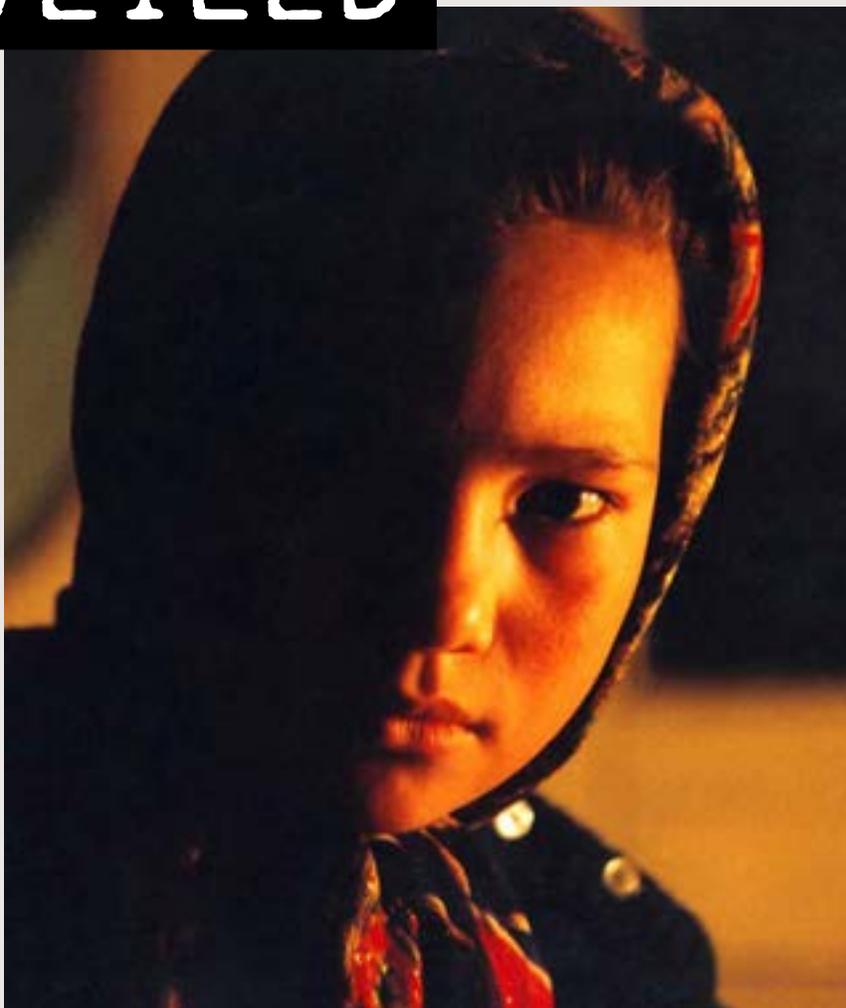


NOVEMBER 2023

SUFFERING

UNVEILED



AFGHAN WOMEN'S STRUGGLES
UNDER THE TALIBAN



WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK
AFGHANISTAN • PAKISTAN • INDIA



YALDA ROYAN

Edited by Chelsea Soderholm
and Dr. Jennifer Euler Bennett

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Yalda Royan

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About WRN

Established in 2010, the Women's Regional Network (WRN) is committed to amplifying the voices of marginalized women, often overlooked in the discourse surrounding peace, militarization, forced displacements, security, justice, and governance in the South Asian region. WRN's dedication to addressing these complex and interconnected challenges extends across countries, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka, where women often confront obstacles related to economic and socio-political inclusion, discrimination within the justice system, and varying levels of security affecting their lives.

Guided by an unwavering commitment to human security and a gender-focused approach, WRN acknowledges that non-traditional crises and threats constitute "conflict" for women. These encompass scenarios where women's lives, safety, and peace are jeopardized, particularly for those experiencing displacement, trapped in armed conflicts, or subjected to exclusionary, divisive, and aggressive politics.

The Women's Regional Network will sunset in its current format by the end of December 2023. However, a new initiative called Canada's Feminist Forum for Afghanistan (CFFA) will continue the legacy of the WRN's work on Afghanistan into the future. To learn more about this initiative and its history based on the WRN Ottawa Symposium for Afghan Women read more here: [Launch of CFFA | WRN \(womensregionalnetwork.org\)](#)

About WomanKind Worldwide

Womankind Worldwide is an international women's rights organisation and funder, working with women's rights and feminist movements across the world to end gender inequality. We support diverse women's rights organisations representing the most marginalised groups to challenge inequality, at home, in communities and the workplace. We fund and strengthen these movements and advocate for change alongside them.

About the Author

Yalda Royan is a senior women's rights activist with a wealth of experience in the fields of development, gender, and human rights. She is an alumna of Kabul University, where she earned her master's degree in Gender and Women's Studies. Her master's thesis marked a pioneering milestone as the first academic research on the factors contributing to increased prostitution in Kabul, shedding light on a critical issue in Afghanistan. Throughout her professional journey, Ms. Royan has been deeply committed to research and advocacy, focusing on vital areas such as gender-based violence and women, peace, and security. She has testified before the UN Security Council and in various international advocacy fora to raise awareness or and protect the rights of Afghan women and girls. Ms. Royan's perspectives have reached a wider audience through op-eds published in notable outlets such as Newsweek and Slate.

About the Editors

Chelsea Soderholm

Chelsea served for a number of years as the Chief Operating Officer overseeing all programming of the Women's Regional Network. She previously served as a Project Coordinator for the South Asia Forum for Human Rights in Delhi, India. She has lived and spent extensive time in South Asia including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka organizing large scale conferences, advocacy initiatives and field research on women, peace and security, focusing on militarization, protection of women human rights defenders, access to justice and women's role in peace-building. Chelsea has a Master's Degree in International Relations from the University of Kent in Brussels and undergraduate degree in Psychology from Dalhousie University in Canada. She was a scholar with the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma.

Dr. Jennifer Bennett

Dr. Jennifer Bennett is an established development sector practitioner, with over 23 years of experience working with various not-for-profit national and international organizations, on leadership roles. Her work, at the micro and macro levels, focuses on the Political Economy of Social Development, Peace and Security, and Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI). Her last formal employment was with the Women's Regional Network as the Regional Coordinator for India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Primarily a researcher, Dr. Bennett has the skills of critical evaluations, writing and editing, and has authored numerous articles, research papers, policy papers and analytical reports, published nationally and internationally. She continues to serve as a human rights activist and has had the opportunity to work with Peace Boat International, lectured on human rights, peace and security at various fora, including the universities and was a core member involved in organizing 5 regional Peace Conferences in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Her work continues to focus on advocating the nexus between just policies and development as a means to attain peace, tolerance, justice, equity and equality and overall human well-being.

ACRONYMS:

AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANPDF	The Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework
CC	Community Conversations
CCPR	the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
CEDAW	The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CRC	The Convention on the Rights of the Child
EVAW	Elimination of Violence Against Women
FRU	Family Response Unit
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, & Intersex
NAP	National Action Plan
NGO	Non-Government Organization
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
VAW	Violence Against Women
WHO	World Health Organization
WHRD	Women Human Rights Defender
WRN	Women's Regional Network

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, marked a tragic turning point, reversing the significant progress made in women's and girls' rights over the past two decades. This regressive shift systematically eroded the presence and participation of women and girls in public life.

Retrospectively, the 2004 Afghan constitution enshrined equal rights for women, with far reaching effects, including spaces for political participation and women's substantial role in the parliament. Given these provisions and, bolstered by international investments and the resolute dedication of Afghan women, notable advancements were achieved. Credible data corroborated a surge in the enrollment of girls in primary schools, with considerable representation of girls in primary education. Higher education underwent significant transformation, accompanied by a doubling of literacy rates over the years. Furthermore, the workforce experienced a rise in women's participation, with numerous women-owned enterprises contributing to employment opportunities, and supporting female artisans in rural areas.

The political landscape revealed a growing presence of women, with women occupying seats in parliament, provincial councils, and ministerial-level positions. Additionally, increased participation of women in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces underscored their integral role in amplifying the country's security.

Civil society organizations led by women played a pivotal role in providing essential services, with a multitude of non-governmental organizations focusing on

healthcare, vocational training, legal support, shelters for survivors of abuse, and facilitating educational access for women. Nevertheless, persisting challenges necessitated extensive campaigns by women's rights advocates to safeguard their hard-fought progress.

These advancements rolled back with the resurgence of the Taliban: women and girls were subjected to severe restrictions, profoundly impacting their health, education, safety, and freedom. Legal safeguards were dismantled one by one, and women were systematically excluded from educational, employment, and political participation opportunities. Anyone, defying the Taliban-style edicts were to be dealt with punitive measures. Onslaught of such human rights abuses triggered protests resulting in escalated incidents of egregious acts of violence, harassment and intimidation against women. Escaping these brutalities and with no other options, women were forced to relocate: prominent women's rights defenders sought refuge abroad, while hundreds of thousands became internally displaced or sought asylum in neighboring nations.

According to UN Women, Afghanistan is now the sole country in the world where girls are categorically prohibited from attending high school.

Human rights organizations and experts have unequivocally characterized the measures imposed by the Taliban as constituting gender apartheid and gender persecution, emphasizing the systematic nature and gravity of discrimination and violence directed against Afghan women and girls. These conceptual frameworks provide invaluable insight into the multifaceted challenges faced by women, with gender persecution denoting the deliberate deprivation of fundamental rights based on



gender, and gender apartheid encapsulating systematic gender-based segregation.

The actions of the Taliban represent a grave transgression of international legal norms and Afghan domestic law. Truly understanding the intricate interplay between gender apartheid and gender persecution is indispensable in addressing the flagrant violations against the rights of Afghan women.

With the change in regime and its impact on the lives of women, WRN conducted this research to comprehensively document and analyze the experiences, challenges, and resilience of marginalized women in Afghanistan, with a focus on women with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities and Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs).

From June to July 2023, we conducted 15 Community Conversations (CCs) involving 500 women representing various provinces and diverse backgrounds, complemented by extensive desk review. The research was conducted in 11 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, namely Balkh, Bamyan, Herat, Jawzjan, Kabul, Kunduz, Laghman, Nangarhar, Nimrooz, Paktia, and Panjshir. We harnessed the resources and networks of our well-established partner offices to facilitate the selection of research sites and participants. We employed a deliberate approach in the

selection of research sites, aiming to create a diverse representation of various ethnic backgrounds across both urban and rural settings. In order to prioritize the safety of both our research team and the participating individuals, we thoughtfully adopted a dual approach, utilizing both in-person (almost all) and online (only Panjshir) methodologies for data collection.

With Afghanistan last among safety rankings for women worldwide, women reported various forms of violence, with 71% experiencing violence from family or community members and 77% enduring violence from the Taliban and

other non-state actors. More than half (56%) of women reported having faced harassment or feel insecure, 91% experienced discrimination due to being women; and a high 86% of these women believe their basic human rights have been violated. It is worth noting that more than 76% of the women have faced violence intersecting with their ethnicity, language, religious beliefs, or physical disability.

The collapse of the judicial system restricted women's access to justice. A majority 88.4% have not been able to access police or court services. Many were reluctant to seek redress in Taliban courts and preferred informal channels including family elders, *Wakil Guzar**, and religious leaders.

Notably, 86% of Afghan women surveyed in this research are facing significant mental health challenges, with only 17% of them able to access mental health services.

