

On March 10, 2025, the Sport & Rights Alliance wrote to FIFA requesting information for and comment on this report.<sup>21</sup> FIFA's Secretary General Mattias Grafström responded on March 21 sharing that a plan has been developed to provide football opportunities for Afghan women both within and outside the country, but did not say whether they intend to officially recognize the AWNT or how specific funding would be allocated.<sup>22</sup> FIFA outlined the plan's three pillars:

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### **Pillar ONE**

#### **Project-specific support to women and girls in Afghanistan**

Measures that focus on activities to promote the wellbeing of women and girls in Afghanistan, considering the current limitations of women's access to sport. This includes exploring support through in-country humanitarian organizations.

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### **Pillar TWO**

#### **Advocacy and diplomacy**

Diplomatic dialogue with relevant actors in Afghanistan, international organizations, governments and other entities with a vested interest in this topic to explore ways to reduce the exclusion from sport of women and girls in Afghanistan over time.

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### **Pillar THREE**

#### **Support to players outside Afghanistan**

Measures to promote the provision of playing opportunities and other forms of support (e.g. organizing friendly games, training camps, providing qualified coaches, technical and medical staff etc.) for those players who are currently outside of Afghanistan.

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FIFA recognized its “duty to do [its] best to use football’s power to unite, inspire change and create opportunities.” The letter also noted the challenges involved in these efforts, and that additional time would be required, and committed to continued engagement with the AWNT and the Sport & Rights Alliance.

## Background



“We wanted to show the power of women in Afghanistan, to be role models for other girls, to encourage them to raise their voices.”

Khalida Popal, founder of AWNT



In 2007, a group of female players – with the support of the Afghanistan Olympic Committee – formed the country’s first Women’s National Football Team, referred to as the AWNT.<sup>23</sup> Khalida Popal, one of the team’s founders and its first captain, described the team’s goals: “We wanted to show the power of women in Afghanistan, to be role models for other girls, to encourage them to raise their voices.”<sup>24</sup>

At that time, the existence of a nationally supported women’s football team would have seemed impossible to those Afghans who had, until recently, lived under Taliban rule. The first Taliban regime, which came to power in 1996,<sup>25</sup> was notorious for its oppressive treatment of women and girls and bans on their participation in nearly all aspects of public life, including education, work, and sport.<sup>26</sup> The repercussions for disobeying such bans were severe – even including public beatings and executions, as documented by organizations like the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup>

The Taliban’s first rule in Afghanistan ended in 2001, when United States-led forces invaded Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban for sheltering Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda armed group, which carried out the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US.<sup>28</sup> The ensuing armed conflict between the newly established Afghan government and international forces against the Taliban were marked by suffering and hardship, as tens of thousands of Afghan civilians were killed or injured in the fighting, and all the parties to the conflict committed serious abuses<sup>29</sup> and apparent war crimes.<sup>30</sup>

They also marked a significant turning point for women’s rights in Afghanistan. The country’s new constitution guaranteed equal rights for women, including the right to education, work, and political participation, and the new government adopted the Elimination of Violence Against Women law.<sup>31</sup> A new quota system reserved 27 percent of parliamentary seats for women.<sup>32</sup> Millions of girls enrolled in schools for the first time.<sup>33</sup>

Women entered various professions, including law, medicine, media, and politics.<sup>34</sup> They also played leadership roles in civil society and as advocates for gender equality, holding key positions in government, including as ministers, governors, and diplomats.<sup>35</sup>

Despite progress for women’s rights in the years after the Taliban were forced from power, gains across the country were uneven, especially in rural areas of the country.<sup>36</sup> Gender-based violence, child marriage, and so-called honor killings continued to be widespread. In 2011 – ten years after the end of Taliban rule – Afghanistan was deemed the “most dangerous” country in the world in which to be a woman.<sup>37</sup> Still, the new reality for women in Afghanistan created the path for many new female-led ventures, including in sport. The formation of the AWNT demonstrated the promise of life in Afghanistan for women and girls after the Taliban were driven from power.

