Submission on Turkmenistan for the 87th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (29 January-16 February 2024)

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Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) is the successor organisation of the Helsinki Group of Turkmenistan and was registered as an independent association in Vienna in November 2004. Through a network of local experts and activists inside Turkmenistan, TIHR monitors and reports on the human rights situation in this country. It also disseminates independent news, comments and analysis from and about Turkmenistan.

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International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) is an independent, non-governmental organisation founded in 2008. Based in Brussels, IPHR works closely together with civil society groups from different countries to raise human rights concerns at the international level and promote respect for the rights of vulnerable communities in repressive environments.

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Introduction

This document has been prepared as input for the CEDAW’s review of Turkmenistan’s sixth periodic report submitted under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It has been jointly prepared by Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) and International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), drawing on their ongoing cooperation on documenting human rights developments in Turkmenistan. It is based on information obtained by TIHR through its monitoring of the situation in Turkmenistan with the help of an in-country network of activists, as well as information from other independent organisations, which monitor and report on developments in the country. It is an updated version of a TIHR-IPHR submission prepared prior to the CEDAW’s adoption of a list of issues (hereafter Lol) for its review of Turkmenistan.

The fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens continue to be seriously violated in Turkmenistan, one of the world’s most closed countries, where there is no independent media, no political opposition and no truly independent civil society organisations. In recent years, the country has been undergoing a protracted economic crisis, resulting in increasing poverty, unemployment and lack of access to basic food staples at affordable prices. Many citizens have left the country in search of jobs abroad. In this context, women remain a highly vulnerable group of the population, with official state policies reflecting and promoting negative and discriminatory attitudes in relation to women and their supposed “traditional” role in society.1

In March 2022, Serdar Berdymukhamedov assumed the presidency in Turkmenistan when his father, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov stepped down after holding this position since 2006. The early presidential elections were unfree and unfair and did not offer voters any real choice. There was nevertheless some hope that the change of president would result in improvements in the situation in the country, including with respect to women’s rights. However, shortly after Serdar Berdymukhamedov took office, a new campaign to promote so-called “traditional” gender standards began, which resulted in new arbitrary restrictions on women’s rights (see more in the section on stereotypes, negative practices and discriminatory treatment of women). This campaign also further reinforced negative gender stereotypes and attitudes, which contribute to the persistence of gender disparity and violations of women’s rights in different areas in the country.

1. Participation in political and public life, national human rights institution

The State party argues that women are “widely represented” in decision-making and executive bodies (par. 104 of its responses to the Lol). However, as can be seen from the information provided by the State party (par. 105-106 of its responses to the Lol), the share of women in such bodies remains comparatively low. Thus, for example, women make up only around 25 percent of the members of the new Parliament elected in March 2023 and less than 30 percent of local decision-making and executive bodies. While the speaker of the new Parliament is a woman, there is only one woman in the Cabinet of Ministers headed by the President: Myakhrijemal Mammedova, who is deputy chair responsible for culture and the media.
Moreover, women often hold certain types of leadership positions. For example, as reported by the State party (par. 107 of the response to the LoI) all women acting as deputy governors at the regional, district and local levels are specifically in charge of social issues.

Given the highly authoritarian government system in place in Turkmenistan, characterised by the concentration of powers at the top and the lack of any real division of powers, women who are represented in decision-making and executive state bodies typically have little real influence. One example is that of the Ombudsperson. While it is welcome per se that this institution was created and that a woman (Yazdursun Gurbannazarova) was appointed as the first mandate holder in 2017 and re-elected in 2022, there are serious concerns about the lack of independence of the Ombudsperson's office, its limited authority and the lack of effective action taken by it to address human rights issues, including in cases involving women.

TIHR has experienced a lack of responsiveness from the Ombudsperson's office: while it has repeatedly submitted written appeals to the office on different human rights issues, it has not received any responses. For example, TIHR did not receive any response to an appeal, in which it requested the Ombudsperson to help ensure public access to information about a devastating hurricane, which hit parts of Turkmenistan in April 2020, and its impact on local residents, including women. The Ombudsperson also did not respond to a joint open letter addressed to her in November 2021 by TIHR, Turkmen News, IPHR and several other human rights NGOs concerning the case of K.I., a female doctor who was unjustly dismissed and thereafter arbitrarily detained, prosecuted and imprisoned for seeking justice (see more about her case below in the submission). The undersigning organisations had requested the Ombudsperson to monitor conditions in the detention facility where K.I. was held and to help ensure accountability for the violations of her rights.