Amidst this grave humanitarian crisis, only 26% of these women have been able to access humanitarian aid,

*A *Wakil Guzar* is a community leader, typically elected by the community and officially registered by the municipal government. This individual serves as a liaison between the local community and the government.



while the Taliban's restrictions on women's employment have compounded challenges in their economic situation.

This research provides recommendations to the United Nations, emphasizing the importance of not recognizing the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government and discouraging support for them. Additionally, it stresses the urgent need to acknowledge the Taliban's treatment of women as gender persecution and recognize it as a form of gender apartheid. It implores the UN to initiate an International Criminal Court investigation into the Taliban's brutal acts against women, advocates for imposing sanctions on key Taliban leaders responsible for human rights abuses, and emphasizes the equitable distribution of humanitarian aid, with a specific focus on women in various regions, and support for vulnerable minority communities.

The second set of recommendations is directed at the international community. It calls for diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to respect and guarantee women's rights, with measurable inclusion benchmarks in education and the workforce. It urges nations with feminist foreign policies to prioritize women's rights in Afghanistan and offer scholarships and asylum to Afghan women affected by Taliban actions. It asks the international community to provide women and human rights defenders from inside

the country platforms and not give the stage to those who are normalizing Taliban. Additionally, it proposes an international dialogue forum involving Afghan women, diplomats, policymakers, and human rights experts to support the formation of an inclusive government in Afghanistan and protect fundamental rights, irrespective of gender, sect, ethnicity, or language.

This research offers recommendations to feminist funding organizations, emphasizing the allocation of funds to both formal and grassroots women's rights advocacy groups in Afghanistan and globally. It recommends supporting educational programs for Afghan women, including opportunities for economic empowerment, education, vocational training, and literacy. It further suggests promoting initiatives to enhance women's vocational skills, retraining, certification, and remote job opportunities, as well as self-care. Additionally, the report advises funding for legal support initiatives, investment in research on mental health issues among Afghan women, and providing funding for accessible healthcare and psychosocial support services.

Finally, it addresses Muslim-majority countries to condemn the Taliban's treatment of women as incompatible with Islamic principles and coordinate efforts to exert pressure on the Taliban for a reversal of their decisions regarding women's rights.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: TRACING THE SHADOWS OF HISTORY

The Taliban's takeover of power in Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, marked a tragic turning point, undoing the significant progress made with regard to the rights of women and girls over the preceding two decades. This regressive shift systematically eroded the presence and participation of women and girls in public life. To comprehensively assess the extent of this reversal, it is essential to delve into the critical statistics and milestones that depict the situation before and after the return of the Taliban.

Echoes of Suppression: Taliban's Reign (1996 – 2001)

In 1994, the Taliban emerged as a significant force, culminating in their capture of Kabul in 1996 after more than two decades of civil conflict and political turmoil in Afghanistan.

Upon taking control, the Taliban introduced draconian restrictions on women, including their rights to education, work, and public life. Women and girls were banned from attending school, pursuing educational opportunities, participating in the workforce, or leaving their homes unaccompanied by a male relative.¹ The public display of skin was forbidden, as was seeking medical care provided by male practitioners. Furthermore, women were excluded from political involvement and public speaking.

Violations of these edicts often resulted in brutal beatings, public floggings, and, in some instances, death.²

- ¹ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/womens-rights-afghanistan-history>
- ² <https://feminist.org/our-work/afghan-women-and-girls/the-taliban-afghan-women/>

A 2001 U.S. State Department report described these actions as “egregious acts of violence” as part of a “war against women,” which included violence such as rape, abduction, and forced marriages.³ Despite these harsh restrictions, a few women doctors and nurses were permitted to work in some of Afghanistan's cities in gender-segregated hospital wards. Secret home schools for girls operated in defiance of the Taliban's dictates. Those involved in running these clandestine schools, doing so at great personal risk, faced the threat of severe punishment or even loss of life.⁴

In October 2001, the U.S.-led coalition invaded Afghanistan to fight against terrorism and to champion “the rights and dignity of women” in Afghanistan. This marked the end of the first era for the Taliban and the beginning of a new chapter for women in Afghanistan.⁵

Pursuit of Empowerment: The Journey (2002 – 2021)

In November 2001, the establishment of democracy in Afghanistan marked the conclusion of the Taliban's initial five-year rule, ushering in a new era of possibilities for women to shape their future. The 2004 Afghan constitution, in a significant milestone, enshrined equal rights for women. The tireless endeavors of Afghan women, complemented by investments from the international community, effectuated a profound transformation in the lives of Afghan women and girls over the ensuing two decades.

- ³ <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/drl/rls/6185.htm>
- ⁴ <https://feminist.org/our-work/afghan-women-and-girls/the-taliban-afghan-women/>
- ⁵ <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2100&context=etd>

In the face of persistent challenges and enduring human rights issues affecting Afghan women, significant progress and achievements illuminated their lives during these two decades.

According to UN data, the number of girls enrolled in primary schools exhibited a remarkable rise, surging from virtually zero in 2001 to 2.5 million in 2018. By August 2021, girls accounted for 4 out of every 10 students in primary education. Furthermore, Afghan higher education witnessed a substantial transformation, with the number of female students surging nearly 20-fold from 5,000 in 2001 to over 100,000 in 2021, as documented by UNESCO.⁶ Over the same period, literacy rates doubled from 17% in 2001 to nearly 30% for all age groups combined. According to the 2019 report by the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education, 80,554 women were serving as school teachers and 2,439 female lecturers at higher education institutions.⁷

In 2000, the World Bank data indicated that women accounted for only 16.5% of the total labor force. The percentage of women in the total labor force reached its highest point at 23.1% in 2019 but slightly declined to 19.7% in 2020. Additionally, the overall percentage of the female population engaged in employment saw a significant increase to 21.9% in 2019, followed by a decline to 16.5% in 2020.⁸ Notably, over 54,000 informal businesses were owned and operated by women across the country. These businesses generated over 130,000 jobs, providing employment for themselves and aiding

more than 100,000 women artisans in rural areas to sell their products in urban areas.⁹

As of February 2021, women held 27% of the seats in parliament. An impressive 21% of all provincial councils were women, and the proportion of women in ministerial-level positions was 6.5%. Over 234 women served as judges, constituting 12% of the total of 2,162 judges and there were over 500 female prosecutors in the country.

From 2014 through 2020, the number of women in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) more than doubled. The number of women in the Afghan National Army (ANA) increased from 528 in 2014 to 1,472 in 2020. The Afghan National Police (ANP) increased its female force from 1,888 women in 2014 to 4,017 women in 2020.¹⁰

During this period, Afghanistan's civil society landscape assumed diverse forms and played a crucial role in providing essential services. According to a comprehensive assessment of the Afghan NGO landscape in 2016, a total of 891 NGOs were documented over the period from 2000 to 2014. These organizations primarily focused on areas such as healthcare, vocational training, legal and mental health support, shelters for survivors of domestic abuse, and facilitating women's access to education.¹¹

In the face of persistent challenges and enduring human rights issues affecting Afghan women, significant progress and achievements illuminated their lives during these two decades. By 2019, when the peace negotiations between the United States and the Taliban commenced, Afghan women's rights activists had embarked on extensive campaigns to underscore the hard-earned strides made over two decades. They relentlessly implored the international community not to relinquish these crucial gains and Afghan women's rights. However, these hopes and aspirations came crashing down with the fall of Afghanistan and the swift resurgence of the Taliban to power on the 15th of August 2021.

6 <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/let-girls-and-women-afghanistan-learn>

7 <https://mohe.gov.af/dr/%DA%A9%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF-%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA-0>

8 <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/afghanistan/>

9 <https://www.justsecurity.org/82788/afghan-women-entrepreneurs-battle-to-retain-economic-freedom/>

10 <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-22-12-AR.pdf>

11 D Mitchell, *NGO Presence and Activity in Afghanistan, 2000–2014: A Provincial-Level Dataset* (2017)

SARA, YOUNG HAZARA WOMEN'S RIGHTS ADVOCATE, KABUL

Sara is a Hazara girl who lives in Kabul who had always been passionate about advocating for women's rights. She was a dedicated advocate, part of several women's associations, and a mediator for the women of her community. She worked tirelessly to support and empower women who were victims of violence in both formal and informal sectors, providing them with legal assistance, counseling, and a voice to speak out against injustice.

Before August 2021, Sara and her group members were making significant strides in their efforts to support women in their community. They were making a real difference, and Sara felt a sense of purpose and fulfillment in her work. However, everything changed with the collapse of Kabul and the rise of the Taliban.

Overnight, Sara found herself in a nightmarish situation. The work she had dedicated her life to was suddenly deemed illegal, and her safety was in grave danger. She noted *"As a Hazara girl, I faced even greater risks and threats from the new regime. The once vibrant and active women's associations we were part of were forced to disband, leaving myself and my fellow advocates jobless, without any source of income."*

"My sense of helplessness and despair is overwhelming, I always tried to help and fight for the rights of women in my community, but now I cannot even help myself. It kills me everyday. I face security threats due to being a Hazara girl and this adds to my fears and anxiety."

Despite the immense challenges she faced, Sara refused to give up hope. She knew that she couldn't continue her work openly, but she was determined to find a way to continue supporting women in any way she could, even if it had to be done in secret. She also found innovative ways to ensure her own safety and that of her family. Sara's resilience and unwavering commitment to her cause inspired many around her. Despite the dark and uncertain times, she vowed that *"I will find a way to continue fighting for the rights of women in Afghanistan, even if it means doing so in the shadows."*

Breaking Promises: Afghanistan's Unfulfilled Pledges on the Global Stage

As a member state of the United Nations, Afghanistan had ratified several international treaties and covenants. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). These international agreements placed an obligation on Afghanistan to uphold the principles of gender equality, non-discrimination, and the protection of women's rights.

These treaties required member states to enact laws and measures necessary for implementing recognized rights. They encompassed the right to a decent quality of life, access to healthcare, and free education for both women and men. Additionally, these treaties mandated the penalization of violations in accordance with the commitments made under these international agreements.

Of noteworthy importance is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Afghanistan ratified in 2003.¹²

¹² <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/CEDAW.C.AFG.1-2.pdf>

This convention aims to provide women with legal protection equivalent to that of men. State parties are obligated to take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women. It requires the implementation of measures to advance women's rights and ensure their equal entitlement to state benefits, including access to healthcare, employment, and education.

The 2004 Constitution, based on the Constitution of 1964, was the prevailing legal and judicial framework in Afghanistan. It explicitly asserted that men and women held equal rights and duties before the law. The constitution also enshrined rights to freedom of expression, the formation of associations, balanced education for women, and the right to peaceful protest.

In 2009, the Afghan government also enacted the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law, criminalizing various forms of violence against women, including forced marriage and physical abuse.¹³ To enforce this law, specialized police units known as Family Response Units (FRUs), prosecution offices, and special courts staffed by female judges were established.

As a UN Member State, Afghanistan upheld UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, which was adopted in October 2000. In 2015, Afghanistan launched its first National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325, reinforcing its commitment to protecting women and girls from gender-based violence during times of conflict.¹⁴

In September 2015, Afghanistan committed to adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and took concrete measures to nationalize these global goals. They were integrated into Afghanistan's own set of Sustainable Development Goals, which were subsequently incorporated into national development plans, including the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF).¹⁵

The ratification of human rights treaties binds the State of Afghanistan to adhere to the UN Charter, international treaties, conventions, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This commitment necessitates the integration of these principles into domestic law and their practical enforcement.¹⁶ However, the Taliban have not abided by these commitments and have violated many of these treaties through the draconian atrocities they have committed against women. This includes the justification for decrees, edicts, and letters that are rapidly eroding women's rights across the nation, thereby challenging the previous commitments to international and national human rights obligations.

