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# **JOINT SUBMISSION FOR THE UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW (UPR) OF TURKMENISTAN**

**For the 44th session session of the UPR Working Group  
in November 2023**

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This submission has been prepared for the fourth cycle review of Turkmenistan in the framework of the UPR by International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR), drawing on their ongoing cooperation on documenting fundamental rights developments in Turkmenistan. The submission 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. This is a slightly updated version of a submission finalised in March 2023.

**International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)** is an independent, non-governmental organisation founded in 2008. Based in Brussels, with branch offices in Tbilisi and Kyiv, 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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## 1. Introduction

1.1. Five years after the previous UPR, **the human rights situation in Turkmenistan remains highly repressive**, and the authorities continue to systematically violate fundamental rights and freedoms. As previously, Turkmenistan **features at the bottom of international freedom rankings** such as the reputable Freedom in the World survey, in the 2023 edition of which only Syria, South Sudan and Tibet fared worse than Turkmenistan.<sup>1</sup>

1.2. Following elections held in March 2022 which were manifestly unfree and unfair and offered voters no real choice, Serdar Berdymukhamedov assumed the presidency after his father Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov had held this office since 2006 when Turkmenistan's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov suddenly passed away. After stepping down as president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov has remained a powerful actor, heading the so-called People's Council, which was recently designated as the country's highest body of power. This development is likely to contribute to cementing his influence and, thus, the repressive policies seen under his reign.

1.3. The current submission covers **a number of key human rights issues of concern**, including state media control, internet censorship and lack of government transparency on issues of public interest; persecution of critical voices both at home and abroad; the lack of space for independent civil society engagement in the country; ongoing problems of arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances and harsh prison conditions; and restrictions on the rights and role of women.

## 2. State control of media and the flow of information

2.1. During the 2018 UPR, Turkmenistan received a series of important recommendations with respect to safeguarding media freedoms and access to information. Among others, it received and supported recommendations to effectively implement media law provisions that safeguard media pluralism (116.63), to stop censorship of online and print media (116.64), to ensure unobstructed internet access (116.65), and to allow the media to operate without interference (116.66).

2.2. Five years later, the Turkmenistani authorities **continue to tightly control the information flow** in the country and to **seriously restrict media operations**, in violation of the 2012 Law on Mass Media and the country's international obligations. Turkmenistan has consistently been ranked at the bottom of the well-known World Press Freedom Index, published by Reporters Without Borders, with only Iran, Vietnam, China and North Korea receiving worse scores in 2023.<sup>2</sup>

2.3. All national media outlets, including the few privately owned outlets, are subjected to **state control and interference with their editorial policies**, which both directly and indirectly result in censorship. In particular, the authorities use state-owned media as **platforms for the dissemination of state-dictated information** about the situation in the country. The president has publicly called on national media outlets to focus on reporting about positive developments and achievements of the government.<sup>3</sup> Journalists working with independent media outlets based abroad face persecution (see also chapter 2).

2.4. To promote its own narratives of the situation in the country, the government **denies and covers up developments that may reflect badly on those in power**. For example, it has failed to acknowledge the scope of the **protracted economic crisis** in the country and has sought to conceal manifestations of this crisis, such as the deficit of basic food products sold at state-subsidised prices. It has also persistently claimed that the **global Covid-19 pandemic** never reached the country, although independent sources reported about a serious national outbreak. As a result, Turkmenistan was the only remaining country in the world to have reported zero Covid-19 cases at the beginning of 2023.<sup>4</sup> As part of its Covid-19 denial policy, the government pressured medical workers to participate in covering up the national Covid-19 outbreak and threatened them with repercussions should they leak information about Covid-19 cases.<sup>5</sup>

2.5. Internet access in Turkmenistan remains **slow<sup>6</sup> and expensive<sup>7</sup>** compared to international standards and the **internet penetration rate is still comparatively low** (estimated as 38 percent in 2022<sup>8</sup>). Interruptions in internet access are regularly reported.<sup>9</sup> 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. A 2019 investigative report found that the authorities use several different techniques to restrict access to online resources, including more than 130 of the most popular websites worldwide.<sup>10</sup> Recently independent sources have reported about a further increase of the number of blocked sites, with the blocked resources including among others leading global social media and messenger services such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter (X), WhatsApp, Telegram and others.<sup>11</sup> An unprecedented large-scale study, which was carried out by a team of computer scientists from several US-based universities in 2021-2022, confirmed the systematic nature of internet censorship in Turkmenistan: it found that **over 122,000 domains were blocked** in the country.<sup>12</sup> 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 blocking access to them and intimidating those who install and use them.