# The Establishment of the Afghanistan Women's National Football Team

The Afghanistan Women's National Team (AWNT) was the brainchild of Khalida Popal and her mother, Shokria, a physical education teacher.<sup>38</sup> In 2002, Khalida and her family were among the millions of Afghan refugees who returned to the country after the Taliban were removed from power.<sup>39</sup>

Khalida had developed her football skills while growing up in a refugee tent city in Pakistan, and was excited to grow the sport upon her return to Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup> Shokria recruited students to play, and girls' high school football teams emerged across Afghanistan.<sup>41</sup> For many of the players during this time period, football brought them great joy and served as a vital outlet for the trauma of war. "I was five when my father was killed by the Taliban and then at the age of 12, my mother was killed by the Taliban," said Nazia Ali, a member of the AWNT from Kabul, "Football was a place for me to find my inner peace, family, and happiness, and it helped me to overcome sadness."<sup>42</sup>

With the Popals' efforts, players across the country gained the skills and experience needed to field a women's national team. And in 2007, Afghanistan's National Olympic Committee agreed to recognize and support an Afghanistan Women's National Football Team (AWNT).<sup>43</sup> The team played in their first major international tournament in 2010, in Bangladesh.<sup>44</sup> "In our first match, dressed in our red jerseys, we stood in line with our hands over our hearts, listening to the Afghan national anthem," said AWNT player Mursal Sadat, "Tears streamed down my cheeks as I felt immense pride representing my country and its 34 million people, especially the women suffering in silence. I thought of the women facing horrific injustices, and it ignited a fire within me." In 2016 the AWNT received official recognition from the Afghanistan Football Federation, building out its coaching and other support staff. Until the Taliban retook power in 2021, the AWNT was able to compete in 22 international matches.<sup>45</sup>

AWNT players – like many women in Afghanistan participating in public life – were met with significant resistance from conservative members of society, who believed that women playing sport was a violation of Islamic law.<sup>46</sup> Public opposition was so strong that the AWNT had to practice inside a NATO military base for their own security.<sup>47</sup> The AWNT's first captain – and one of the team's most prominent faces – Khalida Popal received death threats from people wanting to "cut her to pieces," and a car in which she was traveling was shot at. As a result of these threats, Khalida fled Afghanistan in 2011.<sup>48</sup> She now lives as a refugee in Denmark.

In some cases, even players' own families agreed that women should not play football. AWNT player Manozh Noori's family prohibited her from playing.<sup>49</sup> Rather than stopping, Noori chose to hide her identity in public instead. "I wore a mask to cover my face so as not to be seen by my brothers and my relatives, because a lot of my games and tournaments were broadcast on TV or were published on social media and in the news," Noori said.

AWNT players also faced internal threats from senior leadership within the Afghanistan Football Federation (AFF). In 2017, AWNT players made detailed reports to FIFA of sexual abuse by leaders within the AFF.<sup>50</sup> With the support of the FIFPRO, the footballers global union, AWNT players went public in 2018, detailing the sexual and physical abuses perpetrated by then-AFF president Keramuudin Karim, among others.<sup>51</sup> A subsequent FIFA investigation found that Karim had assaulted multiple AWNT players between 2013 and 2018 – the entire span of his AFF presidency.<sup>52</sup> With the testimony of courageous Afghan women players, FIFA banned Karim for life from the sport.<sup>53</sup> FIFA also helped the witnesses and their families relocate and access psycho-social support. As a result of this landmark case and with pressure from FIFPRO, Human Rights Watch, civil society organizations part of the Sport & Rights Alliance and beyond,<sup>54</sup> FIFA announced the creation of the Safe Football Support Unit, to offer "specialist guidance and support services" to victims of violence, in December 2024.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the hardships and setbacks faced by the AWNT, the sport continued to grow for women in Afghanistan, until the Taliban's return to power in 2021.

## The Taliban TARGET the AWNT

In August 2021, when US and NATO forces withdrew from Afghanistan after two decades of war, the Taliban took power again.<sup>56</sup> The takeover sparked widespread fear, particularly among women. “I was heartbroken,” said Arezo Mohammadi, a member of the AWNT. “It was a day when for all young people, and young women in my country, their flowers withered.”<sup>57</sup> As another AWNT player remembered, “Our team was preparing for some competitions in Tajikistan when the situation in the country deteriorated, and we, the girls of the national team, like millions of other Afghan girls, stayed at home and waited for what disasters were going to happen to us.”