Return to Darkness: Consequences of the Taliban's Resurgence (2021 to now)

Upon the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan witnessed a rapid and devastating erosion of fundamental freedoms and rights, with women and girls bearing the brunt of these oppressive measures. Their rights to health, education, safety, bodily integrity, freedom of movement, and association were brutally curtailed. The Taliban's actions have systematically dismantled crucial legal protection mechanisms, including the abolishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC)¹⁷, and collapse of the law enforcement units entrusted with addressing violence against women.

Through a barrage of more than 100 edicts¹⁸ women were systematically banned from accessing education, engaging in employment and participating in political roles. The impact of this crackdown was felt acutely by countless Afghan women and girls who protested against these restrictions, and faced relentless intimidation, harassment, arbitrary detention, and the perpetual specter of forced disappearances. Those belonging to marginalized groups, including ethnic minorities and LGBTQI individuals, were subjected to even graver

13 https://www.cw4wafghan.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/pages/cw4wafghan-afghansevawlaw_0.pdf

14 <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-s-national-action-plan-unscr-1325-women-peace-and-security-2015-2022>

15 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/280392021_VNR_Report_Afghanistan.pdf

16 <https://moj.gov.af/en/huquq-and-human-rights>

17 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/09/high-commissioner-tells-human-rights-council-human-rights-afghanistan-are-state>

18 <https://msmagazine.com/2023/08/15/list-timeline-taliban-orders-women-girls-afghanist/>



... Afghanistan now stands as the only country in the world where girls are barred from attending high school ...

threats.¹⁹ Members from various sectors, including civil society, government, media, or security were systematically targeted. They endured brutal violence, arbitrary arrests, cruel conditions of confinement, coerced confessions, and a flagrant disregard for due process.²⁰

Following the Taliban's takeover, prominent women's rights defenders had to flee Afghanistan, seeking refuge in various countries.²¹ Concurrently, hundreds of thousands of people, including women and children, were internally displaced within Afghanistan during 2021, compounding an already dire humanitarian crisis. Data from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) revealed that approximately 700,000 people, of whom 21% were women and 59% children, were forcibly displaced within the country in 2021.²² This

brought the total number of internally displaced persons to a staggering 3.4 million by December 2021.

Furthermore, as of July 1, 2022, over two million registered refugees and asylum-seekers from Afghanistan had sought safety in neighboring countries such as Iran, Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Many more remained unregistered, exacerbating the crisis. Shockingly, around 1.27 million individuals, comprising 23% women and 51% children, are estimated to have arrived in these neighboring countries since August 2021.²³ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the repatriation of Afghan refugees to their homeland remained limited in 2022, with only 3,580 returnees, while 162,413 internally displaced persons managed to return to their homes. Notably, the data underscored that women rarely fled Afghanistan unaccompanied; less than 1,000 women sought refuge alone in Iran or Pakistan in 2022, in stark contrast to 10,464 men.

19 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5284-situation-human-rights-afghanistan-report-special-rapporteur>

20 <https://acleddata.com/2023/08/11/two-years-of-repression-mapping-taliban-violence-targeting-civilians-in-afghanistan/>

21 <https://voiceamplified.org/afghan-women-human-rights-defenders-fight-for-recognition/>

22 https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjrn_G2-vWBAXWEK1kFHdvQDcsQFnoECBQQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdata2.unhcr.org%2Fen%2Fdocuments%2Fdownload%2F90521&usg=AOvVaw2AT_Ei8bs2aR-Nnsi-FRQZ&opi=89978449

23 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>

A timeline of some crucial edicts and directives of the Taliban that have directly impacted women

JULY 2021

As the Taliban continued to capture provinces and districts, including near the border areas of Afghanistan, they issued a letter, under the name of Taliban's Cultural Commission, asking local religious leaders to provide them a list of girls above the age of 15 and widows under the age of 45, so they can be married off to Taliban fighters (Ray, 2021).

SEPTEMBER 2021

The Taliban reopened secondary schools only for boys and not girls. They also started revising the education curriculum (Fadel et al., 2021).

The Taliban replaced the Ministry of Women's Affairs with the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice which was to act as a morality police. This ministry assumed the position of an important office under the Taliban regime (BBC, 2021).

Shortly after inviting women to join the government, the Taliban on September 20th instructed all women workers in the Kabul city government to stay at home until further notice (The Observer, Afghanistan, 2021).

Women were also banned from teaching and attending the Kabul University (Constable, 2021).

MAY 2022

The Taliban dissolved the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and four other important departments of the former government, citing them as "unnecessary" (Yunus, 2022).

SEPTEMBER 2022

The Taliban removed the only position held by a woman at the Commission of media violations (Eqbal, 2022).

2021

AUGUST 2021

The Taliban leadership announced a general amnesty for Afghan citizens including previous government officers and pro-republic individuals. This amnesty did not go into effect. In the same announcement, the Taliban asked women to join its government. The announcement was made by the senior Taliban member, Enamullah Samangani (Muzaffar, 2021).

The Taliban officials in Herat province banned co-ed education in public and private educational institutions (PTI, 2021).

NOVEMBER 2021

As part of eight directives launched by Taliban's Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, women were banned from appearing in television shows or movies (Popalzai, 2021).

2022

MARCH 2022

The Taliban announced that girls' schools would be reopened, but only a few hours later directed the schools to shut down again, continuing the ban on secondary education for girls (Barr, 2022).

The Taliban issued a directive preventing women from traveling or entering healthcare centers without a 'Mahram,' a male chaperone (Nader & Amini, 2022).

JULY 2022

The Taliban officials called and notified women working at the Ministry of Finance to send male relatives as their replacement, irrespective of their skills or qualifications (Kumar, 2022).

NOVEMBER 2022

The Taliban closed public baths for women in Northern provinces Balkh and Herat. The announcement was made by Sardar Mohammad Heydari from the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. (Glinski, 2022).

The Taliban banned women from visiting the Band-e-Amir national park in Bamiyan province. The announcement was made by Mohammed Khaled Hanafi, Afghanistan's acting Minister of Virtue and Vice (Radford, 2023).

JANUARY 2023

The Taliban in Kandahar ordered female healthcare professionals not to go to work without a Mahram. The order was communicated verbally to the Public Health Department in Kandahar (Khalid, 2023).

The Taliban ordered travel agencies not to sell tickets to any woman who is not accompanied by a Mahram (Hakim, 2023).

MAY 2023

Through an audio message, the Taliban leader and the head of Kandahar Department of Vice and Virtue, Mawlawi Abdulhai Omar ordered all departments to prevent women and girls from going to healthcare centers and to graveyards (Hakim, 2023).

2022

DECEMBER 2022

The Taliban suspended women from higher education institutions and religious educational centers, besides tutoring classes that took place in private residences. The announcement was shared by the spokesperson for the Ministry of Higher Education Ziaullah Hashmi (Hadid, 2022).

The Taliban issued a decree banning women from working in national and international non-governmental organizations. The Ministry of Economy sent a letter to NGOs and INGOs threatening them with license cancellation in case of non-compliance (Farzan et al., 2022).

Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada directed the judges in Afghanistan to impose Sharia Law punishments for specific crimes, including public amputations, stoning to death and executions (BBC, 2022).

2023

APRIL 2023

The Taliban banned women from working with the United Nations. UN female staff members were stopped from reporting to work in Nangarhar province (Wintour, 2023).

JULY 2023

The Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and Propagation of Virtue issued a notice ordering the closure of all beauty parlors and salons for women in the country within a month (Reuters, 2023).

Such characterizations emphasize that these actions are not isolated incidents, but part of a deliberate and entrenched pattern of discrimination, violence, and oppression targeted specifically at Afghan women and girls.

Women and girls faced heightened risks during displacement, enduring violence, exploitation, discrimination, and a dearth of protection and support. While some women sought to rebuild their lives in host countries, others remained stranded in transit.²⁴

Meanwhile, numerous at-risk women's rights defenders persevered within Afghanistan, confronting escalating threats of violence, abuse, exploitation, and even death at the hands of the Taliban.²⁵ These dangers compounded an already high prevalence of violence against women and girls prior to their displacement. The outlook for protection and safety remained grim, especially for those without passports or the means to escape.

UN Women's stark confirmation that Afghanistan now stands as the only country in the world where girls are barred from attending high school paints a grim picture of the extent of gender persecution in the nation. Additional restrictions prohibit women from working outside the home, except in a few narrowly defined sectors and roles. The complete absence of women in the cabinet and the dismantling of the Ministry of Women's Affairs effectively obliterated women's political participation. Women's freedom of movement was severely curtailed, mandating the presence of a male chaperone for journeys exceeding 78 kilometers. Furthermore, women are compelled to publicly veil their faces, leaving them isolated and vulnerable.²⁶

Simultaneously, the Taliban's directives have forcibly terminated the employment of female personnel within local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), threatening these entities with license revocation should they fail to comply.²⁷

Sima Sami Bahous, the Executive Director of UN Women, has sounded the alarm on the dramatic decline of women's influence in decision-making at all levels in Afghanistan. She has highlighted the substantial increase in restrictions, often enforced by male family members, leading to a surge in child marriages and child labor. These dire circumstances have resulted in a staggering 90% of young women reporting poor mental health, with suicide and suicidal thoughts, emerging as distressing concerns. Afghan women are now urgently calling upon the international community to exert unyielding pressure for change, advocating for imposing sanctions, travel restrictions to other countries, and other measures that withhold recognition of the de facto Taliban government in Afghanistan.²⁸

Experts and human rights organizations have unequivocally labeled the Taliban's oppressive measures as "gender apartheid"²⁹ and "gender persecution."³⁰ These designations underscore the severity and systemic nature of the restrictions placed on women and girls in Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. Such characterizations emphasize that these

24 <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/they-left-us-without-any-support-afghans-in-pakistan-waiting-for-solutions/>

25 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/20/afghanistan-women-protesters-detail-taliban-abuse>

26 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2022/07/press-briefing-the-situation-of-women-and-girls-in-afghanistan>

27 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/329-taliban-restrictions-womens-rights-deepen-afghanistans-crisis>

28 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/statement/2023/08/statement-on-afghanistan-by-un-women-executive-director-sima-bahous>

29 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2023/07/experts-taliban-treatment-women-may-be-gender-apartheid>

30 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/09/08/afghanistan-talibans-gender-crimes-against-humanity>

actions are not isolated incidents, but part of a deliberate and entrenched pattern of discrimination, violence, and oppression targeted specifically at Afghan women and girls.

The concepts of “gender apartheid” and “gender persecution” have become pertinent lenses through which to analyze the systemic interlinkages in Afghanistan. These concepts encapsulate the deeply entrenched gender-based discrimination and violence women in Afghanistan have faced for years. Understanding the intricate relationship between these two forms of oppression is essential in comprehending the multifaceted challenges women confront in the country.

