

ECHOES OF ALARM



AFGHAN WOMEN'S TESTIMONIES OF
GENDER APARTHEID AND THE GROWING
THREAT OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

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About Farageer

Farageer (which means “inclusive” in our local languages) is a nonprofit organization registered in Canada. Our mission is to empower Afghan women to build alliances with different segments of Afghanistan’s society, with the regional, Islamic and global state and non-state allies for advancing women’s rights, resilience, agency and leadership and advocating for a future Afghanistan shaped by collective aspiration of Afghanistan’s women and men in all our diversity.

Farageer seeks to address the current crises that Afghanistan faces while also not losing the sight of advocating for sustainable peace for Afghanistan which is possible only with a constitutional and inclusive government with fair/inclusive governance, rule of law and justice.

FARAGEER’s strategic approach focuses on building the resilience of Afghan women by building their capacity and providing them with a platform that connects women from inside and outside Afghanistan and amplifies their voices to ensure they contribute to shaping Afghanistan’s future. We pursue our mission through alliance building, creating safe spaces for open dialogues, training and mentorship, advocacy and community consultations.

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It is the courage, bravery and willingness of hundreds of Afghan women, to speak with us, to share their testimonies, that has made this research study possible. We are deeply grateful to them for coming forward, sharing their testimonies, experiences and insights with us throughout our extended data collection period that spanned 8 months from June 2024 to January 2025.

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Acronyms

AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DfA	De-Facto Authority
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FHH	Female Headed Household
GBV	Gender Based Violence
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
MPVPV	Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice
PVPV	Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Law
UN	United Nations
WHRD	Women Human Rights Defender

Glossary

Abaya	A loose garment worn by Muslim women that covers their entire body except their hands and feet and in some cases their head
Chadari	Garment worn by women in Afghanistan that covers the entire body, including the face with a mesh opening for the eyes
Hijab	Head covering worn by Muslim women
Pak	Pure
Mahram	A male guardian
Maruf	Amr-Bil Maruf or the morality police in Afghanistan
Madrasa	An Islamic religious education institution
Mujahideen	Mujahideen refers to Islamic guerrilla fighters who fight for Islam, against non-Islamic forces. There is no one mujahideen group but many present in Afghanistan and the mujahideen were known for fighting against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
Mullah	Muslim clergy or mosque leaders
Qawmi	Community madrasas
Tazkira	National identity card in Afghanistan, shown as proof of citizenship



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & FINDINGS

Taking us to Afghan women behind the towering walls which hide and cage them, this rare field study documents women's testimonies of violent gender extremism as it impacts their families' everyday lives, after four years of the Taliban group's takeover of Afghanistan and the institution of a medieval theocracy. Drawing upon a dense tapestry of wide ranging views of 700 men and women reached with 600 women surveyed across 14 provinces of Afghanistan, this study is a testament to the feminist belief that only by taking women's testimonies seriously are we likely to understand the nexus between gender and extremism, or why gender hierarchies and a restrictive gender order matter so vitally in the ideology and practices of the Taliban and the devastating harms that result.

Four years after the Taliban group's lightning takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the desperate hope of Afghan women of a reformed Taliban's Second Islamic Emirate, has crashed. The following documentation of women's voices reveals the high political stakes of the Taliban group's regime in erecting this institutionally backed, widespread and systematic structure of Gender Apartheid which legitimates violence against women in the street and in the home. The study's approach foregrounds the testimonies of women (and men) and shows that it is not only expert analysts but also Afghan women and men who see in their everyday, lived reality the centrality of women's subjugation in the Islamic Emirate's political project. The Taliban, like other extremist fundamentalist groups, use restricting women's rights as a political tool to control Afghan society and secure regime maintenance in Afghanistan's fractured field of power. The testimonies dramatically illustrate that the ultra-conservative Taliban power elite—in their ideology and politics – have instrumentalized the positioning of women's rights as one of the main threats to religion and moral corruption, to rally public support.

Expectedly in Afghanistan's historically complex multi-

ethnic, multi-regional and multi religious society, the study factors in intersectional vulnerability, that is, the increased risk or susceptibility to harm experienced by individuals due to the combined effects of overlapping social identities and systems of unequal power relations. Our data demonstrates heightened vulnerability and threats faced by Shia minorities and non-Pashtun ethnic groups including Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks.

Apart from ethno-religious identities, intersectional vulnerability encompassed categories at risk such as former government and security sector employees, UN and international community staff, women human rights defenders (WHRD) and Female Headed Households. Many such families at risk were driven into hiding or escaping to Pakistan and Iran.

This study not only documents the despair and desperation of Afghans under the oppressive system of Gender Apartheid, deepening economic distress and insecurity, it also highlights women's continuing and creative resistance that the Taliban's brutal crackdown has driven underground. New innovative modes have emerged, individual, collective and transnational involving the Afghan diaspora. The testimonies speak of formidable resistance and hope, especially among the youth.

It is argued that the Taliban's regime is built upon women's oppression, but the opposition to women's oppression is likely to be the terrain upon which resistance is mobilized. The field study shows the Taliban group's ideological remaking of society. The impact of an institutional system of Gender Apartheid is so profound that pushback and resistance when it is mobilized into a movement, is likely to be scripted as a struggle between the conservatives and liberals as has happened in the annals of Afghanistan's contemporary history. The flashes of continuing resistance of women is evidence of that possibility.

This is a hybrid study, melding both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and based on a rare access to a rich and expansive tapestry of Afghan women's experiences. It is an important contribution towards developing a methodology of feminist analysis based on taking women's testimonies seriously to understand the workings of gender and extremism under the Taliban and other such violent fundamentalist movements.

Key Findings:

- **Gender and Extremism Nexus:** The Taliban's ideology is fundamentally rooted in the control and subordination of women. Their policies and actions are driven by a belief in a strict gender hierarchy, where women's subordination is seen as essential for maintaining social order and control. Through indoctrination into their misogynist ideology, and the structure of laws and policies, the Taliban aim to exercise strict control over the public and private lives of all Afghans, thus maintaining their power and crushing any form of possible resistance.
- **Taliban Sophisticates amid the local madrasa groomed cadres.** The Taliban group's rule is regarded as a medieval theocracy, dominated by illiterate local mullahs who are dismissive of rational logic, yet as the study reveals within the governance system there are savvy ideologues and technocrats. This is evident when it comes to the explanatory framing of the extreme pushback on Afghan women's rights and empowerment as integral to the cleansing of the immoral western colonial cultural imposition. Such a framing of the construction of women's rights as a part of the western immoral /colonial agenda of 'liberating' brown women, challenges the simplistic assumption of the Taliban group's lack of intellectual sophistication. Indeed it demonstrates the Taliban's ability to selectively manipulate feminist critiques to their advantage to justify gender inequality.
- **Political Project of Social Control: Why Rollback is Not Possible.** The Taliban group's vital stakes in institutionally maintaining social control through this elaborate architecture of punitively enforced oppressive laws and regulations predicates that there can be no roll back. Fond hopes of reformist Taliban leaders reviewing extremist policies would undermine the integrity of their political project. Analysis of field data corroborates that the Taliban group seems less concerned about gaining popular legitimacy and international acceptance through inclusive representation or by dealing with the economic crisis, and more concerned with embedding its political project of social control and subsequent regime survival.
- **Institutionalized System of Gender Persecution and Apartheid:** The Taliban has established an institutionalized system of gender persecution and apartheid through laws and regulations that severely restrict women's rights and freedoms. The Vice and Virtue Law 2024 further intensifies surveillance and control, effectively erasing women from public life and imprisoning them within the home. The PVPV law has tightened the regulatory framework and widened social control by bringing in family members, service providers and the community into its net, placing the responsibility of enforcement on a widening circle.
- **Fear and Anxiety:** Despite a decrease in armed conflict, widespread fear, anxiety, and insecurity prevail, especially among Afghan women. This stems from the loss of rights, economic hardship, the ban on girls' education, the pervasive surveillance and family policing and the terror of forced marriages to Taliban fighters. The arbitrary nature of the Taliban's laws, the lack of uniform interpretation and implementation of them further adds to women's anxiety as they step out of their homes. Also, the culture of violence is further reinforced as negative masculinities are encouraged in an ecosystem where there is no protective government authority or institutional support to curb social violence.
- **Intersectional Vulnerabilities:** Ethnic and religious minorities, particularly Hazara Shia women, face heightened discrimination and persecution. Their religious rights and practices are constantly infringed upon, while they also face targeted attacks from militant groups, not receiving any form of protection from the regime. Also at risk of targeted violence and revenge attacks are individuals associated with the previous government and with the international community. As women's testimonies reveal, despite the Taliban group's promises of amnesty, those at-risk have to remain in hiding as they face

threats to their lives by the Taliban regime. This prevents them from accessing job opportunities or medical and mental health resources.

- **The Taliban’s Propagation of a Pure Islamic Society – Religiosity:** The critical assessment of many women and men on the hollowness of the Taliban’s protestations of projecting themselves as ‘pure’ adherents and propagators of Islam, challenges their foundational ideology and could open up scope for mobilizing opposition amongst the religious establishment as well as popular resistance.
- **Education Bans:** The Taliban’s ban on girls’ education beyond primary school has severe consequences, leading to increased early, forced marriages, mental depression and suicidal ideation. Paradoxically, while young women’s access to learning institutions is banned, the regime has been fast tracking the opening up of religious schools or madrasas. While women have turned to madrasas since they are the only avenue left for accessing education, our research finds that the changed education curriculum in madrasas aims to propagate the Taliban’s extremist beliefs, showing that the Taliban have been using the madrasas as a means to inculcate extremist ideas and beliefs in boys and girls, to indoctrinate more foot soldiers, spies and supporters of its regime, something that they did during the 1990s as well.
- **Economic Distress:** The ban on women’s employment and the overall economic crisis have significantly worsened poverty, adding to the insecurity and desperation faced by many Afghan families. While Afghanistan’s economy has crumbled since the regime change, frequent natural disasters have exacerbated existing issues, while the ban on women’s employment has rendered once multi income families into single income households. The rising poverty, inflation and unemployment have turned Afghans who were initially supportive of the Taliban’s promise of stabilization, against the regime.
- **Resilience and Resistance:** Resistance is manifested largely in civic space (as opposed to militant action), itself a legacy of the exposure to a kind of democratic culture during the Republic decades. Afghan girls and women who have most to lose are in the forefront, finding ways to push back against oppression and maintain hope for the future. The bans on public gatherings and the intense surveillance on gatherings even in private spaces, have pushed the protests underground. Women have resorted to using social media platforms and online community hubs and spaces to gather, mobilize and share information. Diaspora networks have played a key role in sustaining these collectives within Afghanistan by channeling information to them and providing them access to platforms for advocacy.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS

International and UN Actors

- **Make Gender a Key Component in Countering Extremist Ideologies:** Strengthen the gendered dimensions of the integration of extremism in Counter Terrorism policy. Refer to organizations that have expertise in this area like International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN).
- **Codify Gender Apartheid:** Support UN treaties defining it as a Crime Against Humanity.
- **Use International Legal Tools:** Apply International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law, and CEDAW mechanisms to hold the Taliban accountable, such as the case brought by Australia, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands at the International Court of Justice against Afghanistan for violating the CEDAW and arrest warrants issued for two senior Taliban leaders by the International Criminal Court for violation of Afghan women's human rights.
- **Gender Justice in Geopolitics:** Make women's rights central in all peace, humanitarian, and diplomatic strategies toward Afghanistan.
- **Meaningful Inclusion of Afghan Women:** Ensure meaningful inclusion of Afghan women in all talks and discussions about Afghanistan. Provide more platforms and space for Afghan women to raise their voice and undertake advocacy as they fight for not only their rights but global justice.
- **Funding and Resources:** Provide diplomatic and financial support for Afghan women's resistance against the Taliban's policies of Gender Apartheid.

Donors and International Women's Rights Organizations

- **Find Creative and Innovative Ways to Fund Credible Afghan Women-led CSOs and**

Mechanisms: Provide small, flexible funds to women-led civil society groups and Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) to sustain operations despite shrinking aid. Support the existing effective mechanisms developed by credible organizations that face a severe shortage of funding.

- **Support Connectivity:** Cover internet costs so Afghan women's networks can communicate and engage with global advocacy spaces.
- **Expand Remote Opportunities:** Increase access to online jobs, remote learning, and skills training for Afghan women and girls.
- **Mental Health & Solidarity:** Establish free, virtual therapy sessions, mentorship, and women-to-women listening circles (inside and outside Afghanistan).
- **Fostering Solidarity:** Support Afghan women activists and leaders dialogue and visioning exercises to develop a sustained effort to articulate a shared vision, develop coalitions that address and resolve critical differences and issues of mistrust - and endeavor to work respectfully and collaboratively among themselves and with their international allies.

Role of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Muslim Majority Countries

- **Challenge the Taliban's distortions of Islam:** Issue joint religious statements rejecting the Taliban's misuse of Islamic law to justify gender apartheid. Utilize the resources and efforts of the OIC Independent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) to engage with Afghan women.
- **Accountability:** Call on the Taliban to repeal discriminatory decrees and align with Islamic principles of justice and dignity.

- **Support Afghan Women:** Provide resources, scholarships, and safe regional platforms for women resisting Taliban policies.
- **Moderate Education:** Fund institutions teaching moderate Islamic scholarship as an alternative to Taliban-controlled madrasas.
- **Protect Religious Credibility:** Position the OIC as safeguarding Islam's image against the Taliban's weaponization of religion.

Afghan Civil Society

- **Innovative Civic Space:** Use digital and creative tools to keep civic participation alive under repression.
- **Counter Extremism:** Systematically monitor, document, and raise awareness of the impact of extremism on Afghan society.
- **Expand Alliances:** Engage different segments of Afghan society including men from diverse sectors, young boys, media and moderate Islamic scholars, to strengthen the civic movement.
- **Technology & Safety:** Train women and vulnerable groups in digital security to reduce surveillance risks.

- **Unify advocacy:** Build a consortium/platform to bring together fragmented women's movements for stronger, collective influence.
- **Dialogue & Strategy:** Host discussions to shape donor policies and international responses on extremism and gender persecution.

Digital Platforms

- Monitor and prevent pro Taliban actors from spreading misinformation and extremist propaganda on digital media platforms like Facebook, X and Instagram.
- Enable strict action and account suspension for accounts used to harass and threaten Afghan women.

INTRODUCTION

What would an Afghan woman doing a four year rights audit of the Taliban Second Emirate say? Would she say that four years of Taliban rule have been a struggle to survive gendered ‘extremism’ and misogynist violence against women within families, communities and public space? If so, is it likely then that the Afghan woman would take hope from the Taliban group’s projected illusion about the ‘temporary nature of some of the restrictions on women and girls’ as iterated in a 2023 press meet (Bijlert, 2024) and reiterated in declaring many a fresh ban? Can she realistically imagine that the moderates within the Taliban group would prevail over the dominance of the Kandahar leadership’s unyielding position? After the promulgation of the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (PVPV) law in 2024 can she still hope of a possible rollback in the caging of women? The Vice and Virtue law consolidated and intensified the system of extreme gender hierarchies and punitively enforced exclusions. With a touch of bitterness she might wonder perplexedly at the assessment of the US and others of an ‘improvement’¹ in the situation in Afghanistan, to warrant a step up in transactional engagement and the roll towards soft recognition of the Taliban group. Has the security situation in Afghanistan improved, has the distressed economic situation become more stable?

Certainly the armed battles are over. Random suicide bomb blasts no longer crowd hospitals with the injured and dying and midnight knocks do not leave a trail of terrorized women and children. But what resounds in the voices of interviewees, at FGDs, Town Hall meetings and our myriad survey respondents of an all pervasive “fear, anxiety and insecurity.” Does this reflect the terror of women/ girls stripped of all rights and freedoms, and against whom brutal violence is normalized in the street and the home? Arguably the insecurity is the



result of extreme economic distress. Added to this is the anxiety resulting from the blocking of education for girls, and thus depriving them of the possibility of a future with dignity. There likely is alarm at Afghanistan’s schooling system producing a radicalized generation of Taliban foot-soldiers. Anxiety also could be mounting at the prospect of an intergenerational health crisis as the last educational opportunity for women -medical education and training was snatched away from girls. What of the ethnic minorities -- Hazara, Tajik and Uzbek, do they have reason to believe that only the Pashtun ruling majority is secure? And evidently, it cannot be assumed that all Pashtuns identify with the Taliban system of governance. Do the vendetta seekers relentlessly tracking down the previous regime’s soldiers and administrators, women human rights defenders and judicial prosecutors make a distinction?

In an effort to unravel this puzzle of the everyday lived experience of women and girls, this field study drawing upon a sample of 600 Afghan women provides a rare and diverse spectrum of views, from a walled-in Afghanistan, of the ways in which Afghan women understand the nexus between Gender and

1 Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem justified removal of ‘Temporary Protected Status: for Afghans saying, “Afghanistan has had an improved security situation, and its stabilizing economy no longer prevents them from returning to their home country.” Hanifa Girowal, M Verveer, K Hart. ‘Removing Protected Status for Afghans is No Way to Treat Allies Just Security’ May 29, 2025

Extremism and the harms suffered as a result of the Taliban's misogynist ideology and practices. We posit that by taking women's voices and lived experiences of extremism and gender seriously we can most likely come to understand the situation fully. Significantly while women's testimonies speak of despair and desperate resilience, they also echo determined resistance and hope, especially among the youth.

The Taliban group's systematic ideological remaking of the society, and the impact of the institutional system of Gender Apartheid is so profound that as evidenced from the multiple voices of our respondents, pushback and resistance when it happens, is likely again to be scripted as a struggle between the conservative traditionalists and liberal modernists as has happened in the annals of Afghanistan's contemporary history. We argue that just as the patriarchal critique of women's moral corruption by western notions of gender equality was at the centre of the Taliban's political mobilization and ideological project, opposition to gender oppression is likely to be the terrain on which resistance will be mobilized. This binary analytical framing of the likely contestation is not to suggest that many Afghan women do not believe in religious piety as well as some degree of culturally sanctioned gender roles. As feminist scholar Saba Gul Khattak cautioned, "they [Afghan women] may disagree with the Taliban but that does not mean they agree with western concepts of freedom and liberation either." Also, it needs repetition that there were huge contradictions in the top down advancement of gender reforms during the Republic interregnum, as discussed below. Nonetheless, our research respondents suggest that the grim consequences of the ban on girl's education, especially on their mental health and the impact of the ban on women's work on deepening severe economic distress, is making many a conservative opponent of women's rights reconsider exclusion.

Also, it is not only expert analysts but Afghan women and men who are seeing in their lived reality of everyday politics that women's oppression is central to the Islamic Emirate's political project of establishing social control and regime maintenance in Afghanistan's fractured field of power after four decades of conflict. The objective of the elaborate architecture of laws and regulations is to create a system of multiple levels of policing within and outside homes. By instilling the fear of punitive enforcement, the Taliban aim to control the public and private lives of all Afghans.