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should be requested to:

- Ensure the development and implementation of a comprehensive strategy to promote women’s equal and effective participation in public life and to raise public awareness in this respect.
- Ensure the independence of the Ombudsperson’s office in accordance with the Paris Principles and provide this office with sufficient resources to carry out its mandate and address appeals received, including in cases involving women.

2. Stereotypes, negative practices and discriminatory treatment of women

In its 2018 Concluding Observations on Turkmenistan, the Committee expressed concerns about the persistence of discriminatory stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women as well as harmful practices based on such attitudes, and issued important recommendations in this respect (par. 18-21). However, five years later, these problems remain highly prevalent, which demonstrates the failure of the authorities to effectively implement the recommendations received. In fact, the authorities have not only failed to effectively counteract discriminatory gender stereotypes and negative practices but have also
contributed to further strengthening such attitudes and practices, in particular by enforcing unofficial restrictions on women's rights in the name of safeguarding national traditions and values. After President Serdar Berdymukhamedov took office in March 2022, a new reinforced campaign to this end was launched, resulting in new arbitrary restrictions on women's appearance and conduct.

According to information received by TIHR and other independent sources, propaganda events were organised in educational establishments and other state institutions in different parts of Turkmenistan in spring 2022 to "educate" women and girls on issues of morality, national traditions and appearance. Those attending events were threatened with repercussions, including expulsion or dismissal if they do not wear national-style dresses, or if they use heavy make-up, dye their hair, or undergo eyelash and nail extensions, lip augmentations or other cosmetic procedures. There were also reports of special inspectors visiting educational and medical institutions and ordering women and girls to comply with these types of unofficial requirements.

TIHR learned about arbitrary police raids on women's cosmetics stores, with those working there being ordered to remove cosmetic products that allegedly might harm “the health and appearance" of women. The Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Azatlyk reported that law enforcement officials warned the owners of beauty salons that they could face fines or arrest if providing services such as eyelash and nail extensions and lip augmentations. The service also reported about arbitrary police checks of women in the street, as well as of women being detained and fined for using cosmetic services.

While the campaign to control women's appearance peaked in spring 2022, there have been new reports about restrictive measures taken to this end since then. For example, in November 2022, migration services reportedly denied several women the right to fly to Dubai from Ashgabat airport, claiming that facial recognition software used did not recognise the women because of cosmetic procedures they had undergone. The affected women complained that they were subjected to psychologic pressure and they were not reimbursed for the ticket costs. In May 2023, TIHR learned about new requirements enforced in relation to female university and college students: when attending classes, they were required to wear their hair in braids of a certain length and thickness. If their own hair did not allow for tying such braids, they were expected to buy artificial braids. In August 2023, Radio Azatlyk reported that a special task force had been created to supervise women's “moral" behaviour, in cooperation with the police and other state bodies, in the city of Turkmenabashi and that several women had been detained there because their appearance allegedly was not sufficiently “modest".

Unlike on previous occasions, when the authorities have carried out campaigns to control women's appearance based on so-called traditional norms and standards, state media reported on the campaign launched in spring 2022. For example, on 14 April 2022, the Turkmen State News Agency (TDH) quoted the chairperson of Parliament as saying that campaign and propaganda events had been carried out among girls and women dedicated to “national Turkmen traditions, the sanctity of the family, norms of etiquette and upbringing". At the same time, representatives of the authorities have denied that any discriminatory restrictions have been imposed in this context, claiming that foreign media reports on this topic “do not correspond to reality".
When commenting on the concerns previously expressed by the Committee regarding reported restrictions on women’s right to drive and travel by car (par. 20 d, e of the 2018 Concluding Observations), the State party also denied any gender-based discrimination in this area and argued that any checks implemented are aimed at ensuring road safety (par. 87-88 of the sixth periodic report). However, TIHR and other independent sources have learned about the imposition of new arbitrary restrictions affecting women’s car travel since the 2018 review. For example, in May 2022, Radio Azatlyk reported about the introduction of new rules for taxi rides in the capital Ashgabat, with taxi drivers being ordered not to allow women to travel in the front seat next to the driver. The drivers were told that violations of the new rules could result in fines.13

