

Human Rights Violations in Afghanistan: An Analysis of Women Plights under the  
Taliban

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## **List of Acronyms**

MOWA	Ministry of Women Affairs
VAWG	Violence against Women and Girls
UN	United Nations
US	United States

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**Image 1.** Women for Afghan Women Shelter in Kabul in 2014

**Figure 1.** Leading Factors of VAWG after the Takeover by the Taliban

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## Background

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 impacted all aspects of life in the country with major implications on women and their roles of engagement in society. The Taliban stepped in, and all state systems have fallen apart. The group immediately abolished the country's enacted laws and regulations, including the Afghan Constitution, which provided gender equality to some extent. There was a mood of tolerance and openness as the country began moving toward a fragile democracy. Over the past twenty years, Afghan women made important contributions to national development from education to economy and politics. Women were active in humanitarian relief and civil society organizations, providing a pool of talent and expertise imperative in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. However, the Taliban takeover in mid-August has imposed severe restrictions on women's ability to work, relapsing drastically the situation to two decades ago when women were imprisoned at home by the Taliban's first rule in the 1990s. Although the new administration in Kabul claims it is acting in the best interests of women, the reality proves that the new regime inhumanly reduced women and girls to poverty, worsened their health, and removed them from public sphere.<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan under the Taliban now has one of the worst human rights records in the world. The new regime represses systematically all sectors of the population even the most basic individual rights.

Although the Taliban had promised to respect certain women's rights to work and education, in practice, the new regime has already banned schooling, outdoor profession, and traveling of longer distances unless with a male chaperone. On December 26, 2021, the Taliban's Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice issued guidance, calling on taxi/ bus drivers "not to offer a ride to women traveling for more than 45 miles (72 kilometers) unless they are not accompanied by a close male relative."<sup>2</sup> The guidance also advised the city vehicle owners not to offer rides to women without covering properly according to Islam. As per the Taliban's harsh interpretation of Islamic Sharia, women must cover all parts of their body which is literally known as *hijab*. The Taliban have not yet passed any codified law apart from saying it would be in accordance with Islamic "principles." These vague pronouncements have created a general misunderstanding of what Islamic "principles" are as people of different Islamic faiths have various understanding of Islamic teachings. The Islamist group has also asked Afghanistan's TV

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela Constable and Haq Nawaz Khan, "Kabul University Shuts Down as Taliban Government Bans Women from Campus, for Now," *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2021. <https://wapo.st/3nudANx>

<sup>2</sup> France 24, "Taliban Bans Women from Traveling Longer Distance Unless with Male Relative," December 26, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3rBLHnZ>

and radio channels to stop showing dramas and soap operas featuring women actors, as well as the public not to listen to music and or men shave their beards.<sup>3</sup>

After wielding power in August 2021, the Islamist group disbanded the country's only Ministry of Women Affairs, replacing it with the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.<sup>4</sup> The Ministry of virtue would be responsible to preach the Islamists religious ideology by punishing those who avoid complying with it. During the first stint in power in the 1990s, the Taliban imposed strict Islamic rules and harsh restrictions on women and girls. A similar structure now means a chilling message to human rights – taking the country back to two decades ago. Over the last twenty years, Afghan women have struggled for and gained a number of fundamental rights. However, the fragile progress is now being upended by the Taliban's new all-male and ethnically homogenous interim dispensation. Although the Islamist group has initially promised that they understood the country has changed and that so have they – the political development in the past ten months presents a growing mismatch between promises and policies.

Also, since the mid-August takeover, Afghanistan has been plunged into a sharp economic and financial freefall that has crippled the country's aid-dependent economy, banking systems, and businesses, deepening poverty and sending inflation rates skyrocketing. Foreign aid, which previously made up about three-quarters of the government budget has considerably evaporated. The Taliban, sleepwalking into crisis without international recognition, would not manage access to \$10 billion in national reserves blockaded in the United States. Almost every Afghan will teeter below the poverty line in 2022, according to UN estimates.<sup>5</sup> Of all, women and children would suffer the most from the current plummeting economy. Women who were employed, providing basic needs of their children and families before the August political fallout are now imprisoned at home amid dwindling job opportunities. A female teacher, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, described her life under the Taliban as such:

I was a schoolteacher. My monthly income was around 15,000 Afghanis (around \$150), and now I am at home having no job, which means no income. The Taliban took everything from me. I do not know how to feed my three children. My husband was a foot soldier in the previous government and lost his leg in a