In the days after the return of the Taliban, it was clear that AWNT players were a target for Taliban retribution, given their high profile.<sup>58</sup> One news outlet described the members of the AWNT as “one of the [Taliban’s] most hunted groups.”<sup>59</sup> Players were forced to burn their jerseys and any other information connecting them to their football careers and went into hiding. AWNT player Ahdia Haidari remembered “hiding in one room for almost two weeks, feeling scared as the Taliban fired guns to frighten people. There were nights when I couldn’t sleep or eat properly, and all I could do was cry. I had no hope left.”<sup>60</sup> As AWNT player Mursal Sadat recalled, “In an instant, the dreams I had built felt shattered, and I was left hiding at home, feeling like a butterfly whose wings had been clipped.”<sup>61</sup>

While AWNT players fought for their safety in Afghanistan, as a result of a collaborative effort led by Khalida Popal, FIFPRO, former players, coach Kelly Lindsey and human rights advocates such as Nikki Dryden, Craig Foster, Kat Craig, Alison Battisson,<sup>62</sup> and the Australian government,<sup>63</sup> AWNT players were able to secure humanitarian visas and emergency military evacuation flights to Australia where they were granted asylum.<sup>64</sup> Still, getting safely to the airport and out the country was not guaranteed. “As my brother drove us to the airport, the sound of gunfire grew louder, and I was gripped by panic,” said AWNT player Mursal Sadat. “Arriving at the airport, we searched for our team in the chaos. [A Taliban soldier] pressed a gun to my forehead and ordered me to sit down. Fear froze me, but my mom urged me to obey. She had faced these men before during their first era and knew their brutality.”<sup>65</sup> Players camped out at the airport for days waiting to get on a flight. They had little food and no shelter. After two days of “wandering, waiting, and hoping,” as an AWNT player put it,<sup>66</sup> the AWNT team finally secured a flight to Melbourne.<sup>67</sup>



One month later, in September 2021, players from the Afghan girls' youth football team (aged 14-16) and their families were evacuated to Portugal with the help of former AWNT captain Farkhunda Muhtaj.<sup>68</sup> In October 2021, after extensive pressure from FIFPRO and civil society organizations, FIFA worked with Qatar to evacuate nearly 160 people, including many women's football and basketball players, and provided financial support for athletes evacuated to Albania for several years before their relocation to the United States and other countries.<sup>69</sup> In taking this action, FIFA noted that footballers in Afghanistan have been "deemed to have been at highest risk" under the Taliban.<sup>70</sup> And in November 2021, another group of female club football players and their families were evacuated to the UK from a refugee camp in Pakistan.<sup>71</sup>

As a result of these evacuations, nearly all of Afghanistan's top female football players now live in exile, having fled the Taliban that sought to punish them simply for playing sport.



# The Taliban's BAN on Women in Sport

Since taking power in 2021, the Taliban has enacted a near total “evisceration of women and girls from public life,”<sup>72</sup> resulting in what the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan has called “the most extreme forms of gender-based discrimination” in the world.<sup>73</sup> The UN Special Rapporteur determined that the Taliban’s “discriminatory and misogynist policies and harsh enforcement methods...constituted gender persecution and an institutionalized framework of gender apartheid.”<sup>74</sup>

These severe human rights abuses occurring in Afghanistan have resulted in “a profound rejection of the full humanity of women and girls,”<sup>75</sup> and include:

Girls **banned from attending school** above 6th grade, and women banned from post-secondary education.

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Women and girls **banned from many jobs** in both the public and private sector.

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Women and girls **banned from speaking in public** and appearing on television.

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Women and girls **prohibited from appearing in public or travelling without a mahram** (a male guardian, typically a close male relative).

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Women and girls subjected to **beatings, arrest, arbitrary deprivation of liberty and enforced disappearance** for protesting against the Taliban.<sup>76</sup>

In January 2025, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants against the Taliban Supreme Leader and Chief Justice for their suspected responsibility for the crime against humanity of gender persecution in Afghanistan.<sup>77</sup> The Taliban is also being taken to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for gender discrimination in violation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>78</sup>

There are many ways in which the AWNT players in exile have escaped the worst of Afghanistan’s gender persecution, but even though outside the country, they have not been wholly spared from drastic consequences.

As the Taliban have now banned all women and girls from playing sport, at any level and in every circumstance, all female sports teams – including the AWNT – have been disbanded. Thus far, the Taliban has granted no exceptions to this rule. In the lead-up to the 2024 Summer Olympic games, the Taliban, facing pressure to allow Afghan female athletes’ participation, was not deterred in its stance.

“In Afghanistan, girls’ sports have been stopped,” said a Taliban spokesman at the time, “When girls’ sport isn’t practiced, how can they [represent the country] on the national team?”<sup>79</sup> While the Taliban has had a profound impact on stopping the development of women’s sport in Afghanistan, it also has adverse implications for female Afghan athletes living in exile and dreaming of playing in international competition – both for themselves, and to provide a model for equality and hope for all Afghan women and girls.