There have also been new reports about unofficial restrictions on women’s rights to obtain, renew and use driver’s licenses. In November 2022, Turkmen News reported that women wishing to obtain a driver's license were required to present several documents not required from men, including marriage certificates and certificates from their places of work and the management of the houses where they live. According to the organisation's information, only women who are over 40 and registered car owners are granted driver’s licenses.14 Earlier TIHR had learned that younger women, who were seeking to obtain or renew their driver’s licenses in the capital Ashgabat, were required to provide documents showing that their parents or other relatives owned a car which they were allowed to use. Even after providing the required documents, women typically had to wait for a long time to obtain new licenses.15 In October 2023, Radio Azatlyk reported that driving schools in the city of Balkanabad had received instructions from the Ministry of Interior to only admit women over 40 to their driving classes.16

In another example of how women’s right to drive is restricted, during a road security campaign carried out in September 2023, police reportedly stopped women drivers and warned them or confiscated their driver’s licenses on the grounds of their appearance. One woman told Radio Azatlyk that the police officer who confiscated her driver’s license claimed that she could cause an accident by driving with her hair down, thereby allegedly distracting other, male drivers. The police officer also objected to her use of nail extensions and high-heeled shoes when driving. The officer ignored her arguments that she had not violated any traffic rules.17

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should be requested to:

- Refrain from enforcing arbitrary restrictions on women’s and girls’ appearance and conduct in the name of safeguarding traditional norms and protect women from intimidation, harassment and discriminatory treatment in this context.
- Safeguard women’s right to drive on an equal basis with men and end gender-based discrimination in this area.
- Take effective measures to counter negative gender stereotypes, raise public awareness on these issues and inform women about available mechanisms to challenge unlawful gender-discriminatory actions.
3. Gender-based violence against women

In its 2018 Concluding Observations, the Committee called on the Turkmenistani authorities to implement, without delay, a survey on the prevalence of gender-based violence against women, to expedite the adoption of a law criminalising all forms of gender-based violence against women, and to develop a comprehensive strategy to eliminate all forms of gender-based violence against women based on the survey results (par. 23 a-c).

Since 2018, there has been certain progress with respect to addressing gender-based violence against women. In particular, as the State party reports in its sixth periodic report (par. 89-100), the government carried out a first-ever sample survey on domestic violence against women with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in 2020.\(^{18}\) The results of the survey, which featured interviews with close to 3000 women aged 18-59 from different parts of the country, were published in August 2022. Among its key results, the survey found that 16 percent of all surveyed women had experienced at least some form of violence, including physical, psychological and/or sexual violence by their husbands/partners at some point in their lives. Moreover, 41 percent of the respondents reported encountering some form of controlling behaviour from their husbands/partners, such as restrictions on leaving the house or working/studying outside the home. The survey demonstrated an interlinkage between such controlling behaviour and domestic violence, with a large proportion of women considering it a sufficient reason for a husband to beat his wife if she violates restrictions imposed by him.

The survey also found that women victims of domestic violence rarely reach out for help, with less than 12 percent turning to the police or other relevant institutions. The results indicated that social pressure and the fear of “dishonouring the family” are major reasons why women typically remain silent about violence and refrain from seeking help. In particular sexual violence, which survey respondents reported experiencing least frequently, is associated with a high level of social taboo in Turkmenistan. Over 80 percent of those who sought help did so when the situation had already escalated and they “could no longer endure it”, with 26 percent fearing that their husband/partner would otherwise kill them. Against this background, there is also reason to believe that there might have been underreporting of experiences of abuse among those surveyed and that domestic violence against women might be even more widespread than the survey results show.

Based on the survey results, a number of important recommendations were formulated, including recommendations to adopt specific legislation on domestic violence, to improve support and protection services for victims, to expand public awareness raising and education to prevent gender violence, and to continue data collection on gender-based violence and use the survey data to conduct in-depth research on violence against women belonging to vulnerable groups.

