

**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women**

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**Pre-sessional Working Group for the 87<sup>th</sup> session**

# **Turkmenistan**

Supplementary Report

for the Adoption of List of Issues

by

**Progres Foundation and Saglyk<sup>1</sup>**

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The logo for Progres Foundation, featuring the word "PROGRES" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The letter "O" is stylized with a vertical orange bar through its center.

This submission can be published on the OHCHR website for CEDAW for public information purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> Progres Foundation (“Progres” with one “s” as in the Turkmen language) is a non-profit organization based in the United States that supports various progressive initiatives that contribute to understanding of social realities and to shaping a new vision and approaches to sustainable human development in Turkmenistan. There are two flagship informational portals established by Progres Foundation: Progres.online and Saglyk.org. Progres.online is an online analytical journal that promotes nuanced understanding of societal trends. Saglyk.org has been working to improve public health literacy in Turkmenistan over the last 12 years, including becoming a leading source of COVID-19 information in the Turkmen language. One of the focus areas of Saglyk’s work is to provide the public in Turkmenistan with an access to quality sexuality and reproductive health and rights information in Turkmenistan.

## I. Introduction

We write in advance of the session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) and its review of [Turkmenistan's 6th state party report](#) (SPR) and compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). No international organization in Turkmenistan have publicly called on the government to address the issues discussed below.

## II. Absence of Comprehensive and Meaningful Public Data

Access to comprehensive and disaggregated data allows for a more nuanced and accurate assessment of the situation of women and girls in Turkmenistan and that policies and programs are tailored to address their specific needs and experiences. However, the government of Turkmenistan, including [the State Committee on Statistics](#), does not publish any gender related statistics or indicators. According to the UN Women [website](#): “As of December 2020, only 20.6% of indicators needed to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective were available, with gaps in key areas in Turkmenistan.” It is important to note that even the mentioned 20.6% can be only gleaned from the reports of international organizations. They are not available on the websites of the ministries.

[Sustainable Development Goal 5](#) for Turkmenistan has limited data. [Gender Gap](#) and [Gender Inequality](#) indexes for Turkmenistan are not available. The data shared in the SPR is not publicly available in other sources including websites of relevant ministries and the media.

The SPR also alarmingly lacks qualitative data on outcomes. The government does not measure the results and impact of input activities. The government holds a lot of activities and seminars with the UN structures in the country, but the public only learns about them after the events have taken place. Materials (protocols, treatment protocols) and data from these events with international donors are not published.

No government agency mentioned in this report has a public communication plan or mechanisms for receiving, tracking, responding to the public's inquiries and complaints. Saglyk has sent several emails to the Ministry of Health, the UN, and UNFPA in Turkmenistan either asking questions or requesting a meeting concerning women's and girls' access to sexual and reproductive services. We did not receive any answers.

Further, the ministries did not hold the recommended public consultations in the process of developing the national CEDAW report.

Finally, all references to COVID-19 related activities by the government should be viewed in the context that [Turkmenistan has not reported any cases of COVID-19 infections and deaths](#). [The Ministry of Health](#) refused to call the virus by its name in public messaging and continues to call it “dust”. No information on testing and vaccination is publicly available.

### III. Stereotypes and Harmful Practices (paragraphs 18-19) and Education (paragraphs 32 and 33)

#### A. State Policymaking by Oral Edicts to Control Private Decisions

April 2022 has seen [a flurry of international publicity](#) around government's decision by the word of mouth edict (not written down) [to restrict women's and girls' dress code and beauty services in Turkmenistan](#). These restrictions have been enforced selectively and arbitrarily by the police. This also concerns reports from the public on restrictions in obtaining driving licenses by women, as well as restrictions in mobility by private car and taxi. While these developments have been widely reported in the international media, no state agency or ministry commented reflecting its apathy on its international reputation. The absence of any public communication characterizes the public administration in Turkmenistan for the last 31 years.

We propose that the government:

- Adopt a comprehensive strategy to eliminate patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes that discriminate against women. Such measures should include efforts at all levels, in collaboration with civil society, to educate the public and raise awareness of the negative impact of discriminatory stereotypes on women's enjoyment of their human rights.
- Introduce a set of targets and indicators to systematically measure the impact of the strategic interventions undertaken to combat gender stereotypes.
- Timely publish proposed and adopted laws and policies in official government websites and ensure transparency and meaningful access and participation by the public particularly civil society groups working on women's rights.
- Allocate sufficient resources to modernize public communication services and designate specific ministries to constructively respond to domestic and international media and civil society's queries.