2.6. Recently the government announced plans to create **"an autonomous national digital network"**, with a government working group set up to look into this matter in December 2022<sup>13</sup>. While no details of this initiative have been made public, it has sparked concerns that the authorities might seek to introduce a national state-controlled network and thereby further restrict internet use in the country.

## Recommendations

2.7. The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Enforce in practice the ban on media censorship set out by law and take concrete steps to enable media outlets to operate free from undue state interference.
- Promote access to information on issues of public interest and adequately inform citizens about such issues.
- Adopt effective measures to promote internet access, speed and affordability and safeguard residents' freedom to seek, receive and impart information through the global internet, in particular by ending the practice of arbitrarily restricting access to internet sites and by refraining from intimidating those who seek to circumvent such censorship.

### 3. Persecution of critical voices

3.1. At the previous UPR, Turkmenistan received a number of recommendations on ending intimidation and harassment of journalists, human rights defenders and others exercising their freedom of expression and other fundamental rights and releasing those imprisoned on such grounds (116.75, 116.77, 116.79, 116.80, 116.81 and other recommendations).

3.2. Five years later, **the pattern of intimidation and harassment of critical voices continues**. In fact, the Turkmenistani authorities have further increased pressure on such individuals in response to growing expressions of discontent with the government, in particular through social media platforms.<sup>14</sup> In their widening crackdown on dissent, the authorities have **targeted both people inside the country and outspoken activists who live abroad**, as well as their relatives.

3.3. Anyone living in Turkmenistan who criticises government policies, stands up for their rights or is in contact with exile-based groups or activists risks persecution, **ranging from surveillance and threats to arrest, prosecution and imprisonment on politically motivated charges**. Those currently in prison on charges believed to have been initiated in retaliation for their legitimate exercise of their freedom of expression and other fundamental rights include, among others<sup>15</sup>:

- Journalist **Nurgeldy Khalykov** who was arrested and handed a four-year prison sentence on fraud charges in 2021 after he shared a photo of a WHO delegation visiting Turkmenistan with a Netherlands-based media and human rights organisation and the authorities found out about his cooperation with this organisation.
- Civil society activist **Murat Dushemov** who was sentenced to four years in prison on extortion and other charges in 2021 after criticising the authorities online and attempting to challenge Covid-19 preventive measures imposed in the country despite the government's denial of the national outbreak.
- Human rights activist **Mansur Mingelov** who was sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment in 2012 after exposing torture and ill-treatment of members of the ethnic Baloch minority. During more than a decade in prison, he has reportedly suffered from serious health problems, including as a result of beatings to which he allegedly was subjected when first detained.<sup>16</sup>

3.4. During the Human Rights Committee's review of Turkmenistan's third periodic report submitted under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in March 2023, the Turkmenistani delegation stated that it would "consider" releasing Khalykov, Dushemov and Mingelov.<sup>17</sup> The **Committee also called for their release** in its concluding observations.<sup>18</sup> However, at the time of writing, there has been no further information on this issue, and we remain seriously concerned about the ongoing imprisonment of these three individuals.

3.5. Individuals imprisoned on charges considered politically motivated have sometimes **continued to be deprived of their liberty even after the expiration of their sentences**. This is one example:

- Instead of being released when his original 11-year prison sentence expired in 2019, dissident **Gulgeldy Annaniyazov** was transferred to a remote village for spending another five years under

police control.<sup>19</sup> Annaniyazov was arrested and convicted on illegal border crossing and related charges after returning to Turkmenistan from exile in 2008. For years, he was held incommunicado and denied contact with his family.

3.6. In cases where individuals imprisoned because of their civic engagement eventually have been released following support campaigns, concerns remain about **the lack of accountability for rights violations** to which they have been subjected. This is one such case:

- **Khursanai Ismatullaeva**, a doctor who was sentenced to nine years in prison in 2021 in apparent retaliation for her efforts to obtain justice over her unfair dismissal from a perinatal clinic, was released under a presidential pardon in December 2022. Her release was a great relief, but the authorities should also investigate and hold accountable those responsible for violations of her rights, including her reported abduction from her home in July 2021, her incommunicado detention for two weeks after this, and the unfair legal process in which she was convicted.<sup>20</sup>

3.7. In a worrying practice, **former political prisoners have also faced harassment following their release**. For example, **Agajuma Bayramov**, who was released in 2022 after spending six years in prison on charges believed to have been fabricated to penalise him for speaking out on socio-economic problems in interviews with independent media, has faced ongoing harassment, including by being held under police surveillance and being prohibited from leaving his home without permission by police. His relatives have also been intimidated.<sup>21</sup>

