

HAR TARAF MARUF!
HAR TARAF MARUF!
(THE MORALITY POLICE ARE EVERYWHERE)



SURVEILLANCE AND FEAR IN THE FACE
OF THE VICE AND VIRTUE LAWS
IN AFGHANISTAN

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About the Author

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About Farageer

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

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

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

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Key Recommendations to Multiple Stakeholders.....	3
1. For International Actors.....	3
2. For Regional Actors.....	3
3. For Islamic Countries.....	3
4. For Donors and International Women's Rights Organization.....	4
5. For Afghan Civil Society.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Methodology.....	7
Research Context.....	9
Research Themes.....	11
1. Heightened Surveillance.....	11
2. The Economic Burden.....	14
Case Study.....	17
3. Intersectional Vulnerabilities.....	18
Case Study.....	22
4. Impact on Family Dynamics.....	23
Case Study.....	25
5. Community Perception and Resistance.....	26
6. Mental Health.....	27
Case Study.....	29
Conclusion.....	30
References.....	31



Acronyms

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

Executive Summary

The Taliban issued the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Law (PVPV) on the 31st of July 2024, putting in place sweeping restrictions on women's dress, social interaction, mobility and bodily autonomy and thus codifying in law a system of Gender Apartheid. The PVPV law also outlined the duties and powers of enforcers i.e. members of the Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV), giving them powers to ascertain wrongdoing, and mete out punishment. The PVPV law is not a departure from the Taliban's usual policies, since the Taliban has been issuing decrees regularly since coming to power in August 2021, with a total of more than 100 decrees being issued till 2024, punitively enforcing the denial of women's fundamental freedoms including access to education and employment, erasing them completely from all public spaces. **The PVPV law however is a distinct milestone as it is the first step taken by the Taliban to codify all the decrees into a law formalizing and institutionalizing gender based discrimination into its system of governance.** It shows the worrying escalation of the Taliban's attack on women's rights.

Research participants in the study share that although many of the restrictions like veiling and the requirement of a mahram¹ (a male guardian) existed for the past two years, what the PVPV law has changed is the degree of enforcement. This report underscores the following findings.

1. Heightened Surveillance

Women believe that surveillance has increased in the community since the law was issued, with a higher number of Maruf or morality police

swarming the streets, stopping and harassing women for violating rules. Participants report witnessing women being arrested, publicly beaten and assaulted for offences of wearing a thin hijab, not wearing a mask or travelling alone. Constant harassment from the morality police has instilled deep fear in the hearts of women and their families, curtailing their limited freedom and confining them to their homes. The PVPV laws have also encouraged families and communities to act as enforcers. Women fear being reported to the Taliban by their neighbours. This situation has contributed to increased distrust within the community and the breakdown of social fabric, leading to greater sense of isolation for women.

2. The Economic Burden

Economic insecurity has been the main concern shared by both men and women in our study. The ban on women's employment has rendered once multi-income families into large single income households, with male family members shouldering all financial responsibilities. The absence of proper job opportunities have also forced a large number of men to be unemployed while the others have resorted to taking up lower level jobs despite having university degrees. While the economic burden of sustaining the household has caused increased stress for men, losing the breadwinner status has in turn negatively impacted women's position within the home, subjecting them to greater control and disrespect. The risk of forced and early marriages have also increased due to economic insecurity. Mahram requirements have also prevented women from accessing the very limited remaining job opportunities.

¹ Mahram refers to a close male relative who is either related by blood or through marriage.

3. Intersectional Vulnerabilities

Our findings show that there are broad inconsistencies in the enforcement of the PVPV laws in different provinces and this is dependent upon the local leadership and provincial demographic. Women with multiple marginalized identities face heightened vulnerability. Many respondents believed that the Taliban weaponizes the PVPV laws to unfairly target ethnic minorities and that enforcement is much stronger in ethnic minority dominated areas because these communities show greater resistance to the Taliban's discriminatory policies. Younger women are more frequently targeted by the morality police as compared to older women. Female-headed households are most vulnerable since women can neither access employment nor venture out without a mahram. Threats and insecurity also remain most severe for families of ex-government and military employees who still remain in Afghanistan and have to stay in hiding for fear of persecution by the Taliban.