Perils of Gender Persecution

The Taliban’s restrictions on Afghan women and girls may amount to a crime against humanity of persecution, given the severe deprivation of their human rights combined with acts of imprisonment, torture, and enforced disappearance.³¹ These actions specifically target women and girls due to their gender and these violations against women and girls could be considered gender persecution, a recognized crime against humanity.³²

Gender persecution refers to the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law, specifically directed against individuals based on their gender, which is universally recognized as impermissible under international law. This persecution arises from the identity of the gender group targeted and is in connection with acts or crimes that fall within the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.³³

The Veil of Gender Apartheid

Since 15 August 2021, the Taliban has released over 100³⁴ decrees that intensely discriminate against and control women’s lives in Afghanistan. A study evaluating these

decrees against Article II of the Apartheid Convention, which describes “Inhuman Acts” that signify apartheid when committed systematically to uphold one group’s dominance over another, shows that in this context, the Taliban’s actions against women potentially align with the institutionalized system of segregation and male dominance as described in the Apartheid Convention.³⁵

Gender Apartheid is a system of governance that enforces systematic segregation between women and men based on laws and/or policies, often resulting in the exclusion of women from public spaces and spheres. This system infringes upon the fundamental principles of international law by codifying the subordination of women, denying them equal rights to enjoy all human rights as recognized under international statutes. Similar to racial apartheid’s violation against principles prohibiting race discrimination, gender apartheid contravenes the foundational norms of international law, including all the human rights obligations of Afghanistan and the UN Charter itself.³⁶

In Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, the term “gender apartheid” emphasizes that discrimination is not an anomaly but integral to their governance system. This means that discrimination is not just a byproduct, but the primary objective of their public policy. Consequently, the state or governing body becomes the main driver of such discrimination.

Gender apartheid and gender persecution should be understood as distinct and complementary concepts necessary to effectively combat the Taliban’s gross and systematic violations of women’s human rights. Gender apartheid is the framework within which gender persecution takes place in Afghanistan.

31 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5284-situation-human-rights-afghanistan-report-special-rapporteur>

32 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/6789/2023/en/>

33 UN General Assembly. (1998). Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Article 7(1)).

34 <https://msmagazine.com/2023/08/15/list-timeline-taliban-orders-women-girls-afghanist/>

35 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/05/afghanistan-systematic-crackdown-womens-and-girls-rights-un-experts-say>

36 Karima Bennoune. (2023). The international obligation to counter gender apartheid in Afghanistan (Issue 54.1, pp.24).

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Objectives and Scope

The primary objective of this research, conducted by WRN, is to comprehensively document and analyze the experiences, challenges, and resilience of the most marginalized women in Afghanistan. Our focus centers explicitly on the impact of the Taliban's rule two years after their return to power. The ultimate goal is to inform advocacy efforts, policy recommendations, and program development that address the urgent needs and rights of Afghan women, specifically emphasizing the most vulnerable and marginalized segments of the population. WRN placed women with disabilities, minority women and Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) at the center of this research to reveal and address the unique challenges these groups face.

The research was conducted in 11 provinces, namely Balkh, Bamyan, Herat, Jawzjan, Kabul, Kunduz, Laghman, Nangarhar, Nimrooz, Paktia, and Panjshir between June to July 2023. The careful selection of research sites encompassing various ethnic backgrounds and urban and rural settings, along with logistical and security considerations, aims to shed light on the multifaceted dimensions of women's lives under the Taliban regime.

To achieve this goal, we strategically selected research sites that represent a mosaic of ethnic backgrounds, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and others. Furthermore, our approach encompassed both urban and rural settings, enabling us to examine the impact of the Taliban's restrictive policies on women and account for variations in living conditions, access to resources, mental health, and the distinct challenges women have faced in the two years after the Taliban's return to power.



Lastly, our site selection process was guided by logistics and security considerations. Ensuring the safety of our research team and participants was our foremost concern. In regions where in-person interviews could be conducted securely, we leveraged our established partner offices and networks. In situations where security concerns were paramount, we turned to online methodologies, such as virtual Community Conversations (CCs) (Panjshir province), to gather data from participants facing greater vulnerability.

Research Methodology

To gain profound insights into the experiences and perspectives of Afghan women within this complex context, our dedicated research team conducted a series of in-depth discussions, employing a methodology

known as Community Conversations (CCs). Over the course of two months, this methodology facilitated open dialogues with 500 women, encompassing 25 CCs, in addition to a comprehensive desk review, as discussed below.

Community Conversations (CCs)

The Community Conversations engaged five hundred women actively, carefully selected to represent a cross-section of Afghan society. The selection of Community Conversations as a research methodology was driven by its unique capacity to foster constructive discussions and elicit valuable insights.

Community Conversations thrive on diversity, inviting critical perspectives and drawing upon the collective wisdom of participants. They provide a platform for community members to come together, address pressing issues openly, and collaboratively explore potential solutions. This methodology is particularly well-suited for contexts marked by conflict or post-conflict scenarios, where communities grapple with evolving dynamics and sensitive concerns. WRN has been conducting CCs both in Afghanistan and across South Asia for over a decade, documenting the voices of unheard women in conflict zones.

Desk Review

To complement our primary data collection efforts, we conducted a thorough Desk Review, encompassing a comprehensive literature review and an examination of published materials. These materials spanned the socio-political landscape of Afghanistan, both pre- and post-Taliban resurgence in August 2021. Our sources ranged from statistics to research articles, and reports prepared by various credible entities, including UN agencies, governmental bodies, and non-governmental organizations.

The Desk Review was instrumental in providing valuable context and background information, aiding in the interpretation of primary data. It allowed us to situate the experiences and perspectives shared during Community Conversations within the broader socio-political landscape of Afghanistan.

It is important to note that the quantitative primary data underwent an analysis process, utilizing Stata software to ensure the accuracy and reliability of our findings. Through this research methodology, we aim to shed light on the challenges faced by Afghan women and contribute to a deeper understanding of their experiences in the wake of the Taliban's return to power. Although a modest sample, it was ensured that a wide and diverse intersectional group of women was interviewed. This data sets the stage for deciphering the qualitative information and the voices of women.

Challenges and Limitations

Under the Taliban's rule, women face significant challenges in carrying out their work with the constant fear of persecution, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as women's rights and human rights. During the process of data collection, our research team encountered various formidable challenges. These included the complexities of accessing women due to deeply ingrained cultural barriers, primarily in remote areas, as well as the constraints on women's mobility and their access to public spaces imposed by the Taliban. The need for stringent safety precautions, both for the research team and the participants, was paramount. Moreover, the persistent fear of potential repercussions for discussing sensitive gender and human rights topics dissuaded some women from active participation and candidly sharing their concerns. In some areas, inconsistent internet and phone connectivity disrupted remote interviews. Additionally, the ongoing conflict and violence in areas like Panjshir presented safety challenges that limited the team's access to women. Despite these daunting challenges, our research team tenaciously persevered, successfully amassing a body of valid and reliable data. Importantly, it is crucial to acknowledge the encountered limitations in the report to ensure a comprehensive grasp of the multifaceted issues affecting women in Afghanistan. Pseudonyms were used, paper documents if any destroyed and data stored on secure drives.

UNVEILING THE TRUTH: REVELATIONS AND REALITIES:

Demographics

Data analysis shows that less than half (43.1%) of the women included in this research study were under the age of 25 years, followed by 37.47% in the age group 25-34 years. The remaining 18.4% of the respondents were aged 35-54 years.

Out of the total women respondents, about 40% comprised housewives, 24.5% students, 7.8% activists and the remaining respondents included individuals from various professions such as teachers, social workers and other diverse employment backgrounds.

CHART 1. AGE PROFILE

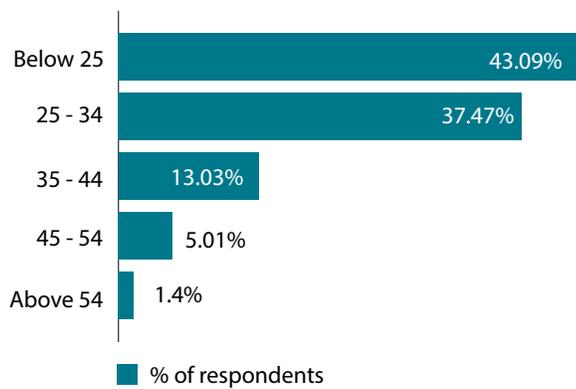


CHART 2. EMPLOYMENT STATUS

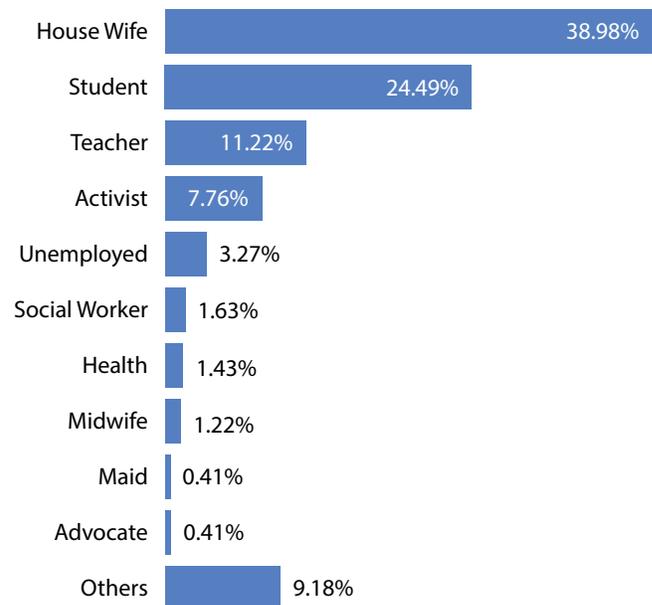
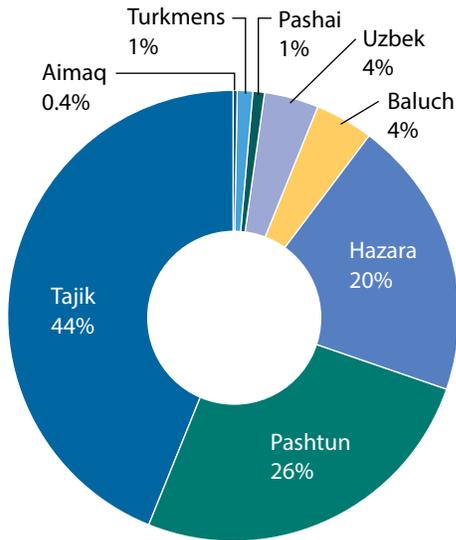


CHART 3. ETHNICITY



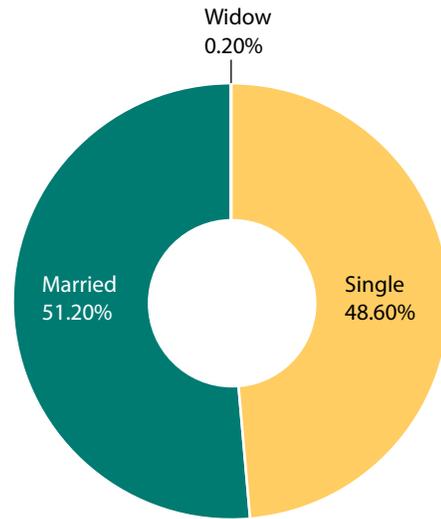
The women included in the research study represented various ethnic backgrounds, with 44% having identified themselves Tajik, 26% as Pashtun, 20% as Hazaras, and smaller percentages belonging to ethnic groups such as Uzbek, Baluch, Pashai, Turkmen, and Aimaq (see Chart 3).

Categorization by religion reveals that the majority of the respondents were Sunni Muslims, accounting for 78.6%, while the remaining 21.4% followed the Shia school of thought.

In regard to marital status, more than half (51.2%) of the respondents were married, followed by 49% being single, and a miniscule number of women (0.2%) were widows.