#### B. Absence of Compulsory Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)

There is no comprehensive sexuality education program in Turkmenistan. Only [50% of women have access to contraception](#), and a UN study found that [nearly 60% of women](#) feel unable to make autonomous decisions on issues like healthcare, contraception, and giving consent to sex. Meanwhile, state media promotes pronatalist propaganda that encourages Turkmen women to have [eight children](#). Macho politics, health misinformation and abortion stigma are the norms. No national budget for CSE including Prevention of Sexual Violence and Teenage Pregnancy is disclosed. The lack of CSE makes children and adolescents vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse. We received letters from our readers where young people lack a basic understanding of anatomy, pregnancy and contraceptive methods. The textbook used in the school curriculum "Basics of life skills" (Основы жизнедеятельности) is not scientifically accurate and promotes outdated and harmful gender norms. It omits sections on sexual health, contraception, abortion,

online and offline violence and abuse. There is a widespread practice of expelling a pregnant teenager from school.

To address some of the challenges of information scarcity, Saglyk has developed [100 answers to 100 questions](#) on sexuality and reproductive health that Turkmen teens are too ashamed to ask their parents and teachers. Saglyk also provides a space for Turkmen-speaking young men and women [to access a science-based sexuality education in their language](#).

We propose that the government:

- Adopt non-biased, science-based comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in and out of schools without the consent of a parent or guardian considering the evolving capacities of children and adolescents and based on the revised International Technical Guidelines for Sexuality Education.
- Allocate adequate resources to design and implement CSE, including teacher training, according to the best practices in the region, in a way that respects adolescents' right to privacy and confidentially.
- Publish on the Ministry of Health website the disaggregated data on the number of teenage pregnancies according to age, welaýat (region), and the related enrolment, attendance, and dropout rates.
- Set up a complaint mechanism for parents and the public to report discriminatory practices of school expulsion due to pregnancy.
- Ensure all CSE materials and content developed in cooperation with international donors are available online in the Turkmen language.
- Provide adequate sanitation facilities and free sanitary pads for girls in schools and include age-appropriate training on menstrual management in school curricula.

#### **IV. Gender-based violence against women and girls (paragraphs 22 and 23)**

There is no comprehensive law, mechanisms, or programs against gender-based violence (GBV) against women in Turkmenistan. According to [UNICEF and TürkmenStat \(MICS\)](#), 59% of women aged 15-49 in Turkmenistan think that a husband has the right to hit his wife. Women are left to assume that they cannot expect support from the government, police, hospitals, civil society organizations, psychological counseling or their families, and that it is safer to remain silent.

The first ever government report on domestic violence was released in August 2022 in partnership with UNFPA Turkmenistan, which Saglyk has [analyzed](#). For the first time, the government acknowledged the incidence of domestic violence in the country. There was no information or discussion on this issue for the last 31 years, since Turkmenistan became independent. The report creates a constructive language for discussing domestic violence and confirms that it harms women's health and rights in Turkmenistan. It urges the development of a domestic violence law, but no public communication or education followed from the government or UNFPA Turkmenistan. It also does not mention any comprehensive support for women fleeing domestic violence. Only one shelter run by Keyik Okara in Ashgabat is known to Saglyk.

According to the report, two hotlines (domestic violence and human trafficking) exist. However, neither of them publishes any data or information on how and where they work and the general profile of their callers. The hotlines have not been mentioned on state media. As interactions with our followers on Instagram demonstrate, the public is uninformed and distrustful of their services. UNFPA and the British Embassy, who fund the hotlines, have not responded to Saglyk's inquiries. There is an urgent need for dialogue and information on domestic violence in Turkmenistan. Saglyk runs [Dymma!](#) (Don't be silent!) campaign where people can share anonymous stories from victims and witnesses of various forms of domestic violence (physical, psychological, sexual), harassment, and discrimination against women in public and private spheres. This campaign is popular on social media and one of the most-read sections of their website.

As of March 31, 2023, UNFPA, the leading author of the report, has not shared any content on its Instagram and/or Twitter accounts. No campaign or content on domestic violence have been produced by [the Ministry of Health](#), [the State Statistics Committee](#), and [the Institute of State, Law and Democracy of Turkmenistan](#).