4. Impact on Family Dynamics

The PVPV laws have also put restrictions on men's clothing and appearance, subjecting them to punishment for not having a beard or for wearing western clothes. Our findings also show that the authorities punish the men, when women in their families are found guilty of breaking any rule. This has negatively impacted men's mental health and has led to increased policing of women and their movement within the household by men and other family members. But a section of men who were never supportive of women's rights, have used the PVPV laws as an excuse to exercise greater control over women and subject them to oppression and harassment within the home. This has in turn negatively impacted household dynamics. Children attending religious schools and growing up amidst this situation have started imbibing these patriarchal beliefs.

5. Community Perception and Resistance

Although existing media monitoring reports show that a section of Afghan society had been supportive

of the Taliban when they took over in 2021, with the belief that they will be different than their first regime in the 1990s, research participants share that the support has now waned due to acute economic insecurity. Heightened poverty coupled with the ban on women's education and work has had a devastating impact on families, leading to increasing dissatisfaction with the Taliban. However, the pervasive sense of fear that the Taliban has instilled in the larger Afghan society, through public punishments, abductions and arrests, has prevented people from protesting or resisting. There is also the belief among participants that the international community has started accepting the Taliban, which has added to their sense of despair and hopelessness. Some women's groups and CSOs however, still work in secret to organize small private gatherings, and online sessions to raise awareness and resist the Taliban's Gender Apartheid policies, but they face multiple risks and a lack of resources.

6. Mental Health

The PVPV laws have had a severe impact on the mental health of not only women but also men and children across the country. Women who have been banned from education and work opportunities, are forced to stay confined to their homes due to restrictions, report suffering from depression, anxiety and stress. Restrictions on simple activities like singing, speaking loudly on the phone in public, listening to music, watching a movie, dancing or celebrating festivals (like Nawruz) all listed in the PVPV law, have had adverse impact on the mental health of women and children. Men also have reported facing stress and depression due to financial troubles and Taliban's restrictions. Mental health support remains limited and inaccessible for most. The distrust and fear of surveillance has also prevented vulnerable women from visiting clinics or sharing their troubles freely with therapists or counselors.

Key Recommendations to Multiple Stakeholders

“We cannot do anything. We have to accept that this regime is going to stay because the foreign countries have started accepting them and this acceptance shows that the Taliban will stay. We cannot do anything.”

The institutionalization of Gender Apartheid through the PVPV law has led to a diverse set of problems for women in Afghanistan. Funders and CSOs now need to adopt innovative approaches to negotiate these barriers and support women in need. But as the reality for Afghans inside the country has continued to worsen, the halt and reduction in international aid from key donors like the USA threatens to have devastating consequences. In light of these developments, the following recommendations are put forth to diverse stakeholders.

1. For International Actors

- ◆ Recognize Gender Apartheid as a crime against humanity.
- ◆ States with Feminist Foreign Policies should take the lead to prioritize women's rights in Afghanistan and hold the Taliban accountable.
- ◆ Principled engagement and humanitarian assistance on human rights and women's rights adhering to specific milestones and benchmarks.
- ◆ Re-initiate resettlement programs for at-risk women, recognizing the ever growing legal jurisprudence that Afghan women are at risk of persecution solely based on their gender.
- ◆ The UN Sanction committee should not grant travel waivers to Taliban leaders and should apply more sanctions.

- ◆ Pressure the Taliban to uphold Amnesty for former government employees, journalists, army officials and WHRDs.

2. For Regional Actors

- ◆ Countries across Asia should honour their commitments to human rights and stop engaging with the Taliban through treaties, trade deals and opening of diplomatic missions. They must stop recognizing the Taliban and providing them legitimacy.
- ◆ Provide asylum to Afghan refugees and grant education and health access to Afghan refugees.
- ◆ Pakistan needs to halt unlawful deportations of women at risk and provide them with temporary asylum which would support their legal and secure stay in Pakistan.
- ◆ Engage with women activists and leaders and provide diplomatic support to Afghan women's movements in their global advocacy for justice and equality.