The Taliban's propagation of building a 'Paak' (pure)

Islamic society within Afghanistan is politically manipulated to justify oppression. However, despite the aggressive religious propaganda, the Islamization of the educational curriculum and institutions and policing of religious practice, it is questionable whether 'religiosity' in Afghan society has increased and thereby won greater support for the Taliban's ideology and rule? Our research findings corroborate further that many Afghan women and men fully understand the dangerous implications of the expansion of the madrasa network and view it as a process of radicalization of Afghan youth and their indoctrination into misogyny. A caveat here should be added, that there were Afghan voices that were supportive. A Jawzjan resident, when surveyed, firmly endorsed the new educational system.

"The quality of the lessons are excellent, both in religious schools and regular schools....We have become more comfortable compared to before."

- Jawzjan Survey respondent

Also, in these four years the Taliban cadre base has grown considerably but what is women's understanding of this expansion? Is it because people have started believing in their ideology and supporting them or because the devastating economic situation in the country has made people desperate to take up any and every job available? Has support for the Taliban group representing stability and security increased or actually decreased? What about the deepening economic distress and the punitive strictures on women's education, work and presence in public space? Has it led to a waning of support for the Taliban's system of governance?

This collaborative field study seeks to engage with these questions and assumptions of 'improvement' and is firmly anchored in the belief that by foregrounding our research on women's voices of their experiences of gender and extremism as our primary data we are likely to understand the situation in Afghanistan, its present and the prospects.

Aims & Objectives of the Study

- The aims and objectives of the study were to explore the construction and function of the Gender Extremism nexus in the ideology and practices of the Taliban 2.0 by uncovering how Afghan women interpret its impact on their everyday lives.

- To unpack the political rationale of the Taliban regime's institutionalized legitimization of misogynist violence against women within families, communities and in public space. To examine why when there is 'peace', women speak of fear and anxiety in the public and private sphere.
- To explore how the propagation of religiosity, the changes in educational curriculum and the prioritization and expansion of the madrasa network is impacting everyday life and whether Afghan women and men view it as a process of radicalization of Afghan youth.
- To inquire into the scope and nature of women's hope and resistance amidst despair and hopelessness.

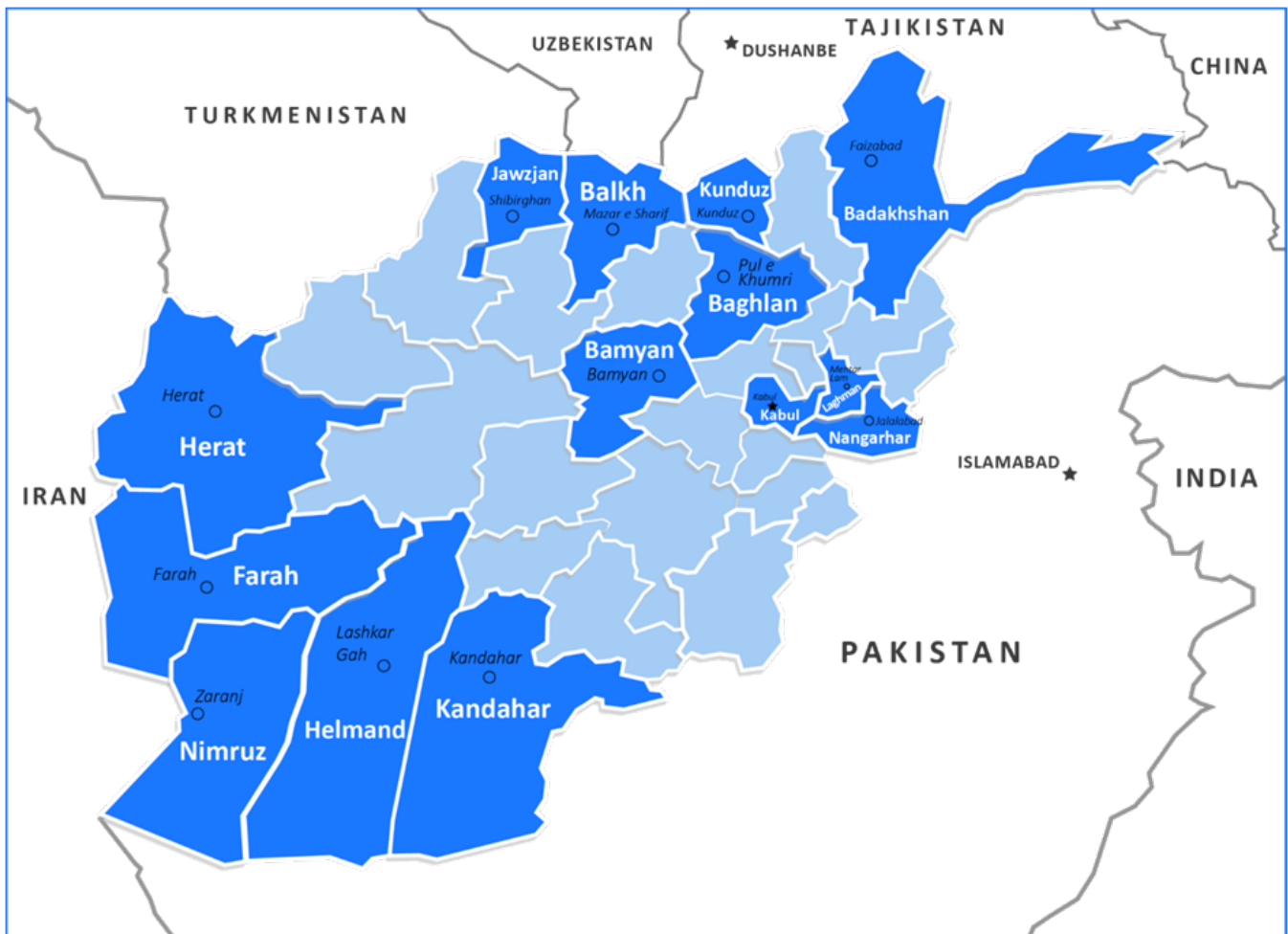


METHODOLOGY

Our research is a hybrid study which blends a sample survey with a qualitative study that documents the voices of women in Afghanistan as they reveal the impact of violent religious extremism on their everyday lives under four years of Taliban rule. The perspective we bring on peace, security and justice is people centric, non-statist and holistic. The research is informed by feminist and human rights principles, and is sensitive to the unequal structures of power underlying governing ideologies and institutionalized systems of control in a continuum of public and private spheres. By bringing to the centre

women's testimonies as our primary data, the study challenges the normative patriarchal discourse that is shaped by dominant masculine perspectives.

Primary data was collected through surveys, focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews. Surveys and FGDs were conducted from June 2024 to January 2025 with close to 700 women and men across Afghanistan. Our main body of data draws from a meld of quantitative and qualitative responses shared to a survey questionnaire which was developed in close consultation with CSOs and women's rights activists

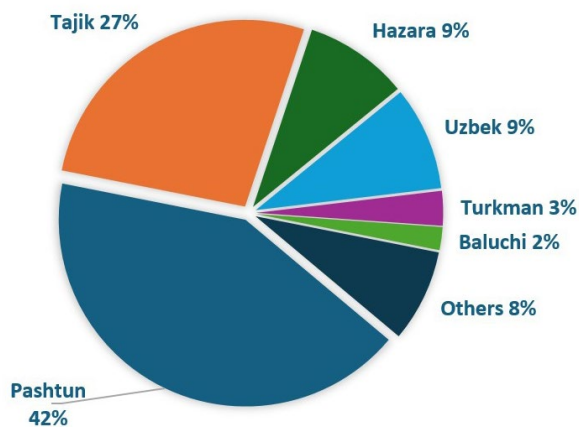


Map of Afghanistan demonstrating provinces covered by the survey

based in Afghanistan. It was translated into Dari and Pashto languages. 600 women, spread across 14 provinces of Afghanistan were reached through this survey from June 2024 to August 2024. A diversity of provinces were included: Badakhshan, Baghlan, Balkh, Bamyan, Farah, Helmand, Herat, Jawzjan, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, Laghman, Nangarhar and Nimruz.

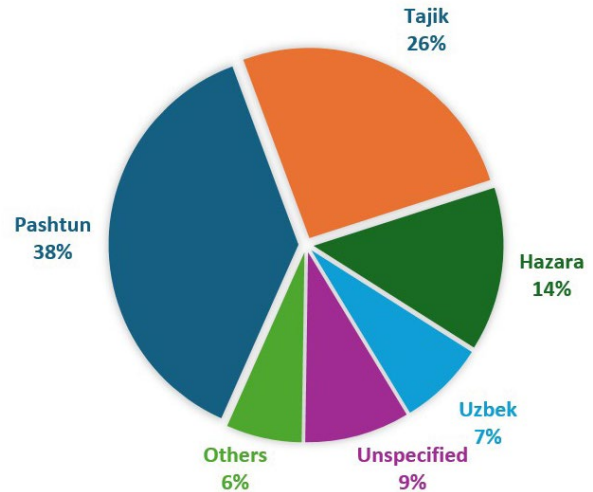
The survey process was crimped by security anxieties about certain questions being considered sensitive because of concerns about intense surveillance by Maruf and co-opted community members. This required us to adapt and make more anodyne certain key questions, thereby limiting quantitative analysis. Survey participants were selected through a snowball method, undertaken by coordinators rooted in the local milieu. In an atmosphere of frayed trust, research participants were selected by research coordinators who drew upon their networks of acquaintances in specific provinces. Research coordinators and enumerators actively sought out women who had participated in various NGO activities and awareness raising programs. Participants represented a wide social cross section, including ex government officials, CSO workers, WHRDs, students, teachers, lawyers, doctors, midwives, athletes, singers, artists, journalists, business women, seamstresses and homemakers. They were educated and uneducated women, urban and rural women and women from diverse age groups and ethnicities.

ESTIMATED ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF AFGHANISTAN¹

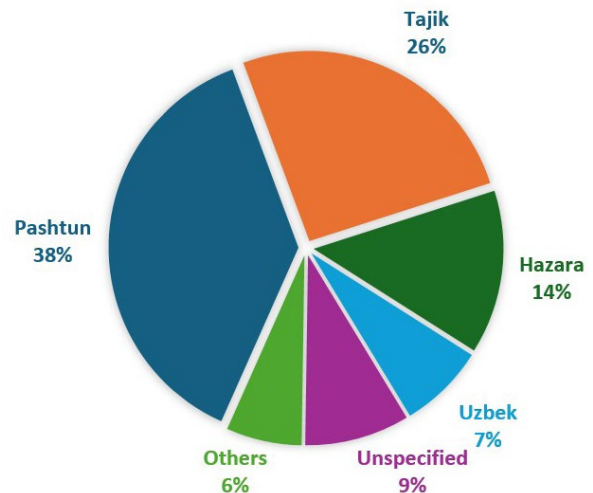


Please note that there is no reliable data available on the ethnic composition of Afghanistan. Surveys conducted by different think tanks and CSOs have pointed to some rough estimates which have been used in this report.

ETHNIC SPREAD OF SURVEY



AGE COMPOSITION OF THE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS



Effort was made to reflect the complexity of Afghanistan's multi ethno-religious and regionally diverse society. 70% of the survey participants were young women, falling under the age of 35. Young women formed the majority of our sample, including a few students as young as 14 years. The fear of surveillance prevented coordinators from carrying printed out consent forms during the data collection period. Thus verbal consent was taken from all research participants and in case of minors, from their parents,

¹ Currently no reliable data is available on ethnic composition of Afghanistan, but we have used data based on previous estimates, drawn from Minority Rights Group Calculations

who were made aware of the contents, scope and aim of the study, along with possible risks associated with it.

Selected participants from the survey, who were willing to share more in-depth experiences were invited to participate in FGDs which were held in each of the 14 provinces. Also in September 2024 town hall meetings were convened in 5 target provinces of Badakhshan, Balkh, Herat, Kabul and Nangarhar with community leaders, religious clerics and scholars, educators, tribal elders, WHRDs and civil society activists. The Town Hall meetings included both men and women and were gender-segregated. FGDs were conducted on the back of these meetings to document opinions and views on community leaders on the issue of rising extremism and women's rights in the country. Supplementary FGDs to bridge gaps and update data were conducted virtually between December to January 2025. They focused on convening a group of male journalists and male and female CSO workers. 10 Key Informant Interviews were conducted with experts in areas of peace and security, religious scholars, research analysts, legal professionals and WHRDs, academics and journalists in Afghanistan and the diaspora. A robust risk mitigation and safeguarding plan was put in place to ensure safety of all involved in this study. Some data for this research has also been taken from focus group discussions and personal interviews conducted from October to December 2024, with 200 women across 20 provinces of Afghanistan, for a research study conducted to investigate the impact of the implementation of the Vice and Virtue Laws in Afghanistan, the report from which was published in March 2025 titled: "Har Taraf Maruf! Har Taraf Maruf! (The Morality Police are Everywhere) : Surveillance and Fear: Vice and Virtue Laws in Afghanistan." ¹

A caveat needs to be added that our sample does not claim to represent the full spectrum of diverse beliefs and opinions among women in Afghanistan. Although the study covers 14 of the country's 34 provinces, the geographic limitations of the study need to be noted especially as our data shows that there is difference between the provinces when it comes to scope and nature of the imposition of restrictive laws and women's experiences of gender oppression in Mazar-i-Sharif and Helmand. Also there were constraints in our access to rural villages and some vulnerable communities such as returnee refugees. Security threats further



inhibited the research team from speaking with more conservative groups or families, especially out of fear that family members could be working with the Taliban. Translation irregularities are possible as is common in translated field work. The original data from the in-person surveys and focus group discussions was in Pashto and Dari. English language translations were used for this report. To overcome uncertainties regarding free translation, follow up FGDs were conducted in English, Urdu, Pashto and Dari (the last two with an interpreter). Moreover, to triangulate and substantiate the analysis, the research team went through a rigorous desk review of existing research studies, and conducted supplementary interviews with experts, civil society and development professionals.

¹ Read the full report here : <https://farageer.org/pdf/research/Har%20Taraf%20Maruf-08.pdf>

AFGHANISTAN, IN VORTEX OF GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICT

Situated between Central and South Asia, Afghanistan is a landlocked country bordering Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and China. Historically, Afghanistan served as a buffer between the British and Russian Empires until it won independence from quasi British control in 1919. The Shah dynasty ruled till the coup in 1973, followed by a communist counter coup in 1978. Afghanistan was sucked into the vortex of geopolitical rivalry, when the Soviet Union intervened in 1979 to support the beleaguered Afghan communist regime (Szczepanski, 2019). The long destructive war that followed involved internationally supported anti-communist Mujahideen pitted against the Soviet Union and resulted in 1989 in their withdrawal from Afghanistan (Cornwell, 2010).

Brutal civil war among the Mujahideen factions was brought to a close when the Taliban group, birthed in the refugee community in Pakistan and groomed in the qawmi madrasas on the Pakistan - Afghan Pashtun borderlands, took over in 1996 (The BBC, 2022). September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, masterminded by the Afghanistan based Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda, precipitated an American led international military invasion. The Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was toppled and a new government with a republican constitution was established. The war was not over. The Taliban regrouped and from 2006 started attacking rural areas in Afghanistan and establishing shadow governments. In 2021 the American and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces withdrew. The negotiated peace process was vitiated as the Republican government collapsed overnight and the Taliban rode back to power in Kabul in August 2021. The Taliban group established the second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Legacy of liberals and traditionalists warring on 'Women's Rights'

Historically, efforts to modernize Afghanistan and especially the top down imposition of social reforms relating to gender justice, have been a central site of contention in the country's politics, and used to mobilize resistance and legitimate and toppling of governments. In this chequered struggle between liberals and conservatives Amanullah Khan's rule (1919 -1926) stands out. His social reforms including promoting women's education and removing compulsory veiling, precipitated a revolt from the Mullahs and other conservative sections of the country. They were encouraged by the British¹ for their own imperial interests. The end result was Amanullah Khan's abdication and exile (Nehan, 2022). His successors reversed the reforms and backed traditional practices. In the oscillation between liberals and traditionalists, the swing back towards reforms began under the liberal minded Zahir Shah. Girl's schools were reopened, a new university was established, and a new constitution drafted. He put in place a democratic framework and granted Afghan women the right to vote. In urban areas, women attended colleges, ran businesses, and participated in politics (Levi, 2009). Kubra Noorzai became Afghanistan's first woman government minister.

These changes were confined to the urban elite and middle class, while women in the rural areas continued living life under age-old traditions and customary laws. Alienated conservative and traditional groups in Afghan society backed Mohammad Daud Khan's coup, and overthrew the monarchy. Md. Daud's subsequent ouster and the coming to power of the Khalaf and Parcham (communist) parties in the 1970s, saw an opening up of opportunities for women. Education

1 The reforms of Amanullah Khan were challenged by Mullahs who were encouraged by the British. They dropped pamphlets with Queen Surryaya's pictures during a visit to London with a caption that she was not observing Purdah and that Afghan honor and culture were in danger.

was made compulsory, the age of marriage raised, Afghanistan signed the women's charter of rights CEDAW in 1980. The deep changes this affected was evidenced in the rising profile of women in schools and jobs during this period. Some 50% of the students and 60% of the teachers at Kabul University were women. In addition 70% of school teachers, 50% of civilian government workers, and 40% of doctors in Kabul were women at the time (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2010).

The swift imposition of these social reforms provoked resistance from conservative factions, which ironically the USA financially supported and manipulated to weaken the communist regime and defeat the Soviets in a proxy cold war conflict. The Soviet exit in 1980 unleashed civil war among the Mujahideen factions, until the Taliban seized power. During the period of Taliban 1.0 rule (1996-2001) in the name of Sharia law¹ Afghanistan became the most dangerous place to be a woman. Adherence to extremist ideologies in the name of instituting in Afghanistan a pure Islamic faith and cleansing western influences from society, made the territory a safe haven for terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda and its ideologue Osama bin Laden. The Al Qaeda terror attack on US territory in 9/11 precipitated the US led international forces attack on Afghanistan to flush out terrorist bases. The Taliban was militarily defeated in 2001, and in an internationally managed peace process, a Constitution and Republican government was established.

Islamic Republic of Afghanistan: Advancement in Women's Rights

The 'saving' of Afghan women from the gender persecution of the misogynistic Taliban regime of the First Emirate, was an important humanitarian and human rights justification for the US led military intervention (Pacwa, 2019. True & Akbari, 2024). Consequently, attention to the promotion of women's participation in social, economic, and political activities became a key priority of the international community. During the Republic decades, international development assistance was invested in the construction of infrastructure: schools, universities, healthcare facilities and women's shelters, as well as for capacity building and entrepreneurial activities. Development donors singled out women for

opportunities. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission were established.

The Taliban First Emirate had banned formal education for women. In 2001, less than a million Afghan children were enrolled in educational institutions and none of them were girls (Chalabi, 2023). Save the Children's report released in 2001, estimated that only 5.6% of Afghan women were literate (The New Humanitarian, 2001). By 2018, 10 million Afghans were enrolled in educational institutes across all levels. Female literacy rate reached 29.81% in 2018 according to UNESCO figures. By 2021, 4 out of 10 students in primary education were girls. Adult female literacy rate stood at 22.6% in 2022 (UNESCO Kabul, 2021, 2023). Women in the labour force increased from 15% in 2000 to 22% in 2019 (Albrecht et al., n.d.). Existing data shows that following the Taliban takeover, under the Second Emirate by 2024, the female labour force participation rate fell to 5.1%, for men it was at 69.9% (World Bank Gender Data Portal, 2025).