## FIFA’s Responsibility to ACT

In the FIFA Statutes, FIFA prohibits discrimination of any kind, including on the basis of gender, and commits to respect and promote the protection of human rights, and to promote the development of women’s football.<sup>80</sup> FIFA’s Human Rights Policy, adopted in 2017, commits FIFA to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UN Guiding Principles),<sup>81</sup> ensuring that its activities and relationships do not contribute to adverse human rights impacts.<sup>82</sup>

By embedding these principles throughout its governance and operations, FIFA is meant to identify, prevent and remediate human rights abuses, including gender discrimination amongst its member associations. The FIFA Statutes mandate that all member associations must comply with the organization’s regulations, including the obligation to prevent and fight against discrimination and to promote women’s football.<sup>83</sup> Member associations may face sanctions for any violations of these obligations.<sup>84</sup>

Additionally, FIFA provides financial support to member associations, including via the FIFA Forward Development Programme,<sup>85</sup> which specifically requires that all recipients “develop and implement adequate policies and action plans to integrate human rights and the principles of anti-discrimination, diversity, accessibility and inclusivity, across its activities.”<sup>86</sup> After a first installment of \$650,000 per year, a second installment of \$600,000 is contingent on the member association organizing women’s competitions, supporting women and girls’ clubs and teams. For the current four-year funding cycle starting in January 2023, each of FIFA’s 211 member associations may receive up to \$9.2 million via FIFA Forward. The Sport & Rights Alliance wrote to FIFA on March 10, 2025, asking whether FIFA have continued to fund the AFF since the Taliban takeover.<sup>87</sup> In an email on March 24, FIFA stated that it ceased all payments to the AFF following the events of August 2021, but noted that the FIFA administration can however decide to make payments to third parties outside of Afghanistan to help their teams (including youth teams) play in official matches abroad. FIFA also reiterated that it has decided to provide “assistance” to Afghan women football players who would like to continue playing football.

In line with the FIFA Statutes, Human Rights Policy and the UN Guiding Principles, FIFA has a responsibility to stop discriminating against Afghan women football players, provide remedy for those impacted, and prevent future violations. Because FIFA has failed to address the exclusion of the Afghan women from international football since 2021, it is plausible to conclude that FIFA is contributing to gender discrimination.

## FIFA's Responsibility to RESPOND

The Afghanistan Football Federation (AFF) has been in violation of its obligations as a member of FIFA since 2021. Run by authorities within the Taliban, the AFF has repeatedly refused to support a women's national football team, including for the training and qualification for the 2023 Women's World Cup and the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics.<sup>88</sup> With the AFF refusing to support or recognize a women's team, and no other way to receive official recognition, the AWNT does not have a pathway to compete in international competitions unless FIFA intervenes on their behalf. In addition, the opportunity to receive recognition is fading fast as there are few, if any, younger players coming up behind the current team. If FIFA does not intervene for the current AWNT, there may be no future Afghan women's footballers to recognize.

For nearly four years, AWNT players in exile have asked FIFA to bypass the AFF under the Taliban and endorse a women's football team to represent Afghanistan in international football events. On 27 October 2022, Khalida Popal, on behalf of the players representing the AWNT in exile, filed a complaint via FIFA's former BKMS Incident Reporting System (BKMS System), documenting the AFF's violations of FIFA Statutes and Ethics Code, and imploring FIFA to "intervene on behalf of the exiled women's national team and grant [AWNT players] their right to represent Afghanistan even in exile."<sup>89</sup> Several months later, FIFA acknowledged receipt and informed Khalida that the BKMS System had been "eliminated" on October 4, with no explanation as to why the system was still functioning on October 27, when Khalida filed the complaint. No further information was provided on next steps or whether FIFA would investigate the complaint.

In the few public statements FIFA has made regarding the status of women's football in Afghanistan, FIFA has referred to the established autonomy of its Member Federations, including the AFF. For example, in July 2023, FIFA stated that "the selection of players and teams representing

a Member Association is considered an internal affair of the Member Association. Therefore, FIFA does not have the right to officially recognize any team unless it is first recognized by the concerned Member Federation."<sup>90</sup> However, this statement contradicts FIFA's own statutes which require members to comply with its regulations on gender equity. In addition, the uniquely egregious interference of the Taliban in the governance and affairs of the AFF means that the AFF's autonomy contravenes FIFA's own standards.