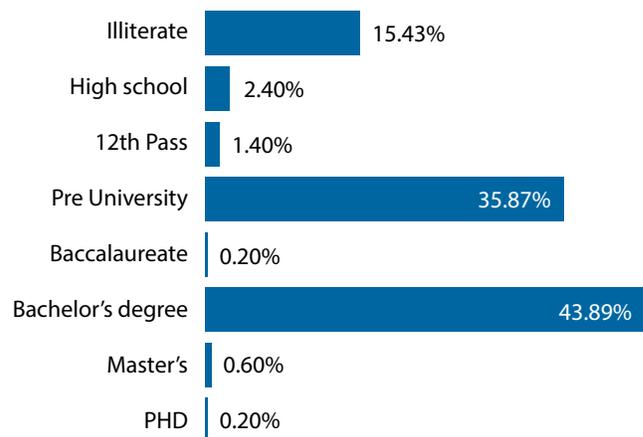
Chart 5 provides the educational status of the respondents. Data reveals that a large number of women (43.9%) had attained a bachelor’s degree and 35.9% had completed pre-university education. These figures together show that as high as 79.8% of women had attained a college or an undergraduate degree, with

CHART 4. MARITAL STATUS



0.8% obtaining either a PhD or a master’s degree. Only about 15.4% women reported being illiterate. The results manifest the importance and attention given to female education in the two decades of advancements made prior to the Taliban takeover in 2021.

CHART 5. EDUCATION



Realms of Violence

“The Taliban are afraid of educated and knowledgeable women, and they want to submerge them in ignorance.”

—A woman from Bamyan, CCs

In the wake of the Taliban’s growing restrictions, Human rights organizations and UN experts have consistently voiced alarm over the extreme discrimination, severe restrictions, and heightened levels of violence³⁷ imposed by the Taliban.³⁸ According to the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security’s 2022-2023 report, following the Taliban’s takeover of the country, Afghanistan plummeted to the last place among 177 countries.³⁹ This decline can be attributed to worsening rates of violence and a deteriorating sense of community safety. A study conducted in March 2022 revealed that 77% of women’s civil society organizations, which provided legal and protection services to victims of Violence Against Women (VAW), had discontinued their projects for the year. The abolishment of government backed preventive and protective mechanisms has left Afghan women vulnerable to various forms of violence.⁴⁰

One of the striking actions taken by the Taliban was the issuance of a directive in May 2021, mandating that all Afghan women cover their faces in public. This order stipulated that a woman’s male guardian was responsible for ensuring her compliance with a Sharia hijab, and the guardian was held accountable for any violations.

37 For the purposes of this report the term violence and “violence against women” means any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. Reference: Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women Proclaimed by General Assembly Resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993. Reference: [Microsoft Word - Document1 \(un.org\)](#)

38 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/06/afghan-women-suffer-extreme-discrimination-restrictions-and-violence-deputy-high>

39 <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/WPS-Index-full-report.pdf>

40 https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/af-Research-on-Challenges-Barriers-Opportunities-women-CSOs_full-report_0.pdf

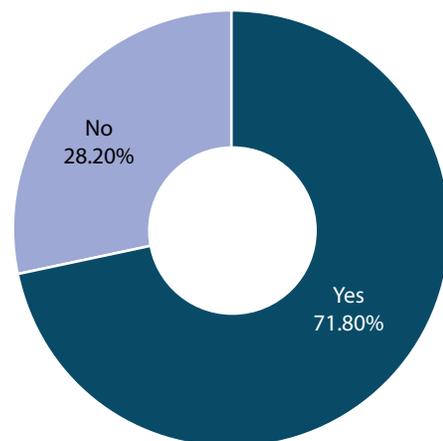
This decision effectively transferred control over women to their male family members, significantly contributing to the heightened levels of violence against women, which underscores the distressing plight faced by Afghan women under the Taliban’s rule.

Out of the 500 women that WRN engaged with, participants spoke about various forms of violence they experience as a given, as part of their daily lives. These women openly discussed the challenges they encounter, spanning four main areas: experiencing various forms of violence and discrimination as women, facing obstacles to accessing justice, dealing with deteriorating mental well-being, and struggling to access humanitarian aid. These findings provide a comprehensive view of the hardships Afghan women encounter in their daily existence.

Within the Shadows: Violence within Families and Communities

Overall, data analysis indicates that a staggering 71.8% of the women included in this research study reported experiencing various forms of violence from either family or community members since the Taliban assumed control.

CHART 6. VIOLENCE BY FAMILY OR COMMUNITY MEMBERS



NAJIBA, WOMAN FACING VIOLENCE FROM KABUL

Najiba, a 45-year-old woman, had always dreamed of a better life for herself and her family. She had worked hard as a cleaner in a local organization, providing for her children and contributing to the household income. However, her husband's physically and psychologically violent behavior had always been a dark cloud hanging over her head. Despite the abuse she faced at home, Najiba expressed that she *"found solace in her work. Her colleagues at the organization had become her family, and they had always been there to support her through the tough times. They had encouraged her to speak up about the abuse and had even helped her seek legal assistance."*

But everything changed when the organization closed due to the political upheaval in the country. She lost her job, and with it, the support system she had relied on for so long. She noted that *"I found myself trapped in an abusive marriage, with no means of escape. While the closure of the Ministry of Women's Affairs only added to my despair as there is no longer a place for women like me to turn to for help."*

The system that was supposed to protect her had failed her, leaving her feeling helpless and alone.

She knew that she couldn't continue living like this. She wanted to break free from the cycle of violence and create a better future for herself and her children. But she didn't know where to go or how to start anew.

Najiba is currently at home, enduring beatings, and torture at the hands of her husband. She feels trapped and helpless, with nowhere to turn. Her own family has turned her away, telling her that they are unable to support her. She said *"I have no choice but to stay in this abusive situation and await what will inevitably be a tragic fate."*

The provinces of Nimrooz, Kunduz, and Bamyan displayed the highest occurrence rates, reaching 100%, while Jawzjan reported the lowest incidence at 23%.

Violence against women extended beyond the confines of families. A substantial portion of the Afghan women interviewed for this report, approximately 77%, reported having had experienced violence perpetrated by the Taliban or other non-state actors.

Categorizing the responses by region shows that all the respondents (100%) from the province of Balkh, Kunduz, and Bamyan faced violence from these groups. Most of the women (80%) from the province of Herat also shared having experienced the same.

CHART 7. VIOLENCE BY TALIBAN

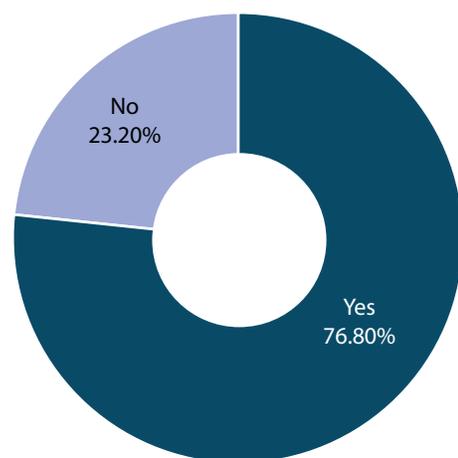
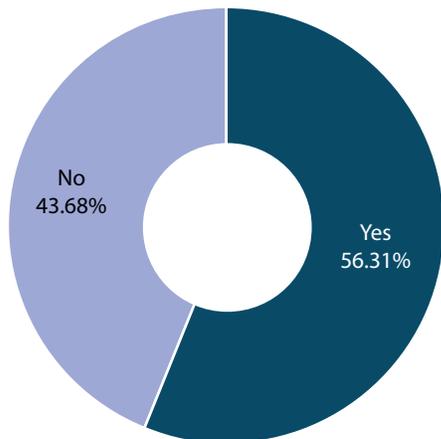


CHART 8. INSECURITY



Insecurity

Despite the Taliban's claims of security in the country, over half of the participants, constituting 56.3% of the overall respondents, expressed feelings of insecurity under the Taliban regime.

It is worth noting that 15.6% of the survey participants identified poverty, lack of income sources, or unemployment as additional contributing factors to their sense of insecurity. About 20.4% specifically mentioned the Taliban as the primary source of insecurity, in addition to their violent treatment of women.

"I don't want to go out because I feel insecure. I fear the violent behavior of the Taliban, I don't want to be punished in public, or be humiliated on the streets. I am afraid of the armed Taliban insurgents themselves."

A Woman in Nimrooz CC

Furthermore, 18.6% of the participants believe that the absence of armed conflict has not translated into physical security for women at present. The highest levels of insecurity were reported in the regions of Nimrooz, Herat, and Bamyan.

Fahima, a young mother who lives with her two sons in Bamyan said *"My husband is working in Iran."* With

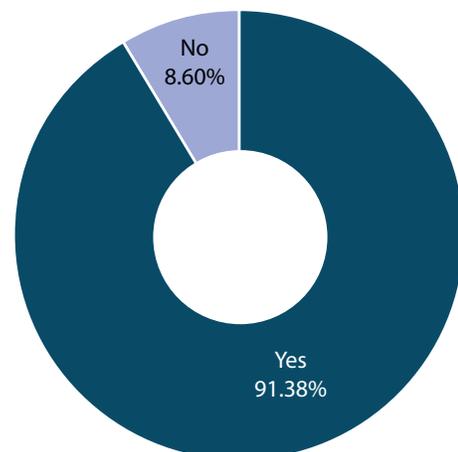
her voice shaking she mentioned, *"I used to work for the former government, and I fear every minute now that the Taliban will come and arrest me. If we had a source of income and my husband stayed with us, I would feel secure."*

Subjugated for Being Women

An overwhelming 91.4% of the respondents reported having faced gender-based discrimination⁴¹ for being a woman. (See Chart 9). Provinces like Panjshir, Nimrooz, Kunduz, Herat, and Bamyan were identified as areas with acute discrimination against women.

While this question was closed-ended, participants frequently touched upon the general situation for women, highlighting the restrictions imposed by the Taliban on women's mobility, right to work, and right to education as forms of violence targeting specifically and intentionally women, signifying gendered-discrimination/gender persecution. During a CC in Herat, one participant expressed *"The Taliban are not physically killing us, but they have extinguished all our hopes for life and a future."* Another woman stated *"We have become slaves to men. We*

CHART 9. DISCRIMINATION FOR BEING WOMAN



⁴¹ Discrimination occurs when a person is unable to enjoy his or her human rights or other legal rights on an equal basis with others because of an unjustified distinction made in policy, law or treatment. Reference: [Discrimination - Amnesty International](#)

are either tasked with providing for our brothers and fathers, fulfilling our husband's sexual needs, or caring for our children."

"There are no constant suicide bombings and armed conflicts as before. However, I can't refer to it as security. Both our physical and mental security have been severely compromised; all our human and legal rights have been stripped away. We can't even challenge these restrictions. We don't feel safe at home or outside; there's a constant fear of being tracked and detained by the Taliban."

A Women's Rights Activist from Laghman CC

Shattered Rights: Violation of Basic Human Rights

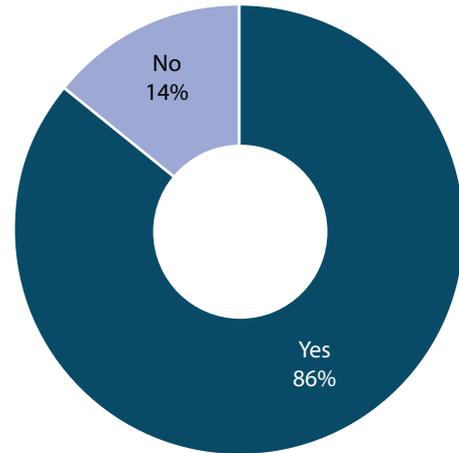
Overall, 86% of the respondents reported that the Taliban had stripped them of their basic human rights. The provinces of Nimrooz, Kunduz, Bamyan, and Herat exhibited the highest occurrences, followed by Panjshir which was not far behind.