It is welcome that the UNFPA-supported survey was carried out and that the government acknowledged the problem of domestic violence, saying that the survey provided “an objective assessment of the prevalence of domestic violence against women in Turkmenistan” (par. 96 of the sixth periodic report), unlike previously when it claimed that violence against women is “not a widespread phenomenon” in the country (par. 51 of the State party’s replies to the Committee’s LoI in 2016). However, it also imperative
that the government implements a comprehensive and effective strategy to counter domestic violence against women in follow-up to the survey results. In its responses to the LoI for the current review (par. 81), the State party stated that a road map for the implementation of recommendations resulting from the UNFPA-supported survey has been elaborated for the period 2022-2025, covering the elaboration of legislation on the prevention of domestic violence and the development of a coordinated system of support services to women victims of violence. However, it is not clear what concrete actions this roadmap sets out or what progress there has been to date on its implementation.

**Recommendations**

The Turkmenistani authorities should be requested to:

- Develop and implement a comprehensive strategy for countering domestic violence in follow-up to the UNFPA-supported survey.
- As a matter of urgency, elaborate a separate, comprehensive law criminalising all forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence as previously recommended by the Committee.
- As previously called for by the Committee, systematically investigate and prosecute all reported cases of gender-based violence, including domestic violence; strengthen support services for victims and survivors of gender-based violence, including through the provision of well-resourced shelters; and conduct effective educational and awareness-raising campaigns on issues of gender-based violence, including through state media.
- Ensure that independent international experts and civil society representatives are consulted and engaged in all efforts undertaken with respect to addressing and preventing gender-based violence and assisting victims.

**4. Restrictions on women’s exercise of the freedoms of expression, association and assembly**

The **freedoms of expression, association and assembly continue to be seriously restricted** in Turkmenistan, which undermine women’s opportunities to obtain and exchange information, engage with others and speak out on issues relating to their rights.

As previously, there are no truly independent media outlets in the country, and all national media outlets (including the few privately owned ones) are subjected to state control and interference with their editorial policies. This results in censorship, both directly and indirectly, in violation of the 2012 Law on Mass Media and the country’s international obligations. The government uses state-controlled media to promote its own narratives of the situation in the country and deniers and covers up developments that contradict such narratives. For example, it has failed to acknowledge the scope of the protracted economic crisis in the country and has persistently claimed that the global Covid-19 pandemic never reached the country, although independent sources reported about a serious national outbreak. In this way, the government has violated citizens’, including women’s right to have access to information on issues of public concern.
Internet access in Turkmenistan remains slow and expensive compared to international standards and the internet penetration rate is still comparatively low (estimated as 38 percent in 2023). Moreover, internet access is heavily censored, with many social media networks, messenger apps, news sites and other resources having been arbitrarily blocked in the country. Recently independent sources have reported about a further increase of the number of blocked sites, and a study carried out by a team of computer scientists from leading US universities found over 120,000 domains to be blocked in the country.

While blocked online resources only are accessible with the help of internet circumvention tools, the authorities have intensified efforts to prevent the use of such tools, including by systematically blocking access to them and intimidating those who install and use them. As a result, citizens, including women experience serious obstacles to accessing information from foreign sources, including Turkmenistani news outlets and exile-based human rights organisations, as well as to communicating with relatives and friends who live and work abroad.

The authorities continue to intimidate and harass women who dare to criticise government policies, stand up for their rights or be in contact with exile-based groups or activists, using tactics ranging from surveillance, threats and smear campaigns to travel restrictions and arrest and imprisonment on politically motivated charges.

This is an example of intimidation and harassment of a female journalist who cooperates with TIHR:

- Independent, Ashgabat-based journalist S.A. has been held under surveillance and subjected to other forms of intimidation and harassment. For example, in April 2022, she told TIHR that a young man was keeping watch outside her house from early morning to late evening (a photo documenting this surveillance was posted on TIHR's website). S.A. also told TIHR that security services tried to put pressure on her by targeting people whom she has interviewed, questioning them about their conversations with her and warning them that they may face problems if they continue to communicate with her. According to her, security service officials told her interviewees that she is associated with "subversive foreign organisations working against the state". After this, some people stopped communicating with the journalist.