In August 2024, after three years of public advocacy, several players from the AWNT had their first official meeting with FIFA at the Paris Olympics. During the hour-long meeting, the international federation emphasized their "hope of negotiating with Afghanistan, meaning the Taliban, for them to recognize a women's team," said AWNT member Mursal Sadat, who was in attendance.<sup>91</sup> FIFA's approach in the meeting greatly disappointed the players who attended. As Mursal Sadat noted, "If the whole world could not negotiate for the rights of women under the Taliban, we don't have faith that FIFA will be able to change the Taliban's discrimination against women."<sup>92</sup>





However, the AWNT has continued to engage with FIFA and maintains ongoing dialogue in hopes of further progress, though the request for official recognition has still not been answered.

During these meetings, FIFA has also expressed concerns to the players over the safety of Afghan female players, especially regarding the risks to their families still in Afghanistan who could be targeted by the Taliban. Khalida Popal, who was also in attendance at the meeting, pushed back. “Afghanistan was never a safe country in which to play football,” said Khalida. “They have to let us make our own choices.”<sup>93</sup> The players have also expressed frustration at this argument given most of their already-public profiles and advocacy for their right to play sport.

While in attendance at the 2024 Summer Olympics, FIFA President Gianni Infantino stated that the situation of Afghan women football players was “a very important topic to me and FIFA, namely providing access to girls and women to play sport in Afghanistan and to support their representation on the national and international stage.”<sup>94</sup> More than seven months later, the players are still hoping FIFA will recognize their team, provide access to training and support, and enable them to return to international competition. FIFA has an opportunity to hold the AFF accountable for its human rights abuses,

thwart the Taliban’s regime of gender oppression, create a path to remedy for AWNT players and provide a platform of hope and inspiration for thousands of women and girls in Afghanistan and around the world.

FIFA should recognize and support the AWNT in exile. The approach of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in the leadup to the Paris 2024 Olympics offers an example of a sport governing body taking proactive leadership and finding a practical solution. The IOC banned Taliban government officials from the Olympics, and instead recognized the Afghanistan National Olympic Committee (NOC), which was in itself in exile, as representing the country.<sup>95</sup> The Afghanistan NOC fielded a “gender equal” team of three men and three women to represent Afghanistan in the 2024 Olympics.<sup>96</sup> Other Afghan women athletes were able to participate in the Games through the Refugee Olympic Team and the Refugee Paralympic Team. A letter from UN experts to the IOC strongly stated the importance of Afghan women athlete participation in international events: “It is essential that inspiring and talented Afghan women athletes are seen at the pinnacle of sports in Paris, as well as in other competitions, especially when they are being eviscerated from public life in their home country. Their participation stands against the Taliban’s systematic oppression and exclusion of women and girls.”<sup>97</sup>

## The AWNT in Exile is READY TO PLAY

The AWNT players in exile have not waited on FIFA's intervention to hone their professional football skills and stay ready for international competition. The Australian professional football club Melbourne Victory FC sponsored members of the AWNT in exile upon their arrival to Melbourne.<sup>98</sup> Women Onside, an NGO, helped to integrate the players into the local football community and provided support for their continued participation in the sport.<sup>99</sup> The opportunity to continue to play football at a high level was central to AWNT players' well-being as they adjusted as refugees. "Football means everything to me. It's not just a game; it's part of who I am," said Ahdia Haidari, a member of the AWNT. "Playing football has given me strength and hope, especially during the hardest times of my life."<sup>100</sup> Looking for new challenges, members of the AWNT also began to play for other Australian football clubs in 2025, "just like the national players do in other countries," said AWNT player Mursal Sadat.<sup>101</sup>

Knowing the importance of training camps, members of the AWNT are asking FIFA to fund week-long training camps to bring together the top talent from the Afghan players in exile from around the world. Holding training camps is a norm for other national teams, will promote player development and "show FIFA we have the infrastructure and training in place for their support," said AWNT player Mursal Sadat. "Once we have recognition and financial support from FIFA, we will be able to hold trials to select the best team possible from all the young players in exile."<sup>102</sup> Members of the AWNT aspire to represent Afghanistan at international events, to demonstrate the ability and strength of Afghan women and girls to the whole nation and to the world. They cannot do this without FIFA's intervention.

"Playing for my country is one of the ways I can stand up for the girls back in Afghanistan. My dream is to be reunited with my teammates from all over the world, to play with them again and bring back the football dreams we had when we lived back home."<sup>103</sup>

Fatima Foladi, who was part of the Under-15 and Under-19 Afghanistan national teams.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

By failing to address the exclusion of the Afghan women from international football since 2021, FIFA can be said to be contributing to gender discrimination, in violation of the FIFA Statutes and Human Rights Policy, and in contravention of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

In line with these standards, FIFA therefore has a responsibility to prevent or cease this discrimination, and to provide remedy for those impacted.