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> BBC, "Afghanistan: Taliban Morality Police Replace Women's Ministry," September 17, 2021. <https://bbc.in/3ImqPbf>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Development Program (UNDP), "97 Percent of Afghans Could Plunged into Poverty By Mid-2022," September 9, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3qHMWmA>

bomb blast, making it impossible for him to work now. Therefore, before anything else, we will starve.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the recent political collapse occurred at a time when Afghanistan was already hit hard by the COVID pandemic, which left tremendous socio-economic and health crises. The UN findings show that women and girls are disproportionately impacted by conflict, social injustice, and humanitarian crises compared to men.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly true for Afghan women and women from minority communities who are more burdened by decades of conflict, economic inequality, social injustice, and food insecurity. Traditional norms restrict their movement, access to education, health care, job opportunity, and ultimately expose them to more domestic and social violence. The COVID pandemic, proving to be no different in nature, is exacerbating further the already existent inequalities, and domestic violence Afghan women face.

Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that the *de facto* authorities now in Afghanistan and the relevant international actors must work together to adapt their responses and policies to the various implications the current changing political dynamics and the COVID outbreak have had specifically on Afghan women and women from the minority communities. To ensure that the voices of Afghan women are heard, and their sufferings are reflected globally, this research, therefore, is an attempt to assess and gather thoughts and views from Afghan women through interviews and the existing literature. Based on the responses and analysis, the following key concerns were identified that range from policy level to practical spheres:

1. Gender-based violence and discrimination
2. Growing economic hardship and poverty
3. Repression and Arbitrary arrest of women activists and protesters
4. Reprisals against women activists and former female security members

## **Methodology**

This study has been conducted using primary and secondary data, analyzing developments following the regime change on 15 August 2021 in Afghanistan. The primary data has been compiled through interviews with women activists, women entrepreneurs, and women from minority communities now live in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. In addition, a rapid desk

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<sup>6</sup> Anonymous, interviewed by H. S., Kabul, January 05, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Kate Whiting, "Why Do Humanitarian Crises Disproportionately Affect Women," *World Economic Forum*, December 7, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3AgSmYU>

review of existing literature was undertaken, illustrating the deterioration of human rights in Afghanistan. Due to the prevailing security concerns, all sources related to interviewees and their references have been fully anonymized in line with the principles of *Do-no-Harm*.

### **Research Objectives**

The overall objective of this study is to examine the situation of women and women from minority communities in Afghanistan. The research will also provide recommendations to different national and international stakeholders to re-consider their programs in support of Afghan women.

The study will particularly:

- Explore the social, political, and economic discriminations borne by women with a particular focus on women belonging to religious minority communities in Afghanistan; and
- Identify the needs of local women and establish a benchmark for national and international stakeholders to work against to ameliorate the current struggling plights.

### **Research Limitations**

The security situation has had a major impact on data collection on the ground. Widespread threats against human rights activists caused a general atmosphere of censorship as few informants expressed readiness for interview due to topic sensitivity. Additionally, many contacts did not respond to the call, putting the research assistant in a difficult position in the field. Similarly, the evacuation of the lead consultant of this project from Afghanistan to Germany also hampered the smooth process and delayed activities. Finally, the lack of stable internet during the evacuation and resettlement in Germany has interrupted the timely process and analysis of the inputs.

### **Gender-based violence and discrimination**

The mid-August Taliban takeover and irresponsible international troop withdrawal has left a seismic impact on all areas of life with specific consequences on women in Afghanistan. This situation further fortified the already perpetuated militarized masculinities, placing particular emphasis on warriorship, dominance and control, gender-based violence, abuse, and discrimination. The Taliban with long-standing and institutionalized patriarchal values and

structures adhering to Pashtun honor codes have impacted the lives of Afghan girls and women in horrific ways. Afghan women and girls are now banned from public spheres altogether, including work, education, and severe movement restrictions combined with major arbitrary arrests and reprisals against female activists and former government employees, resulting in an unprecedented human rights erosion.<sup>8</sup>

### *Exclusion from Work*

The World Bank statistics show that women constituted more than %21 of the workforce before mid-August 2021 in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> The Taliban takeover, however, led to a dramatic decrease in women's participation in public life. The Taliban leaders are institutionalizing large-scale and systematic gender-based discrimination and violence presumably aimed at erasing women and girls from public life.<sup>10</sup> When the Taliban seized power in August, they initially provided verbal assurances that women would be allowed to exercise their rights within Islamic Law, and yet, without any further clarification on what the Islamic Law exactly means.<sup>11</sup> However, despite these verbal commitments, women and girls are experiencing a dramatic reversal of their rights, especially the right to work.

