CONFERENCE REPORT

EMPTY CHAIRS, SILENCED VOICES

Five Years Under Taliban Rule



STOCKHOLM • 24 AUGUST 2026

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

A public forum on five years of restrictions and repression

On 24 August 2026, Stockholm hosted “Empty Chairs, Silenced Voices: Five Years Under Taliban Rule”, a public event focused on the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan and on Sweden’s and the international community’s responsibilities. The programme brought together more than 70 participants from different parts of Swedish and Afghan society, including writers, civil society activists, women’s and human rights defenders, politicians and a representative of the Afghan Embassy in Stockholm.

The programme combined personal testimonies from inside Afghanistan, a contribution from Richard Bennett, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, a four-person panel discussion, the symbolic “Empty Chairs” installation and a musical performance in support of Afghan women.

DATE	LOCATION
24 August 2026	**Katasalen, ABF Stockholm**
ATTENDANCE	CORE FOCUS
More than 70 participants	**Women’s rights, voices & responsibility**

CENTRAL MESSAGE

The situation of women and girls in Afghanistan must not be forgotten, and their exclusion from education, employment and public life must not become accepted as normal.

Programme at a glance

- Four video testimonies from young women inside Afghanistan.
- Message and reflections from Richard Bennett, UN Special Rapporteur.
- Panel discussion on Afghanistan, women, migration and Sweden’s responsibility.
- “Empty Chairs” installation representing voices silenced inside Afghanistan.
- Musical performance in solidarity with Afghan women.

01 / CONTEXT & SYMBOLISM

Eight empty chairs for voices that cannot be heard freely

One of the event's central symbolic elements was the "Empty Chairs" installation, placed outside the main hall near the entrance. Eight empty chairs represented people inside Afghanistan whose voices have been silenced and who are unable to speak freely or exercise their right to freedom of expression.

At the centre of the installation stood a mannequin dressed in white. Participants were invited to write messages and words of solidarity for the women of Afghanistan directly onto the garment. The installation turned an abstract political issue into a visible, participatory statement.

THE VISUAL IDEA

Although many women and girls inside Afghanistan are prevented from speaking freely and participating fully in public life, people outside the country can stand with them and help ensure that their voices are heard.



The audience and programme setting in Stockholm.

The messages written by participants became a visible expression of solidarity and a reminder that the absence of these voices does not mean they have been forgotten.

Four girls share their stories

The first part of the programme included four video testimonies recorded inside Afghanistan. Four young women shared personal experiences of the past five years, speaking about being denied access to education, changes in their lives, efforts to continue learning despite restrictions, emotional wellbeing and what they are doing today.

These testimonies brought the reality of Afghanistan directly into the room. Rather than discussing the situation only through experts, politicians and activists outside the country, the programme created space for girls and young women living inside Afghanistan to speak about their own experiences.

WHY THE TESTIMONIES MATTERED

The denial of education is beyond the closure of schools and universities. The testimonies connected restrictions to future plans, opportunities, social lives and emotional wellbeing.

Key themes emerging from the testimonies

- Restricted access to education and the disruption of learning.
- Changes in everyday life and future plans.
- Attempts to continue learning despite restrictions.
- Emotional and psychological consequences of exclusion.
- The importance of preserving women's own voices and perspectives.

The videos also created a direct connection between the event title and the lived experiences of women and girls whose ability to speak openly inside Afghanistan has been severely restricted.

Richard Bennett: the situation must not become normalised

A key contribution to the programme came from Richard Bennett, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan. His contribution reflected on developments over the preceding five years, and the extensive restrictions imposed on the lives of women and girls.

Bennett addressed the issue of gender apartheid in Afghanistan and highlighted the systematic exclusion of women and girls from many areas of public life. A central message of his contribution was that the international community has not done enough in response to the situation.

CORE TAKEAWAY

Standing with Afghan women, amplifying their voices and continuing to support their rights and fundamental freedoms were presented as essential to preventing the current situation from becoming normalised.