3.8. Because of their civic and social media engagement and their criticism of the Turkmenistani government, activists abroad have been subjected to different forms of pressure, including **threats**, **smear campaigns** denouncing them as “traitors”, and **physical assaults** believed to have been carried out at the orders of security services.<sup>22</sup>

3.9. The Turkmenistani authorities have also **sought the detention and return of activists based abroad**. In this context the Turkmenistani authorities are believed to have handed over a confidential document, featuring the names of 25 activists<sup>23</sup> to their counterparts in Turkey – a country with friendly relations to Turkmenistan and a large Turkmenistani migrant community. Since autumn 2021, several of the activists named on the list have been detained and threatened by return to Turkmenistan, where they would be at a serious risk of politically motivated arrest, imprisonment, and torture.<sup>24</sup> Most activists have been able to challenge such measures through court, thereby avoiding return to Turkmenistan. However, in the following case, an activist included on the confidential list was sent back to Turkmenistan:

- Blogger **Farhat Meimankulyiev** (also known as Durdyiev) was reportedly detained in Istanbul at the request of Turkmenistan’s consulate on 19 May 2023 and deported to Turkmenistan the following day, allegedly because of a migration violation.<sup>25</sup> His deportation gave rise to serious concerns that he might be arrested, prosecuted and tortured in retaliation for his vocal criticism of the Turkmenistani authorities. Information obtained by human rights defenders indicates that he was indeed arrested, convicted and handed a lengthy prison sentence upon return.<sup>26</sup> The blogger has also previously reported harassment, in particular in August 2021, when he was arbitrarily detained at the premises of Turkmenistan’s consulate in Istanbul, ill-treated, and pressured to apologise for posting videos critical of the regime.<sup>27</sup>

3.10. In September 2022, the Turkmenistani authorities requested Turkey to temporarily introduce a visa requirement for citizens of Turkmenistan, thereby ending a previous visa-free regime.<sup>28</sup> This gave rise to concerns that the authorities would seek to use this requirement to restrict travel of “inconvenient” individuals. Reinforcing such concerns, human rights defenders have obtained information indicating that citizens have been **required to sign statements pledging not to engage in protests or online discussions** critical of the government before being allowed to travel to Turkey.<sup>29</sup> Citizens residing in Turkey have also been **unable to renew their passports** at Turkmenistan’s diplomatic representations in this country, instead being encouraged to travel back to Turkmenistan to do so, which could result in arrest and other repercussions for citizens who have expressed critical views of the government during their time in Turkey.

3.11. In an ongoing practice, the Turkmenistani authorities have attempted to make activists shut up by **targeting their relatives**, who have been detained, questioned and warned of serious repercussions unless the activists stop criticising the authorities.<sup>30</sup> In some cases, local authorities have even targeted children who are relatives of outspoken activists. For example, in May 2021, security services in Turkmenistan summoned, questioned and threatened the 14-year-old nephew of **Rozybai Jumamuradov**, an outspoken activist and journalist based abroad.<sup>31</sup> In another example, in February 2023, Turkey-based activist **Dursoltan Taganova**, who also is openly critical of the government, reported an incident in which security services in Turkmenistan questioned her 12-year-old son about her and attempted to recruit him as an informant.<sup>32</sup>

## Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Stop persecuting citizens living in- and outside the country because of their criticism of the current situation in Turkmenistan and their engagement on issues of concern to them.
- Ensure in particular that no one is criminally charged, declared wanted, arrested or imprisoned because of their expressions of discontent or their civic activities; and promptly drop the charges and release anyone currently behind bars on such grounds.
- Refrain from intimidating and harassing relatives of outspoken citizens, above all children.
- Thoroughly and impartially investigate all alleged violations of the rights of citizens in retaliation for their or their relatives’ legitimate civic engagement and criticism of the government and hold those responsible to account.

## 4. Restrictions on civil society organisations, assemblies and visits of UN special procedures

4.1. At the 2018 UPR, Turkmenistan received recommendations for concrete steps to improve protection of the freedoms of association and assembly, including by simplifying the procedures for legal registration of NGOs (116.74), minimising reporting obligations for such organisations (114.28), and ending forced mobilisation of residents for government-organised mass events (116.71). Turkmenistan was also recommended to extend a standing invitation to all UN special procedures, and to permit and



facilitate visits from all special procedures who have requested to visit the country (116.25, 116.28, 116.30 and others).

4.2. Five years later, **serious obstacles to the operation of civil society organisations (CSOs) remain in place** in Turkmenistan. The 2014 Law on Public Associations grants citizens the right to establish and join associations of their choice and prohibits state interference in the activities of associations. Although some changes have been made to this law to simplify the procedure for creating and registering associations<sup>33</sup>, it nevertheless provides for **excessive restrictions** on the freedom of association of CSOs and grants authorities wide powers to oversee their activities without adequate safeguards against abuse. It is compulsory for CSOs to obtain state registration in order to operate in the country and there are broad grounds on which associations may be closed down by court.