While the COVID pandemic, continued conflict, climate disruption, and the shift in power have triggered widespread poverty and food insecurity, restricting women from working could result in immediate economic loss of up to \$1 billion or up to 5 percent of the GDP, the UN findings estimated.<sup>12</sup> The Taliban see women in their role as wives, mothers, and sisters, rather than as independent human beings with free will and choices. When first in power in the 1990s, the Taliban had largely and effectively imprisoned women and girls in their homes. Women were banned from going outside alone, girls from attending school, and unmarried women were forced to marry fighters. Twenty years later, the Taliban's regain of the country now means the resumption of an all-out war against women. Many women had been the sole or primary food providers for their families, and with the fall of Kabul, they lost their employment due to

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Rigby, "Taliban 'Rolling Back' Rights for Afghan Women and Girls in 32 Areas, Say Human Rights Experts," *The Telegraph*, September 29, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3uphrA>

<sup>9</sup> The World Bank, "Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate) – Afghanistan," June 15, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3Gfip3X>

<sup>10</sup> United Nations, "Experts Decry Measures to Steadily Erase Afghan Women and Girls from Public Life," January 14, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3ogk1Ev>

<sup>11</sup> France 24, "Taliban Say Afghan Women Will be Allowed to Work and Study According to Islamic Law," August 17, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3L1onsP>

<sup>12</sup> UN Women, "Gender Alert NO.1: Women's Rights in Afghanistan Where Are We Now?" December 2021, p.2. <https://bit.ly/3s0UW1q>

discriminatory policies, restricting women's access to work amid spiraling prices for basic commodities. As one female entrepreneur described her own life story as such:

I had a small café/ restaurant in Kart-e-Say of Kabul. My sister and I were managing the café. We had spent all our savings on designing and decorating the café to offer a comfortable environment for our customers. However, I did not expect everything could fall apart in just a blink of an eye. We were forced to close our café with the initial hope to re-start once the situation turns to normalcy. Later, when the Taliban placed restrictions on women, my hopes were shattered once and for all. We are now in a state of limbo without any income. I do not know how to sustain my life and what will happen to my siblings. I just want the Taliban to let women work, and we will die of hunger otherwise.<sup>13</sup>

This is how women's life looks like in Afghanistan that requires immediate attention of the international community and philanthropic organizations engaging with the Taliban. The imposed restrictions have impacted all women to realize their rights to work, especially the women of minority groups, as they have continuously been marginalized. The UN human rights experts equally expressed their concerns over the Taliban's harsh approach towards women belonging "to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities such as the Hazara, Tajik, Hindu, and other communities whose differences or visibility make them even more vulnerable."<sup>14</sup> One female teacher in central Daikundi province whose name remains anonymous for security reasons described her life as such:

The Taliban have special animosity toward the Hazaras. They (Taliban) have put severe restrictions on us. Our culture is different. We are open and our men do not have any problem with women working outside, and yet, Taliban fighters belong to a different ethnic group with parochial views towards women. They now dictate their own traditional, tribal culture to us. Previously, I was a schoolteacher here in Daikundi province and now I am stuck at home. The Hazara community is mostly destitute here and the Taliban now put us in a more formidable circumstance. They treat us badly and forced all women to remain indoors. The Taliban fighters have forced all school staff to speak their (Taliban's) language

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<sup>13</sup> Anonymous, interviewed by H.S., Kabul, January 7, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Aljazeera, "UN: Taliban Attempting to Exclude Women, Girls from Public Life," January 17, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3IXhiaR>.

Pashtu and anyone who speaks Farsi/ Dari, the Taliban ignore them. Most people do not understand Pashtu; we speak only Dari. This has created an additional problem especially for women here.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, the Taliban have already attempted to collect Usher/ Zakat<sup>16</sup> from the people across many provinces adding an extra burden on the households suffering from an already shrinking employment since the takeover. The female teacher from Daikundi province also stated that the Taliban forces households here to pay Usher and food to the fighters in this province and anyone who denies is punished. She described the situation as below:

We are caught between Taliban abuses and starvation. The international donors recently distributed cash and food items but we have not even seen a little portion of them. The Taliban distributed them to the people of their own ethnic group and loyalists. As a woman, I request the international community to monitor their aid assistance distribution to ensure sufficient transparency. The foreign countries and organizations should pay special attention to minorities who now face systematic exclusion from public structures.<sup>17</sup>

While the 2004 Afghan Constitution grants women's rights to work across different national and sub-national governance, the vast majority of women employees have reported job loss since August 15, 2021, as a result of stern restrictions.<sup>18</sup> Despite pressure from the international community on the Taliban to allow women the right to work, the new hardline Islamists have said women would work within limits laid down by Sharia law but without any further details.