Moreover, in November 2023, S.A. was prevented from leaving Turkmenistan to go to Geneva at the invitation of the Martin Ennals Foundation in follow-up to her selection as a finalist for the foundation's prestigious human rights award. She was due to feature as a keynote speaker at the Geneva Human Rights Week and meet, among others, with representatives of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. However, she and her daughter, who was accompanying her were first subjected to lengthy and humiliating security checks at the airport in Ashgabat and thereafter stopped by customs officials who deliberately moistened their passports and claimed that the documents were invalid for travel.

This is an example of politically motivated arrest and prosecution of a woman standing up for her rights:

- K.I., an Ashgabat-based doctor was dismissed from her position as paediatrician at a perinatal centre in in Akhal region in July 2017 because of alleged "absenteeism". However, the circumstances
of her dismissal indicates that she was fired for demonstrating professional integrity and independence, which displeased the clinic’s management. In particular, she had opposed a practice of prescribing paid, but not medically indicated procedures to the clinic’s patients and refused to participate in state-organised mass events (see more below on this practice) during worktime as she considered her time better spent treating patients. K.I. turned for assistance to a regional trade union association, which concluded that she had been dismissed in violation of the Labour Code and should be reinstated. However, later, the trade union changed its position and withdrew its support. Following a trial marred by irregularities, a local court rejected K.I.’s complaint against her dismissal.27

As K.I. did not succeed in obtaining justice for her unfair dismissal despite appeals to court, as well as petitions to different state bodies in Turkmenistan, she turned to organisations based abroad for help. The independent, Netherlands-based organisation Turkmen News published information about her case in November 2020 and raised it with international decision-makers, including at an online event organised by Members of the European Parliament on 15 July 2021. The day after this event, Turkmenistani law enforcement authorities arbitrarily detained K.I. For almost two weeks, there was no information about her whereabouts or the grounds for her detention; after this, it turned out that she was held in pre-trial detention on criminal charges brought against her.29

On 7 September 2021, K.I. was sentenced to nine years in prison for fraud, document forgery and taking advantage of a dependent person – all offenses allegedly committed in relation to an elderly disabled man, whom she had previously cared for. At the trial, she was not assisted by any lawyer of her own choice as all lawyers her family approached refused to take up the case given its politically sensitive nature.30 Human rights groups and MEPs repeatedly called for K.I.’s release.31

In addition to targeting “inconvenient” people living in Turkmenistan, the authorities have also gone after outspoken activists living abroad, in particular in Turkey, which accommodates a large community of migrants from Turkmenistan. Through contacts with the Turkish authorities, the Turkmenistani authorities have sought the detention and return of activists, including women activists to Turkmenistan. In several recent cases, activists have been forcibly sent back from Turkey to Turkmenistan, exposing them to a serious risk of imprisonment on politically motivated charges and torture and ill-treatment.33 The Turkmenistani authorities have also attempted to silence activists based abroad, including women by intimidating and harassing their relatives in Turkmenistan.34

This an example of a Turkey-based woman activist who has been subjected to pressure both directly and indirectly through her relatives:

• In September 2021, Turkish police detained D.T., a Turkmenistani activist who is openly critical of the Turkmenistani government and has a large social media followership. She was held for two days in a deportation centre before being released following interventions by her lawyer proving
her right to legally reside in Turkey. This was the second time that the activist faced the threat of deportation. Previously she was detained in July 2020 in connection with a planned protest outside Turkmenistan’s consulate in Istanbul and held for two months pending return to Turkmenistan – the official reason was a migration violation but, in reality, she was believed to have been targeted in retaliation for her civic engagement. Following an international campaign in her support, D.T. was eventually released at that time and granted the right to legally stay in Turkey during the examination of her asylum application. In August 2022, D.T. was briefly detained again at the request of Turkmenistan’s consulate in Istanbul in connection with an incident, when she and several other activists were attacked and beaten by a group of unknown, masked perpetrators as they attempted to hand over a letter addressed to the president to consulate representatives. D.T. sustained bruising because of the attack and was held for several hours at a local police station before being released. D.T.’s relatives in Turkmenistan have also repeatedly been subjected to intimidation and harassment, including by being summoned for questioning, detained, allegedly ill-treated and pressured to denounce the activist on camera. In February 2023, D.T. reported that security services in Turkmenistan had questioned her young son about her and attempted to recruit him as an informant.