4.3. Moreover, **only a limited number of registered public organisations exist** in the country of (officially) six million residents. According to official information, as of the beginning of March 2023, there were a total of 135 registered public associations, out of which 58 (or 43 percent) were sport associations. The other registered associations include organisations dealing with economic, scientific, cultural, ecological, disability and other issues.<sup>34</sup> However, as previously, **no truly independent NGOs which work on human rights issues or challenge the government's policies are registered or able to work openly** in the country given the repressive climate there. Civil society representatives who dare to publicly speak out about the situation in the country are highly vulnerable to persecution (see more in chapter 3). Independent, **exile-based Turkmenistani NGOs have also faced pressure**. For example, Austria-based TIHR has regularly been the target of cyberattacks believed to be aimed at stifling its independent and critical reporting, and TIHR's director, his family members, and those of the organisation's in-country contributors who do not work clandestinely but have a public profile have been subjected to intimidation.<sup>35</sup>

4.4. The right to **freedom of assembly is also still seriously restricted** in Turkmenistan. 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. It also sets out that assemblies, as a rule, should be held in specifically designated venues, although it is unclear whether any such venues have been identified.

4.5. In practice, **public protests are an extremely rare occurrence** in Turkmenistan because of the repressive climate in the country and the risk of persecution associated with any public criticism of the authorities. However, in some cases, residents hold spontaneous protests to express discontent about issues of concern to them and to demand action from the authorities. In recent months, there has been a growing number of such protests, which seems to indicate an increase in the level of discontent among residents because of difficulties related to the protracted economic crisis in the country, widespread corruption, and other problems facing them.<sup>36</sup> The authorities typically seek **to suppress spontaneous protests** using tactics of, on the one hand, intimidation of participants (such as through detentions and threats) and, on the other hand, persuasion.<sup>37</sup> For example, in March 2023, a group of around 30 women who gathered in front of the presidential palace in Ashgabat hoping to convey their concerns to the president were detained by police, questioned and made to sign explanatory statements before being sent back to their homes in different parts of the country.<sup>38</sup> In another case, in early August 2023, hundreds of people – mostly women – reportedly gathered outside the mayor's office in the city of Turkmenbashi to protest against the shortage of flour and other basic food products sold at subsidised prices in state-run stores. They only left after the

mayor came out to talk to them and promised to address the issue, while also threatening them with repercussions should they try to communicate their concerns directly to the president.<sup>39</sup> As documented by TIHR and other independent sources<sup>40</sup>, the increasing shortage of food sold at subsidised prices in Turkmenistan has had severe negative consequences especially for the poorest segments of the population, further aggravating the situation of impoverished families.

4.6. In violation of the right to voluntary participation in assemblies, the Turkmenistani authorities continue to **mass mobilise public sector employees, students and other residents for participation in various state-organised events at the threat of reprisals**, such as dismissal or the loss of benefits. According to TIHR's information, when hired, public sector employees have even been required to sign agreements 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".<sup>41</sup>

4.7. The authorities have also **jeopardised the health and well-being of residents**, including children by mobilising them for participation in mass events in challenging weather conditions and failing to grant adequate access to drinking water and opportunities for rest. For example, according to TIHR's information, hundreds of people required medical assistance after being made to participate in outdoor celebrations of ex-President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov's 65-years anniversary in June 2022 despite exceptionally hot temperatures of over 45 degrees.<sup>42</sup> During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Turkmenistani authorities **exposed participants in state-organised mass events to a heightened risk of contracting Covid-19** by failing to enforce protective measures such as physical distancing and the use of masks.

4.8. In accordance with UPR recommendations received, the Turkmenistani government **issued a standing invitation to UN special procedures** to visit the country in May 2018.<sup>43</sup> This was a welcome step. However, although several mandate holders have made new requests to visit the country since 2018, and there have been some discussions on possible visits, the authorities **have yet to finally agree to and facilitate new visits** in practice. To date the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to religion or belief is still the only mandate holder to have visited Turkmenistan – in 2008.

## Recommendations

4.9. The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Bring the provisions of the Law on Public Associations and the Law on Mass Events into full compliance with international human rights standards.
- Ensure that independent NGOs that so wish may obtain legal status in a fair and transparent process and carry out their activities without undue interference by authorities.
- Allow residents to hold peaceful spontaneous protests without facing repercussions.
- Put an end to the practice of forcible mobilisation for state-organised mass events and protect the health and well-being of participants in such events.
- Facilitate visits of all UN special procedures who have requested visit the country and cooperate constructively with them on the preparation, conduct and follow-up of visits.