The Republic decades had seen a huge expansion in the participation of women in public life, including as vice president, governors and ministers. Constitutionally guaranteed gender quotas saw women occupy 27% of seats in the Afghan Parliament till 2021. In the judicial sector, 21% of all defence counsel were women, 7.3 % of judges were women. The number of women police officers increased to over 8,000 by 2021.

"Previously, women had a role in politics, but now we no longer have any role in society. We used to be able to go out without a male guardian, but now this is no longer possible. We used to go to the cinema, but now cinemas have disappeared. Women and girls were able to study, but now the opportunity for education has been taken away from us."

- FGD participant from Badakhshan Province.

Decades of conflict and political instability had impacted the condition of women's healthcare in the country. Afghanistan recorded the second highest maternal mortality ratio (MMR) in the world in 2000 at 1,450 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000, which decreased to 638 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2017. Afghanistan reduced infant mortality from 88 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2001 to 45 deaths per 1000 live births in 2020 (Glass et al, 2023). Currently with the larger percentage of Afghans slipping into

¹ Sharia is a body of religious law that forms a key part of Islamic tradition. Sharia is based on Islamic scriptures, mainly the Quran and the Hadith.

poverty, the unstable healthcare infrastructure with only 2.5 healthcare workers per 100,000 Afghans in 2020, is under huge pressure. The ban on midwifery and nursing training for women, threatens to worsen the condition of women's healthcare in the country.

During the Republic's transitional decades the advancement in women's rights was widely hailed as the most positive outcome of the internationally backed regime. However, existent critiques of the period of the Republic point to huge differences in access to opportunities and resources among the urban and rural spaces (Asey, 2019). US audits of their development investments expressed concern over wastage and inappropriateness of investment, and admit that "many projects did not fully consider and understand the barriers faced by girls and women in Afghanistan" (SIGAR, 2021). The common critique was that development projects led by Western countries that address women's rights separately from local politics were not that successful (Ahmadi and Lakhani, 2016).

An Asia Foundation Survey 2019 found, development assistance played a controversial role, producing political and social alienation (Abrecht, Rude Stitteneder, 2022). A few of our Survey, FGD respondents and experts echoed the criticism about the exclusionary and isolationist focus on women's development and its divorce from awareness raising within the local socio-political milieu. Afghan men were said to have taken even more conservative and defensive positions on gender equality because of the development assistance practices followed. Widespread practices of corruption that substantially wasted US development assistance also greatly discredited social reform programmes (SIGAR, 2025). Such an analysis points to the socio-cultural complexity of the Afghanistan situation. This helps explain why so many conservatively inclined men but also women were willing to give the Taliban 2.0 a chance.

"There have been many changes [over these four years], both positive and negative. One positive change is that women's clothing has improved, become appropriately modest."

- Balkh Townhall Meeting.

GENDER AND EXTREMISM

Why gender hierarchies and a restrictive gender order matter in the ideology and practices of violent extremist groups?

Sifting through our rich field database what is striking is the growing public understanding, birthed in the experiences of Afghan women and men living violent religious extremism, of the centrality of the Taliban groups' opposition to women's rights, and the importance of women's abject subordination, in the ideology and practices of the regime. Drawing upon the wide range of survey respondents, FGDs and interviews, we find the growing awareness that the Taliban's political worldview is less concerned with gaining popular legitimacy and international acceptance through inclusive representation or addressing the country's severe economic crisis. Some survey respondents and interviewees were explicit in their understanding that the intention of the Taliban leadership is to establish social control and remake society at all levels. This was echoed in the UN Special Rapporteur, Richard Bennett's observation. The Taliban's "institutionalized way of [gender] discrimination, violence and exclusion" is central to the maintenance of the Taliban's theocratic political regime (Bennett, 2023). Saba Gul Khattak argues that even during the anti-communist Jihad period of the 1980s, extreme restrictions were imposed on Afghan women in the refugee camps of Pakistan and justified as pivotal for the "success of the jihad" in Afghanistan (Khattak, 2007). It can be argued that what became 'normal' in the refugee camps was carried over to how it was and is practiced inside Afghanistan today. This posits a continuity and importantly builds on the connections between women's rights and extremism (Khattak, 2007).

Anthropologist Nancy Dupree, a keen observer of the socio-political eco-scape of the Taliban's First Emirate (1996-2001) has also emphasized this aspect. In analyzing the group's political project, Dupree singled out the Taliban's manipulation of the sanctity of the

Afghan family, 'as the most potent instrument of their rule.' That is, the control of women, and the invoking of male responsibility for family honor was a way of establishing total control over a complex multi ethnic multi regional and conflict fragmented society.

"Taking advantage of the deeply embedded attitudes toward the centrality of women in the social concepts of family and honour, Taliban policies wrapped entrenched customary practices and patriarchal attitudes in the mantle of Islam. They were then manipulated to maintain power. By imposing strict restraints directly on women, the new rulers sent a message of their intent to subordinate the personal autonomy of every individual, thereby strengthening the impression that they were capable of exercising control over all aspects of social behaviour" (Dupree, 2004).

Substantiating that analytical understanding, the Afghanistan Human Rights Centre (AHRC) in its Report on 'Access to Education' (2025) states, that "There are clear signs that the Taliban policy about human rights, women's rights, and particularly the right to education is a political approach. The Taliban uses restricting women's and girls' access to education as a tool to control Afghan society."

However, the Taliban's Second Emirate (2021-) is confronting a very different society than the Taliban First Emirate did. They are confronting a mass of urban based women and men who have been exposed to twenty years of national and international attention focused on transforming the status of women's rights and human rights in the country as discussed below. The aspiration for a life of dignity and the confidence that it can be possible through education has taken deep roots. The continuing outcrop of women-led protests –public and covert- is evidence of the deep stake that a sizable section of Afghan society has developed in social reforms, especially access to education.

“I am not weak like the willow that blows with every wind,” I am from Afghanistan and I have to suffer, But one day I will break this cage, leave this humiliation, And sing with happiness.”

- Taiba Sulaimani, student activist

Understanding the Gender – Extremism Nexus

Violent Religious Extremism

“Religious extremism is defined as rigid interpretations of religion that are forced upon others using social or economic coercion, laws, intolerance, or violence. It is accompanied by non-fluid definitions of culture, religion, nationalism, ethnicity or sect which move citizens into exclusionary, patriarchal and intolerant communities... The use of violence justified for religious ends is a characteristic of some extremist movements, but not all... While not all extremism is underpinned by religious claims, many extremist movements do use religion because it is supposedly out of the realm of debate, especially when backed up by so-called religious scholars and leaders...”

(Anderlini & Koch, 2015)

In the narratives of violent extremist groups, scholars of violent extremist groups have been struck by the significance of the centrality of women’s oppression and the subordination of their place in society (Ahmadi & Lakhani, 2016). Extreme movements, whether Islamist, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, or right wing male supremacist groups, all tend to advocate a hierarchical and restrictive gender order, which combines a belief in male supremacy and patriarchal dominance, women’s subjugation and the naturalization of their reproductive/caregiver role (OSCE, 2024). Violence against women is established as legitimate. Global policy studies aver that the political instrumentalization of the backlash against progressive (western/colonial) social reforms promoting gender equality is pivotal in the ideology and mobilization strategies of violent extremist groups (OSCE, 2024).

A UN Women led study of South and South East Asia (2020) exposes the gender dynamics that underpin violent extremism and reveals how structures of patriarchy and harmful performances of masculinity are deeply embedded in the modus operandi of violent

extremist groups. Violent extremist groups are portrayed as protectors of women against defiling enemies, such as the West and/or the central government. Men in the paradoxical act of protecting women and the family’s honor/dignity justify violence against women within families and communities. Taking this further, scholars such as Diaz and Vahlji posit a nexus between violent misogyny and extremist violence.

“[Misogyny] is a political phenomenon whose purpose is to police and enforce women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance, rather than the more common understanding of individual hatred or hostility towards any and every woman, or women in general, simply because they are women...”

(Kate Manne cited by Diaz and Vahlji, 2024).

Pivotal to extremist movements such as Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL, Da’esh), the Taliban, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab is intolerance of diversity and opposition to human rights in general and gender equality in particular. It is conspicuously manifest in the violent enforcement of restrictive controls on dress, mobility and education. Women’s full humanity is denied. A United Nations Development Program (UNDP) study on the nexus between feminine and masculine identities and violent extremism argues that “Such misogynist acts are not merely part of their repertoire of violence or accessories to their political project, but rather central to it, and that control over women’s bodies is just as important to these groups as controlling territory or defeating their enemies” (UNDP & UN Women, 2020).

Extremism-Misogyny nexus: The Taliban’s ‘Islamic Emirate’ is A Man’s World!

The Taliban’s First & Second Emirates are paradigmatic of violent extremist movements that combine the aggressive propagation of a ‘pure’ Islamic system of governance in accordance with Sharia law, and the manipulation of the communities’ existing unequal gender power relations and cultural narratives to validate their actions and their rule. Particularly insightful is Afghan scholar Niamatullah’s analysis of the Taliban’s hybrid political mix which combines “a fundamentalist interpretation of religion with a particular form of exclusionary Pashtun ethno-nationalism”(2023). The Taliban’s domestic or

nationalist orientation distinguishes it from transnational jihadi groups such as Daesh. The Afghan tradition the Taliban aggressively and exclusively promotes is shaped by the social upbringing of the Taliban leaders in qawmi (community) madrasas of the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Indeed there appears to be tension between some of the more savvy ideologues of the Taliban and the foot soldiers who are the madrasa/seminary products. The latter have little exposure to the country's diverse ethnic and cultural landscape. As an Afghan woman journalist, now in exile, plaintively said:

“Afghanistan is not only Kandahar or Helmand. There are 34 provinces. These Talibs have never seen girls going to school.”

Also, with the expansion of the Taliban group's grip on the country, the Pashtun leadership's discriminatory and exclusionary tendencies against the other ethnic communities are becoming more evident. Also, this is related to the recent history of the country's intra conflict between the Northern Alliance, led by Dostum (Uzbek) and Ahmad Shah Massoud (Tajik) and others and the Taliban group (Pashtun). It was not unexpected that respondents belonging to the Hazara, Uzbek and Tajik minorities indicated they were being discriminated against in the sharing of political power, access to jobs and land claims. Hanafi Sunni religious orthodoxy was being imposed on the Shia minority in religious studies curriculum and curbs introduced on freedom of [Muslim] religious practices.

Niamatullah avers that the Taliban reflects the “values of the village as interpreted by refugee camp dwellers or madrasa students most of whom have never known ordinary village life.” Many Pashtuns have spoken up against the Taliban's distorted understanding of Pashtun culture and the Pashtunwali code¹. One of our interviewees, a Pashtun academic whose family comes from Paktika village, was emphatic:

“They [Taliban] assume they know Pashtun rural traditions, but they don't know how life was in villages before Soviet takeover and the radicalization that followed the Mujahideen decades. In Pashtun social hierarchy tribal elders are held in high esteem and disputes resolved in a circular assembly - 'jirga'-convened by them. Taliban violently suppresses Pashtun cultural tradition of jirgas, slights tribal elders and empowers instead local mullahs, who are

not highly regarded, to do dispute settlement in the mosques.”

The Pashtun academic averred that the assumption that Pashtunwali was guiding Taliban's cultural practices was a misrepresentation. “Pashtunwali, is a pre Islamic code and comprises some practices that are considered against Islamic values.” she explained. It should be added that many Pashtuns would contest this interpretation.

Afghanistan's plural and diverse religio-cultural traditions were flattened during the Mujahideen -jihad decades when the era of radicalized Islam became dominant. An Afghan religious scholar reminded that Afghans traditionally have been religious but not fundamentalist . “We had Sufis and other traditional Islamic schools of thought. However from the 1980s we witnessed the Saudi-US financed spread of political Islam and extremism in Afghanistan.” He explained that the Mujahideen groups in the scramble for power sought to outbid each other in enforcing the outward manifestations of Islamic piety. “Hijab became a predominant declaration of their Muslim rectitude” Like the competing Mujahideen factions, the Taliban too are competing with other Islamist groups on building the ‘purest’ Islamic society. The touchstone for giving legitimacy to that claim and entrenching their political power in Afghanistan is by demonstrating that “our women are cleansed of and removed from any defiling reach of western influence”, he explained.

The ultra-conservative Taliban power elite—in its ideology and politics -- has made gender inequality central to manipulating Afghanistan's fault lines of centre and periphery, urban and rural, tradition and modernity and local and foreign values. As Pakistani scholar Nazish Brohi says, “positioning women's rights as one the main threats to religion and religiosity remain crucial for these groups to rally public support.”

An Afghan digital data analyst picked out some social media posts of young boys in Kandahar and Helmand egging on each other to become good mujahids (fighters) so as to cleanse an Afghanistan in which Afghan women have been corrupted by American soldiers.

“American soldiers were doing bad things, [during midnight raids] They would search women and drink alcohol... [Afghan] women working as social activists

1 Pashtunwali is the traditional tribal code of conduct and honour among Pashtun people

were drinking, dancing and having sex with soldiers. Now, we are free. We need to go and become good Mujahids. That is what these boys would say."

It is commonplace for local clerics to promote such misogynist propaganda. An eminent Afghan human rights defender spoke of how, "In the local mosques, poorly educated Mullahs blame women for everything. Young boys are brainwashed that it's all because of women's gunah (sin). You will hear this in the mosque and on social media. Everything, from natural disasters -the flood and the drought to poverty is blamed on women. Afghanistan is poor because women don't wear Hijab ..." she said.

"Religious leaders frequently spread negative propaganda against women. The cleric at our mosque said that women and dogs are alike in character and that women will never enter paradise."

- Survey respondent from Bamyan

This debasement of women is reinforced in the new educational curriculum which includes compulsory reading of Emirate Studies and the chapter on Violence Against Women. It iterates that "the issue of women's liberation from the colonial era is considered one of the most important weapons of the West, which they use to accuse and deceive Muslims..." Consequently "the Islamic Emirate, based on Islamic teachings, has prohibited the mixing of men and women, enforced the wearing of hijab, and prevented women from

engaging in actions that lead to their own sin and cause others to sin." The chapter contends that the Taliban's implementation of the above Islamic rulings directly challenges the lawless system of the West, and therefore the enemies of Islam [liberal western society] became enraged and accused the Islamic Emirate of violating women's rights" (AHRC, 2025).

What are Afghan women living under violent religious extremism saying?

Certain common ideas can be randomly picked out from our mass of data, that speak of — "society having become very religious, in an extreme way", and fearfulness about the rise of extremists in society and "the harms suffered by women and girls." There is a clear understanding of the nexus between rising extremism and bans on women's education and work, and deepening poverty and immiseration. Women also recognize the impact of the Taliban's extremism on their men. "Our men's views on constraining and suppressing women in the family are becoming more extreme", some recognize that "ideas of extremism were always there in Afghanistan but earlier they (conservatives) weren't able to impose it." It reflected an awareness of the institutional backing of the Taliban regime in systematically embedding in Afghan society 'religious extremism' and its harmful effect. Greater clarity was available as we sifted through survey data from a multi ethnic border province. However, it should be kept in mind that the data is not representative of



the breadth of provinces across Afghanistan nor does it capture the multiplicity of voices or imply that these women respondents were bolder than others. Still, the spread of quotes conveys how a group of women in Badakhshan province understood 'religious extremism' and its impact on their lives.

Women of Badakhshan Province Speak —

"...that things have become very religious, in an extreme way. The new regulations are claimed to be Islamic but are not aligned with the true teachings of the Quran or the Prophet. Women are not safe or secure, they are confined to their homes, and are losing their self-confidence, and facing violence and discrimination."

"The biggest harm from religious extremism has been suffered by women and girls, as they have been deprived of all opportunities."

"Currently, the biggest concern for me and my family is these extremists, along with their laws, regulations, and the commanders who are against women. They adhere to no principles, are completely unreasonable, and only resort to violence. They promote discrimination and prejudice, while unemployment, and the closure of schools and universities, continue."

"It is due to this religious extremism that women have been barred from education and work. Women's problems have increased, and suicide rates are rising."

"The type of education is such that they [boys] are raised to be extremist, radical, violent, and to become mullahs who will harm themselves, their families, society, and their country."

"Men's views on constraining and suppressing women have become more extreme. This imposition of a system of rigid and criminal enforcement of the practice of hijab, the denial of education for girls, the emphasis on religious studies and madrasas -- are extreme manifestations of religious practices."

"Religion is being used against women. Religious extremism is manifest as oppressive exclusion and erasure of women from public life. Women are subordinated and reduced to second class citizens. Women are forced into mandatory hijab. If women do not comply, they face insult and humiliation in the community. Men now feel a sense of superiority over women. Preventing women from accessing education is extremism. If schools focus totally on jihadist education, how will our youth make progress?"

"Forbidding women from leaving the home and closing universities for women is a form of extremism. It has resulted in women experiencing severe mental depression."

"Extreme restrictions against going out without a mahram indicates a lack of trust in women/girls."

"These extremist driven bans on girl's education and other oppressive restrictions have led to the daily increase in violence against women and its legitimization."

GENDER PERSECUTION & GENDER APARTHEID

The Taliban group in its second term as the Second Islamic Emirate has implanted an institutionalized system of gender persecution which amounts to 'Gender Apartheid'. Not only have the Taliban brought back the brutal conservative rule of the First Emirate but this time with greater political and technological sophistication. The ideology, laws and practices of the Taliban group have legitimized with logical rigour misogynist violence against women within families, communities and in public space.

Gender Persecution: Gender Persecution is recognized as a Crime Against Humanity under the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) Art 7 (1) (h) and defines it as persecution on the grounds of gender. It refers to acts of violence and denial of fundamental rights to a particular group because of their sex characteristics or gender identity and the social constructs that are used to define it (ICC, 2022).

Gender Apartheid: Gender Apartheid refers to systemic discrimination against, segregation of individuals or a group on the basis of their sex or gender identity which leads to them being relegated to subordinate positions in society. This discrimination or oppression is enforced through laws, legislation, policies or practices. The defining factor of Gender Apartheid is its systemic nature and its institutionalisation for regime maintenance. (COFEM, 2024)

Despite their initial promises of being different from their first regime, the Taliban group since coming to power in August 2021 have issued more than 200 edicts, imposing severe restrictions on women's mobility, rights and bodily autonomy. The Taliban through these edicts has erased women from all public spaces and denied them the right to live with dignity. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has been replaced by the Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV). It directly answers to the Kandahar



based Taliban Emir Hibatullah Akhundzada, and is empowered to enforce the restrictive laws and rules. All educational institutions beyond the primary school 6th grade are closed to women. Only technical courses for training nursing and midwifery were exempt but in December 2024, these last two avenues were closed with inevitable consequences for perinatal mortality. Hijab-abaya-burqa have become mandatory, as well as an accompanying mahram for travel, beyond a local perimeter. Doors have closed on women's work in the public and private sector. The few still working in the public sector, in healthcare and primary schools have found salaries slashed down to the lowest scale of 5000 Afghani (around 70 USD). As an interviewee said "they bring out a new law every other day." Further constraining the remaining opportunities; additional prohibitions have targeted women working in the UN system and NGO sector.