3. For Islamic Countries

- ◆ Provide humanitarian aid to help Afghans and to fill the gap that now emerges due to reduction of funding from other countries.

- ◆ Pressurize the Taliban to roll back the restrictions on women showcasing the positive role women lead in Islamic countries.
- ◆ Hold the Taliban to account for not only violation of women's rights but also for weaponizing Islamic religion and damaging its credibility.
- ◆ Engage with women activists and leaders and provide diplomatic support to Afghan women movements in their global advocacies for justice and equality.

4. For Donors and International Women's Rights Organizations

- ◆ Increase funding directly to CSOs operating in Afghanistan, especially those working with women and children. Donors and the international community should step up, fill the funding gap and encourage others to do so in an environment where funding into Afghanistan for women led CSOs has decreased.
- ◆ Provide more remote jobs and learning opportunities for women and girls in Afghanistan.
- ◆ Increase mental health support and virtual, free therapy sessions for women.
- ◆ Provide mentorship, sisterhood listening circles and virtual meetings that connect

women within Afghanistan to women (both Afghan and non Afghan) from outside the country. Respondents shared that they found virtual sessions where they could talk to other women helpful and therapeutic, since surveillance and trust issues prevent them from freely talking to other women in their community.

5. For Afghan Civil Society

- ◆ Undertake more awareness raising activities, particularly with men to promote positive masculinity.
- ◆ Build the capacity of Afghan women and enable them to work/engage more effectively with civil society organizations.
- ◆ Collaborate with religious leaders for raising awareness about human rights and human dignity among diverse communities in Afghanistan.
- ◆ Afghan women inside and outside the country should work more collaboratively on steadfast and more coordinated efforts to uplift and support the women in Afghanistan.
- ◆ Organize and host intra-afghan dialogues and promote social cohesion.



Introduction

On 31st July 2024, Taliban published a 35 article law called the “Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice” (PVPV) in its official gazette, putting in place even more stringent restrictions on women, ranging from their social interactions to their private lives, dressing and bodily autonomy.¹ The law puts the Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) at the helm of implementation, by regulating the conduct, attire and behaviour of Afghans and administering punishments for defaulters.² The law is the first of its kind to explain in detail the duties and power of the enforcers i.e. the employees of the MPVPV and list out punishments for wrongdoers that range from verbal admonishing to fines and imprisonment. The law puts restrictions on women’s very basic personal freedoms, suppressing their very lives, bodies and voices, which the Taliban deem to be “instruments of vice.” The law imposes a large number of limitations on the most basic activities, including requiring women to cover their entire selves, not speak or sing loudly enough to be heard by non-family members, forbids adult women from looking at men outside their families (Na mahram), and prohibits men from wearing tight clothes during sports, requiring them to be covered from the navel to the knee.³ Media is forbidden from publishing content that contains pictures of living beings, and drivers of vehicles are not allowed to play music or carry women as passengers. Celebration of historical events with fireworks is forbidden as well as celebration of Nawruz and



Shab-e-Yalda and so is befriending or helping non-Muslims, that the law terms as “infidels.” The law sees romantic relationships between people of the same sex, as forbidden, or haram. The law also interferes in people’s observation of religion by asking the enforcers to refer to those who do not fast during Ramadan or those not praying, to the court. There are many more restrictions the law lists out. But above all the law gives sweeping powers to the enforcers to pronounce any act they witness, as a wrongdoing, based on their own judgement and thus subjectively mete out punishments.

Right after its publication, the law had led to global outcry and condemnation from the UN accusing the Taliban of trying to render women to “faceless and voiceless shadows.”⁴ There was also the question of enforcement, to understand how the Taliban was planning to implement a law that sought to regulate and detect acts and behaviours which

1 The Dawn Report : Taliban govt enacts “vice and virtue” law (2024). <https://www.dawn.com/news/1854076>

2 Statement release by Ministry of Justice in reference to the law: <https://moj.gov.af/ps>

3 Afghan Analysts Network Translation of the PVPV law: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/the-propagation-of-virtue-and-prevention-of-vice-law-translated-into-english/>