## 5. Ongoing problems of arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances and harsh prison conditions

5.1. During the 2018 UPR, Turkmenistan received important recommendations with respect to addressing problems of arbitrary detentions and convictions, torture and ill-treatment, incommunicado detention and enforced disappearances; improving detention conditions in accordance with international standards; and ensuring independent monitoring of places of detention by national and international bodies (116.9, 116.10, 116.45, 116.46, 116.50, 116.52, 116.56, 116.57, 116.79 and others).

5.2. However, five years later, serious problems persist in these areas. As previously, the judiciary is heavily dependent on the executive, and **the pattern of arbitrary detention, prosecution and imprisonment of individuals for their legitimate exercise of fundamental freedoms continues** (see also chapter 3). Trials in such cases are typically held behind closed doors, without access to a lawyer of their own choice for the defendants and in violation of other basic fair trial guarantees.

5.3. Given the closed nature of the country's detention facilities, it is very difficult to obtain information about the problem of torture. However, available information, in particular reports from former detainees indicate that **torture and ill-treatment remain widespread**. Torture and ill-treatment are **largely perpetrated with impunity** due to the lack of effective measures to investigate allegations of such treatment and hold the perpetrators accountable, although torture is criminalised in the country. Torture and ill-treatment are believed to be frequently used in pre-trial detention facilities, with "confessions" obtained under duress routinely being used as the basis for guilty verdicts against defendants in criminal cases, but also in prisons, with individuals imprisoned on politically motivated grounds being especially vulnerable to prohibited treatment.

5.4. The **lack of independent and effective monitoring of detention facilities** remains a key problem. Contrary to UPR recommendations received in both 2013 and 2018, Turkmenistan has **not ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT) or established an independent national preventive mechanism** under it. The national bodies with a mandate to monitor detention conditions, including government supervisory commissions and the Ombudsperson's office are not independent and, judging from the information provided by the authorities, only occasionally carry out visits to detention facilities. The **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) does not currently have access** to monitor the country's detention facilities. The government has reported proposing a re-initiation of negotiations with the ICRC on a mutual agreement to provide the basis for such monitoring<sup>44</sup>, but at the time of writing there does not appear to have been any tangible progress on this issue.

5.5. There have also been new reports about **hazing and torture in the army**, and TIHR and other independent organisations have received information about several cases in which soldiers died under circumstances suggesting that this was the result of abusive treatment to which the soldiers were subjected by army officials and fellow conscripts.<sup>45</sup> There have typically been no effective investigations into such cases.

5.6. The **practice of enforced disappearances continues** in Turkmenistan. The Prove They Are Alive NGO campaign has documented dozens of cases of enforced disappearances since the systematic use of this

practice began following a reported assassination attempt on then President Saparmurat Niyazov in November 2022.<sup>46</sup> While some of the victims are known to subsequently have died, been released or granted contacts with their family, other cases of disappearances are ongoing. The victims include individuals convicted because of their alleged involvement in the assassination attempt, former state officials prosecuted after falling out of favour with the government, people charged with so-called Islamic extremism and civil society activists. The authorities **have yet to provide information, in a systematic and transparent manner, on the cases of disappearances documented by NGOs.**

5.7. There have also been reports about the **use of incommunicado detention in recent cases** of individuals detained in retaliation for their legitimate exercise of fundamental freedoms. For example, Khursanai Ismatullaeva was held incommunicado for two weeks following her detention in July 2021, with her relatives having no information about her whereabouts during this time (see more about her case in chapter 3).

5.8. While the material conditions within parts of Turkmenistan's prison system have improved as a result of modernisation efforts undertaken by the authorities, **serious concerns remain about prison conditions.** Available information indicates that major problems documented in a 2017 report, prepared by TIHR and Turkmenistan's Independent Lawyers Association (TILA)<sup>47</sup>, persist in prisons, including overcrowding, poor sanitation and availability to food and drinking water, widespread diseases such as tuberculosis, lack of adequate medical assistance and corrupt practices. During the global Covid-19 pandemic, new restrictions were reportedly enforced on prisoners' contacts with their relatives, including meetings and receiving parcels with food and other necessities.<sup>48</sup> While introduced for public health reasons, these measures further increased the vulnerability of prisoners.

5.9. As previously, there are particular concerns about the treatment of prisoners held at the **notorious Ovadan Depe facility**, where conditions have been described as terrifying by previous prisoners.<sup>49</sup> Many individuals imprisoned on politically motivated grounds have been taken to Ovadan Depe and this secretive facility is also believed to accommodate many of those who have disappeared within the prison system. As confirmed by the government<sup>50</sup>, the Ombudsperson has not carried out any visit to this facility as part of her mandate despite the violations reported there.