### *Exclusion from Politics*

Previously, around 28 percent of parliamentarians were women. The recent regime change, however, limited their political engagement to zero level.<sup>19</sup> Despite initial assurance for establishing an inclusive government urging Afghan women to join,<sup>20</sup> the Taliban gripped to

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<sup>15</sup> Anonymous, interviewed by H.S., Kabul, January 15, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Usher is the amount of money/ wealth forcefully collected by the Taliban in order to finance the fighters' war machine.

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous, interviewed by H.S, Kabul, January 20, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Alasdair Pal, "Exclusive Afghan Women Should not Work Alongside Men, Senior Taliban Figure Says," *Reuters*, September 13, 2021. <https://reut.rs/3gqEKB5>

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan (former), "Afghanistan's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325-Women, Peace, and Security," June 2015. <https://bit.ly/3GCUcVG>

<sup>20</sup> VOA News, "Taliban to Announce Framework for Inclusive Islamic government Soon," August 22, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3uyRjTc>

power with an all-male structure, demonstrating a dramatic reversal of progress on women's participation in the political arena. Almost ten months after sweeping into power, the Taliban has yet to draft a public plan or show a practical move to restoring women's political participation. On July 30, 2022, Taliban organized a large gathering of around 3,000 all-male tribal elders known as *Loya Jirga* (Grand Assembly) to exchange views about the country's fragile political landscape and yet without women participation as ever. "Women are our mothers, sisters. We respect them a lot. When their sons are in this gathering it means they are also involved, in a way, in the gathering," said Abdul Salam Hanafi, Taliban's Deputy Prime Minister.<sup>21</sup> Taliban's failure and unwillingness to include women is a clear indication to remove women from public life altogether and direct them to households' role only.

Over the past twenty years, a plethora of much-needed laws and legislations were approved, the fledgling Taliban have abolished all, namely the 2004 Constitution. In late September 2021, the Taliban suggested enforcing the country's half-century-old Monarchy Constitution for an interim period.<sup>22</sup> The 1967 Constitution grants certain rights to women, including universal suffrage and the right to go to education and run for office; however, the Taliban has neither implemented the Monarchy bill nor has introduced a codified bill of their own, causing public confusion among other things. Likewise, other laws such as the Elimination of Violence against Women Law and Criminal and Penal Law, National Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security, along with several other national policies, had provided protection for Afghan women.<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that Afghanistan is also a signatory to multiple international human rights conventions that requires the country to comply with. Although the Taliban has yet to make an official pronouncement on the status of these laws and the country's international human rights obligations, in practice, the regime is not, by any means, willing to comport accordingly.

Furthermore, the Taliban has disbanded a significant part of the country's gender equality organizational structure: the Ministry of Women Affairs (MoWA), established in 2001 under the auspices of the Bonn Agreement.<sup>24</sup> The ministry's directorates across the provinces have also been removed afterward. Instead, the Taliban have installed the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice assigned to execute the regime's self-declared Islamic rules.

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<sup>21</sup> Reuters, "Men Will Represent Women at Gathering for National Unity -Taliban Leader," June 29, 2022, <https://reut.rs/3ycKrLI>

<sup>22</sup> Shirshah Rasooli, "Use of Shah-Era Constitution, not Final: Source," *TOLO News*, September 29, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3IYLPFo>

<sup>23</sup> International Labour Organization, "Afghanistan (82) Criminal and Penal Law." <https://bit.ly/3uyp4Vq>

<sup>24</sup> BBC, "Afghanistan: Taliban Morality Police Replace Women's Ministry," September 17, 2021. <https://bbc.in/3sg6azc>

The replacement of MoWA implies that gender equality and women's rights in the Taliban government do not have a political primacy. The move has left many Afghan women and girls in a state of limbo with a grim prospect about their future. "I wish I was not born a girl in Afghanistan. I had dreams but now should I die or live with a lifetime of deprivation," said a women activist in Kabul.<sup>25</sup> Despite the international pressure, the Taliban have not yet made a move to appoint women to their current all-male government.

### *Denial of the Rights to Education*

Over the past two decades, women and girls in Afghanistan played a significant role in education by getting enrolled in schools and universities across the country's 34 provinces despite security and traditional challenges. Female access to education, at all levels, was enshrined in the country's newly abolished Constitution. However, equal access to education has changed dramatically for girls and women after August 2021. The newly installed regime banned women and girls from universities and schools. In mid-September 2021, the Taliban called on boys, but not girls, to resume education, claiming the group needed to set up a "secure transportation system" for female students before allowing them back into classrooms.<sup>26</sup> Yet, it has not been made clear what the "secure transportation system" means for girls. Likewise, young women are also facing challenges accessing university-level education. It has caused growing fear now that the regime will attempt at reimposing a similar policy of the 1990s. Since mid-August 2021, many underage girls were forced to get married. For example, a female teacher said, "at least three of our girls aged 15 and under have been married off underage since the Taliban took over."<sup>27</sup> If the situation continues as it does now, many other families will follow the same as they grow frustrated seeing their" girls locked at home and doing nothing. It is especially true when previously educated young women were forced to leave their jobs, spending time at home without any prospect to get on back to duty.