Our recent research and report [Digital Violence as a Mirror to Offline Realities](#) revealed that content promoting violence against women and girls online is prevalent, along with hate speech. The lack of informative and educational content and engagement with youth and population in general likely contribute to the increased incidences of hateful speech against women and girls in Turkmenistan.

Due to the absence of any other educational resources in Turkmenistan, Saglyk is the only place where a Turkmen speaker can learn about [domestic violence and its impact, with an emphasis on public health costs](#) for the family and society . We consistently develop content explaining that domestic violence should not only be a private family matter. Our content includes [lawyers' and doctors' advice](#), [explaining cycle of violence](#) and types of violence. We also provide a comparison and examples of the [level of protection from intimate partner violence in our region and globally \(in English\)](#). The Saglyk team has also developed comprehensive content concerning [women's health](#) and [access to abortion](#), [contraception](#), [family planning](#), as well as [child mortality](#) and its [causes](#).

We propose that the government:

- Regularly publish comprehensive statistical data on gender-based violence (GBV) disaggregated by age, sex, and relationship between the victim and the perpetrator including the work of Keyik Okara in Ashgabat.
- Draft a law addressing GBV in line with CEDAW and other international human rights standards and ensure the meaningful participation of civil society organizations in particular those working on women's rights.
- Address stigmatization of women who are victims of GBV, including sexual violence, which deters them from reporting cases, by establishing mandatory capacity-building programs for judges, prosecutors, police, social workers, psychologists, and health-care workers on gender-sensitive investigation and interrogation procedures in cases of GBV against women.

- Task the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population, the Ministry of Health with educating the public on existing support and complaints mechanisms for gender-based violence (GBV) online and offline. Allow victims to file complaints without parental or legal guardian involvement and ensure access to free legal aid, medical assistance, psychosocial counseling, and rehabilitation.
- Publish protocols for doctors and law enforcement officers that have been developed together with UNFPA.

## V. Participation in Political and Civic Life (paragraphs 26 and 27)

In Turkmenistan, [91.4% of domestic workers are women](#) and their economic activity is lower than men due to caregiving activities, whether by choice or social pressure and [families' investment and focus on sons' education](#). In 2018, only 39.8% of higher education students were female, but this increased to 43.4% in 2021/2022, according to the government report. Women remain underrepresented in leadership and management roles in public and private sectors. Although the proportion of women in the national parliament has been reported as 27%, the proportion of women in senior- and middle-management positions is unknown. There are no women heads of regions (welayats), provinces and city mayors. Only 5,231 out of 27,000 members of the Association of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Turkmenistan are women, according to the government.

We propose that the government:

- Disclose the proportion of women in senior and middle management positions outside of the Parliament.
- Discuss the concrete steps taken to increase the share of female students in higher education establishments.
- Promote women representation in various professions particularly at decision-making levels.
- Explain the increase in female students in higher education, whether due to deliberate measures and government programs or because of the 2-year compulsory military service for male students, which disrupts their education.

## VI. Civil Society and Non-governmental Organizations (paragraphs 28 and 29)

The number of NGOs in Turkmenistan is [unknown](#), and there are no government reports on the registration of new NGOs. About 6 pro-governmental NGOs based in Ashgabat operate in cooperation with the UN and EU agencies with government permission.

Despite Saglyk's offer of COVID-19 content and public messaging support, Saglyk received no response from the Ministry of Health, UN, UNDP, and UNICEF.

We propose that the government:

- Publicize registration requirements for nonprofits both online and offline. It is not publicly available at the moment.
- Disclose the number of NGOs registered in the country.
- Simplify the process and requirements for registering new NGOs both in the capital and other cities.
- Review [the Law on Public Associations](#) (2014) in consultation with civil society. The current law and its implementation is a major obstacle in the registration and operation of nonprofit groups in the country.

## VII. Employment (paragraphs 34-35)

Data on this section under the SPR is not publicly available. The origin and source of the purported data is uncertain and unverified, as there is no public data on unemployment in Turkmenistan, and none that is gender-disaggregated.

Parental leave is not culturally accepted and the process of obtaining parental leave remains obscure and unexplained by state agencies. Fathers' involvement in parenthood remains low given the traditional roles of males taking the breadwinner role and female family members taking the childrearing role.