Through punitively enforced verbal and written decrees, the Taliban have confined women to their homes. Before too, at the time of the Republic, Afghan women faced restrictive socio-cultural barriers, but there was some limited scope for protection against violations such as the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law. Also, there was an infrastructure of courts and institutions such as MOWA and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) as well as a responsive international community, media and women's collectives. Describing the Taliban's institutionalized structure of suppression of human

rights and gender discrimination, the UN Special Rapporteur for Afghanistan, Richard Bennett said:

“The Taliban’s institutionalisation of its system of oppression of women and girls, and the harms that it is continuing to entrench, should shock the conscience of humanity...These violations are so severe and extensive that they appear to form a widespread and systematic attack on a civilian population which may amount to crimes against humanity. This attack is not only ongoing, it is intensifying.”

“... that Gender Apartheid most fully encapsulates the institutionalized and ideological nature of the abuses in question and places squarely into view the responsibilities of other international actors to respond appropriately. [He]recognizes an emerging, gender-inclusive interpretation of the concept of apartheid as including Gender Apartheid. To effectively address the current, unparalleled human rights crisis confronting Afghan women, strengthening this interpretation is highly desirable.”

(Bennett OHCHR, 2024)

Afghan women exist only in the shadows. Research participants shared that this erasure of women from public space has produced visible discomfort among men to talk about women or discuss their issues. Even the Taliban members themselves are found to be uncomfortable around women, exhibiting anxiety and frustration when women argue back or fight for their rights.

“As a woman in Afghanistan, you are like a zombie. People get nervous when women are talked about or even mentioned. You are sidelined and avoided.”

- An interviewee from Nangarhar

“I have noticed that those around us, especially the Taliban, look at us with suspicion and disdain.”

- Survey respondent from Nimruz

What is at stake in the Taliban’s high-cost policy of erecting this elaborate architecture of reinforcing layers of gender oppression? Afghan activists and academics who spoke to us, believed that it is a question of exerting absolute social control through laws and regulations that extend to women’s public and private lives. The objective is to create a system of multiple levels of policing within and outside homes which is further reinforced by engaging community

members to be enforcers of the laws. By instilling the fear of punitive enforcement, they aim to control all Afghans. As indicated by our Survey respondents, this system of restrictive rules and regulations sows distrust among families and within communities, undermining collective opposition and reinforces isolation and makes the society easier to control.

“Even during their first rule, it was this path (of denying women rights) but this time they (the Taliban) came more prepared for its implementation. They are showing that they are not going to bow down to any pressure.It is a question of control. Control women, control society.”

- An Afghan Human Rights activist in exile

“I spoke to a woman. She is married. One day she had gone to visit her parent’s home. She realized that her father’s and brother’s behaviour had changed. She had gone wearing her usual hijab but her brother abused her and shouted at her because she was not wearing a chadari (an all enveloping cloth covering). Her brother and father asked her not to visit them without wearing the Chadari. She told them, ‘I am married. The man who has the right to exercise control over my attire is my husband. Why are you, my father and brother policing me?’”

- An interviewee from Laghman

The Vice and Virtue Law 2024

The PVPV law promulgated in July 2024, marked a distinct and dangerous milestone in the consolidation and formalization of Taliban’s surveillance architecture. The Law consolidates and codifies the 100+ directives and decrees issued by the Taliban group and details the traits and responsibilities of the enforcers of the law, that is, the Ministry’s officials: the Amr Bil Maruf or Morality Police (Shekhawat, 2024). The law introduces new draconian restrictions. Women are instructed to conceal their voices in public spaces and enforcers are tasked with the responsibility to ensure women’s voices are not heard in any gatherings. The reasoning is that women’s faces, bodies and voices need to be concealed since they are a source of temptation that can cause people to sin. Women are instructed to cover themselves in front of non-believer women (non-Muslim women) who are denounced as “loose women” in the law.

While relegating duties and responsibilities to ministry

officials, the law goes one step further and widens policing authority and responsibility to include community and family members as enforcers. Also, the law directs enforcers to ensure that drivers of commercial vehicles do not transport inappropriately veiled women or those unaccompanied by a mahram. The onus of responsibility also lies on the driver to disallow any woman from sitting beside or “mingling” with unrelated men. The law pushes obligations on everyone to police women, within the homes and outside, to ensure they obey these laws.

The law is filled with subjective terminologies which lack clear definition, thus giving unchecked discriminatory power to the enforcers to punish at will. The law states that an accusation or report brought by any two people whose testimony is “acceptable” is enough to warrant prosecution (Rafi, 2024). But what qualifies as “acceptable” is not defined. The vagueness in the law and its terms can lead to arbitrary detentions with enforcers weaponizing the law for personal vendettas or prejudices, to target vulnerable women. The law also intensifies state control over media, mandating enforcers to ensure journalists don’t publish any news that goes against “Islamic principles”, criticizes Muslims or contains photos or videos of any living beings. It also curtails people’s access to entertainment such as watching movies or singing. The law prohibits befriending, assisting or imitating non-Muslims (Mazurana & Samar, 2024). The publication of this law points towards the institutionalization of Gender Apartheid in Taliban’s state policy, setting the stage for further, more severe violations of women’s human rights.

Interviewees shared that the Taliban’s surveillance has intensified since this law came into effect, with a larger number of morality police swarming the streets to check on people and punishing defaulters. Women report witnessing and being themselves involved in situations where the Maruf have threatened, publicly beaten or arrested women for the “offences” of wearing white shoes, having headphones on, or wearing a thin veil etc. Since the law provisions remain vague and open to interpretation, women shared that they feel a constant sense of anxiety due to the uncertainty of getting arrested or harassed or abused (Kundu, 2025). Also, reports of the installation of thousands of cameras in public spaces by the Taliban and tightening of surveillance has increased women’s sense of anxiety and fear (Nowrouzi, 2025).

“I was with my nephew. We had gone to the bazaar when Taliban officials stopped us and asked – why is my hijab thin? My nephew told them- her body is covered from head to toe. What is the problem? But they kept insisting, why is your veil so thin?”

- An Interviewee from Bamyan

This testimony shows that the morality police often target women simply for the sake of scaring them rather than for actual violations. The imposition of the law is not uniform and is largely dependent on the mood and disposition of the Maruf and the ethnic identity of women, especially easily recognisable young Hazara women. There is also great disparity between different provinces when it comes to enforcement of the law.

“I went to the local market alone. When I passed the checkpoint, they asked me -where is your Mahram? I said – I don’t have a Mahram. The Talib said – You don’t have a child who can come with you? I said – no. He threatened, this is your last chance. If you do this again, you will be arrested.”

- An interviewee from Kunar

“In Mazar-i-Sharif, things are much more open than Kabul. The gyms were open last week. There were no banners, but they were open. Computer and English centres were open and girls were going in. These are not open even in Kabul. An amusement park there was open for families. In Kabul, those parks are also banned. Even in the early days of the Taliban when schools were banned, Mazar-i-Sharif was the only place where the schools stayed open until 6 months even a year after the decree came. Girls moved there to continue their education.”

- An interviewee from Kabul

Uncertainty intensifies the paranoia and fear in women, leading to a stifling environment. Constant anxiety over whether their action and behaviour will prompt violence from the Maruf is a burden all women now shoulder, compelling them to stay within rather than risk the whimsicality of the Maruf’s punitive action.

Empowered by the Taliban group’s supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, the morality police are feared as a law unto themselves and operate with impunity. At the whim and prejudices of the Maruf, people are at risk of physical assault, abuse, public humiliation, arrest, torture or being shot dead.

“Not knowing whether the Talib on the street will be in a bad mood and pick on you is a real concern. The pretext can be a too thin hijab, the absence of a mahram, or just being out which is denounced by them as “loitering.”

- An interviewee from Bamyan

A women’s rights activist from Laghman narrated the story of a woman waiting in line to get her Tazkira (Identity Card), anxious at the delay as her daughter was in hospital. She requested the Taliban officer to allow her to get ahead in the line. He brusquely warned her and reportedly said, “Those women who talk in front of us, we kill them.” She had dared to speak back and was shot in the heart. Rushed to hospital, she died the next morning. In Court, the doctor who treated her, despite being advised to say that she died of a heart attack, spoke up of the gunshot wound. Nonplussed, the Talib brazenly justified the cold blooded killing, claiming the dead woman had provoked him. “This woman told me, ‘I am annoyed with this government’. That’s why I killed her”, –The Taliban official was not punished.

In seeking to understand the Taliban’s misogyny and the logic of the disproportionate ‘punishment’ meted out to women, an Afghan human rights and security expert , explained, that what the Taliban group fears and wants to suppress by its elaborate structure of oppressive social controls is any possibility of women emboldened enough to talk back. Substantiating this argument, are other such incidents.

The Amr bil Maruf picked on a woman travelling with her very young son in an auto-rickshaw (three wheeler vehicle). The auto was flagged to a stop, and she was forced to get out. Menacingly, she was asked, where is your mahram? Not to be cowed down she replied, “my husband is dead, my brother in law is in Iran. You give me some money to take my son to the doctor’. The exasperated Talib reportedly said, “This is why we don’t like women. They argue too much.”

- A women’s rights activist from Laghman

The Taliban group has created a pervasive sense of terror among the people, not so much out of fear of violating the law but by creating uncertainty over what the law is. Families have locked up daughters, wives and sisters. Two young women spoke of the fear and terror pushing them inside to cower behind four walls.

“If I go out and the Talibs create problems for me, I will not be allowed to return home. They (my family) will kill me,” a young Survey respondent said.

- Survey respondent from Bamyan

Men exposed to an NGO awareness programme singled out the humiliation of being subjected to interrogation and the dishonor of public assault and arrests. In a FGD conversation, one of them cited a common occurrence. A couple went grocery shopping. A Talib beat the husband because his wife’s hijab did not completely cover her face.



Daily Life in Afghanistan’s Capital 29 - by Milad Hamadi, Tasnim News Agency, CC BY 4.0

“At checkpoints Talibs will stop you and demand, where are you going? Is this your wife? Show us proof. I always carry my marriage certificate with me. Since I am a Pashtun, I can talk to them in Pashto and it is easier to convince them to stop bothering me.”

What complicates matters is that marriage certificates and the national identity card tazkira are not readily available. (Himmat & Shapour, 2025).

Further the new law has put the onus on community members, family and service providers to police women and ensure they conform to the rules. This has created trust issues within the community and isolated women further. It has impacted personal relationships and increased women’s vulnerability to violence within their homes. Women reported facing harsh violent behaviour from male family members and also policing from young male members.

“Young brothers are going to Madrasas, and on returning home, they tell their parents to stop the girls of the family from working and studying. In one case the brother stabbed his sister 8 times because she did not obey the new rules. He was trying to stop her from going to school. Outraged at her defiance, he stabbed her. Irony is that his elder brother had been working with the previous government and was killed by the Taliban. He still supported the Taliban.”

- An interviewee from Laghman

Mahram rules have imposed huge hurdles on women in accessing public spaces and limited job opportunities. This has been especially stressful for female-headed households where in the absence of a mahram, women are unable to step out of their homes. A mahram is mandatory when travelling a distance from one province to another. Vehicles are stopped at check posts with travellers asked to show evidence that women are accompanied by a legitimate mahram. If travelling with one’s husband, proof of a marriage certificate is necessary. Such checks cause humiliation and discomfort. The fear of arrests also looms large. If men get arrested it threatens the family income while in case of women’s arrest, it threatens family honor. The Taliban’s shifting of responsibility for enforcing obedience on the men in families has reinforced not only greater policing by family men but also the reproduction of violence in the private sphere. Men who face harassment at the hands of the Taliban, come back home to reproduce violence on women.

“I was running a big tailoring workshop earlier. I had 54 students. Now due to hijab and other restrictions, it has affected work. Now, there are only 14 students. Whenever the students come, DFA officials question them. Where are you going? Why is your hijab not proper? DFA orders my husband to tell students to not wear belts with their abaya, and to dress properly. They warn my husband and say if the students don’t dress properly, they will get us evicted from our house.”

- An interviewee from Baghlan Province

“Brothers are treating sisters very strictly, telling them to stay inside the house. They warn them, we cannot protect you. Don’t cause any trouble for us. They are worried for their own safety, of being beaten and punished by the Taliban if a girl in their family breaks a rule. They [Taliban] try to find someone who is related to the girl and jail them. Be it brother, uncle, cousin or anyone.”

- An interviewee from Badakhshan Province

These punishments are randomly inflicted. Some participants alleged that the Taliban and morality police have weaponized the PVPV law to target women who oppose or criticize them, and especially Hazara women, recognizable by their eyes. Women who go out to work, attend classes, or just go out of the house are vulnerable to being accused of ‘loitering’. Singled out are women who speak out or defy Taliban’s rules. The constant harassment of the Maruf and DFA officials have forced many women to stay confined to their homes and even drop out of tailoring and other courses.

“Mahram policy is enforced differently in different regions and communities. Sometimes women are able to go out without a Mahram. But when they want to target someone, belonging to an ethnic minority or an activist, then they use the mahram issue as an excuse to arrest them. If women are silent and meek, then they don’t face a problem.”

- Afghan legal expert and activist, in exile

FEAR AND ANXIETY

Public Security, Personal Insecurity

Armed battles are over. Suicide bomb blasts no longer daily crowd hospitals with the injured and dying. Midnight knocks do not bring the terror of boots kicking open doors wrenching awake the sleeping and leaving scarred women and wailing children. Assassinations and kidnappings by any and every one with guns have fallen. The insurgency of the National Resistance Front (NRF) has been contained. There still are attacks on religious minorities, including Muslim religious minorities such as Hazaras, and religious Shia holy sites which are blamed on ISIS (K). According to the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT, 2024), clashes between the Taliban and ISIS (K) have been reduced to a half dozen gun battles. The Taliban leadership claims it has defeated the threat of rival Islamist groups. The geography of that war and public insecurity moved one set of refugees. But fear and personal insecurity is displacing another set of refugees.

*"...Load poems like guns —
each moment is loaded
with bombs
bullets
blasts
death-sounds —
death and war
don't follow rules
you can make your pages into white flags
a thousand times
but swallow your words, say no more...."*

- Somaia Ramish

*"I am from mountains so high and sharp like the
edge of a knife,
Skies so blue reflecting like an ocean,
Clouds floating in an endless sea.
I'm from sandstorms so thick, which whip around,
Forcing your eyes to close and ravish your skin.
I come from a country ravaged by decades of war,
Soviet tanks lay around in the streets,*

*The trees that can tell you a story of what they have
seen,
By the branches they bare through the years.
I'm from a small family that overcame a storm of
darkness and later saw light,
The light that showed the pathway to a country that
has 50 stars on a flag,..."*

- Katra (Khatera) Nejrabi

In Afghanistan, "Security is better now", echoed many of our respondents. But interviewees were quick to add, "that is because Taliban are not fighting, which is what they were doing earlier." Cynically a digital data watcher alluded to the Taliban's wooing of the diaspora to do 'whitewash tourism.'

*"Tourists talk about security, say how safe it is now.
How easy it is to go to a park. They don't say that
earlier the major hurdle was the violence. And that
violence was from the Taliban."*

*"Diaspora Afghans think Afghanistan is peaceful
now. Physical security is better but there is great
anxiety over the economic situation, there are no
jobs, as for education, that is the real problem."*

- An Afghan digital data watcher, living in exile

Why is there Fear, Anxiety and Insecurity in Afghanistan?

What makes for this fear and insecurity, and a choking anxiety is the closing in of the Taliban group's spy system. The latest surveillance technology is being installed. Amnesty International reported that the Taliban planned to install 62,000 security cameras around Kabul and other areas citing 'national security' concerns. Even more significant is the spread of a network of human intelligence resources, not only of spies but also of Talibs living amidst the community. Research participants believe that the Taliban has co-opted men and women as spies who live within

the communities. Some claim that the Taliban has indoctrinated boys and girls in madrasas who act as their spies. One participant reported that young boys were being indoctrinated in madrasas to report back on things happening in their families. The all-seeing Taliban eye, with cameras on the streets, and entering the home through indoctrinated brothers and sons, has an Orwellian feel to it. It chillingly reminds that the Taliban governance which is deemed a medieval theocracy, has deployed a sophisticated digital strategy which aims at thought control, as in 1984. This sense of being spied upon has heightened everyday fear, anxiety and desperation.

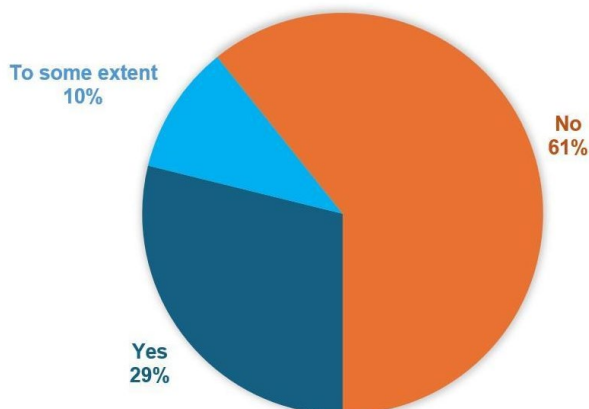
“All women are scared. They are afraid of community members, afraid they will complain to Talibs. There is great suspicion and uneasiness because Talibs do not listen to anything or follow any logic. They don’t even follow Sharia properly. You cannot engage or talk to them. Their position is absolute. You have to be silent. You cannot talk to a man. You have to stay at home. You cannot go out.”

- FGD Participant from Nangarhar

“There are many who spy for the Taliban. Many women cooperate with the intelligence group. I myself am afraid that the neighbours will report me. Even within the family we do not talk about our rights work or the online [protest] gatherings. People are spying for the Taliban for very little money. Poverty is the reason. People don’t have jobs”.

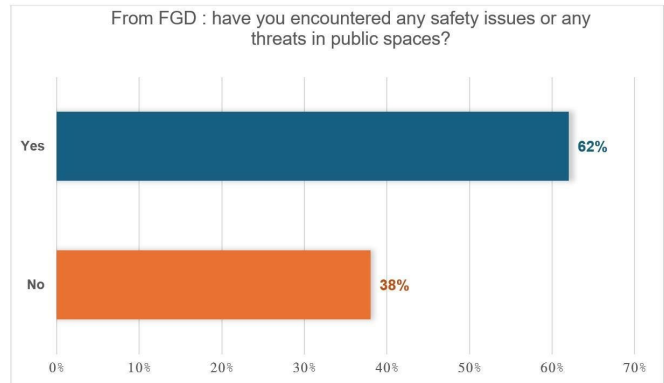
- A male CSO worker from Bamyan

Do Women in your community feel safe?



Responses from survey participants.

Public Violence against Women



Responses to our survey

Extremism and violence against women should not be viewed as an isolated phenomena but as part of a continuum. Women are stripped of all but bare life, and are safe as long as they stay walled in, confined to domestic chores and reproductive duties and stay quiet and obedient. Otherwise you can risk public floggings and executions. An incident was narrated by an interviewee from Laghman. A young woman doctor had lost her mobile and was being blackmailed by someone who had picked it up. It contained a video of a ‘friendly’ conversation with an ‘unrelated’ male. Such ‘friendly’ relations are prohibited. The video went viral and was seized by the morality police. The woman was tracked down, arrested and publicly flogged. In the moral homily that was delivered, the authorities said:

“This woman was a doctor and she did this. If you too come out of your homes, you will do worse. This is why we impose rules.”