According to the State party, the 2014 Law on Public Associations has been amended to simplify the procedure for creating and registering associations, in particular by reducing the number of founders required (par. 126 of the sixth periodic report). This is welcome. However, serious obstacles to the operation of civil society organisations persist in Turkmenistan and only a limited number of public associations are registered in the country. According to information provided by the government in March 2023, there were a total of 135 registered public associations, out of which 58 were sport associations and the rest dealt with economic, scientific, cultural, ecological and other issues. There is little public information about the work of registered associations (e.g., they rarely have functioning websites), but available information indicates that some groups provide important social support services to women and other vulnerable groups. However, as previously, no truly independent organisations monitoring and reporting on violations of human rights, including women’s rights are registered or able to operate openly in the country given the repressive climate there.

Independent, exile-based Turkmenistani have also faced harassment. TIHR has been the target of cyberattacks believed to be aimed at obstructing its critical reporting about the situation in Turkmenistan and TIHR’s director and family members have been intimidated. For example, in November 2021-January 2022, K.Iz., the TIHR director’s elderly mother who lives in Turkmenistan, received several intimidating visits by police. In another recent case, the head of the Bulgaria-based Turkmen Helsinki Foundation (THF) – a woman – was stopped at the border and deported when travelling to Turkey in November 2023. She was informed that she had been declared a “national security” threat and banned from entering the country for five years, a measure which THF believes was taken by the Turkish authorities in response to a request from the Turkmenistani authorities.

The 2015 Law on Mass Events allows for organising assemblies if the authorities are informed in advance and the venue is agreed with them. At the same time, the law grants wide discretion to local officials to refuse to permit assemblies if the proposed venue is deemed unsuitable, and it does not allow for spontaneous assemblies. In practice, public protests are rare in Turkmenistan because of the risk of persecution associated with any public criticism of the authorities. However, in recent months, there has been an increasing number
of cases in which citizens – often women – have spontaneously gathered to voice discontent about difficulties related to the protracted economic crisis in the country, widespread corruption, and other problems. Local authorities have sought to quickly suppress such protests, by detaining and intimidating participants, on the one hand, and, on the other, by making limited concessions to their demands to convince them to disperse. These are two examples involving women protesters from this year:

- On 7 August 2023, hundreds of people – mostly women – gathered outside the mayor’s office in the city of Turkmenbashi to protest against the shortage of flour, oil and other basic food products sold at subsidised prices in state-run stores. They demanded to talk to the mayor, saying they would otherwise walk to Abaz - a nearby resort - to convey their concerns to the president who was on vacation there at the time. When the mayor appeared, he promised the crowd to deal with the issue but also warned them that the president’s security service “might use arms” against them should they try to approach him directly.46

- On 6 March 2023, a group of around 30 women gathered in front of the presidential palace in Ashgabat, hoping to convey their concerns to the president on a number of issues, including the lack of effective measures by authorities to investigate and address criminal actions to which they and their relatives had been subjected. However, although the women were first promised that the prosecutor general would receive them (as the president was said to be busy), they were soon detained by police and taken to a local police station, where they were held for several hours, questioned and made to write explanatory statements. Finally, they were sent back to their homes in different parts of the country.47

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should be requested to:

- Take effective measures to protect women’s right to have access to information on issues of interest to them, including by granting them unhindered internet access.
- Safeguard the freedoms of expression, association and assembly of women activists, journalists and other citizens, based in and outside the country and protect them and their family members from harassment and intimidation.
- Facilitate the establishment and operation in the country of independent women’s rights organisations.
- Ensure that women are able to hold peaceful spontaneous protests on issues of concern to them without intimidation and harassment.

5. Violations of the rights of women public sector employees

As women make up the majority of those working in the public sector, they are most affected by several state-initiated practices that violate the rights of public sector employees.
Women public sector employees are **regularly mobilised for participation in state-organised celebrations and festivities at the threat of dismissal or other reprisals**. According to TIHR's information, when hired, public sector employees have even been required to sign statements accepting that they may be dismissed if they refuse to participate in “mass events aimed at glorifying the great achievements of the country and its leadership”. State-organised mass events are often preceded by time-consuming rehearsals and, in some cases, **the health and well-being of participants are at serious risk** as they are not granted adequate access to drinking water or opportunities for rest, even when events or rehearsals are held in challenging weather conditions. For example, according to TIHR's information, hundreds of people (including women) required medical assistance when public sector employees were ordered to participate in outdoor celebrations of ex-President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov's 65-years anniversary in June 2022 despite exceptionally hot temperatures of over 45 degrees Celsius.