## Recommendations

5.10. The Turkmenistani government should be requested to:

- Take concrete measures to strengthen the independence of the judiciary and ensure that the judicial system is not used to hand down politically motivated sentences in trials violating international due process and fair trial standards.
- Ensure that the Criminal Code provision on torture is applied in practice and that any allegations of torture and ill-treatment are promptly, thoroughly and impartially investigated, the perpetrators prosecuted and given penalties commensurate to their crimes, and the victims granted adequate compensation.
- Put an end to the practices of prolonged incommunicado detention and enforced disappearances, and undertake to investigate all cases involving alleged victims of these practices documented by independent NGOs and to provide information about the fate and whereabouts of those concerned

in a transparent and systematic manner and to grant those currently held incommunicado access to their lawyers and family members.

- Ratify the OPCAT and establish an effective national system for independent and regular monitoring of all places of detention; and grant the ICRC unhindered access to detention facilities and enable it to carry out monitoring in accordance with its standard procedures.
- Take effective measures to address overcrowding and other problems within the prison system and to bring prison conditions in line with international standards.

## 6. Violations of women's rights

6.1. At the 2018 review, Turkmenistan received important recommendations concerning women's rights, among others recommendations to strengthen legislation and policies for the protection and empowerment of women, to counter stereotypes on the roles and responsibilities of women, and to take concrete measures to fight gender-based violence, including within families (114.72, 114.75 and 114.79).

6.2. Turkmenistan's government has identified efforts to improve the status of women and promote gender equality as a political priority.<sup>51</sup> However, **women currently remain one of the most vulnerable groups of the population.**

6.3. Shortly after Serdar Berdymukhamedov's inauguration as president in spring 2022 reports emerged about **reinforced efforts by the authorities to promote so-called traditional values and standards** regarding women's role and to **enforce restrictive, informal requirements regarding women's appearance and conduct.** For example, according to information received by TIHR and other independent sources, propaganda events were organised in state institutions, public organisations and educational establishments to "educate" women and girls on issues of morality and observance of national traditions and how they are expected to behave, dress and look. Those attending events were **threatened with repercussions**, including dismissal or expulsion if they fail to comply with requirements such as wearing national-style dresses and refraining from using heavy make-up.<sup>52</sup> There were also reports of police carrying out **arbitrary raids on cosmetic shops and beauty salons** and **arbitrarily checking, detaining and fining women** for having made use of beauty services.<sup>53</sup>

6.4. The authorities' drive to promote so-called traditional and moral values is likely to further **strengthen entrenched negative and discriminatory attitudes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and girls**, in addition to resulting in arbitrary restrictions on their rights. It might also **aggravate problems of violence against women** by leaving perpetrators feeling vindicated and reinforcing patterns of victim blaming, thereby making victims even more reluctant to report abuse.

6.5. A recent first-ever national survey of its kind, which the government carried out with UNFPA assistance,<sup>54</sup> found that **16 percent of all women have experienced violence**, including physical, psychological and sexual violence by their husbands/partners. Moreover, **41 percent of the survey respondents reported encountering some form of controlling behaviour** from their husbands/partners, such as restrictions on leaving the house, or on working or studying outside the home. Such restrictions

further increase the vulnerability of women to physical abuse. 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 institutions. The results indicated that **social pressure and the fear of “dishonouring the family”** are key 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. Against this background, there is also reason to believe that there might have been underreporting of experiences of abuse among those surveyed and that violence against women in the family might be more widespread than the survey results show.

6.6. A number of recommendations were formulated based on the survey results, including improving legislation on domestic violence, improving support services to victims of violence and expanding measures to prevent gender discrimination and stereotypes. It is imperative that the Turkmenistani government **takes effective measures to implement these recommendations** in follow-up to the survey.

## Recommendations

6.7. The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Put an end to arbitrary and discriminatory restrictions on women’s and girl’s rights and ensure that efforts to promote so-called traditional values are consistent with national commitments and international human rights standards on women’s rights and gender equality.
- Take concrete measures to implement the recommendations resulting from the 2022 national survey on the health and status of women in the family with a view to combating violence and discrimination against women.
- Make the national action plan on promoting gender equality for the years 2021-2025 publicly available, disseminate it widely and ensure that it is effectively realised in practice.