"Deprivation of girls from education, exclusion from official employment in offices, denial of individual activities and commerce, restriction from sight-seeing, and confinement from moving freely all culminate in the deprivation of fundamental and human rights. There is no hope for the future when faced with these deprivations. When we raise our voices against these deprivations, we receive the harshest possible response (even imprisonment and beating)."

A Women's Rights Activist from Laghman CC

The message from this woman paints a bleak picture of the challenges faced by Afghan women under the rule of the Taliban. Another respondent vehemently expressed that their voices of dissent were met with harsh repression, including imprisonment and physical violence. Despite their peaceful and civil struggle for rights, the Taliban resort to armed force against them. What is particularly disheartening, she pointed out, was the lack of international support and condemnation of

CHART 10. VIOLATION OF BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS

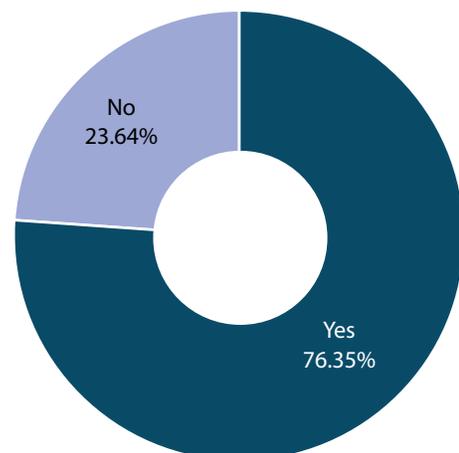


these actions. Human rights organizations and the international community have, in her view, remained silent and have not provided the support these women need.

Discrimination Beyond Bounds

The data underscores the pervasive and distressing challenges encountered by Afghan women during Taliban governance, arising not only from gender-based biases but also influenced by factors such as religion, ethnicity, and disability. Approximately 76% of respondents reported facing discrimination based on their ethnic, religious, or physical identities. Notably, these instances were pronounced in provinces like Nimrooz, Kunduz, Bamyan, Panjshir, and Herat.

CHART 11. IDENTITY BASED DISCRIMINATION



ZAHRA, NGO WORKER AND WOMAN WITH DISABILITY, NANGARHAR

Zahra, a woman from Nangarhar, Afghanistan, has faced many challenges in her life.

She became physically disabled and lost her husband several years ago, leaving her as the sole provider for her family. *“Despite my disability, I worked tirelessly in one of the local NGOs, not only to support my family but also to make a difference in my community.”* Zahra’s job at the NGO had been her lifeline. It provided her with a stable income, allowing her to put food on the table and ensure her children had access to education and healthcare. She felt a sense of purpose and pride in being able to provide for her family, despite the hardships she faced. However, everything changed after 2021. The political upheaval and the withdrawal of international aid had a devastating impact on the local NGOs. Many organizations were forced to close their doors or downsize significantly due to a lack of funding. Zahra found herself among the countless individuals who were terminated from their jobs, leaving her and her family in a dire situation. The loss of her job was a heavy blow for Zahra. She noted *“I have no other source of income, and the prospects of finding another employment are slim, especially given my disability and the dwindling opportunities in the province.”*

“As I don’t have good connections I didn’t receive any humanitarian support, as there is no transparency in the distribution of humanitarian aid and no monitoring system in place.”

“I am afraid of losing my kids due to not providing food for them, and my situation is getting worse day by day.” Zahra’s voice was heavy with worry and desperation.

While this indicates a grim situation for ethnic minorities and women, leading to a sense of hopelessness regarding the future, and enduring pervasive feelings of hardship and insecurity, surprisingly, nearly half of the women in Laghman province reported living in relatively peaceful and secure conditions. A response from a Pashai Sunni woman in Nangarhar encapsulated this sentiment: *“We live in peace because security has relatively improved with the arrival of the Taliban.”*

Conversely, ethnic minorities confront a distressing reality, being deprived of fundamental human rights such as opportunities for work, education, recreation, and religious freedom, particularly when accessing humanitarian aid. Their plight is exacerbated by the absence of basic life facilities and job opportunities, without any accommodations made for minorities. They are frequent targets of violence and targeted killings, lacking freedom of expression and political participation, further compounded by their exclusion from governmental positions, favoring those aligned with the ruling group. Dismissals of Hazara professors from universities serve as a stark example of this discriminatory practice.

Numerous participants reported witnessing instances of torture, violence, harassment, intimidation, and mistreatment targeting individuals from the Tajik community in Panjshir and the Hazara ethnic minority within their neighborhoods or communities. Individuals with previous affiliations with the military or police fear reprisals from the current regime, leading some to seek refuge by fleeing the country. Moreover, those accused of association with the National Resistance Front endure violence from the Taliban, including brutal torture inflicted upon men and young boys.

“In Panjshir, we live under house arrest, witnessing firsthand how women are subjected to oppression under various pretexts, often because of their ethnic background.”

A woman from Panjshir

For women with disabilities, many identified, in addition to violence, a lack of access to justice, access to mental health services, and essential services like health and education. Not only this, but disabled women have also

been deprived of government allowances and humanitarian aid, significantly impacting their well-being. The absence of knowledge about advocacy organizations and support services tailored to their unique needs compounds the adversity these women encounter.

"In the previous government, I received a pension, but currently, I don't. My financial situation is not good."

A woman with disability from Laghman CC

Another woman with disability confirmed that the allowance she received from the former government has been slashed, pushing her further into deep poverty. She calls on the international and national organizations to assist them and provide vocational training. This way, she remarked *"women with disability can generate income, break free from poverty, and become self-sufficient."*

ZAINAB, HAZARA WOMAN , KABUL

Zainab is a 24-year-old woman from the Hazara tribe living in Kabul city. She was forced into marriage 6 years ago owing to some family secrets, and she has faced many problems since.

"I was forced into marriage against my own will. There are certain family secrets behind it which I cannot share but due to those secrets my life was treated as a toy. I have not been happy about this marriage and have been facing physical and mental violence by my own husband since the day I got married."

After the fall of the government, the violence from her husband increased day by day to the point where he broke the bones on her face several times. Due to severe violence, Zainab left her husband's house and moved to her father's residence. She decided to divorce her husband.

"I had enough violence for 6 years, I couldn't take it anymore. The pain and trauma I faced everyday was because I was living with people who just wanted me to cry and have bruises every day. No one thought of me as a human being. I was humiliated, beaten and considered a burden by my own husband."

She went to the government district authority of the Taliban, registered her complaint and asked for a divorce. Since then, notwithstanding a long wait, and several visits, the Taliban government did not address her case.

"No one paid attention to my case, I was constantly being ignored by the Taliban members working there. But that made me more determined to achieve freedom from this marriage. I kept trying again and again."

Not losing hope, Zainab continuously pursued her case and succeeded in getting her divorce formalized. However, since her husband was from a non-Hazara tribe and after having doled out a huge bribe to the Taliban administration, the verdict was changed and Zainab's divorce case was rejected. Zainab feels powerless and fed up with all of the cruelty. She strongly feels she is facing gender discrimination, especially because she is a Hazara woman, who can excessively be insulted and humiliated by the Taliban forces.

"Being from the Hazara tribe, the Taliban humiliated me and insulted me for asking for a divorce from my husband who was from a non-Hazara tribe."

She realized that going to the Taliban forces, seeking any help or assistance, as a Hazara woman was completely pointless.

"Despite losing hope of getting a divorce I searched for alternative ways to save myself."

Her family was threatened by her in-laws and she was forced to flee Afghanistan with her father's family to seek refuge in Iran. She and her father's family are now refugees in Iran, and her husband has still not divorced her, leaving her in a state of limbo.

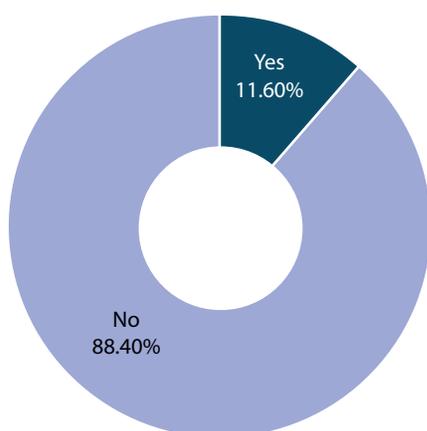
Seeking Justice in the Shadows

In the aftermath of the Taliban's resurgence in August 2021, Afghanistan's judicial system collapsed. The Taliban replaced all professional legal personnel with their members, primarily religious school graduates. This transition witnessed the exclusion of over 250 women judges, along with hundreds of women lawyers and prosecutors, effectively erasing them from the legal system.

Consequently, laws and rules concerning legal procedure, judicial appointment, and procedures for fair trials, specialized courts, including those devoted to managing sexual and gender-based violence, have been dissolved. This systematic exclusion of women from the legal system, inclusive of women judges, prosecutors, and lawyers, does not only represent a blatant act of discrimination but also hinders women's access to justice.⁴²

The implications of these actions extend further, as many women judges have been compelled to flee the country or adopt clandestine measures to ensure their safety. Women lawyers are unable to seek renewal of their licenses, further undermining the foundation of Afghanistan's legal landscape. Without female lawyers, judges and prosecutors, women and their families will not have equal access to justice.⁴³

CHART 12. ACCESS TO POLICE OR COURT



⁴² <https://rawadari.org/040620231635.htm/>

⁴³ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/ijudiciary/statements/2023-01-17/202301-stm-sr-ijl-sr-afghani-stan-day-endangered-lawyer.pdf>

The findings of this research show that 88.4% of all respondents did not have access to the police or courts to report incidents of violence, directed towards themselves or others they knew. It is important to note that none of the respondents from the provinces of Nimrooz, Kunduz, Jawzjan, Herat, and Bamyán had the opportunity to avail themselves of legal services.

In response to situations involving violence, 26.4% of the respondents expressed a profound reluctance to seek redress in the Taliban's courts, driven by the palpable fear of potential retaliation. About 13.8% of women harbored the belief that the Taliban would not genuinely address their concerns or take their complaints seriously, primarily due to their gender. Further 12.6% of the respondents preferred seeking justice through informal channels, with a pronounced emphasis on tribal elders and religious leaders as potential arbiters to resolve their grievances. Of these, 3.3% women shared a common perspective that the Taliban, as the primary perpetrator of violations of their basic rights, lacked the willingness to reconsider their decisions and effectively resolve the issues.

It is important to note that although women are not explicitly banned from accessing justice, the restrictions imposed by the Taliban, such as the requirement to be accompanied by a Mahram, coupled with the overall aggressive behavior towards women, create significant barriers that discourage women from seeking justice. Additionally, the lack of protective mechanisms and the vulnerable position of female employees further contribute to this deterrent effect.

"I go to my own relatives, not to government offices because they don't listen to me. There are many obstacles to achieving justice, including the Taliban themselves, their inappropriate behavior, and ongoing administrative corruption. I suggest that the Taliban reform themselves and also make their actions righteous."