High tech surveillance technology is being enlisted to police such licentious ‘friendships.’ Security cameras and facial recognition technology will ensure that a young woman and a man coming into a restaurant will be tracked and punished. Following heightened surveillance in the city, an October 2024 news report on AMU TV showed video footage of Taliban authorities in Kabul arresting young women and bundling them in trucks for violating dress codes.¹

There is the terror of the thousand eyes of the Maruf, and then there is the harm caused by the family’s psychological pressure. An Afghan analyst chillingly summed up the fragility of the life experience of an Afghan woman. “This is a country where women are killed without any reason, yet no one raises their voice.”

1 [1] AMU TV report dated 6th October 2024 titled: Taliban intensify surveillance of women and girls in Kabul. <https://amu.tv/128411/>

Family Policing & Domestic Violence

Several of our interviewees emphasized that the Taliban's restrictive laws and regulations have resulted in more stringent family policing. For some, the Taliban's gender persecution has provided an opportunity for families, especially husbands, sons, and other male members to oppress, abuse, and dominate women without fear of legal repercussions. The judicial system is governed by the Taliban's particular interpretation of Sharia-based values, where women are institutionally reduced to "second-class" citizens,

*"I would love to be anything in this world
But not a woman
I could be a parrot
I could be a female sheep
I could be a deer or
A sparrow living in a tree
But not an Afghan woman."*

Roya (2009)

Survey respondents across provinces voiced alarm at the spiralling surge in domestic violence (AWPMC, 2024). A woman from Bamyan observed that Afghan men have become much more controlling and aggressive, often resorting to physical abuse towards women. They have also become more emboldened.

"My sister's husband has beaten her several times, and boldly asserts, 'this is the time of the Taliban, none will hear your voice now.'"

Particularly vulnerable are women who during the time of the Republic were encouraged to use protective laws such as the EVAW (2009) and appealed to the courts against domestic violence. For instance, in a case of life threatening bodily violence of a repeated offender, the courts had ordered the husband's arrest. Released by the Taliban, he is back brutally beating up his wife again. As reported by a journalist, the husband defiantly taunted his wife:

"Now, you don't have any support. The previous government was your supporter. Now the government is mine."

A former Commissioner of AIHRC drew attention to the plight of those who had availed of the right to divorce during the republic. The Taliban has denounced the former government as non-Muslim and invalidated divorce decrees as in violation of Sharia. 'Husbands now are free to hunt down divorced 'wives' and

forcefully take them back, even if they are remarried. Those who resist are arrested. According to a survey respondent from Herat, several women who resisted are languishing in prison. There is no one to litigate for them. Afghan women who were judges, defence prosecutors and lawyers during the Republic have fled. Those who remain are in hiding or without jobs.



Burqa clad women waiting - Herat, Afghanistan by Marius Arnesen, posted on Flickr and reused via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0

Clearly, women as a social group are persecuted and are insecure because of their gender. A Kabul based survey respondent who earlier had a job and was respected within the family because of the income she brought in, sharply observed, "where is the security for women when they have become totally dependent on some male or the other." Expectedly the harms suffered by the vulnerable and marginalized women (and men) are compounded. Who is safe, then becomes a function of gender identity but as we examine below, security is also of ethnic, religious belonging, regional and urban location, class and past association with the Republican regime.

Whose security is imperilled? Who is at risk under Taliban 2.0?

In a country as hugely diverse geographically and socio-culturally, and as complex politically and economically, not only are some likely to be far more at risk than others but the implementation and enforcement of the denial of fundamental freedoms also varies greatly. Four decades of violent conflict have left a legacy of fragmented politics further complicated by Afghanistan's multiple ethnicities. The Taliban's struggle to emerge as a politically cohesive force confronts the

challenges of a Pashtun dominant majority (42%) ruling over Tajik (27%), Hazara (9%) and Uzbek (9%) ethnic groups ¹ (Minority Rights Group, 2021). The Taliban group has to establish control over territories which remained beyond the Taliban's sphere of influence as in the north east (Foschini, 2024) where power holders were Tajik or Uzbek elites.

Intersectional Vulnerabilities :

Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Afghanistan

In the face of terror from the Taliban and other Mujahideen groups, Afghanistan's religious minorities — Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Bahais have emigrated in large numbers, with only a few hundred remaining. But Afghanistan a Sunni majority country, has Muslim minorities. Shias make up 10-15% of the population, while there are a few hundred Ahmadiyas. Ethnic Hazaras estimated to be 9 % of the population are predominantly Shia. Since the Taliban's takeover, during these last four years, Hazaras and their mosques have been targeted by the ISIS jihadi group, but with little punitive response from the authorities. More insidious has been the squeeze on the religious ideology and practices of the Shias, with many religious celebrations and ceremonies, holidays banned by the PVPV law. The Taliban group recognizes only one school of Islam, the Hanafi school, and all other sects are excluded. A Hazara educationist from Nangarhar spoke of the harm caused by this exclusionary domination of only one ideological school of thought in Islam. "Hanafi jurisprudence has created major problems for the Shia community especially in family matters", he explained. Also freedom of religious practice of Shias has been restricted. The observance of Shia social ritual during Muharram has been restricted.

"In Kabul, in an area with a significant Shia population, the Taliban's nominated representative asked the people to fill a form about who would be observing Muharram social rituals. Taliban then asked those very people to sign promissory letters for swearing that they would not engage in Muharram observance."

- A lawyer belonging to a Shia minority

"Putting pressure on people to change their ideology [follow only the Hanafi school] can have very negative effects and create resentment. As God says: 'There is no compulsion in religion'. Forced piety cannot be sustained."

- A journalist from an ethnic minority in Jawzjan

"Definition of security is different for different people", asserted a non-Pashtun interviewee, WHRD now in exile. "Pashtuns are more secure", an eminent Justice asserted. For instance, it was claimed that the privilege of safe travel is available largely for Pashtuns and those with foreign passports. Some Hazaras and Tajik groups still cannot travel safely. Hazaras, who belong to a Shia minority, are particularly vulnerable and have been victims of a series of mass killings in suicide attacks. In the last such attack, in September 2024 in Daikundi province 14 young Hazara men travelling in a bus to receive pilgrims returning from Karbala (Iraq) were killed. ISIS-K claimed responsibility. Interviewees raised questions about the involvement of ISIS-K group which is in conflict with the Taliban. "If ISIS-K is doing it, why are they not killing the Taliban, who are Pashtuns?" Others questioned how the Taliban's expansive security and intelligence network was unable to pre-empt these attacks.

Even more vulnerable is the tiny population of Hazara Christians in Afghanistan who face increased threat from the Taliban regime and are forced to remain in hiding. For this research we were unable to speak with anyone from the community and women who were surveyed and interviewed, even if they were Christians, were not comfortable in sharing that information. This invisibilization points towards the fear in which the community lives.

Amongst the broad Hazara population what exacerbates their vulnerability is that Hazara families and to some extent ethnic Tajiks, were more open to seizing the opportunities for education and professional advancement of women and girls which the international community and the Republican regime enabled. It also meant as our interviewees indicated that there was a congruence of Hazara and Tajik girls being most harmed by the Taliban's patchwork of interlocked decrees, conspicuously resisting and therefore being targeted by the morality police. An eminent human rights advocate explained that in the

1 There is no reliable and official data available on Afghanistan's ethnic composition, however some CSO's and think tanks have drawn up rough estimates based on surveys. The data here has been taken from <https://minorityrights.org/country/afghanistan/>

Kabul University protests, Hazaras were very visible but that also was to be expected as Hazara populated areas are proximate to the University. Even among the Hazara community, not all agree that Hazaras are singled out.

“There is no difference in the Maruf’s control of women. It is not based on ethnicity. Hazaras tend to stand out, as they put themselves forward, showing themselves as more committed than others [to social reform], which is why they get arrested.”

- Hazara woman interviewee from Bamyan

A Pashtun woman academic pointed to reverse discrimination against Pashtuns. She readily concurred that during the 20 years of the Republic the Tajiks and Hazaras were able to take greater advantage of the expanding educational facilities. Hazara families were more liberal and supportive of girl’s education. Discriminated against or left out were the more conservative Pashtuns in those years. Also, Pashtun villages had very few educational facilities.

“Panjshiri Tajiks had real power during Karzai’s time. Under the gender quota system, if a Pashtun and a Hazara woman applied, the Hazara woman was given preference. In government offices, Hazaras and Tajiks were given first preference and only then Pashtuns got the opportunity.”

- An Afghan-Pashtun academic, now in exile

The majority of our respondents emphasized that the rule of the Taliban was the rule of Pashtuns. In an FGD with journalists and development professionals in Jawzjan, an Uzbek journalist pointed out that some 90-95 % of the DFA representatives in the central ministries are Pashtun, and only a few junior officials are Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek.

“In the beginning they retained former officials to train Pashtun successors but once they mentored them, they were fired. The Taliban rulers do not fire Pashtuns who worked with the Republic, only Hazaras and Tajik officials.”

- A former Court Judge, Hazara, now in exile

In multi-ethnic provinces which only recently came under the sway of the Taliban and where the traditional power elites were Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras or Baloch, the DFA followed a hybrid policy of power sharing. For instance in Nimruz, where the majority of the population is Baloch, the governor is Pashtun but

the Maruf Deputy is Baloch. Most of the Taliban are Baloch. It is noticeable that such hybrid arrangements are transitional. In Bamyan the administration was run by Hazara officials but now all state employees are from the Pashtun community.

“The ones in power are all Pashtuns, whether educated or knowledgeable or not, Pashtuns have all jobs. My sons are educated and don’t have jobs just because they are Tajik, but Pashtuns have jobs even without qualification.”

- An interviewee from Baghlan

A group of FGD participants agreed that more control is exercised over Hazaras. For instance, a Hazara couple travelling from a rural area to the city is likely to be harassed at the checkpoint to prove spousal relationship. Others will not be so insistently bothered. There is also discrimination when it comes to accessing job opportunities. Women from other ethnic communities like Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks and more, allege that men and women from their communities are discriminated against in job opportunities, land disputes and are more likely to be targeted as ‘suspect’ and picked up for being associated with the former regime.

Since 2021, there have also been reports of the Taliban forcefully displacing families belonging to non-Pashtun ethnic groups, grabbing their land and distributing it amongst their own people. Particularly, in multi-ethnic provinces where there are competing power centres, analysts have observed that Hazaras and Tajiks have been targeted and displaced from their lands with the likely intention of changing the ethnic demography of the provinces and establishing their own power base there (Kawa, 2024). Taliban fighters have settled their own families in most of these homes. There appears to be a widespread practice of dispossessing Hazara and Tajik communities of their land.

“Yes there is ethnic discrimination. I am always targeted. I have lost jobs and am most at risk, because I am Uzbek. I lost a case in court. It was a land dispute case. I lost the case in court because I am Uzbek. The other party won the case because they were Pashtun, although they had no legal documents. I lost the land I had bought.”

- A male journalist in Jawzjan

Commonly echoed by many of our non-Pashtun survey respondents was their sense of discrimination and

persecution because of their ethnic identity. This was felt even more so because of their ethno-religious identity. A former high school teacher decried the disadvantage and harassment her family suffers because of their Shia identity, and she, doubly so, as a woman and a Shia living under the Taliban.

“We are Shia, it has been challenging, and we constantly face religious discrimination. We have lost our jobs, and even the men in our family cannot find employment opportunities. Our neighbors treat us badly, because we are Shia and the men in our household face harassment both in the mosque and in the street. Our religious ceremonies are highly restricted, and we are not allowed to perform our religious practices. When we go to the hospital, our patients do not receive proper attention. We are subjected to harassment by morality police on the pretext of our hijab.”

- Survey respondent from Jawzjan

Non-pashtun ethnic groups complain of discrimination in accessing humanitarian assistance. Climate induced natural disasters of successive droughts have added to Afghanistan’s socio economic disruptions and resulted in 80% of Afghan women and children in need for their survival. However, reports indicate that aid has not reached them (O’Donnell, 2022). Many Afghans shared that although they signed up for humanitarian aid multiple times, they have not received any support despite reports of foreign assistance. Survey respondents alleged that the Taliban have been diverting funds for their own needs, providing the aid to their own people, while other groups, particularly the Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks have remained deprived. The Taliban have also been accused of using the foreign aid money to pay their own workers instead of feeding the starving Afghans (Jozwiak & Synovitz, 2022).

‘Collaborators’: Taking Revenge

When the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021, they announced a general amnesty for all former government workers and members of the Afghan security forces (Stockton et al., 2022). This assurance, like that of their initial promises of respecting women’s rights, was soon forgotten. Former government employees, security personnel were tracked down, disappeared, killed or forced to flee (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Women working with the previous government or the international community and

WHRDs were at great risk of harm and fearful of threatening telephone calls - “We won’t leave you.” Judicial prosecutors were particularly vulnerable as the criminals they had put away had walked out of opened prison gates. Others spoke of the double jeopardy of their ethnic identity and of having worked with the former regime.

“A few days ago we saw on the international news that the Taliban took away a Hazara man from his house. He had been a police officer under the previous regime. They did this only because he was Hazara. They would not do this to Pashtuns.”

- An interviewee from Badakhshan

Respondents narrated a web of stories of families of former officials with the Republican administration in hiding, especially those who had served in the Afghan army or police. The UN Special Rapporteur had warned of a “culture of impunity for torture and inhumane treatment in detention centers, as well as for human rights violations against former government officials and military personnel, despite promises made to the contrary,” A 2023 UN report accused Taliban fighters of committing more than 200 extrajudicial killings since taking power despite the general amnesty.

One of our interviewees, now in hiding, is representative of the many who were not able to flee. A WHRD, who after moving from one refugee camp to another in Iran and Pakistan and facing visa cancellations from third countries like Germany, and with dwindling resources, was forced to return with her family to Afghanistan.

“I am a WHRD and I used to work with the government. I sought asylum and received admission from Germany. I went to Iran with my family to process my case and stayed there for 6 months after which they transferred my case to Islamabad. After 9 months I got my visa but 14 hours before departure my flight was cancelled and I was asked to wait. We waited for 6 months in Islamabad and then they rejected my case without any reason and gave back my documents and passport. We had to come back.”

- A WHRD interviewee from north western Afghanistan

The Taliban are tracking down ex-government employees and military personnel. The fear and the threat have not diminished even after 4 years of this regime. Women and men from these families are forced to remain in hiding. They cannot apply for jobs for fear of getting discovered. During the republican

regime, foreign governments, INGOs and even the Afghan military had maintained online databases for their employees which contained their biometric information and other details. These sensitive databases were left behind when these organizations left the country or were disbanded after the Taliban took over. The Taliban have access to these databases. There have been reports of the Taliban using biometric information to track down ex-military officials (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The situation remains dangerous as hiding from the Taliban becomes more and more challenging.

“My brother was just a military student. When the Taliban came, they stopped the training/lessons. They came to our house and took him away. They covered his eyes and put a hood on him. For 2 days we could not find him and when he came back he did not talk about what had happened. I fear that he might have been tortured. Now he is staying home. He is afraid because the military has his biometric data.”

- Interviewee from Laghman

“I worked as a lawyer and also with NGOs during the republic era. My father and brother were both members of the military in the previous government. Everyone said that the Taliban will arrest us. Our family had to change our place of residence due to fear of violence. Since 2021 we all are jobless.”

- Interviewee from Eastern Afghanistan

THE TALIBAN'S PROPAGATION OF A PURE ISLAMIC SOCIETY

Is there greater 'religiosity' in Afghan society?

Afghan society has been exposed to the Taliban's intensive and multi-mode religious propaganda onslaught. It is widespread, systematic and institutionally backed, and includes indoctrination in educational and other institutions, and the policing of mandatory religious practice. After four years of living in such a faith-saturated socio-cultural environment, is there a significant surge in religiosity or piousness?

Several of our respondents and interviewees pointed to the Taliban's intensive and technological investment in the spread of religious-cultural propaganda through multiple media platforms. There are the regular mosque broadcasts and sermons, wall posters, radio and television programming and social media platforms, especially the group's Twitter accounts and affiliate pages that spread pro-Taliban propaganda (Civic Media Observatory, 2022).

"A vast amount of religious propaganda and social guidance is targeted at our minds from morning till night, whether we want to pay attention or not. Local radio stations broadcast religious teachings every day for several hours, and a large part of television programming is dedicated to explaining religious issues and jurisprudential discussions. Additionally, Afghanistan's social media is relentlessly bombarded by religious propagandists. Religious leaders call on people to respect Islamic values, not only on Fridays, but throughout the week from mosque loudspeakers."

- An educationist at a town hall meeting

Previously, in schools, religious subjects were taught for two hours a week, but now these subjects are taught daily in all grades in the public schools. With more and more ill trained mullahs (clerics) replacing professional educationists in schools, students reportedly told

mothers that there is not much difference between the public schools and the proliferating network of madrasas. Both are active in indoctrinating boys and girls. Young women from a Kabul based madrasa, indoctrinated in the gender hierarchical obedience value system of these religious schools, were mobilized to outface women protesters at the 'Bread Work Freedom' protest rally outside Kabul University. Their young brothers are bringing into the home the values of the Taliban and policing their sisters.

"Young boys studying in public schools too are getting affected. The curriculum in these schools has changed. Their social media posts are full of intolerant comments. Not only boys, but girls too are leaving extremist comments critiquing what they consider inappropriate clothing and appearance. Young women are turning against one another and acting as moral police."

- An Afghan media professional in exile

Some survey respondents spoke of having a comfort level with their firmly held and freely followed Islamic faith. However, after the Taliban's imposition of a rigid fundamentalist Islam and punitively enforced practices of worship, they felt alienated from the group's manipulation of Islam to justify denying them freedom.

"Previously, I used to go out wearing the hijab that I chose, which nonetheless, was an Islamic hijab, but now I cannot. In the past, I could go to an educational institution, work and travel. I was able to do many things within the framework of Islam. Unfortunately, this is not possible now."

- Survey respondent from Kunduz

Among educated professionals, there was scepticism, if not outright rejection about whether religious devotion had deepened. A few did refer approvingly to the increase in the outward display of Islamic piety--the following of the Four Pillars of Islam-- the attention to appropriateness of dress and appearance, regular

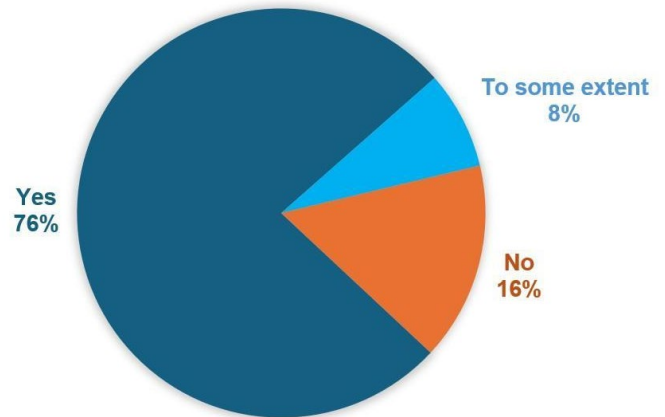
practice of Namaz and other social rituals, considered important for shaping Islamic religious identity. But many more respondents and especially interviewees were doubtful whether there was any real increase in religious devotion, especially when religious practice is being policed and enforced. One Afghan religious scholar was emphatic, “forced piety cannot be sustained!” Significantly religious scholars, educated professionals and women homemakers were all confidently assertive that the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam was distorted.