We propose that the government:

- Collect comprehensive data on the participation and use of parental leave including statistics on how many fathers file for and take paternity leave. [Only 13% of fathers \(UNICEF, MICs\)](#) in Turkmenistan participate in their children's development.
- Implement measures to ensure the equal sharing of domestic responsibilities between women and men and promote the value and use of parental leave through awareness-raising campaigns for both men and women.

## VIII. Sexual Harassment in the Workplace (paragraphs 36-37)

Under the SPR, the government claimed that no allegations of sexual harassment in the workplace have been filed. However, this is because there is no separate law protecting women and girls from sexual harassment in the workplace and establishing complaint mechanisms for it. The absence of a legal framework is coupled with a patriarchal culture and widely used sayings such as “ganjyk guýrugyny bulamasa, köpek yzyna eýermez.” (if the bitch does not raise her tail, the dog will not follow her”) makes this issue to disappear from the public discourse. This proverb is used widely as “our forebears saying”. This means that women who receive male attention have asked for it and it blames women and girls for being harassed.

We regularly receive letters from readers sharing stories of harassment in the workplace and streets. Sextortion is normalized in the country.

We propose that the government:



- Provide information on existing complaint mechanisms and how they provide for confidentiality of information and protection for sexual harassment in the workplace.
- Adopt legislation to explicitly prohibit sexual harassment in the workplace, ensure that victims have access to effective remedies and that complaints about sexual harassment are effectively investigated, that perpetrators are prosecuted and adequately punished and that victims are protected from retaliation.

## IX. Health (paragraphs 38-39)

According to UNICEF, [Turkmenistan has the highest mortality rate](#) among children under 5 in Central Asia (45.8 per 1,000 live births). Around [50% of women have access to contraception](#) and across all women aged 15-49, [8% have an unmet need for contraception](#).

In 2016, the gestational term for abortion has been [reduced from 12 weeks to 5 weeks](#) in Turkmenistan without any public consultation. In April 2022, the Ministry of Health published and later removed from the media the protocol for abortion care. Saglyk has a copy of it. [Once the five-week limit has been passed](#), pregnant people are left with few options. Some could seek permission from a special medical committee, which requires a bunch of time-consuming tests that can lead to critical delays, putting them at greater risk.

Both links provided in paras. 187-188 SPR (<https://minjust.gov.tm/ru/hukuk/merkezi/hukuk/331>) and (<https://minjust.gov.tm/hukuk/namalar/1579>) does not contain the information that it claims to have. Protocol for abortion care is not publicly available. Medical professionals also do not have any access to it.

Turkmenistan's recent ban on abortion before 5 weeks of pregnancy has made it effectively illegal and unsafe, putting women's health and economic status at risk. The ban creates a two-tier system, where women with resources can pay bribes or use personal connections to obtain abortions, while others are left without access. As a result of the bribe, doctors tend to record gestational age as 5 weeks or as missed miscarriage. This system exacerbates health and economic inequality in the society and highlights major issues with data quality in public health.

We propose that the government:

- Disclose comprehensive and disaggregated data from the 95 offices providing reproductive health services and publish on the website of the Ministry of Health. Both UNFPA and the government remain silent on data on who and how uses these services. Many people do not know about the services.
- Repeal the 5-week restriction on abortion and restore the term to 12 weeks.
- Ensure public information is disseminated nationwide, particularly to girls and women and to national and local authorities and health professionals, clarifying the circumstances under which abortion is currently legal.



- Ensure access to comprehensive quality abortion and post-abortion care whether or not abortion is legal in accordance with the [WHO Abortion Care Guideline](#).

**X. Women Living with HIV/AIDS (paragraphs 40-41)**

The government continues to keep silence on HIV/AIDS in Turkmenistan by not disclosing and reporting data to [UNAIDS](#). This, and also the criminalization of sex work, homosexuality, and the drug use in Turkmenistan makes it impossible to have any constructive engagement around these issues.

We propose that the government:

- Publicly disclose information and data on the six HIV centers mentioned in the SPR including their location and the services that are available. The public remains unaware of these centers as they never get mentioned in the media.
- Publish the seven HIV treatment protocols mentioned in the SPR in the Ministry of Health website.
- Review and decriminalize legislation on sex work, homosexuality and the drug use in consultation with civil society. Decriminalization is long overdue and the impact of discriminatory laws on public health is significant.