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<sup>1</sup> See Freedom in the World 2023 survey, published by Freedom House: <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://rsf.org/en/Turkmenistan>

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the following report from a government meeting in February 2021:

<https://turkmenistan.gov.tm/ru/post/52315/prezident-turkmenistana-provyol-soveshchanie-po-sovershenstvovaniyu-sfery-kultury-i-smi>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://covid19.who.int/table>. It should be noted that although WHO’s global table does not feature any confirmed COVID-19 cases for North Korea either, the authorities of that country have officially confirmed a national COVID-19 outbreak, even if failing to provide confirmed numbers of COVID-19 cases.

<sup>5</sup> The government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic was examined in detail in an IPHR-TIHR report published in July 2020: <https://www.iphronline.org/it-came-with-the-wind-turkmenistan-s-covid-19-response.html>

<sup>6</sup> 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>

<sup>7</sup> 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>

<sup>8</sup> See <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-turkmenistan>

<sup>9</sup> For a recent example, see TIHR report from 27 July 2023: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/07/internet-interruptions/>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.qurium.org/alerts/turkmenistan/turkmenistan-and-their-golden-dpi/>

<sup>11</sup> See report from Turkmen News from 10 October 2022: <https://turkmen.news/v-turkmenistane-zablokirovali-tret-suschestvuyuschih-ip-adresov/>; and from 26 July 2023: <https://turkmen.news/cifrovoy-vakuum-kakie-hostingi-provadjery-i-servisy-zablokirovany-v-turkmenistane/>

<sup>12</sup> The study, "Measuring and Evading Turkmenistan's Internet Censorship: A Case Study in Large-Scale Measurements of a Low-Penetration Country" is available at: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2304.04835.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> As reported by state media: <https://tdh.gov.tm/ru/post/33943/sozdana-rabochaya-komissiya-po-razrabotke-koncepcii-formirovaniya-nacionalnoj-cifrovoy-seti>

<sup>14</sup> For more information about this trend, see IPHR-TIHR report from June 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CLOSED-CIVIC-SPACE-IN-TURKMENISTAN-JUNE-2021-1.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> For more detailed case descriptions, see TIHR-IPHR submission to the Human Rights Committee, January 2023, <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/TIHR-IPHR-submission-to-the-HR-Committee-January-2023.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> See more in Turkmen News article from 4 October 2021: <https://turkmen.news/banner/mingelov-prison-health/>

<sup>17</sup> Information provided by the government at the Human Rights Committee review of Turkmenistan in Geneva on 2 March 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Turkmenistan, 24 March 2023:

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2FC%2FTKM%2FCO%2F3&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2FC%2FTKM%2FCO%2F3&Lang=en)

<sup>19</sup> See more in the following report by the Prove They Are Alive Campaign: [https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/List-of-the-Disappeared-in-Turkmen-Prisons\\_Sept-2019\\_ENG.pdf](https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/List-of-the-Disappeared-in-Turkmen-Prisons_Sept-2019_ENG.pdf) (page 7)

<sup>20</sup> For more details, see the following joint NGO letter on her case from 23 November 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ENG-open-letter-Hursanai-Ismatullaeva-23-Nov-2021.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> See more on his case in IPHR-TIHR statement from June 2022: <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-new-president-should-end-persecution-imprisonment-of-critical-voices.html>

<sup>22</sup> For examples see joint TIHR-IHR submission to the Human Rights Committee, January 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/TIHR-IPHR-submission-to-the-HR-Committee-January-2023.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> The list is available at <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/02/25-activists-list/>

<sup>24</sup> For examples, see joint TIHR-IHR submission to the Human Rights Committee, January 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/TIHR-IPHR-submission-to-the-HR-Committee-January-2023.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> For more information, see reports by TIHR and Turkmen Helsinki Foundation: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/05/fargat-durdyev-detained/>; <https://www.tmhelsinki.org/article/a6177b10-6aec-4f43-9975-11a07619d1f4>

<sup>26</sup> Report from the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation from 3 August 2023: <https://www.tmhelsinki.org/article/df999951-7b5e-41e7-8962-f1944de92a44>

<sup>27</sup> For more details, see IPHR-TIHR update from October 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-s-government-targets-critics-at-home-and-abroad-in-its-relentless-crackdown-on-dissent.html>

<sup>28</sup> Press release by Turkmenistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 September 2022: <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/index.php/ru/news/3299>

<sup>29</sup> Information from Turkmen Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 5 March 2023: <https://www.tmhelsinki.org/article/4d8697be-7222-40d3-a520-fe91c525eb07>

<sup>30</sup> For examples, see TIHR-IHR submission for the Human Rights Committee's adoption of a list of issues on Turkmenistan, December 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/TIHR-IPHR-submission-on-Turkmenistan-December-2021.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> See joint statement by TIHR, IPHR, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International from 13 May 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-threats-against-relatives-of-dissidents-abroad.html>

<sup>32</sup> See report by Turkmen Helsinki Foundation from 8 February 2023: <https://www.tmhelsinki.org/article/c6c0e061-1564-463a-aebd-b6de1f313cb7>

<sup>33</sup> See more in par. 126 and 127 of Turkmenistan's sixth periodic report to the UN CEDAW, July 2022:

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FTKM%2F6&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FTKM%2F6&Lang=en)

<sup>34</sup> Information provided by the government at the Human Rights Committee review of Turkmenistan in Geneva on 2 March 2023.