“What the Talibs claim to be Islamic often is not aligned with the true teachings of the Quran or the Prophet.”

- Survey respondent from Kunduz

Striking were the opinions voiced by women/girls. Many distanced themselves from the Taliban’s understanding of Islam and their propagation of a ‘pure’ system of religious beliefs. Women challenged the Taliban’s use of Islamic texts and law to justify and violently enforce gender exclusion in education and work. Some insisted that they had knowledge of the Quran and knew that Islamic texts did not oppose women’s education. Several mothers expressed concern at the misogynistic indoctrination of their sons (and daughters) in madrasas and their exposure to debasing anti-women propaganda in the mosques. Expectedly, there were contrary voices too, including among urban educated women and men who approvingly echoed the narrative of the defiling contagion of so called ‘reformist’ immoral western ideals and welcomed the Taliban bringing back a focus on religious observance and knowledge. But even the women who supported Taliban’s policies on religious observance, objected to the ban on education for girls beyond primary school.

Has your society become more religious since august 2021?



Women in burqa with their children in Herat, Afghanistan - by Marius Arnesen, via Flickr and reused through Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0

“What the Taliban is doing is not Islam. I know Islam and Sharia, and what is written in the Quran. When the Taliban says something about Islam, it is so different from what we have read and learnt. We know this is not Islam and the Taliban is wrong. In Islam it says that a mahram is necessary for travel beyond 76 km, but the Taliban insists that a mahram is required for travel within 2km. What the Taliban imposes is only their opinion.”

- Interviewee from Kunar

“People who have less education are more influenced by the Taliban’s propaganda broadcast through Friday Namaz at mosques. They listen, come home and exert more pressure on women. More and more people are getting influenced by their ideology.”

- Interviewee from Jawzjan

“Before the Taliban came, not many here were interested in learning about religion. People were not practicing Islam, reading the Quran, praying, or wearing hijab, like they should have. They were more interested in learning about western ideas and values. Now, especially after the Taliban’s many bans, people are interested to know more about Islam. They are reading the Quran and going to Madrasas. The practice of religion has increased.”

- A woman CSO worker based in Kabul

“From historical times, Afghans have been faithful Muslims, abiding by the teachings of Islam. The recent extreme exclusionary developments that we observe in society cannot solely be because of the Taliban’s Coercive imposition of religious worship through violence. To believe that would be to accept that Afghans will embrace anything under duress. We know that is historically untrue. We know that Islam does not prohibit girls from receiving education. It is good that the Taliban should insist on the wearing of proper hijab and stop harassment and the mixing of unrelated women with men. But to deny girls access to schools, that is a grave injustice.”

- Survey respondent from Nangarhar

“People are following [Taliban’s bans] out of their own accord. First they announce a regulation –like don’t shave your beards. It makes an impact on people’s thinking. Slowly they accept, even willingly, these changes. But nobody is supporting the denial of women’s rights to education and work. People don’t understand the religious basis of these bans. Religion has nothing to do with it. It is politics. In the eyes of the world, the Taliban justify these bans in the name of religion. But not everything they are doing is based on Islamic values and beliefs. Islam has nothing to do with it. Islam tells us to learn and work. If the Taliban rulers understood Islam, they would not support this.”

- A male Pashtun journalist from Jawzjan

“Society has become more religious and extreme. Once when we were traveling by bus to Herat, during prayer time, the driver stopped. A Talib ordered that the women should pray saying that prayer is obligatory for both men and women. He made everyone get off, and no one dared to ask, “Where is the ablution facility or the mosque, and are you not aware of women’s monthly cycles?”

- Survey respondent from Farah

“You might assume that the extensive religious propaganda would increase people’s interest in religion and make them more pious. However, in comparison to heartfelt devotion to religious values which once existed when religious propaganda was not so pervasive in our society, far from increasing ‘religiosity’ it seems to have diminished. The Taliban claim to govern in the name of Islam and to implement Sharia, and believe their rigid system to be the only true Islamic system in the world. But they have created an atmosphere of oppression and coercion. Every extremist activity of the Taliban is justified in the name of religion. It is blotting the image of Islamic religion.”

- A male Pashtun journalist from Jawzjan

EDUCATION BANS

The Paradox of The Taliban's ban on education and fast tracking of madrasas!

It is curious that the Taliban leadership is completely unyielding on the ban against women's right to education (beyond primary grades for girls). It has made this discriminatory prohibition a key marker of their 'pure' Islamic faith. Yet, at the same time, they have flung open the doors to their state run network of madrasas (religious schools) to girls/women, with age no bar, and male teachers no inhibitor. It is striking that in barely two decades a desire for education seems to have taken root in large parts of the country, not just in the cities but also in many villages and across ethnicities, even among Pashtuns. Significantly, several surveys, including one focused on Afghan men's views (Bijlert.b, 2025) found that families who had never sent their daughters to school, identify the ban on higher education as the principal problem facing Afghanistan. Many Afghans view the Taliban group relenting on girls' access to education as the game changer in ending DFA's international ostracism.

"Afghans are willing to accept the compulsions of wearing Hijab, and having a Mahram, but they really value education. If the Taliban provides education, women are willing to put up with other things. This is the fundamental right everyone now wants to have."

- A Pashtun academic analyst

The epidemic of mental depression, suicide attempts by Afghan women, may have added to the desperation of families. The default option for families of early and forced marriage has reinforced the crisis. The survey based study 'Access to Education' by AHRC quotes a teacher from Kunduz province estimating that about 60 % of her female students have been forced into marriage after the ban on education. "With the schools closed, these girls have no hope for personal and educational development, they can't become self-sufficient, they can't work", she said (AHRC, 2024).

Our survey respondents speak of fathers/brothers who had been ambivalent if not negative about their daughter/sister's education, now willingly escorting them to private online English and computer classes.



“Parents are struggling to find alternative ways to educate their children, and in the process assure prospects for future employment. Some brothers want to help their sisters learn skills to get jobs. Those who support the oppression of women are in minority. Families are desperate to keep their listless daughters/sisters busy and seek out tailoring workshops, online education classes.”

- Male Uzbek journalist from Jowzjan

“[Families] are trying to be more open after seeing their daughter’s’ abject desolation at the discriminatory persecution of girls, and policies that cage them within four walls. Although no other girls in her extended family had ever been allowed to work, especially with men, now these very relatives accompany their daughters to English classes, and encourage them to go for training in para-medical institutions for nursing and midwifery classes.”

- A Hazara development professional in exile

The majority of our respondents confidently asserted that “discrimination is unacceptable in Islam” and opposed the Taliban’s policy of allowing boys to receive education while girls are deprived of it as a clear form of discrimination. Some of our interviewees quoting canonical text insisted that integral to the Islamic faith and practice was ‘to learn.’ However, there were others, especially in more conservative provinces and villages who welcomed the restrictions and the repression against women. One respondent from Bamyan shared how her father rebuked her saying, “What good did your education do for you”! and, “Education is not for girls! Now that the Taliban are in power, women should stay at home.”

Girls Losing Out on Education

During the decades of the Islamic Republic, some 2.5 million girls attended primary school in 2018, up from virtually zero in 2001; women in higher education stood at over 100,000 in 2021, an increase from 5,000 in 2001. UNESCO announced that in 2021 literacy rates among women had increased to 43 %, from the rate of 17% in 2001 (AHRC 2024, UN Women Gender Report 2024). Official Statistics of the Islamic Republic state that in 2020, 110,315 girls (28%) were enrolled in universities, and 3,561,264 girls (39%) were attending public schools at the primary and secondary levels.

However, according to an UNAMA report of April 2024, the percentage of girls/women with access to educational services has dropped from 39% to just 3% (AHRC, 2024).

Since the August 2021 takeover, in these four years the Taliban group has institutionally, systematically and extensively targeted the freedoms and rights of women, especially deprivation of the right to education through successive announcements, decrees, and laws. In December 2022, the Taliban banned girls’ education beyond 6th grade. This was followed in December 2024 with the choking of the last remaining institutions, the banning of education of women/girls in all medical and semi-higher technical education institutes.

“In hospitals they need female doctors. If women are denied access to study medicine and train, then a generation ahead, there will be no qualified female doctors. Will we women be forced to seek treatment from foreign doctors?”

- A survey respondent from Nangarhar

Adding to the education crisis is the profound upheaval affected in the educational curriculum and the mutation in the teaching staff. Several respondents averred that it “was collapsing the difference between religious and regular schools.” The AHRC’s report quotes the acting Higher Education Minister, Neda Muhammad Nadim, denouncing the previous curriculum imported from “Westerners and infidels” which brought “a version of debauchery and obscenity to Afghanistan.” It was declared un-Islamic and against Afghanistan’s cultural traditions. In January 2024 the primary school curriculum was changed and according to our survey respondents subjects such as culture, civic education, and art were dropped. At Universities the number of courses on “Islamic culture” was increased. A teacher anxious about the hollowing out of the secular curriculum in regular schools, stated, “Previously, religious subjects were taught for two hours a week, but now these subjects must be taught every day, and in the first three hours of each day. They must be taught in all grades (AHRC, 2024). Its impact on students was made clear by our survey respondents.

“My son still goes to (regular) school but has lost interest in his studies due to the lack of professional teachers. Illiterate mullahs have taken their place, and the entire education system has become religious and extremist. This is very dangerous.”

- Survey respondent from Kunduz

A compulsory text is Emirate Studies which celebrates the history of the Taliban group and includes chapters such as The Emirate Leader’s Recommendations, as well as Violence Against Women.” The latter upbraids foreigners’ instrumentalization of Afghan women’s rights and their reproduction of colonial discourses of gender and empowerment.

Not only has the quality of educational content been affected but professionally trained teachers too have been displaced by mullahs including in regular schools. According to the Ministry of Education’s annual report, “A collective exam was conducted for 33,900 scholars (Taliban cadre and clerics) in the centre and provinces of the country, as well as 1,300 Mullahs from Dar al-Hijrah, to assess their academic level, of which 21,300 were successful.” Educational certificates were issued qualifying them to enter schools and universities as teachers (AHRC, 2024).

Survey respondents expressed concern about their children’s future prospects.

“My cousins, uncles, and other relatives, believe that education should solely focus on religion, and the sciences are unnecessary. They believe knowledge should only be in religious studies, and everyone should become religious scholars, especially as the Taliban encourages and directs students towards religious schools.”

- A student FGD participant from Kunduz

While criticism about the deterioration in school education standards and concern over the spread of the madrasa network was dominant in the observations of our respondents, there were some who defended the new system.

“Enrolling boys in religious schools has both positive and negative effects. If boys turn solely to religious schools, we risk losing modern systems, but if they receive proper religious education, they can contribute positively to society. However, if the religious school system becomes the only option, we will lack doctors, engineers, and lawyers in the future.”

- Herat Townhall Meeting

Madrasas in Every Village

The Taliban group has phenomenally expanded its investment in a countrywide network of madrasas. (Nasimi, 2024), According to the Education Minister more than 3.6 million students (boys and girls) are enrolled at these state run 21,000 centres of Islamic Education which are registered, not to count the 24,000 unregistered ones founded by local power brokers seeking to show off their power by opening a madrasa in every village. The Taliban has set up at least one large madrasa in every province which it is reported can accommodate 2000 plus students with dormitory facilities. The network far outnumbers the 18,000 public and private schools (Wahaj, 2024). The number of religious Madrasas created by the Taliban in just one year is 13% (2,920 Madrasas) more than the total number of schools established over several decades by the Ministry of Education under the previous government (AHRC, 2024).

What adds to anxiety at this proliferating network of madrasas is the fear that they are modelled on the Pakistani qawmi madrasas and inculcate an extreme version of political Islam. It was in such madrasas near the Afghan border that the Afghan Mujahideen and indeed the early generation of Talibs, refugees in Pakistan, were indoctrinated. The concern is that the madrasas will groom and prepare a new generation of jihadists and individuals (Balkhi, 2025) who believe in Taliban values of rigidity, intolerance and the tactics of violence. It is noticeable that in the multi ethnic provinces in the northeast where competing local power brokers still exist, the Taliban group has prioritized the setting up of state run madrasas with the likely intention of creating a loyal Taliban cadre (Wahaj, 2024). An astute religious scholar was quite blunt. “One reason for madrasas is to have influence on non-Pashtuns. North East Afghanistan has a large population of Uzbek and Tajiks. Indoctrination through the religious schools would be an effective way to instill support for the Taliban’s ideology” (Fabrizio, 2024).

It appears that the Taliban group’s education policy is focused on making higher education an extension of their movement by theocratising and instrumentalizing its structure, curricula and policing its injunctions (Afghan Witness, 2023).While some of our interviewees and survey respondents were anxious and critical at the proliferation of madrasa, others were openly welcoming.

“Madrasa type of education is such that youth are being raised to become extremist, radical, violent, and religious figures (mullahs) who will harm themselves, their families, society, and their country.”

- Survey respondent from Kunduz.

The ease with which young minds are being indoctrinated was evident in some of the observations of survey respondents and interviewees:

“My nephew, who is very young, on his return from the madrasa tells me, ‘I am your Mahram, you cannot go out of the home without a mahram. I will grow up and be your Mahram’.”

- Interviewee from Nangarhar

Madrasas: Welcome Mat for Girls

The expansion of these religious schools for indoctrinating youth in the Taliban’s radical Islamist orthodoxy and misogyny is worrying not only for boys but also for the many girl students eagerly turning to these schools as the only option available to move outside their homes and learn something. Statistics provided by the Deputy Minister of Education in 2023 state that 28 % (95,662) of the students enrolled in the Taliban run madrasas are girls between the ages of 4-24 years. Quixotically a vast majority of teachers in these madrasas are male, even in the Madrasas established by the Taliban for women and girls. Only 5% of the teachers are female, and come from Taliban affiliated families. They too were schooled by male teachers in madrasas.

“Going to a madrasa is the only way girls can get an education. They see it as an opportunity to get freedom and go out of the house and get higher education. In Mazhar and Balkh, more girls are going to Madrasa than boys. More Madrasas are growing for girls and not boys.”

- A male CSO worker from Balkh

Afghan scholar Sajad Malawee in an incisive critique of propagandists who suggest that such religious schools enable “female agency”, avers that religious schools will increase the repression on women. He argues that “religious schools are a tool for appeasing Afghan women.” Girls are driven to these schools because all formal educational institutions are closed to them. The teachings in religious schools support

the Taliban’s world view and inculcate the group’s values and beliefs. They effectively strengthen the dominant patriarchal discourse of women as obedient home makers and reproducers. Educating women in these schools ultimately convinces them to accept the current oppressive conditions, and this ultimately contributes to the continuation of the Taliban’s rule”, emphasised Malawee (2024).

As evidence, he alluded to the Taliban’s use of schoolgirls from madrasas in Kabul to outflank the women’s protest movement “Bread, Work, Freedom” and to show that women supported the Taliban. Their indoctrination was evidenced further in these girls’ social media posts which a senior development professional noted, critically upbraiding others for wearing ‘free clothing’ or a thin hijab. These intolerant and extremist observations were in line with the Taliban’s injunction to forswear such clothing and to prevent others from wearing them.

Drawing upon interviews with teachers, AHRC’s report claims that instructors in these schools propagate adherence to religious instructions, early marriage, the virtue of polygamy, raising children with a religious and jihadi mind-set, the obligation to defend the Islamic system, the value and importance of jihad, hatred towards other religions, narrating stories of the Taliban’s wars and comparing them to the battles of the Prophet Muhammad’s era, labelling the previous government as corrupt, and opposing the Taliban’s enemies.” (AHRC , 2024)

“The boys and girls who went to madrasas remain in contact with the Taliban. They are used to spy on the communities. In madrasas controlled by the Taliban, they use the youngest boys and girls to report on their families.”

- An interviewee from Laghman

“Even very young children who go there start acting like the Taliban. Most families are used to sending sons to madrasas. Some are forced to send daughters to madrasa because schools are closed.”

- An interviewee from Herat

Whether it is a hyper anxiety, several respondents and interviewees regarded the Taliban’s madrasa policy as systematic and intentional, aimed at radicalizing Afghan youth and mobilising boys and girls for jihad. An Afghan male development professional described his own personal experience to substantiate his sense

of alarm. He had returned from Umrah and many of his relatives called on him to show respect. A young relative studying in a madrasa, also called upon him. He was dismayed that his young relative was full of praise for the Taliban and could not imagine wanting to be anything other than a Talib himself.

“A million students will graduate from Madrasas by 2030. These young boys learning in Madrasa, are not in touch with modern subjects such as science. Their studies are concentrated on religious studies -the Quran and Sharia. Their teacher is a Talib or a Mullah. After two to three years of exposure, their minds are deeply influenced.”

- A male CSO worker from Kabul

“For the Taliban entrenching social control through the madrasa network is not about establishing religious dominance, but rather of producing thousands of trained suicide bombers . This is extremely dangerous for both Afghanistan and the world. The world must realize what a grave mistake they are making by continuing to cooperate with the Taliban.”

- Survey respondent from Kunduz

“It is a site for radicalizing boys. They keep saying Madrasa is only to learn Islamic studies, it should be recognised as a Jihadi training centre. Radicalisation of boys is clearly for Jihad and that of girls is similar because they train them to be good, obedient wives and work to serve husbands and raise Jihadi sons. It is dangerous. During the Republic years, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) opposed the government, when they tried to establish madrasas to stop children from going to madrasas in Pakistan. But as was feared, the authorities could not control the workings of these religious schools. On inspection it was found that boys and girls were being radicalised . They were quarrelling with their families to stop them from watching TV or listening to music.”

Eminent Afghan Human Rights advocate

The Taliban leadership has shaped its education system, the institutions and the curriculum to strengthen their political and military goals and align it with the movement’s violent and misogynistic ideology. As an astute human rights advocate asserted, the Taliban’s education policy is a tool to control society, it is politically driven.

Early Marriage Compulsions

Commonplace is the refrain, “My father wants me to get married, because as he says ‘you are not doing anything, then you should get married and have children.” A young woman from Laghman province who months before had been working as a freshly trained midwife and respected at home for bringing in money, was now jobless and rendered useless. She shared her fear stating ,“I’ll have to get married to a conservative man who doesn’t want his wife to work.” The AHRC Survey found that 66% of the victims of forced and early marriage were schoolgirls, and 33% were university female students. Adding to the psychological harm, 83% of the victims reported being subjected to physical violence (beatings) by their husbands, fathers, brothers, and other male family members. 91% of the victims mentioned that they suffered from mental health issues and severe depression, while 25% admitted that they had frequently considered suicide and had attempted it, but according to their own statements, they were unsuccessful (AIHRC 2025).

“There was a panic wave in 2021-2022, girls were marrying at extremely young ages. Everyone was afraid that their daughter would be taken away by force by the Taliban, if found to be single. It was out of concern for their safety that in Kabul families were agreeing to their daughters to marry really old men to escape the country. After a while the panic subsided as the threat of forced marriage decreased.”