Recognizing and supporting the AWNT in exile is also a real opportunity for FIFA to show that it stands with Afghan women and for its values of inclusion, diversity and accessibility.<sup>104</sup> Despite the immense hardships and setbacks faced by the players, the AWNT remains resilient and ready to play – ready to showcase not just their talent but also their strength to both their nation and the world.

The following recommendations are based on FIFA's own rules, AWNT players' wishes, and their supporters' requests, as well as international human rights legislation and the UN Guiding Principles. With this report, we aim to amplify these players' voices in international football and advocate for women and girls' right to play sport everywhere, including in Afghanistan. This section is divided according to each respective sport governing body and related member states.



### To the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)

As head of world football, and in line with its own statutes and anti-discrimination policies, FIFA should:

1. Recognize the AWNT in exile, and restore their right to play in international competitions as representatives of Afghanistan;
2. Provide financial support, as it does for other member associations, to equip and provide capacity for the team to continue training and competing in exile;
3. Ensure an inclusive player-led process, respecting AWNT players' views and agency;
4. Provide trauma-informed care and holistic security (physical, psychological, and digital) to players and coaches involved with the team;
5. Negotiate for and include the AWNT in future pathways for coaching programs, encompassing career transitioning planning, financial literacy, retirement planning services and other opportunities;
6. Use its considerable leverage to restore women's and girls' right to play sport in Afghanistan; and
7. Review FIFA's current Reporting Portal<sup>105</sup> to ensure it is independent, responsive, predictable, transparent, trauma-informed and in accordance with best reporting practices, including operating with continuous engagement, learning and dialogue with civil society and affected people; promoting the portal widely among footballers across the world.

### To the Asian Football Confederation (AFC)

As the governing body of football for Asian countries, including Afghanistan and Australia, the AFC determines which countries are included in draws for its sponsored competitions. As such, AFC should:

1. Include the AWNT in all AFC-sponsored draws for international competitions;
2. Allocate the AWNT to a federation of the AFC where they may safely travel and compete (such as ASEAN); and
3. Host friendly matches between the AWNT in exile and other national teams, including potential exhibition matches at high-profile tournaments, such as the 2026 Women's Asian Cup in Australia and 2027 Women's World Cup in Brazil.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### To the Government of Switzerland and the Swiss Football Association (SFA)

Considering its obligations as the State in which international sporting association FIFA is domiciled and following its updated Swiss National Action Plan 2024-27<sup>106</sup> which recognizes Switzerland's major role in ensuring "Swiss-based international sports federations incorporate human rights into their governance and operations," Switzerland, in collaboration with the SFA, should:

1. Uphold its responsibility to enforce human rights as the host government of FIFA's headquarters by engaging with FIFA to recognize and support of the AWNT in exile;
2. Host and support other countries to host official friendly matches in the context of international competitions;
3. Provide ongoing monitoring and accountability of FIFA's adherence to human rights responsibilities under its own statutes and policies, as well as under the UN Guiding Principles, including by ensuring FIFA has a legitimate, independent, transparent, and trauma-informed human rights grievance mechanism; and
4. Leverage its influence to promote respect for women's rights in Afghanistan.

### To the Government of Australia and Football Australia (FA)

Following its newly released Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2032+,<sup>107</sup> highlighting commitments to human rights and gender equality and providing a platform for Afghan women to assert their presence in public life, as well as being the host country of the 2026 Asian Football Confederation and the 2032 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, Australia and FA should:

1. Advocate for the inclusion of the AWNT in future AFC qualifying draws and Asian Cup competitions;
2. Host an official friendly game between the AWNT and other team as part of the 2026 Women's Asian Cup; and
3. Leverage its influence and "unwavering support for Afghan women and girls" by ensuring their right to participate at the 2032 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games.

### To the Government of Brazil and the Confederation of Brazilian Football (CBF)

As the host of the 2027 FIFA Women's World Cup, Brazil and CBF should:

1. Advocate for the inclusion of the AWNT in future World Cup qualifying draws, and in other international competitions; and
2. Host an official friendly game between the AWNT and other team as part of the 2027 Women's World Cup.

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**"IT'S NOT JUST A GAME.  
IT'S PART OF WHO I AM"**

hummel



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