<sup>35</sup> See more in IPHR-TIHR briefing paper from November 2022: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/IPHR-TIHR-briefing-paper-on-Turkmenistan-November-2022.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> For more information on this trend, and examples, see IPHR-TIHR update from June 2023:

<https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-un-human-rights-body-issues-important-findings-as-the-authorities-continue-to-reign-in-dissent.html>

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- <sup>37</sup> For examples, see TIHR-IPHR submission to the Human Rights Committee, January 2023, <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/TIHR-IPHR-submission-to-the-HR-Committee-January-2023.pdf>
- <sup>38</sup> Report from Turkmen News, 6 March 2023, <https://en.turkmen.news/news/turkmen-women-kicked-out-of-capital-for-trying-to-see-president/>
- <sup>39</sup> Report by the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty from 7 August 2023: <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/v-turkmenbashi-sotni-lyudey-vyshli-na-aktsiyu-protiv-nehvatki-prodovolstviya/32537841.html>
- <sup>40</sup> See, for example, TIHR report from 10 August 2023: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/08/beggars-increase/>
- <sup>41</sup> See more in TIHR report from 19 October 2019: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/10/pay-to-work/>
- <sup>42</sup> For more information on this and other examples, see TIHR-IHR submission to the Human Rights Committee, January 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/TIHR-IPHR-submission-to-the-HR-Committee-January-2023.pdf>
- <sup>43</sup> <https://spinternet.ohchr.org/StandingInvitations.aspx>
- <sup>44</sup> Information provided by the government at the Human Rights Committee review of Turkmenistan in Geneva on 2 March 2023.
- <sup>45</sup> For examples see the following TIHR reports: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/09/army-hazing-2/>; <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/army-hazing-3/>; <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/08/army-hazing/>
- <sup>46</sup> See Prove They Are Alive statement, November 2022: <https://provetheyarealive.org/twenty-years-since-the-beginning-of-mass-repression/>
- <sup>47</sup> TIHR-TILA report, *Turkmenistan's Penitentiary System*, December 2017, available in Russian at: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2017/12/penitentsiarnye-uchrezhdeniya-turkmenistana-doklad-tipch/>
- <sup>48</sup> See more on these restrictions in report by Memorial and Turkmen Helsinki Foundation from 15 February 2021: [https://memohrc.org/ru/news\\_old/politzaklyuchyonnyh-v-turkmenistane-ogranichivayut-v-kontaktah-s-rodstvennikami](https://memohrc.org/ru/news_old/politzaklyuchyonnyh-v-turkmenistane-ogranichivayut-v-kontaktah-s-rodstvennikami); TIHR report from 26 July 2021: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2021/07/no-visits/>; and Turkmen News report from 27 August 2021: <https://turkmen.news/turkmenistan-itk-peredachi/>
- <sup>49</sup> See TIHR-TILA report from December 2017: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2017/12/penitentsiarnye-uchrezhdeniya-turkmenistana-doklad-tipch/>; and Prove They Are Alive report from February 2020: [https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/TKM-prison-system\\_briefing-paper\\_Prove-campaign\\_Feb-2020.pdf](https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/TKM-prison-system_briefing-paper_Prove-campaign_Feb-2020.pdf)
- <sup>50</sup> Information provided by the government at the Human Rights Committee review of Turkmenistan in Geneva on 2 March 2023.
- <sup>51</sup> See, for example, <https://turkmenistan.gov.tm/ru/post/63208/v-ashhabade-sostoyalos-zasedanie-dialoga-zhenshchin-gosudarstv-centralnoj-azii-i-rossii>
- <sup>52</sup> TIHR report from 26 April 2022: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/04/women-morality/>
- <sup>53</sup> TIHR report from 14 June 2022: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/06/unhealthy-makeup/>, and Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty report from 6 May 2022: <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/turkmenistan-puts-severe-restrictions-on-women-s-appearances-and-ability-to-travel/31837016.html>
- <sup>54</sup> Available at <https://turkmenistan.unfpa.org/en/news/turkmenistan-releases-first-ever-national-survey-health-and-status-woman-family>