Although on January 17, 2022, the Taliban leaders provided a timeline for the resumption of high schools for girls in the Afghan New Year, which starts on March 21, many women activists believed that the pledge was only for international recognition rather than a genuine

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<sup>25</sup> Anonymous, a women activist, interviewed by H. S., Kabul, February 1, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Nic Robertson, Ingrid Formanek, Taylor Barnes and Ivana Kottasova, "Taliban Deny Claims Girls Will be Banned from School but Do not Say When They Will be Allowed in," *CNN News*, September 18, 2021. <https://cnn.it/3snowOL>

<sup>27</sup> Hugo Williamms and Ali Hamedani, "Afghanistan: Girls' Despair as Taliban Confirm Secondary School Ban," *BBC*, December 8, 2021. <https://bbc.in/3smgUfw>

commitment. A women activist in Western Herat province said “Taliban will not allow girls and women to return to education at all levels. The regime must be taken by their actions rather than their hollow words.”<sup>28</sup> More than three months have passed from that promise and female schools are still remained closed across the country.

Meanwhile, the lack of a defined, country-wide policy guaranteeing gender equality or at least women and girls’ access to education at all levels will further put them at risk of discrimination. The erstwhile Afghan government, with support from the international community, had developed a bunch of laws and policies, mainly in the area of education, and yet, the new de facto authorities avoid using them. It is also important to note that a large number of Afghan professionals and technocrats have already left the country. The Taliban tribal leaders now do not have the sufficient technical know-how to draft and introduce codified policies. The Taliban fighters are adept enough at brandishing guns but not governance. Many women believe that even if the Taliban allow girls to go to school but without any subsequent opportunities to apply, it would be a “dead-end.” This logic stresses the need to ensure a complete return to provide women’s rights.

#### *Movement Restrictions*

On September 27, 2021, the Taliban issued an order, banning women to travel a long distance of more than 45 miles (72 km) alone without a close male guardian. The directive also advises taxi drivers and public transport to refuse rides to women not wearing Islamic face coverings or garments. The order also forbids taxi drivers from listening to music in their vehicles.<sup>29</sup> The new restriction largely shuts off opportunities for women and girls as they will no longer be able to move freely and without any male companion. Women who have lost their husbands and are the only food providers to their children will fall the primary victim of such practices. The restriction also includes women going to health centers and would not be provided treatment unless accompanied by a close male guardian. A woman described the situation as such:

A student went with her pregnant sister-in-law to the doctor in Ghazni province.

The Taliban did not let them enter without a *mahram* or male guardian. The

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<sup>28</sup> Anonymous, women activists based in Herat province, interviewed by H.S., January 15, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> BBC News, “Afghanistan’s Taliban Ban Long-distance Road Trips for Solo Women,” December 27, 2021. <https://bbc.in/3B4Vs2w>

woman called the interviewee's brother who arrived an hour later. The Taliban did not have mercy on pregnant women. It is humiliating.<sup>30</sup>

In the meantime, families are also imposing restrictions on the mobility of women and girls as a protection measure. This measure is more visible across the provinces and tribal areas, feeding into cultural perceptions of families anchored in patriarchal norms and values. Of course, these restrictive practices will have short and long-term consequences on women, impacting their mental health, imposing them to more domestic violence, economic dependency, and depriving them of outdoor opportunities.

### *Increased Violence against Women and Girls*

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) has been widely established as a critical issue facing the majority of women and girls in Afghanistan with horrible and long-term consequences, including women themselves, children, families, communities, and society as a whole. The VAWG has continuously been part of daily life for many Afghan women and girls. Before the mid-August fall of Kabul, rates of gender-based violence were very high, mainly across the provinces and rural areas. In 2016, the former Afghan government drafted the country's first-ever National Action Plan on the Elimination of Violence against Women to ensure women's access to justice.<sup>31</sup> In addition, gender equality was also enshrined in the 2004 Constitution. For example, Article 22, reiterates that "any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law."<sup>32</sup> These legal bills provided women with protection, at least on paper, to escape violence and seek justice. However, with the Taliban takeover, laws have been abolished, access to justice has been hampered, while the need for justice and services has increased. On November 25, 2021, the United Nations expressed its concern over the rise of VAWG following the control of Afghanistan by the Taliban. Due to restrictions on women on women and girls movement, they are now more prone to violence, said the UN statement.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Heather Barr, "List of Taliban Policies Violating Women's Rights in Afghanistan," *Human Rights Watch*, September 29, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3gt9wcv>