The international dimension

- Continued attention to the human rights situation in Afghanistan.
- Support for women and girls living under restrictions.
- Amplification of voices that cannot be freely heard inside the country.
- A sustained international response rather than temporary attention.
- Avoiding normalisation of systematic exclusion.

04 / PANEL DISCUSSION

Afghanistan, women, migration and Sweden's responsibility

The main discussion featured four speakers representing different perspectives on Afghanistan and the consequences of the past five years. The panel brought together questions of human rights, women's rights, migration and Sweden's role.



Panel discussion during the Stockholm event.

Four connected areas of discussion

Women and girls in Afghanistan — Restrictions on education, employment, freedom of movement, public participation and other areas of women's lives.

Social and human consequences — The wider consequences of excluding women from education, employment and public life for families, communities and Afghanistan's future.

Afghans living in Sweden — Challenges facing the Afghan community, particularly Afghan women, and the importance of support for people living in Sweden while maintaining attention to Afghanistan.

Sweden and the international community — The responsibilities of governments, civil society and international organisations in protecting women's rights and keeping Afghanistan on the international agenda.

Keeping Afghanistan on the international agenda

A significant part of the discussion focused on the responsibility of Sweden and the international community. The Swedish representative acknowledged that Sweden could have done more in response to the situation of Afghan women and discussed the need for stronger support.

The panellists stressed that attention to Afghanistan should not increase only during major political developments or crises. Support for human rights, civil society and, in particular, the rights of women and girls was framed as a sustained commitment.

A RESPONSIBILITY THAT CONTINUES

The discussion emphasised that governments, civil society and international organisations all have a role in protecting women's rights and ensuring that Afghanistan does not disappear from the international agenda.

From dialogue to action: the report's stated priorities

- Maintain sustained international attention to Afghanistan.
- Support Afghan women and civil society.
- Document human rights violations.
- Keep Afghan voices present in international discussions.
- Create opportunities for women inside Afghanistan to express their own experiences, demands and perspectives.

The event also underlined an important principle: the international community should not speak on behalf of Afghan women while excluding them from the conversation.

Music, solidarity and a shared civic space

Following the first part of the programme and a short break, the event continued with a musical performance. A young female artist performed two songs in support of Afghan women, accompanied by a guitarist.

The performance added an artistic dimension to the programme and offered another way of expressing solidarity. Together with the testimonies, panel discussion and "Empty Chairs" installation, the music reinforced the broader message of preserving women's voices, identity, hope and resistance through different forms of expression.

A cross-section of Swedish and Afghan society

More than 70 people attended, including writers, civil society activists, women's rights defenders, human rights activists, politicians and a representative of the Afghan Embassy in Stockholm. The gathering created an opportunity for dialogue between Afghan civil society, human rights advocates, members of the Afghan community in Sweden and political and social representatives.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GATHERING

The event connected experiences inside Afghanistan with the lives of Afghans who have sought safety and built new lives abroad, while creating space for political and civic discussion in Sweden.



07 / CONCLUSION

Five years on, Afghan women's voices must still be heard

"Empty Chairs, Silenced Voices: Five Years Under Taliban Rule" marked five years since the Taliban's return to power not simply as a political anniversary, but by placing the lived experiences of Afghan women and girls at the centre of the discussion.

From the eight empty chairs outside the venue to the testimonies of four girls inside Afghanistan, from Richard Bennett's contribution to the panel discussion and musical performance, each element contributed to a shared message: the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan must not be forgotten, and their exclusion must not become accepted as normal.

The closing message

> **A FINAL IMAGE**
>
> **The chairs remained empty at the end of the event. The messages written on the white garment offered a different message: the absence of these voices does not mean they have been forgotten.**

Five years after the Taliban's return to power, the report records extensive restrictions affecting women's education, employment, public participation and everyday lives. It concludes that maintaining international attention, supporting Afghan civil society and creating space for Afghan women to be heard remain essential.

The programme ended with a clear call to continue supporting Afghan women, to stand with those who cannot speak freely, and to ensure that the situation in Afghanistan—and the exclusion of women and girls—is never allowed to become normalised.