- A female CSO worker from Kabul

There were still cases in certain provinces, we were told by CSO workers , of young teenage girls being abducted, if Taliban members liked them. Talib would falsely accuse a young teenage girl, saying “She looked at me. Now I have to marry her.”

Landay* verses

“When sisters sit together, they always praise their brothers.

When brothers sit together, they sell their sisters to others”

“You sold me to an old man. May God destroy your home.

I was your daughter.”

Mothers with good reason are worried about their minor daughters being pushed into a forced marriage. An interviewee from Farah province recalled an anxious mother whose daughter was 14 years old and engaged to a man who was 14 years older who had another wife. She was already impregnated by her fiancé before their wedding. The mother had no say in the matter. Her husband and son decided on the marriage driven partially by their distressed economic condition. Also, amongst the Pashtun community, it is culturally believed that if a girl gets married, even if she is very young, she'll get more respect and responsibility. It was cold comfort to the mother when there were so many stories of young girls of the same age, who had given birth and developed life threatening health complications. UNICEF recorded Afghanistan having one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates with 638 mothers dying for every 100,000 births in 2019, exacerbated by acute shortages of qualified birth attendants.

Extreme economic distress is pushing many families to marry off their minor daughters. Also, there are instances of mature women agreeing to marry economically comfortable Talibs. In Kabul, in one such case, a 27-year-old woman (beyond the desirable marriageable age of 20 years), willingly agreed to marry a Talib from Nimroz. He proposed to make her his second wife and provide for her. She would stay in Kabul and he would travel between his two wives and his two homes.

ECONOMIC DISTRESS ALIENATES SUPPORT

I grind almonds and sell them,
With that, I buy oil and rice.
We have no sugar, no rice, no oil
Just surviving on these almonds.

- Kandahar respondent

Social media monitoring conducted by the Civic Media Observatory from 2021 to 2022, showed that during this initial period, there was approval and support for the Taliban within Afghanistan. For Afghans who were living through violent conflict, random bomb explosions, midnight raids, and facing threats from multiple armed groups against whom the government could not offer them protection or justice, the Taliban takeover offered a gleam of stability. For Afghans from the conservative factions of society, who resented the opportunities provided by the international community to women in the development aid sector and the gender quotas which vaulted women into public office, and jobs in government offices, educational institutes and businesses, the Taliban takeover promised a return to the patriarchal order. Rampant corruption had eroded optimism about the democratic order and the Republican governments. These developments made some people more open to the establishment of a pak Islamic moral order.

Four years later, much of that support for the Taliban rule, has waned, especially because of deepening economic distress. The interviewees we spoke to, irrespective of gender, class, location or age, emphasized economic hardships as the most pressing concern they faced. International sanctions have dealt a heavy blow, foreign funded development assistance has been choked and the banking system has collapsed and access to the country's foreign exchange reserves frozen (Pandey, 2021). Organizations and businesses have closed down. Afghanistan's economy has contracted by 27% with unemployment having

doubled (UN News, 2024). Only 40% of Afghans now have access to electricity, according to UN reports. One third of Afghanistan's population faces acute food insecurity (Security Council Report, 2025).

Women have been excluded from the formal labor market and barred from working in commercial establishments, government ministries, judicial services, foreign embassies, UN system, NGO sector and in educational institutes (except as teachers in primary school for girls). Businesses like beauty parlours, gyms, and education centres have had to shut shop. Even the few remaining spaces- the health sector, tailoring workshops, bakeries struggle to cope with mandatory requirements such the availability of a mahram, and the harassment of the Maruf. Once multi income families have been rendered into single income households. With only six per cent of Afghan women working outside of the household in 2024, restrictions on women are projected to cost the Afghan economy nearly \$920 million between 2024 and 2026, according to a UNDP report (UNDP 2024, UN News, 2025).



Restrictions on women's rights and employment are significantly hampering economic recovery in Afghanistan. The UNDP report notes women's participation in the workforce dropped dramatically — from 11% in 2022 to just 6% in 2023 — as a consequence of restrictions placed on them by the Taliban. In Afghanistan, women have played an important role in running businesses and creating jobs for both women and men, as more and more men took up arms after the Soviet invasion. In 2020 AWCCI identified 2,471 formal and 56,000 informal women-owned businesses, providing 130,000 jobs. Since then the Taliban's policies have targeted and undermined women's workforce participation, eroding their livelihood sustainability (USIP, 2024).

What has added to the distress is the prospect of intergenerational hollowing out of the economic prospects for the future. There is the foreclosing of the future possibility of acquiring knowledge and skills for economic advancement for not only girls but also boys. Technical and scientific education is being devalued and the new educational curriculum and the proliferating network of madrasas will turn out clerics, not technologists and scientists. The crushing blow is that the closure of technical and medical schools for women will deny access to health services for a generation and more of women.

"I dreamt of becoming a doctor, but now I can't. My sister used to work in a legal institution, but now she's unemployed, and our family's economic situation has been greatly affected."

- Survey respondent from Nimruz

"Before the collapse of the republic I was a lecturer in a university. Now I do not have permission to work as a teacher due to the bans. I lost my NGO job as well. My mother was a school teacher and she too lost her job ...Since 2021 we both are unemployed. Now I stay at home. The economic situation is very bad for us now."

- An interviewee from Kunar

It is not only the women who have suffered. Interviewees share that even the qualified men in their families struggle to find work, with many working as daily wage laborers despite having advanced degrees. This has created a sense of frustration in men for their inability to fulfil the role of providers for their families. The distress over worsening economic conditions and the struggle for survival has heightened domestic

discord leading to increasing arguments, abuse and violence within families.

"I wanted to go ahead in my education. I have done LLB. I wanted to do my Masters. But I cannot do it. I am stuck at home. And my brother is working as a daily wage labourer despite having a degree in computer science, and our life now depends on that income."

- An interviewee from Nangarhar

The desperation for livelihood opportunities and finding a stable source of income has driven many to join the Taliban. Our interviewees believed that the reason the Taliban cadre has grown considerably in the last few years, is not just because people have started believing in their ideology and supporting them, but because the devastating economic situation in the country has made people desperate to take up any and every job available. They felt that after 2021, the only people who have prospered in Afghanistan are members of the Taliban and people who have joined them.

"Most people are not supporting the Taliban out of choice. They are supporting them due to fear and insecurity of life. They are unemployed. Those working with the Taliban are doing so because of economic need. They mostly disagree with Taliban's rule and regulations."

- An interviewee from Badakhshan

The financial burden has caused heightened stress in men. A large number of men who used to work as journalists, employees in foreign companies or as teachers in educational institutions, have faced a reduction in their salaries, but their economic burden has doubled.

"I am the sole breadwinner. I have two kids. My parents are dependent on me. My wife used to work as a teacher in a private school. But now she is at home because the government does not allow it. 60% of my old colleagues are now jobless. Now I get 10,000 Afghani as salary. Before 2021, I was earning 28,000 Afghani as salary."

- A male journalist from Jawzjan

The recuperation of men's status as sole breadwinner restored their authority, but increased their stress levels with the disappearance of the family's double income economic comfort. For women the loss of being able to contribute to the family's income, adversely impacted



their position, and deprived them of the consideration previously shown to them in family decision making. Also loss of job meant the imminent threat of early marriage of girls, with families keen to have one less mouth to feed. Girls sitting idle have been forced to marry older men, Taliban leaders or become second or third wives for the sake of economic security. This situation has also led to men exercising greater control on the decisions and autonomy of women in the family. They now dictate where women in their families should or should not go, what they should wear, and how they should behave. The threat of domestic violence and abuse has increased in many parts of the country with overall frustration increasing, including of unemployed or underemployed men. Forced confinement in the home space, a space not free from violence, has led to mental health issues.

“I lost my job and had no income. Before I was dismissed, my husband treated me very well, but after the Emirate took over, he started behaving very aggressively. I now spend most of my time living at my father’s house.”

- Survey respondent from Bamyan

“Economic difficulties and the inability to meet family expenses have led men to react to the family’s needs with violence, as employment opportunities are very limited and people’s incomes are falling.”

- FGD participant from Bamyan

A few interviewees remarked that the men in their families have remained supportive of their [women’s] dreams and aspirations. Even others of a more conservative bent, who earlier had opposed women studying, working, or venturing out, seeing the dire

economic implications of women’s exclusion, are supporting women’s demand for access to employment and questioning the Taliban (Bijlert b. 2025).

“Community people realize that men and women both need to work to support their families. Female headed households where women are tailoring and supporting their family are common and always have been. They see the positive side of this and support women’s rights, at least the right to work.”

- Interviewee from Nangarhar Province

Education and healthcare were the two sectors where women were able to work even after 2022. Women also worked as teachers in girls primary schools and madrasas. Salaries of teachers and female government employees were already cut when the Taliban took power in 2021. But in June 2024, Taliban reduced to minimum wage all female government employee’s salary regardless of position, qualification or experience (Jozwiak, 2024). In December 2024, midwifery and nursing training institutes were closed to women (Druri & Gharanai, 2024).

“I used to work as a midwife. After the ban, I am jobless. I think about my future and I feel I will be forced to marry a conservative man who doesn’t want his wife to work. My father wants me to get married, because he says – as you are not doing anything, you should then get married and have children. When I was working, it was good for the family because I was earning money. Everyone was happy. Now I have lost that position and respect.”

- A young interviewee from Laghman

Under the Taliban's tight surveillance and arbitrary decisions, tailoring, bakeries and other small businesses that women run from homes have been forced to take down any banners or advertisements, which make getting customers difficult.

"After the government changed, first, they painted over our salon sign, and later the salon's working hours were limited and eventually shut down. They warned my husband that if a beauty parlour for women was opened again, he would be imprisoned."

- Survey respondent from Farah

"Earlier my sisters and I were going to school and a technical training institute but since 2021 life has changed. Now only my youngest brother and sister go to school. My other sister and I do tailoring at home. We had a banner above our house to advertise, but the Taliban took it down and now it is difficult for us to get customers because people don't know and cannot find out that we do tailoring here."

- A young interviewee from Jawzjan

"Economic Distress has hit certain vulnerable and marginalized communities hard. Drawing upon our survey/ interviewee sample, among the worst affected were former government employees, female headed households, women human rights defenders. This is not to ignore the economic plight of IDPs and rural communities which are beyond the scope of this report."

- Former Government Employees

"The biggest problem is the loss of jobs. I [public prosecutor] cannot apply for a job. During the republic, I fought a case, in which a Taliban member was convicted. The Taliban threatened me then. So now I cannot apply for a job out of fear that the Taliban will find out and take revenge."

- Interviewee is a former legal prosecutor from southern Afghanistan

"My husband was working with the Afghan military... On the day the Taliban took over, he came home, saying "I can't put my family or my life in danger. I have to go to Iran." So he left. Since that day, I have not heard from him. I know people in

Iran, I reached out to them but they could not find him. ... I used to work in the Ministry of Women's Affairs. But now I have no job. I have two young sons. I live in my neighbour's house. I have no home of my own, no income. The community leader helps me get humanitarian aid and that sustains us."

- An interviewee from eastern Afghanistan

Female Headed Households

Estimates indicate that 20 percent of the households in Afghanistan are female headed (Halaimzai et al., 2024). Women have lost their spouses, fathers, brothers and sons to the conflict. Also, after the Taliban takeover many men viewed as 'collaborators' with the previous system, have gone into hiding. Female headed households with no adult men are currently among the most vulnerable groups. These women, as they lack a mahram, are unable to go out and find work to support their families. Many resort to running small businesses like bakeries, tailoring from their homes or undertaking domestic work, teaching online classes for survival while others depend on humanitarian aid that comes in or money sent by family members living abroad, in order to sustain themselves. With mobility severely constrained, even going to the market or hospital exposes them to huge risks.

"When there is no work and a widow has no breadwinner to support her family, it has a profoundly negative impact on her mental well-being."

- Survey respondent from Jawzjan

Respondents were particularly bitter and resentful about US funds propping up the survival of the Taliban government and believed that were the US to stop the flow of these support funds, the regime would collapse. Several influential politicians, including former Afghanistan VP Amrullah Saleh¹ and US Congressman Tim Burchett² have decried the US' funding of the Taliban, ostensibly in the name of humanitarian assistance (Manchanda, 2025). However, as "Afgreen"³ An Afghan opposition movement detailed, the allocation of the \$446,103,076 million that the Biden administration paid to the Taliban under the rubric of Operation Enduring Sentinel in 2024 seemingly has no

1 Link to Saleh's tweet - https://x.com/amrullahsaleh2/status/1609479297260994560?s=46&t=ue7RG83ShK-seR_gXTX-Pg

2 Link to Burchett's tweet - https://x.com/reptimburchett/status/1876294194941292842?s=46&t=ue7RG83ShK-seR_gXTX-Pg

3 Link to referred post - https://x.com/agtafghanistan/status/1875988331491905585?s=46&t=ue7RG83ShK-seR_gXTX-Pg

beneficiaries other than the Taliban. In addition, there is the claimed shipment of \$40mn to \$80 mn in cash to the Taliban controlled Central Bank in Kabul every week or ten days. Evidently, the US is persuaded that the Taliban is focused on establishing internal control within Afghanistan and that it should be bolstered in its competition against trans-national Islamist terrorist groups such as Daesh and Islamic State (Khorasan) (Manchanda, 2025). But there could be a disruption in the continuing “engagement” of the Trump administration with the Taliban if the US’s negative vote on the UNGA Resolution A/79/L.100 (7 July, 2025) is any indicator. (<https://usun.usmission.gov/explanation-of-vote-on-the-situation-in-afghanistan/>). However the European countries continued to endorse the policy of continuing engagement as indicated in the support for UNGA Resolution A/79/L.100.

At the popular level there appears to be considerable cynicism about the international community’s continuing support for the Taliban regime and a negative assessment of humanitarian aid flows to Afghanistan.

“They [Taliban] do whatever they want, ignoring the poor and the widows. In the past, we were given some charity, but now they take it themselves.”

- Survey respondent from Helmand

“There is huge economic distress. The Taliban are Pashtun. The 80 Million dollars humanitarian aid is manipulated by the Taliban. They are giving it to their followers, soldiers and to Pashtuns. Then Tajik and Hazaras. Very little aid goes to FHHs and other needy groups. The situation is dire. Those who receive some aid can survive. But Farsi speaking people get nothing.”

- An Afghan WHRD in exile

CRISIS OF MENTAL HEALTH

We have no health left; we are wounded souls,
With suffering hearts, full of untold stories and burdened minds..
Where should we go?
Who can we cry for justice, for the rule of the fair?

- Baghlan Survey respondent

The women's mental health crisis in Afghanistan made its way into international media headlines when the number of female suicides in the country started surging from 2022 onwards. Globally the number of men dying by suicide is more than double than that of women (World Health Organization, 2021). But research conducted by The Guardian using figures shared by healthcare workers in 11 provinces showed that barring one province, in the other 10, female suicide deaths and attempts outnumbered those of men (Nader, 2023). An investigation conducted by Afghan Witness showed that from April 2022 to February 2024, there were 195 cases of female suicides, largely attributed to the Taliban's violence and the threat of forced and early marriages (Afghan Witness, 2024). These numbers are likely to be the tip of the iceberg. Taliban regime's suppression of media, voices of dissent, coupled with societal stigma have prevented real reports from coming out.

Our Survey and interviews indicate that the closure of schools and work opportunities are viewed as major triggers for young women going into deep mental depression, suicidal ideation and finally suicide.

"I was preparing for the university entrance exam when the Taliban announced that the university was banned for us. At that time, two other girls who were preparing for the university exam with me, committed suicide."

- A young woman interviewee from Bamyan

"All women are depressed and stressed. My daughter was studying midwifery earlier. When it was banned, she came home depressed, and did not eat for many days and felt hopeless."

- An interviewee from Baghlan

More than 95% of women respondents and interviewees in our study shared that they are suffering from some kind of mental health condition. They repeatedly stressed that their mental health issue is not their individual problem, but one that is connected deeply to their surroundings, to their grim reality and bleak future. Their struggles and suffering are understood as resulting from a system that has excluded them, stripped them of their rights and locked them up.

"Mentally, I have reached a point where I no longer react to anything. I have lost all hope."

"My body goes numb, and I have become forgetful over these years. Half of my body aches, and I am living through the worst days of my life. I face this illness and these problems every day. The lack of education for girls is painful for mothers and fathers."

- Participants of FGD in Herat

Having been stripped of their rights, and now struggling with poverty, threat of violence and an uncertain future, women shared that they felt lost and hopeless. They suffer extreme stress, sleeplessness, anxiety and depression. The home which was once a safe space, has become a cage for them. Economic

distress has strained personal relationships, especially in families where once both women and men were contributing to the family income, and men are left shouldering the economic burden at a time of under and no employment. This has added to men's stress, anger and frustration. For women who have lost their position as breadwinners, disrespect from their family members has increased. This has led to frequent arguments at home sometimes leading to domestic violence and abuse.

"The fact is that fights and arguments break out due to unemployment. We can't afford to have full meals. It causes great distress and has a significant impact on family life."

- An FGD participant from Farah

"Not just me, but the entire population of Afghanistan is facing mental health issues. On one hand, there's poverty and unemployment, and on the other, women are banned from work and education. I've sought online therapy multiple times, but it hasn't helped because the situation remains unchanged. If this continues, my mental health will deteriorate further."

- Survey respondent from Badakhshan

Within an institutionalized system of gender persecution, where men are constantly exposed to Taliban's misogynist propaganda, there is legitimization of violence against women within families, communities and in public space. This has led to severe mental health issues for women.

"My mental state is deteriorating. I often think about killing myself to escape the hardships of life. My husband cannot work, and my brother-in-law beats me, blaming me for going out to work. But I have to, as my children depend on me."

- An FGD participant from Farah

"I feel a deep sense of insecurity and am afraid of going out into society. When I think about this situation, I become overwhelmed with hopelessness and severe depression, wondering why, despite all our efforts, we have to live in a way that makes us feel unwanted and worthless in society."

- survey respondent from Bamyan

Taliban's rules have banned women from what had been their usual leisure activities, picnics in public

parks, going to gyms, listening to music and singing. Wedding celebrations are no longer festive. Female students of the Jamiat-e Eslah run madrasas, show up at wedding parties and scold women, telling them listening to music is haram and they should listen to recitations from the Quran (Ahmadi and Lakhani, 2016). Women are weighed down by constant fear and dread of violence, and the hopelessness of nowhere to go to for help. They worry for themselves, but more so for their daughters, for whom the prospects of education and careers have been cruelly clipped. Instead they will grow up caged with early marriage as the only option. Crippling poverty has taken away the chance of a good education and career for even their sons. More than 60% of our participants shared that their primary cause for stress was worry about their children's future.

"When schools and universities are closed, society only sees women and girls as tools for reproduction. We had experienced freedom for so long, with so many dreams and ambitions, but now we have no goals in life, and I spend my days on sleeping pills. This has especially affected my daughter."

- Survey Respondent from Badakhshan

Mental health concerns manifest themselves through physical health problems and bodily ailments. But when families are struggling to put food on their tables and ensure a roof over their heads, mental health ends up becoming a lower priority. Healthcare infrastructure is woefully inadequate in Afghanistan. Even in priority areas such as reproductive health care, a 2023 Survey of health care workers in urban areas showed that half of the respondents (42.9%) reported a decrease in availability of maternal and child care, and 43.8% stated that conditions for providing care were 'worse' or 'much worse' than before (Glass et al, 2023). In mental health the condition is much worse, in both the lack of trained mental health professionals and funding infrastructure (WHO, 2023). NGOs have been holding mental health camps and clinics to address this gap. But these camps are mostly project based and cannot provide sustainable long term support.