<sup>31</sup> UN Women, "Global Database on Violence against Women: Strategy and National Action Plan on the Elimination of Violence against Women." <https://bit.ly/3rB11Us>

<sup>32</sup> Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Strategy and National Action Plan on the Elimination of Violence against Women 2016- 2020," October 2, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3uFqxJ7>

<sup>33</sup> United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), "UN Calls for Solidarity and Commitment to End Violence against Women and Girls amidst Humanitarian Crises," November 25, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3oxxbgA>

Previously, there were a handful of safe houses in which women facing serious domestic violence could seek shelter. With the Taliban now in power, those women shelters are no longer operating in the country, leaving many women in a horrible state of harassment and violence without any safe place to go to seek protection. It is especially true when those women previously held in shelter are now back to their homes from which they had fled due to domestic violence. “Now, we have no choice but to tolerate both domestic violence and social harassment. We live in a state of lawlessness and helplessness,” said a women activist in Kabul.<sup>34</sup>

**Image 1.** Women for Afghan Women Shelter in Kabul in 2014



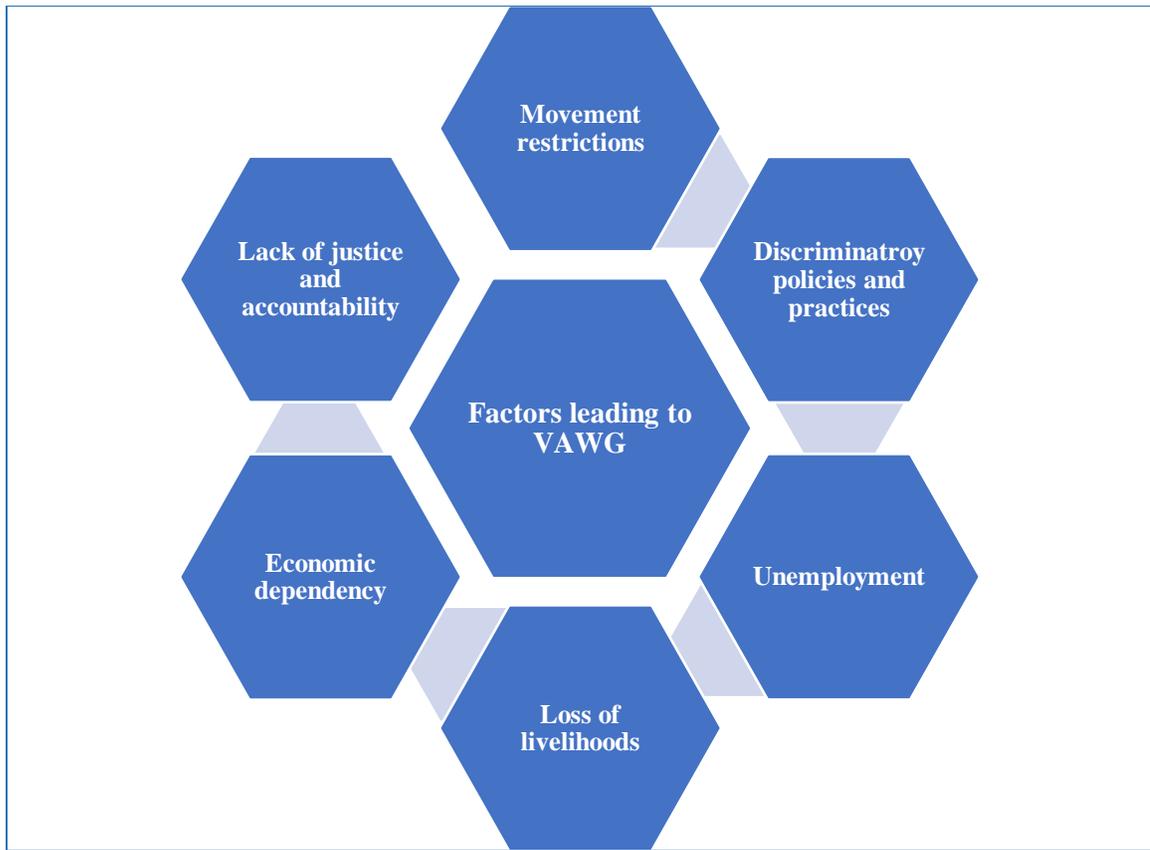
**Source:** By Lynsey Addario/ New York Times

In a state of political instability and economic crisis, women and girls are more susceptible to violence and exploitation. Below are the key factors why Afghan women and girls become the primary victims of the current situation unfolding in Afghanistan.