Moreover, as documented by Turkmen News and TIHR, in cooperation with the Cotton Campaign, **women public sector workers are annually forced to pick cotton** across the country. The conditions in which they pick cotton are often hazardous and unsanitary, and there are serious concerns about lack of access to clean drinking water and adequate medical assistance. Those mobilised for participation are often required to work intensely, also during weekends and other days off, while being paid little if any compensation at all for their cotton picking. The use of forced labour in the cotton fields has also had a debilitating impact on the provision of basic public services with public employees spending time picking cotton instead of carrying out their regular work. According to TIHR's information, for the first time, teachers, doctors and local civil servants were not mobilised for the cotton harvest in 2023. However, other public sector employees continued to be mobilised for picking cotton.

Women public sector employees are also ordered to participate in **reoccurring so-called subbotniki, or days of unpaid public labour**, when they plant trees, clean outdoor areas and carry out other similar tasks during weekends or other time off from their jobs.

In another ongoing practice, women public sector employees are frequently **required to pay supposedly voluntary contributions from their salaries to cover various costs** related to the organisation of mass events, the cotton harvest or other state initiatives. These contributions can be quite significant in relation to the salary of employees and thus have a detrimental impact on the well-being of entire families, especially as many families struggle to make ends meet amid the protracted economic crisis and rising food prices. For example, in January 2023, public sector employees in Balkan region were reportedly required to contribute funds for the replacement of presidential portraits and accompanying carpets and banners in the offices of their organisations, in addition to paying for new subscriptions to state-controlled newspapers and journals. These costs (310 manat or around 80 EUR according to the official exchange rate) reportedly amounted to up to 20 percent of the monthly salary of some employees.

Trade unions existing in Turkmenistan operate under strict state oversight and control, which prevents them from effectively protecting the rights of employees, including women employees (for an example, see the case of K.I. in the previous chapter).
Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should be requested to:

- Take effective measures to put an end to the practices described above which particularly affect women public sector employees, including forcible mobilisation for the participation in state-organised mass events and time-consuming rehearsals, the annual cotton harvest, and days of free labour, as well as involuntary financial contributions for state needs.
- Protect public sector employees against arbitrary restrictions on their rights in violation of Turkmenistan’s international obligations.
- Facilitate the creation and operation of independent trade unions providing legal and other support to women employees to help ensure respect for their rights.

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2 This is one example of an appeal submitted by TIHR concerning a devastating hurricane that hit Turkmenistan in April 2020 and its impact: https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/ombudsperson-open-letter/
4 TIHR report from 26 April 2022: https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/04/women-morality/
5 TIHR report from 14 June 2022: https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/06/unhealthy-makeup/
6 Radio Azatlyk report from 12 April 2023: https://rus.azathabar.com/a/31797335.html
8 Radio Azattyq report from 23 November 2022: https://rus.azattyq.org/a/32145480.html
9 TIHR report from 31 May 2023: https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/05/cedaw-session-report/
11 TIHR report from 15 April 2022: https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/04/no-womens-rights/
13 TIHR report from 11 May 2022: https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/05/front-seat-discrimination/
19 For example, Turkmenistan was ranked last in an assessment of broadband speed in 224 countries and territories in mid-2021-mid-2022: https://www.cable.co.uk/broadband/speed/worldwide-speed-league/ Turkmenistan has also repeatedly been ranked among the worst countries in the Speedtest monthly assessment of the average speed of fixed broadband connections worldwide: https://www.speedtest.net/global-index
20 For example, in 2022, the cheapest, unlimited monthly broadband internet access rate offered by the state monopoly internet provider, TurkmenTelekom was about 10 percent of the minimum monthly salary for city residents and five percent for rural residents: https://telecom.tm/ru/internet
21 See https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-turkmenistan