4 United Nations Statement. Afghanistan: Condemnation for new Taliban ‘virtue and vice’ order targeting women (2024). <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/08/1153631>

are extremely private. It has been more than six months since this law was published. To understand the severity of these new developments and how they are being experienced at the community level, it is crucial to gather evidence on how these laws are being enforced in different parts of Afghanistan and how this has impacted the lives of Afghan women. While reports and existing studies have provided statistical data on Afghan women impacted by Taliban policies, a qualitative study that amplifies the voices of Afghan women as they experience these realities in situ, and their interpretations of the law, is necessary to provide a balanced picture. This study not only documents how women in different parts of Afghanistan have been experiencing the imposition of this new law, but also focuses on how they perceive and evaluate these latest developments in the country, the measures they take to ensure their safety and wellbeing as well as what they feel can change the situation.



Aim

To document and analyze the experiences of women in Afghanistan surrounding the Vice and Virtue Law and its implementation.

Objectives

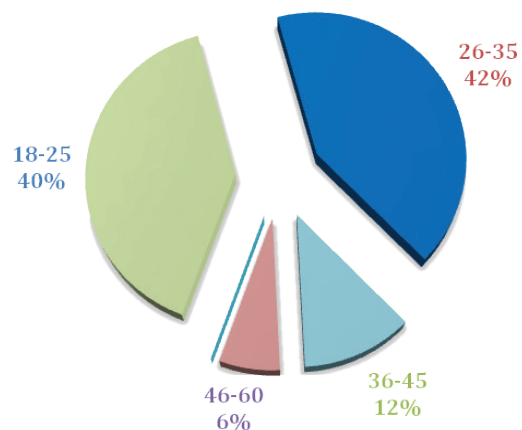
- ◆ To document and understand the impact of the Vice and Virtue Law on diverse women's lives in Afghanistan.
- ◆ To find out how the law and larger Taliban policies have impacted family dynamics and women's experience within the home.
- ◆ To find out how women perceive their experiences and how the law has impacted their mental health.
- ◆ To find out how Afghan women are responding to these laws and strategies they are adopting to cope with the restrictions.
- ◆ To analyze their experiences and understand further how intersectional identities of Afghan women (economic status, ethnicity, displacement history, disability etc) have impacted their experiences.

Methodology

The research is a qualitative study that aims to document the voices of women in Afghanistan. Our perspective on peace, security and justice is people centric, non statist and is actively informed by feminist sensitivities. The research aims to actively investigate power structures and by centering women's stories as data, challenge the normative patriarchal discourse that is shaped by dominant masculine perspectives. This research study makes use of a feminist intersectional, narrative analysis methodology. Data has been collected through focus group discussions, individual in-depth interviews conducted from November 2024 to January 2025 with 200 women across 20 provinces of Afghanistan and through 10 key informant interviews with technical experts which included civil society members, women's rights activists, security experts, journalists, lawyers and academics based inside and outside of Afghanistan. Twenty provinces include Badakhshan, Badghis, Baghlan, Balkh, Bamiyan, Farah, Faryab, Helmand, Herat, Jawzjan, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunar, Kunduz, Laghman, Logar, Nangarhar, Nimroz, Paktia and Samangan. Focus group discussions were conducted in-person in each province and in-depth interviews were conducted online. Keeping in mind the security risks of undertaking such research and data collection in Afghanistan, research participants were selected based on a snowball method, where on the ground researchers and enumerators selected women based on interest as well as safety, (to keep away participants who could pose security threats to the group). A robust risk mitigation and safeguarding plan was put in place to ensure safety of all involved in this study. Within this limited sample, effort was made to include diverse voices in terms of age, ethnicity

and class position. The sample is not a true representative of the entire population of Afghanistan, which is very diverse. The analysis and stories speak for the experiences of our participants only and not all the women in the country. The research aims to provide a snapshot of the experiences and challenges of these women in Afghanistan under the new laws and decrees. To get a broader sense of the challenges and current situation in Afghanistan, data has also been collected through three additional focus group discussions, one with male journalists and the other two with CSO workers in the provinces, which included men and women. The primary data collection has been complemented by robust desk research that involved going through existing research reports, news reports, press statements and media monitoring.