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<sup>34</sup> Anonymous, women activist, interviewed by H.S., Kabul, February 4, 2022.

**Figure 1.** Leading Factors of VAWG after the Takeover by the Taliban



**Source:** Author

### *Reprisals and Arbitrary Arrest of Women Protesters*

Verified accounts testify to the Taliban’s violent reprisal attacks and arbitrary arrests of human rights defenders, activists, and former government employees over the last ten months. The threats have been especially visible against women human rights defenders, activists, and female members of the former security forces. The regime had initially announced what it called “general amnesty,”<sup>35</sup> the incidents took place afterward; however, demonstrate horrible reprisal attacks and night-time-house search operations, looking after those with previous role of engagement with the former government or any other local and international organizations in their credentials. On August 31, 2021, a former female police officer Banu Negar was shot dead in front of her family in her home in the central Ghor province.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, a female police officer, previously manager of the prison in Western Herat province, has been arrested by the

<sup>35</sup> France 24, “Taliban Declares General Amnesty for Afghan Government Officials,” August 17, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3LqfUiY>

<sup>36</sup> BBC, “Afghanistan: Taliban Accused of Killing Pregnant Police Officer,” September 5, 2021. <https://bbc.in/3rCPm6k>

Taliban without any clue about her whereabouts since then.<sup>37</sup> Also, the body of a female police officer was found in the city of Jalalabad province following concerns over the increased targeted killing.<sup>38</sup> During an interview, a female police officer, previously working in the Gender Directorate of the Ministry of Interior of Afghanistan, described her situation as such:

Most of my female colleagues and I live in hiding now with growing fears of being taken by the Taliban. The Taliban's fighters mostly come for former security forces during the night, dragging them out of their homes without leaving any clue in place. The international community engaged in Afghanistan had provided us military and police training. Eventually, they left us behind and exposed us to intimidation and threats.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, many women and female activists have been reported to have facing intimidation and that the Taliban are asking for their home addresses. The BBC has interviewed former Afghan policewomen and highlighted serious accounts of harassment and threats, stating that policewomen continuously receive phone calls from the Taliban, asking for their addresses.<sup>40</sup> Female judges and prosecutors are, too, under persistent threat, not only from the Taliban but also from men who had been convicted and imprisoned on charges of murder or domestic violence against women and freed from prison by the Taliban following the takeover, said a group of international human rights organizations.<sup>41</sup>

The dramatic deterioration of women's human rights, mainly the right to education, work, movement, discrimination, and gender-based violence by the Taliban, forced a large number of women to defy the Islamists' rule by pouring into streets calling for justice and inclusivity to reflect the country's diversity. In response, the hardline Islamists cracked down on women protesters, whipped, arrested, and intimidated them. In the latest instance, the Taliban fighters have abducted six female protesters in Kabul who had participated in a rally chanting for

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<sup>37</sup> Mohammad Shaker Rasa, "Alia Azizi, Manager of Herat Prison Disappeared Since October," *Hash-e-Subh Daily*, January 13, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3JxChl9>

<sup>38</sup> Ahmad Sultan and Sardar Razmal, "Female Police Officer Killed in Eastern Afghanistan: Officials," *Reuters*, April 1, 2021. <https://reut.rs/3GGjr9w>

<sup>39</sup> Anonymous, female police officer at the former Ministry of Interior in Kabul, interviewed by H.S., January 25, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Yugita Lemama, "Increased Accounts of Reprisals by the Taliban (Persian)," *BBC*, February 10, 2022. <https://bbc.in/3LszJGH>

<sup>41</sup> Amnesty International, "The Fate of Thousands Hanging in the Balance: Afghanistan's Fall into the hands of the Taliban," September 2021, P. 11. <https://bit.ly/3rIOxcp>

freedom and justice.<sup>42</sup> While expressing concerns over gross human rights violations, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights urged the Taliban to release the abducted activists<sup>43</sup> These are emblematic of the countless reprisal attacks against female activists and former policewomen in Afghanistan. It is especially important to note that many cases of gender-based violence, arbitrary arrests, and disappearances are taking place in shadow across the provinces as many journalists and civil society activists have already left the country, and those stranded inside, are pursuing self-censorship as a lifesaving tactic.

**Image 2.** Afghan Women Protest in Kabul



**Source:** The Guardian/ Wakil Kohsar

## Conclusion

Two major occurrences, the COVID-19 outbreak and state collapse, have hit hard Afghanistan, resulting in widespread economic and healthcare hardships, deterioration of human rights, poverty, and security challenges. The COVID pandemic led to border closure and business disorder, greatly undermined public health system, and triggered domestic violence against women as everyone was forced to stay indoors. Many women working as teachers,

<sup>42</sup> United Nations, "Six Women's Rights Activists Still Missing in Afghanistan," February 1, 2022.