A woman from Balkh CCs

Unraveling the Mind: Mental Health

Mental health, as defined by the World Health Program (WHO), refers to an individual's state of well-being, allowing them to effectively manage life's pressures, realize their potential, engage in learning and productive work, and contribute positively to their communities.⁴⁴ In Afghanistan, prior to the Taliban takeover, as revealed by the 2019 Global Burden of Disease study from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 5.13% of the population, equivalent to 1.44 million individuals, grappled with depression. Notably, this data unveils a considerable gender disparity, with 47% of Afghan women experiencing mental health issues, including depression. These high rates are attributed to the chronic trauma, emotional abuse, and deeply rooted patriarchal norms in Afghanistan, contributing significantly to the prevalence of severe depression and suicidal thoughts among women, along with gender-based violence, forced marriage, and the enduring impact of conflict.⁴⁵

In 2021, another study indicated that 79.1% of Afghan women were already struggling with depression even before the Taliban's return to power.⁴⁶

The WHO's Quality of Life (QoL) framework serves as a comprehensive measure of an individual's overall well-being, taking into account both the positive and negative aspects of their life.⁴⁷ The persistent and intensified restrictions imposed by the Taliban on women have taken a severe toll on their quality of life, leading to pronounced mental health challenges. A 2021 study published by the National Library of Medicine, focusing on depression, anxiety, and the quality of life of Afghan women living in urban areas under the Taliban's governance, highlights the significant prevalence of depression among these women. Another study examining the mental health and suicidality of Afghan university female

students revealed that 69.7% exhibited clinical signs of depression following the Taliban's takeover in 2021.⁴⁸

"I have been a passionate women's human rights defender, dedicating my life to empowering and advocating for the rights of women in my community. Now, I find myself without a job, living in constant fear for my safety. I have reached out to numerous organizations for evacuation, but no one has come to my aid. This has taken a severe toll on my mental health, and I feel utterly abandoned in my time of need."

Quote from a WHRD who wished to remain anonymous, Kunduz

A report issued by the United Nations in July 2023 unveiled that an overwhelming 90% of Afghan women experienced heightened feelings of anxiety, isolation, and depression. These outcomes were attributed to various factors, including Taliban-imposed restrictions that limited freedom of movement and access to essential public spaces such as schools, universities, parks, gyms, and public baths. Additionally, the lack of communication tools, such as mobile phones and Internet access, further exacerbated the situation, restricting avenues for coping and opportunities for continued education through clandestine and online means.⁴⁹

Regrettably, even prior to the country's collapse, there was a glaring lack of access to mental health services. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that Afghanistan's mental health services are not only limited but also of low quality due to insufficient funding. In the entire nation, only 320 hospital beds are available for those undergoing mental health issues.⁵⁰

44 <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

45 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s44202-023-00068-4#ref-CR10>

46 <https://pesquisa.bvsalud.org/global-literature-on-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov/resource/pt/covidwho-2274018>

47 <https://www.who.int/tools/whoqol/whoqol-bref>

48 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10401256/>

49 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35390352/>

50 <https://www.emro.who.int/afg/programmes/mental-health.html>

SAMIRA, 16 YEAR OLD GIRL, BAMYAN PROVINCE

Samira, is a 16-year-old girl from Bamyan province, who was living happily with her family in the Kabul city. Her father was the principle of a private school during the previous government. She had a very good life and a promising education. She was planning to pursue a career in political science and wanted to travel the world and learn about different cultures.

"I always had a dream to travel the world and share my experience on social media. I couldn't wait to finish high school and start studying at a university to study political science but who knew every dream, every passion, every excitement would be destroyed within a moment."

After restrictions imposed on girls' education she was not able to go to school anymore and pursue her dream education. Her father's salary was reduced from 25,000Afs to 6000 Afs. They were forced to relocate to Bamyan because it was impossible financially for them to live in Kabul. *"That day my father came home very disappointed, he gathered us all and told us that we cannot afford live here (in Kabul) anymore. We have to move to Bamyan to be able to survive. I remember crying back in my room because everything kept getting worse from every angle."* Now her father sells vegetables in Bamyan province and Samira tries to help him although she cannot leave the house with a male chaperone and only does so to go to the hospital out of necessity, wearing a long black hijab. She was in grade 6 when the schools were closed.

Her father recently decided to marry her off to her uncle's son without her consent, despite Samira's strong objections, her father engaged them. *"I think of suicide every day, because I do not feel like a human with her own will anymore. My education was taken away from me, the freedom to go where what I want was taken away from me and now the freedom to choose my own spouse was also forcefully taken away from me. What would you call such a life?"*

FARISHTA, 11TH GRADE GIRL, NANGARHAR

Farishta was an 11th grade high school student in Behsud district of Nangarhar province during the previous government. When the Taliban came to power, the school doors closed in front of them. Farishta wished to become a doctor in the future and serve her country and people, but her hope was destroyed.

"A week after the fall of Kabul, I remember that I wanted to go to school. They shut the doors of our school right in front of us and told us we are not allowed to enter the premises. I saw the boys of the other school entering the school premises and only girls were not allowed. I felt terrible being born as a girl at that moment. I felt less of a human because of the way I was treated due to being a girl."

Her father was killed by unknown armed men, making them a female headed household and the situation became more stressful for her and her family. To make a living for her family, she washes the clothes for her neighbors and does housework in order to buy basic life necessities for her little brothers and sisters as well as her sick mother. *"From the wish to be a doctor, I now do housework for our neighbor in order to put food on the table for my family and to buy medicine for my mother. As I am the eldest, and my poor mother is too sick to be able to work for herself. We have no one to financially support us after the death of our father."*

ZARAKHSHA, EX-GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL, RETURNED FROM PAKISTAN, NANGARHAR

Zarakhsha, an ex-officer in the Ministry of Interior in the previous republic has been living in constant fear after the country was taken over by the Taliban. Not only did she lose her job, she constantly fears for her security.

The Taliban sent executive death threats from the Emirate authorities which forced her to flee the country. She stated that *“while in Pakistan despite making my case as a person under extreme threat and one who would face persecution upon return to Afghanistan, I remained an ‘illegal migrant’ with no status. I had many concerns, trying to put food on the table, the Taliban’s behavior in Afghanistan and what kind of future I would face if I had to return back to Afghanistan.”*

Over time, her fear turned into reality, and she decided to go back to the country last month due to the extreme torment, harassment and illegal behavior of the Pakistani law enforcement. She was deeply affected, extremely disturbed psychologically, with no psychological support. She now lives in Afghanistan and is afraid of the Taliban. She has seen what they are doing to the soldiers of the previous republican system. She is under serious threat and requires the help of international organizations and the institutions more than ever.

“When I was in Pakistan, though I was not happy being away from my country, I was hoping for a better future for my children and I knew they would receive better education in Pakistan compared to my own country. Now that I have returned back to my country I see no future in education for them. And now I live in constant fear due to my previous position.”

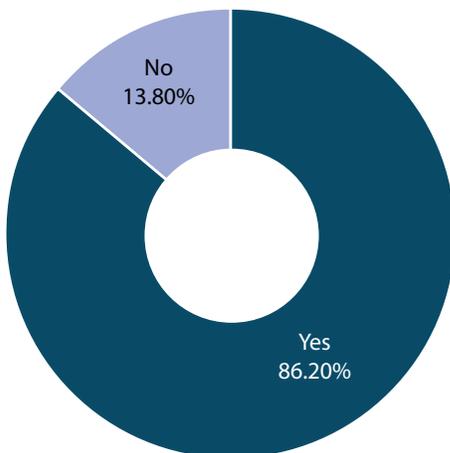
As per the 2017 World Health Organization (WHO) Atlas for Afghanistan, a notable dearth of mental health professionals is evident, with just 0.23 psychiatrists, 0.10 mental health nurses, and 0.30 psychologists per 100,000 individuals. The mental health infrastructure comprises a lone mental hospital, four psychiatry units within general hospitals, and several mental health and community-based outpatient facilities. Importantly, a significant portion of the mental healthcare system is overseen by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) under the Ministry of Health’s purview, introducing complexity in managing mental health services in a vast and diverse country.⁵¹



⁵¹ https://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/atlas/profiles-2017/AFG.pdf?ua=1



CHART 13. MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS



The primary data comprising 500 women in the CCs reveals that 86.2% of the women respondents suffered from some form of mental health challenge. Of these, 82% of the respondents stated that their access to mental health services was severely restricted. This finding is well substantiated by the desk review research carried out by WRN as a component of this research.

All these women, while facing mental health challenges, specifically mentioned experiencing anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Notably, the highest prevalence was observed in participants from Nimrooz, Kunduz, Bamyan, and Herat. It is worth mentioning that these provinces were also marked by reports of violence from both family members and the Taliban.

"I endured a significant amount of mental pressure due to poverty. I became ill as I worried about my kids. I couldn't seek medical attention due to a lack of money, and I still haven't fully recovered."

A woman from Balkh participating in the community conversation

FATIMA, JOURNALIST, BAMYAN PROVINCE

Fatima was a journalist and her husband was a teacher in Kabul when the Taliban took Afghanistan for the second time and the republic fell. They had a good life and enjoyed their human rights despite the problems and lack of facilities in the country.

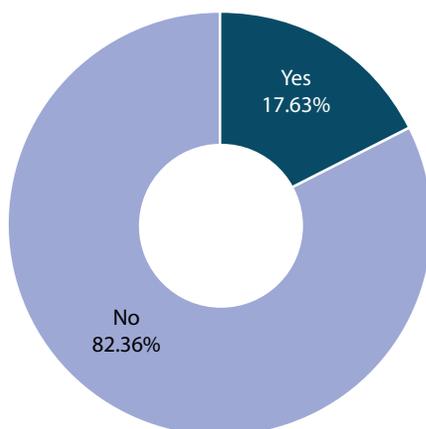
Fatima was in the job which she wanted and she hoped to continue studying law in one of the prestigious universities in Kabul to become a defense lawyer. *“Growing up I always wanted to be Defense Lawyer. Noticing the unjust treatments women were facing in Afghanistan it made me want to somehow defend them but I couldn’t. That is when I realized why I really wanted to study further so I could defend my sisters.”* Initially she became a journalist to access the media and cover the realities for Afghan women.

Her husband was her greatest supporter and he never prevented her from doing her work and activities, especially pursuing her passion. She knew it was her duty of faith and conscience to be the voice of the oppressed women of Afghanistan and to highlight their deprivation. Suddenly her dreams fell apart like all other women of Afghanistan when the Taliban returned and another black page of history was created. *“I remember the day when the Taliban came, when the news came out that the Taliban is in Kabul city, I had a sudden moment of numbness as if my soul left my body. I felt partially dead because all I could think was that everything is over, our dreams, our life, our freedom, everything!”*

She now cannot serve as the voice of the underprivileged Afghan women anymore, because she is locked within the four walls of her house and she cannot even travel to the market and nearby villages without a male chaperone. She noted that there are no dreams or hope left for her. Now her biggest concern is surviving: finding a morsel of bread and fuel for the winter. She stated that every day she feels that deep discrimination against her as a woman. Her parents fled to Iran and her in-laws whereabouts and fate are unknown. The pain of all of this has brought her to the *“border of madness.”*

“I think about suicide every day. I only continue to live for my children. I am afraid of what their fate will be after me? Every day of our life becomes more difficult.” She further added that *“I was a woman who two years ago was a platform and voice of marginalized women. And now I cry out my own struggles, but no one hears my voice.”*

CHART 14. ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES



When questioned about their access to mental health services, it was discovered that only 17.6% of the participants from the CCs, had the capability to access any form of mental health support.

SADAF, UNIVERSITY STUDENT AND PROTESTER, KABUL

Sadaf was once a bright and ambitious student at the University of Kabul. She was pursuing her dreams and had big plans for her future. But when the doors of the university were closed to women after the collapse of Kabul, her world turned upside down. Isolated and confined to her home, Sadaf said *"I felt like my dreams were slipping through my fingers. I longed for the days when I could freely pursue my education and make a difference in my community."*

One day, a university friend of hers who was a protester reached out to her.