"The anxiety over our financial problems and how to build my children's future on a salary of 5000 Afghani is putting a lot of pressure on my mental state. I have no hope for the future and fear that if I do not continue teaching, I might end up like other women, struggling with depression while sitting in the corner of the house. So, I make do with this salary and continue with my work."

- Survey respondent from Jawzjan.

Some research participants admitted that they are dependent on antidepressants and cannot function without them. Reports substantiate rising drug dependency among women and girls (Hasht-e-Subh Daily, 2025). For women who are at risk -WHRDs, NGO and government workers, the issue of safety is a deterrent from visiting a psychiatrist, lest their identity be revealed.

“In Afghanistan, when I came back, there were very few trustworthy centres that I could go to. The therapist might listen to my story and share my problem with others. Because of my security vulnerability I cannot go anywhere. I suffer from mental problems because of that. The trauma of having to face the Taliban has made my mental health worse.”

- Interviewee from Herat

The mental health crisis among women and girls has caused grave anxiety among Afghan fathers who are fearful of losing their daughters to depression or drug use. The situation has become so dire that men who were not keen on their daughters' education or working, have started getting their daughters enrolled in tailoring and language lessons to keep them occupied. Girls too are struggling to recover their mental balance by getting enrolled in anything that will give them a sense of purpose, or an opportunity to get out of the house, including enrolling in madrasas. Others seek solace in reading the Quran, or making handicrafts.

RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

I am a woman, I am the world.
I love my freedom ...
If the boots are on my throat, the fist on my mouth,
I swear by the light of my heart,
I will not stay in this terror.”

- Adilah law student Kabul

When the Taliban took power, for the second time in Afghanistan, they believed that like in the first Islamic Emirate in the 1990s, they would use brute force and punitive mechanisms to force Afghan women into submission. That they would roll back the changes made in the past twenty years, push women back into their homes, silence their voices, and rapidly re-establish their misogynist patriarchal order. But the Afghan women in 2021 weren't the women of the 1990s. Many of them had survived the Taliban's first cruel rule and others had grown up listening to the stories about the harsh rules and barbaric punishments of the time (Harrison & Makoi, 2019). The two decades of the Republic opened up opportunities for women and the desire for education, careers and independence took root.

Even then there were constraints. An overall environment of insecurity, of violence and random bombings inhibited women's movement. Also there was disparity in access to resources and opportunities for women in urban versus rural spaces. Widespread corruption, as indicated by some respondents, resulted in many qualified people being frustratingly sidelined for jobs and opportunities. Also as the United States' own audit process SIGAR showed, there were huge wastages. Despite these limitations, there was a remarkable expansion in the opening up of spaces for women, including non-elite women, to assert agency and dream of living lives of dignity. There was the possibility of access to justice, availability of

protection laws: EAW and if the police and courts remained unresponsive, there were women's rights collectives, and a responsive international community (Manchanda & Kundu, 2023).

The Taliban 2.0 on taking over imposed a blanket ban on women's freedoms but this time there was resistance especially against the ban on education. Protests led by the opposition political body, National Resistance Front of Afghanistan erupted in various parts of the country. Feminists, democratic activists joined in to demand decentralization of power, multiculturalism, social justice, education and food (Bergen, 2021). Public protests took place in Kabul, Jalalabad, Asadabad, Khost, Herat and more provinces. In the violent crackdown, protesters were beaten, tortured, shot at and forcibly disappeared (Washington Post, 2022). In late 2022, when secondary schools closed down for girls and the Taliban banned women from university education, Afghan women and girls took to the streets. Protest marches took place in several provinces including Kabul, Takhar, Herat, Nangarhar (Shaheed, 2022). Slogans such as "Rights for everyone or no one!", "Education is our right!" and "Bread, Work, Freedom!" reverberated across the country. The protests started from Hazara dominated areas near the University, in Kabul (Rezaei, 2024). The protesters stood their ground facing Taliban's use of tear gas, tasers and water cannons. Despite continuing protests, the Taliban did not relax the ban. Instead the crackdown on the protesters intensified.

A prominent Afghan WHRD told us women protesters

were arrested, imprisoned, sexually assaulted, tortured and some were forcibly disappeared or killed. Mobile phones and personal items were seized and checked. In interviews conducted by Amnesty international, published in August 2022, women protesters spoke about the torture and violence they were subjected to, and how they were released only when their families signed a declaration, promising they would not continue their activism in the future. Journalists were also arrested and mercilessly beaten for reporting on the protests. A female protester told Amnesty International, "There was no court, no charges and no due process. We were abducted from the streets, kept in a private jail for several days during which we had no access to our family, lawyer or any other official... Some of the women and girls who were with me in the same room never returned and none of us knew what happened to them" (Amnesty International, 2022).

"Those who protested were beaten and even imprisoned. We saw it in Kabul, and in Kandahar as well, where most of the protesters were our neighbors. Most of them were taken away, and now there is no trace of them, even now."

- A survey respondent from Kandahar

The family members of detained protesters were also arrested, with male relatives being subjected to electric shocks. The General Directorate of Intelligence persistently tracked down protestors and activists (AWPMC, 2024). They raided safe houses, people's homes, arbitrarily detained, arrested activists and journalists. Families of those who were released had to handover property papers to the Taliban as surety, and sign declarations for swearing any future involvement. When videos of protesters being arrested and kidnapped appeared on social media, it spread fear. Many protesters fled the country, others went into hiding (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Some of our interviewees shared that Taliban members would post photos of the protesting women on social media, branding them as agents of the west, or corrupted women, inciting hatred and violence against them from within the community, further endangering their lives. One of our key informants shared with us that some of the protesters were released on the condition that they would work as Taliban's spies and would share information about other protesters with the authorities. Following these widespread crackdowns on protesters, resistance went underground.

"Yes, I participated once in a protest and was beaten."

I sent videos to a foreign TV broadcaster, but it made no impact, as the international community seems indifferent to our situation."

- A survey respondent from Badakhshan

Women feel an overwhelming sense of hopelessness following the failure of their high risk public protests, especially as they failed to get the Taliban to budge even an inch. Some of the survey respondents noted that international attention had shifted away from the suffering of Afghan women. Foreign governments, far from putting pressure on the Taliban, were transactionally engaging with them. India for one had resumed humanitarian assistance and re-established communication at the Ministerial level in May 2025. Subsequently in July Russia became the first country to formally recognise the Taliban Islamic Emirate. Also, most of the leadership for mobilizing civil society has left the country or are in hiding. The few remaining CSOs face routine harassment from the authorities. No one seems able to organize and bring people together for collective resistance, again.

"Twenty years ago, during the Taliban's first regime, very few supported them because of their harsh treatment and extreme policies. Everyone fought back. Now after 20 years we see the same thing happening and we cannot do anything. We have to accept that this regime is going to stay because the foreign countries have started accepting them."

- A young woman interviewee from Badakhshan

"Who has the courage to gather? Their [Taliban] intelligence network is strong. If they see you twice on the same route, they interrogate you, asking who you are, where are you coming from, and where are you going. I have never participated in any protest gathering."

- Survey respondent from Kunduz

Big demonstrations have paused, but resistance has not stopped. Protests have been driven underground and resistance has emerged in new forms. A few demonstrations still take place, on a smaller scale, led predominantly by Hazara women in Kabul and a couple of other provinces. An interviewee felt that such continued resistance from the community has yielded some results. In these areas, the Taliban has not enforced restrictions as strictly as elsewhere. Does that explain the existence of some limited educational opportunities like language classes, computer training

centres in Kabul and Bamyan which have sizable Hazara populations.

“Here in Kabul, there is a lot of control and many check points. Mondays and Wednesdays Maruf will come and exercise control on all Hazara areas, but there is less control here than in some other provinces. This is because resistance is high here. Therefore there are some avenues still open for women.”

- An interviewee from Kabul

Women have resorted to finding other modes of protest. Protests have gone indoors and found expression on social media platforms. In 2021 a large number of Afghan women had protested against the Taliban’s imposition of strict dress codes for female students which consisted of long black or blue abayas, chadors and burqas, by posting photos of themselves in colourful traditional Afghan clothing. The hashtags #DoNotTouchMyClothes and #AfghanCulture accompanied the posts. The campaign was aimed at showcasing Afghanistan’s culture and historical tradition, and challenging the Taliban’s rules as being not in line with Afghan culture or identity (BBC, 2021).

Indoor protests and intimate protest gatherings have become common. For instance, women display banners and posters with their messages and upload them on social media. But Taliban’s increasing surveillance has made indoor protests dangerous as well. ‘Spies’ or Talib sympathizers within the community were found to infiltrate women’s gatherings. It led to raids and detentions. Women continued these protests online despite facing harassment and trolling from Taliban supporters on social media (Chandran & Hakmi, 2023). As restrictions increased women started covering their faces and using anonymous IDs for protection.

Following the Taliban’s promulgation of the PVPV Law in 2024 which forbade women from talking loudly or singing in public, Afghan women took to social media and uploaded videos of themselves singing, in an act of brave defiance. They concealed their faces, hid their identities, but their message was clear - We will not be silenced! (Mukhtar, 2024).

Afghanistan’s singing sisters defying the Taliban from under a burka

9 March 2024

Share Save

Kawoon Khamoosh
BBC 100 Women



The sisters became a social media phenomenon. Here, recording one of their latest songs

Screen grab from BBC report : <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68500111>

Two sisters who sing and upload their videos in protest against the Vice and Virtue Law.

Women across Afghanistan still actively participate in online protests, twitter storms, hashtag campaigns, fireside chats, webinars and more. On festivals like Shab-e-Yalda and Nowruz which are banned by the Taliban, they upload photos of their celebration on social media in an act of defiance and resistance. Some are associated with the Afghan Women’s Protest Movements Coalition (AWPMC) which was founded by six active women’s movements coming together in 2023. It is involved in advocacy nationally, regionally and internationally.



Screengrab from report by Focus on Africa. News headline says : Afghanistan, Afghan Women Celebrate Shab-e-Yalda in Secret Amid Taliban Restrictions.

<https://www.focusonafrika.info/afghanistan-le-donne-afghane-celebrano-shab-e-yalda-in-segreto-tra-le-restrizioni-dei-talebani/>

Young women run and participate in several whatsapp groups to share information, exchange ideas and help one another. They use different names and stay vigilant, disbanding and deleting groups immediately if the security of the group or any of its members is compromised. Lawyer, journalist and activist networks continue to operate virtually, in secret, with members joining from Afghanistan and in the diaspora. They share their stories, experiences and collaborate for transnational advocacy and publications. These virtual ‘protestors’ organize online meetings and join webinars to raise awareness about their challenges and their situation. These solidarity networks have been effective to an extent in working through local community leaders to engage with the Taliban. In some provinces the Taliban authorities have rolled back some restrictions and allowed women to work with NGOs and as journalists on select themes and topics that don’t threaten the regime.

“There are online protest meetings, using fake accounts, and in-person gatherings in people’s

houses. Several topics that are discussed in these gatherings like ways of getting around the Taliban’s laws, discussing the scope for political change and what we can do towards it.”

- A young woman interviewee from Bamyan

“Protests still happen. Sometimes people protest outside, but our experience is that the Taliban takes aim, arrests and kills them. We women also protest. We used to write on Facebook, but we were advised by our friends to not share on Facebook because it is not safe and that the Taliban will arrest us. We want to speak, to share about our life, share our songs against the Taliban. We don’t feel afraid. Last week we issued a Declaration against the Taliban. In it we said that Afghan women are frustrated, we need jobs and land, we need space and rights. We hold some meetings online and try to find a way to protest that is safe.”

- A WHRD in Herat

At times there are instances of dangerous defiance, particularly by young Afghan women, expressing anger against the Taliban, out of desperation. Interviewees relayed to us their experiences of witnessing young girls and women arguing with the Taliban, defying their rules openly and fighting back. Unfortunately some of them get assaulted, others face detentions or worse are killed.

“A few years back before all the universities were closed for women, I saw with my own eyes that one of my classmates was standing next to the door without a hijab. The Taliban guards came and asked her to wear the hijab she was holding. She threw it down and ran. They chased her. Ran after her. The girl had breathing issues and could run no faster. She was afraid of being killed since the Taliban had weapons. But she was caught by the Taliban and threatened.”

- Interviewee in Jawzjan

More cautious but no less daring are WHRDs. They are hiding for their own security, but continue to be active in resisting oppression. One WHRD from Herat, despite being at risk, vocally advocates for women’s rights online, issues statements and declarations. Their work is a testimony to the indomitable spirit of Afghan women under truly repressive conditions.

Of particular interest is the solidarity potential of transnational links between local women’s groups and the extensive Afghan diaspora. For instance, in Afghanistan, local women’s collectives offer an important link for Afghan journalists outside Afghanistan. They can get ground level reports and stories and publish them without putting the security of local men and women at risk. Whatsapp and signal groups are also used by women and men to run secret online classes. Our interviewees shared that at a time when Taliban have isolated them, locked them within their homes, avenues like these help them connect with the world outside and improve their mental health.

These transnational links play a crucial role in keeping online communities alive. Local Afghan women valued having a safe space to share problems and find ways of working together. It gave the women a sense of direction preventing them from falling into despair and provided them the skills, in law, development and communication, to assist their communities. While the digital divide remains a challenge since most poor Afghan women cannot afford to get internet recharge,

diaspora networks help bridge this gap by providing small stipends or internet cards, provided through local CSOs.

These transnational links helped women from Afghanistan connect with decision makers, various country representatives and UN members, by offering them a platform to share their issues with the world outside. Afghan diaspora groups attempted to ensure that international policies concerning Afghanistan are informed by the views and experiences of Afghan women who live in the country. A recent example is the consultations carried out by several diaspora networks towards the development of UNAMA’s 2025 plan. In what emerges as a two way process, the diaspora collectives and groups help channel information to women in Afghanistan and support them to emerge as active voices of their community in shaping the decisions that affect their lives.

CONCLUSION

“Throw open the windows,
Shining brightly is the sun,
Upon the darkness of the shackled night.
The darkness must know that I shine and glow
Like the crown on the moon’s daughter,
While the morning star has the same sparkle
As the gems in my ears.”

- Nadia Anjuman ¹

In the shifting jigsaw of global geopolitics, realpolitik expediency along with pressures in the wake of the global surge in anti-immigrant/refugee sentiment, governments are determined to see an ‘improvement’ in the security situation in Afghanistan and a presumed ‘stabilization’ in the dire economic situation. However, our field based study showed no evidence of any roll back of the Taliban’s ideology and entrenched and systematic system of gender apartheid. On the contrary, indications point to an intensification and consolidation because oppression of women’s rights and the subjugation of women is central to the Taliban regime’s political project of social control which is at the core of its strategy of regime maintenance. Within the international community, the movement towards transactional engagement with the Taliban group and the slow slide towards soft recognition risks dangerously normalising this egregious system of gender apartheid by violent extremist groups with likely dangerous contagion effects on the region.

The study has explored the central importance of the nexus between gender and extremism for religio-fundamentalist movements such as the Taliban. The subordination of women and the punitive control of their public and private lives is key to maintaining socio-political control and crushing resistance. The study

alluded to a continuum in an ideological framework that premised ‘success’ through such extreme misogynist practices of gender control as were practised in the Afghan refugee camps of the 1980s jihad decade, the First Emirate and the present day Second Emirate. This ideological construct is buttressed by their particular interpretation of Islam and Pashtun ethno-cultural traditions to secure and maintain power through such practices of social control.

The study also reveals that Second Emirate which is referred to as a medieval theocracy dismissive of scientific temper, and unduly influenced by illiterate qawmi mullahs, and policed by Talib cadres groomed in local madrasa of the Pakistan-Afghan borderlands, has within the governance system savvy ideologues and technocrats. This is evinced in the Taliban’s ideological construction of its push back against women’s rights as a push back against colonial oppression. Western advocacy of women’s rights is located within a colonial, neo colonial discourse of ‘liberating’ brown women.

Further evidencing the complexity that the medieval theocracy of the Taliban manifests, is the system of thought control. There is its use of technology, that is, the strategy of digital surveillance in the streets and the complementary strategy of indoctrinated children within the home. In addition there is the visible and

¹ Free Translation by poet Deepak Manchanda

aggressive presence of the maruf or morality police.

Also, despite the Taliban's propagation of building a pure Islamic society in Afghanistan and cleansing it from the immorality of previous systems of governance many Afghan women and men, and religious scholars are sceptical of the Taliban's understanding of Islam and their religious piety. Given that their foundational ideology and rationale for the practice of (oppressive) governance is justified in the name of bringing in a 'pure' Islamic system, skepticism about the Taliban group's projection of religiosity could destabilize their support base. Although Afghans see themselves as pious Muslims and many women and men as being knowledgeable about the religion, many of our respondents communicated a sense of alienation from the hyper religiosity propagated by the Taliban. Indeed many were openly critical of what they considered was a distorted use of Islam to justify the discriminatory exclusion of women and denial of their rights to education, work and public space.

The field study tracks the deepening economic distress, the ambivalence over the ban on women's work and the loss of crucial income, the deterioration in educational standards prognosticating closure of job opportunities, severe mental distress of women and girls and the overall sense of fear and anxiety of living in an oppressive, punitive all seeing Taliban state. Analysis of field data corroborates that the Taliban group seems less concerned about gaining popular legitimacy and international acceptance through inclusive representation or by dealing with the economic crisis, and more concerned with embedding its political project of social control and subsequent regime survival. Ironically many of the international powers regard it in their realpolitik interest to support the Taliban, because it takes on transnational terrorist forces such as Daesh and Al Qaeda.

Our analysis suggests a waning of popular support amongst those who welcomed the Taliban as a force for stabilization, with even some conservative elements alienated. But at the same time the study recognises that severe economic distress and the success of the political project of social control is pushing many into opportunistic co-optation into the Taliban system.

Despite the fear, anxiety and despair, what is most striking in our field data is the resilience and resistance shown by women and girls in Afghanistan. Against huge challenges, Afghan girls are finding ways to push back against oppression and maintain hope for

the future. The bans on public gatherings and the intense surveillance on gatherings even in private spaces, have pushed the protests underground. Women are using social media platforms and online community hubs and spaces to gather, mobilize and share information. Diaspora networks play a key role in sustaining these collectives within Afghanistan by channeling information to them and providing access to transnational platforms for outreach and advocacy. Many local women activists in Afghanistan demonstrate huge courage and innovativeness but are constrained because of lack of small funds to help them in paying for internet usage. While several respondents decried the flow of western aid which they denounced as propping up the Taliban, small targeted amounts to sustain the resilience of women's networks, i.e. 'good aid' could make a huge difference in strengthening their communication capacity and keep alive flashes of resistance.

Finally, recognition of the Taliban's ideologically backed restrictive gender order as 'Gender Persecution' and approximation to 'Gender Apartheid', as delineated in the draft Convention of Crimes Against Humanity is hugely important to keep up international pressure against the regime.

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