<https://bit.ly/34vr3yo>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

entrepreneurs, and business owners lost their jobs and or were impacted by the pandemic. This led to great economic dependency, weakening their income. The country's minority groups who have suffered the most already due to systematic discrimination and marginalization were exposed to more poverty. Nevertheless, the unexpected political development following the foreign troops' withdrawal on August 15, 2021, further exacerbated the situation. Since then, there have been major while dramatic reversals on human rights and certain freedoms, particularly women's human rights on large scale, impacting their access to fundamental rights such as education, healthcare, employment, freedom of movement, and their participation in public sphere. The restrictions put in place by the *de facto* Taliban regime through formal and informal acts normalized gender discriminatory practices, especially when the country's laws and policies, guaranteeing gender equality and equal human rights for all, have been abolished by the new ruler, leaving huge uncertainties whether the situation will ameliorate at any time soon in the future.

Despite the Taliban's initial promises that they have changed and would allow women and girls to enjoy their fundamental rights, the subsequent development has shown the opposite. The regime is still struggling to apply their narrow, discriminatory Islamist ideologies across the country, through an exclusionary system of governance. The human rights situation is unspeakable with increasing accounts of arbitrary arrests, killings, disappearances, and torture of journalists, human rights defenders, women activists, and former member of security forces. Women's rights are especially being violated, with women and girls being barred from public life and education. Crackdowns on peaceful protests across different provinces have left several people injured and dead. Arbitrary arrests of women activists, detention, and ill-treatment of journalists, along with reprisals against former security forces, mainly women security officers, are emblematic of massive human rights abuses by the newly installed regime in Kabul.

Meanwhile, civilians are grappling with persistent poverty and unemployment, as international aid dried up that caused deep economic crisis. To alleviate the current hardships, more than \$921 of foreign aid and other humanitarian packages have been put into Afghanistan since August 2021 to fight poverty and support banking system.<sup>44</sup> However, women of minority groups interviewed in this report expressed their concerns over the lack of transparency in the distribution of humanitarian aid. The Taliban fighters distribute aid only to their loyalists or ethnic groups. The country's minority groups who have fallen the main victims enjoy a small

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<sup>44</sup> Etilaat Roz Newspaper, "Afghanistan has received \$921 million since last year (2021)," June 29, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3aasmpj>

portion of the life-saving aid or do not receive anything at all. Lack of transparency in the distribution of international aid in Afghanistan has been a constant challenge over the past two decades, leading to entrenched, systematic corruption. Among other things, the international community and donor organizations are required to provide effective, efficient oversight to ensure the aid goes to the people in need, mainly women and minority groups; otherwise, the vicious cycle of corruption in the world's poorest country will be further reinforced.

## **Recommendations**

### 1. To the United Nations and international community:

- Engagement with the Taliban should be limited to area-specific objectives, which incorporate a range of well-defined conditions, including the insurance of education at all levels and work for girls and women.
- Monitor the human rights situation thoroughly and closely to make sure women activists are protected and those who have already been arrested are released immediately.
- Any political recognition of the Taliban regime must be conditioned to tangible progress, including the meaningful participation of all people across national and sub-national governance regardless of their ethno-religious and gender background.
- While appreciating the current international engagement in providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, the donor communities should make sure that aid goes to the people in need, mainly women and minorities as they have been affected the most. This requires a robust system of oversight.
- The international community, mainly the UN should increase pressure on the Taliban to adhere to international human rights laws and to end all human rights violations and abuses now and immediately.
- Put pressure on the Taliban to immediately cease all discriminatory policies that impact women's life and that of minorities and form an inclusive political transition.
- The international community should support women's movement and CSOs in Afghanistan, both financially and politically, amplifying advocacy opportunities to ensure that women are no longer silenced.

### 2. To the de facto authorities in Afghanistan

- End all human rights abuses that are taking place across Afghanistan, including reprisal attacks, repression of civilian protests, arbitrary arrests of women

activists, human rights defenders, former security forces, and attacks on members of minority groups.

- Comply with international human rights law to ensure all forms of discrimination against women and minorities are ended, paving the ground for an inclusive political transformation.
- Adhere to international human rights law to make sure individual's privacy is not infringed.
- Release all human rights activists, former women security officers, and women activists who are now in detention centers.
- Allow humanitarian aid is distributed fairly and transparently regardless of gender, religious and ethnic backgrounds.

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