Sadaf was hesitant at first, but she felt a spark of hope as she listened to her friend's stories of resistance and resilience. She decided to join her friend at a protest, and for a moment, she felt empowered and united with others who were fighting for their rights. She continued this but as the protests grew increasingly dangerous, Sadaf realized the risk she was taking. She couldn't bare the thought of putting her family and herself in any harmful situation. She made the difficult decision to step back from the movement after many death threats.

Now, as she stated, *"she finds herself drifting around Kabul, struggling to make ends meet amid a dire financial situation. She has no one to turn to for support, and she feels lost and alone in a city that once felt like home."*

Despite the challenges she faces, Sadaf refuses to give up hope. She knows that she is not alone in her struggles and that there are others like her who are fighting for a better future. She clings to the memories of her time at the university and the dreams she once had, holding onto them as a source of strength and inspiration. As she navigates the uncertain and tumultuous landscape of Kabul, Sadaf remains determined to find a way forward. She said, *"I will reclaim my voice and my agency and build a better future for myself and others like me."*

During the CCs, participants consistently emphasized that the dire circumstances have inflicted significant psychological pressure on the entire Afghan population, with a more profound impact on women and girls. One woman pointed out that the fear of retaliation by the Taliban, in response to protests against these restrictions, has forced women to internalize their burdens, resulting in mental distress. Many stressed the urgent need for mental and emotional support, but regrettably, the availability of such services is limited, primarily concentrated in provincial capitals, leaving those in remote villages without access to essential care.

Humanitarian Aid: Complaints Amidst Crisis

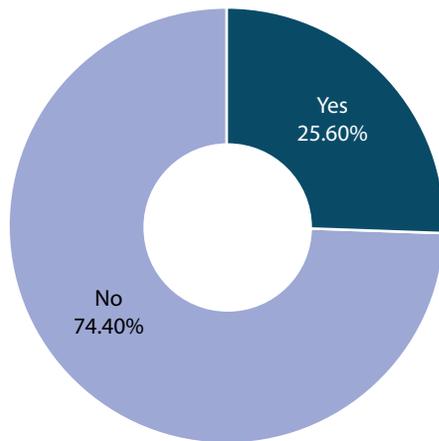
The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan has significantly weakened the country's already fragile and donor-dependent economy. As of May 2023, Afghanistan remains the world's most severe humanitarian crisis, with 28.8 million individuals in dire need of assistance.⁵² A staggering 17 million people are confronting acute hunger, with 6 million on the precipice of famine.⁵³ The Taliban's restriction on women's employment is a pivotal factor not only in the current state of affairs but also in the prospective economic trajectory of the nation.⁵⁴

52 <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-update-may-2023>

53 https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/news-stories/stories/2-years-after-taliban-takeover-afghanistans-population-need-urgent-humanitarian-assistance_en

54 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1135762>

CHART 15. HUMANITARIAN AID



In 2021, the Taliban ordered all female civil servants to stop working until further notice. This decision was not reversed, instead, more rules limiting women's work were added in the following years. By 2022, women were not allowed to work, even for international non-governmental organizations. Following, in the year 2023, the situation further worsened when the Taliban banned women's work for UN agencies.⁵⁵ They also closed down 12,000 beauty salons that were owned and run by women and more than 60,000 women lost their main source of income.⁵⁶ During this period, 60% of female journalists also lost their jobs, 91% of whom were the sole financial sustenance for their families.⁵⁷

At a time when the people of Afghanistan urgently require humanitarian assistance, the ban on women working for UN agencies has generated significant anger and apprehension within the global community. Moreover, there have been troubling reports of aid not reaching households led by women and marginalized communities.⁵⁸ These decisions also hamper the efficient distribution of humanitarian aid and the provision of basic necessities.⁵⁹

The data gathered from the CCs revealed that 74.4% of the respondents have not received any type of aid while they face acute economic challenges, along with other pressing humanitarian needs.

In particular and strikingly, none of the Community Conversations participants from Balkh or Herat have received any form of humanitarian support, indicating a significant gap in support provision in these regions. Conversely, the data reveals a notable discrepancy in access to humanitarian assistance among respondents from Bamyán, Kunduz, and Kabul: a mere 10% of those from Bamyán were able to access humanitarian support, compared to an encouraging 85% from Kunduz; with 15% in Kabul who reported having received such assistance.

These findings emphasize the pressing need for more equitable and consistent access to humanitarian aid, particularly in regions where support is currently limited or absent.

55 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1135357>

56 <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/beauty-salon-ban-afghanistan-blow-womens-financial-freedom-2023-07-21/>

57 <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/afghanistan-87-of-women-journalists-have-suffered-discrimination-under-taliban-rule>

58 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/food-aid-in-a-collapsed-economy-relief-tensions-and-allegations/>

59 <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/press-releases/undp-warns-restrictions-womens-rights-will-worsen-economic-catastrophe-afghanistan>

CONCLUSION

This research sheds light on the profound challenges faced by Afghan women under the rule of the Taliban, offering a sobering perspective on their struggles in various dimensions of life.

The findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted issues affecting Afghan women, encompassing violence and harassment, discrimination, mental health concerns, access to justice, and humanitarian aid.

The data reveals that a significant proportion of Afghan women have been subjected to violence, with stark regional variations. The threat and harassment levels reported in Nimrooz, Herat, and Bamyan underscore the pressing need for measures to ensure the safety and well-being of Afghan women. Discrimination against women and other forms of discrimination further exacerbate the challenges faced by this vulnerable population.

The research also illuminates the mental health crisis among Afghan women, with the prevalence of conditions such as anxiety and depression being distressingly high. Access to mental health services is limited, leaving many women without essential support.

Furthermore, the inability to access justice due to deeply ingrained cultural barriers and fear of repercussions paints a grim picture of the obstacles women encounter when seeking legal redress. The reluctance to engage with Taliban courts and the preference for informal channels reflect a fundamental mistrust in the justice system and a need for drastic reform.

Access to humanitarian aid, though observed in some regions, reveals a significant gap in support provision, particularly in areas where women reported facing acute challenges. Ensuring equitable distribution and targeted assistance is paramount.



ASKS FOR CHANGE: RECOMMENDATIONS

Incorporating the voices and insights of Afghan women who actively engaged in the CCs during our research, we present a series of compelling 'Asks for Change' categorized for key stakeholders. These recommendations, divided into categories for the United Nations (UN), the international community, feminist funding organizations, Afghanistan's women leaders, and activists and Muslim-majority countries, represent a powerful 'Call for Action' by Afghan women as they articulate essential steps toward advancing women's rights and empowerment in Afghanistan.

These practical and specific recommendations aim to address the identified challenges and limitations, emphasizing the protection of women's rights, the provision of mental health services, enhanced access to justice, and the equitable distribution of humanitarian aid with an inclusive, diverse and survivor centric approach.

Charting the Course: The United Nations

- Refrain from recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and engage in diplomatic efforts to dissuade nations from providing support to the Taliban.
- Acknowledge the Taliban's treatment of women as constituting gender persecution and recognize it as a manifestation of gender apartheid. The UN should take decisive actions to curtail these grave violations of international law, including the prosecution of those responsible.
- Advocate for the referral of the Taliban's actions, particularly the crimes of gender apartheid, to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for a thorough investigation and subsequent prosecution. This referral would align with international legal norms and facilitate accountability.
- Impose targeted sanctions and full travel bans on key figures within the Taliban leadership responsible for orchestrating or condoning human rights abuses, particularly those related to gender apartheid. These measures should restrict their mobility, freeze their assets, and underscore the international community's commitment to accountability.
- Allocate quotas for female aid recipients and ensure the equitable distribution of humanitarian assistance, especially to women in smaller provinces, remote areas, and women-headed households. Recognize regional variations and support minority communities vulnerable to persecution, violence, or marginalization.
- The UN should provide platform for the marginalized ethnicities/communities to raise their voice and support them inside Afghanistan.

Global Allies: The Role of the International Community

- Exert significant diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to uphold and respect women's rights, establishing measurable benchmarks for women's inclusion across Afghan society, with a focus on education and workforce participation. This could include international sanctions, condition based engagement, and the threat of isolation.
- Encourage nations adhering to feminist foreign policies to prioritize safeguarding women's rights in Afghanistan, including the cessation of gender-based violence and discrimination.
- Provide scholarships to Afghan women and extend asylum and protection to victims and survivors of Taliban atrocities with priority to those in third countries.
- Provide flexible and adaptable funding to women led organizations specially from the oppressed and marginalized communities for providing support and protecting victims of GBV.
- Initiate an international dialogue forum, incorporating Afghan women, diplomats, policymakers, and human rights experts, to facilitate constructive discussions aimed at supporting the establishment of an inclusive government in Afghanistan, ensuring the protection of basic human rights irrespective of gender, sect, ethnicity, or language.

Empowering Change: Feminist Funding Organizations

- Support and fund educational programs designed specifically for Afghan women, encompassing opportunities for education, vocational training, and literacy to ensure their long-term empowerment. Ensure inclusivity and diversity in all your funding opportunities, by focusing on, and not continue to ignore, those communities that are further oppressed by the Taliban.
- Promote initiatives for women's vocational and skills development to enhance employability, including training and certification, alongside the creation of remote job opportunities.
- Collaborate with formal and grassroots women's rights advocacy groups in Afghanistan, and globally to fortify legal advice protecting women's rights. Fund initiatives providing legal aid and support to women facing legal challenges.
- Contribute to the understanding of mental health issues among Afghan women through research and data collection efforts. Fund healthcare and psychosocial support services, including counseling services, support groups, and trauma-informed care making them easily accessible all over the country.
- 30% of humanitarian and developments funds should be channeled through women organizations.
- Provide support for women platforms and networks in exile to be able to continue their advocacy efforts and amplify the voices of women who are oppressed and suppressed by the Taliban in Afghanistan

In Unity and Faith: Muslim Majority Countries:

- Condemn the Taliban's treatment of women as incompatible with Islamic principles and amplify messages from Islamic scholars and political leaders in Muslim-majority countries, highlighting the discrepancy between the Taliban's restrictive women's rights policies and contemporary Muslim world practices.
- Coordinate efforts to exert pressure on the Taliban through diplomatic channels, economic ties, and regional cooperation mechanisms to encourage a reversal of their decisions regarding women's rights.
- Use your influence to pressure the Taliban to allow girls to schools and women to work especially in the countries where the families of Taliban are living and their daughters are enjoying world-class education while girls inside are banned from school.
- The Muslim-majority countries should also work with women and men from different ethnicities and communities in Afghanistan. The few initiatives that have been taken so far are providing a platform for the one dominant ethnicity of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's women leaders and activists

- Civil society, Afghan women and activists in exile should further organize themselves to become more impactful at the global level advocating for restoration of democracy and respect women's rights in Afghanistan.
- Coordinate efforts through different mechanisms and continue amplifying the voices of Afghan women from inside through different campaigns, advocacy and research and dialogues.
- Continue documenting the Taliban's war crimes and violation of women's human rights and continue making the case for recognition of gender apartheid.
- Lead and host intra-Afghanistan dialogues and promote social cohesion, unity and coordinated civil resistance against the Taliban.
- Do not provide platforms and seats to civil society organizations and women activists who work closely with the Taliban due to funding opportunities and ethnic ties. They use their presence in Afghanistan as the legitimacy to be the only voice of Afghan people and women.

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