AGE RANGE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

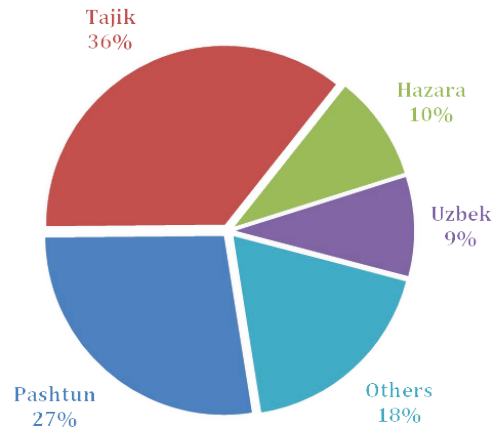


Note: 82% of our sample were women under the age of 35.

Limitations of the Research

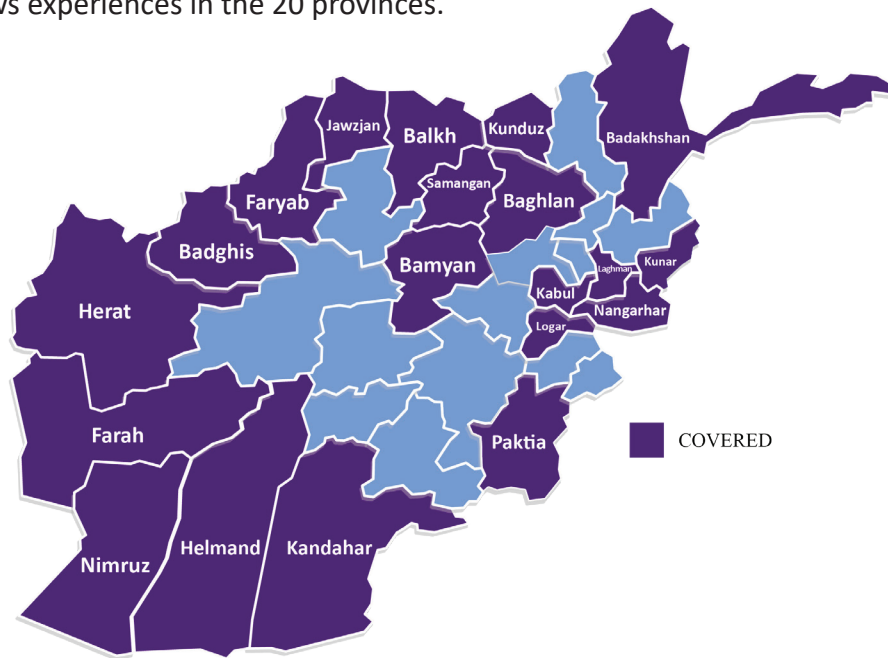
1. Diversity in Sampling: The most significant limitation of this research study has been the lack of diversity in sampling. Only 20.6% of Afghan women are literate¹ but the majority of our research participants were literate and were employed at some point in their lives. Owing to the risk of the research and ongoing surveillance in the country, coordinators were only able to pick women who were known to them, were interested in participating in the study and were believed to not be related to the Taliban. This limited access to rural villages and to extremely vulnerable communities.

ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF RESEARCH RESPONDENTS



Note: 10% of participants from two eastern provinces refused to share any identity based information including age, name and ethnicity.

- 2. Fear and Security issues:** The heightened fear in the hearts of the research respondents also impacted the data, since many participants were not comfortable to share in-depth details about their experiences they sometimes resorted to simple responses.
- 3. Geographical limitations:** The Study was only able to reach participants from 20 provinces out of the total 34 in Afghanistan. Our data shows that there is a huge difference between the provinces when it comes to imposition of laws and experiences of women. So our research is geographically limited and only shows experiences in the 20 provinces.



¹ UNESCO Article : A mother’s journey of learning and empowerment through literacy in Afghanistan (2024). <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/mothers-journey-learning-and-empowerment-through-literacy-afghanistan>

Research Context

Since seizing power in 2021, the Taliban has issued over 100 edicts placing severe restrictions on women and men's fundamental freedoms, the majority of which have severely infringed on women's participation in public life and the exercise of their fundamental human rights, including access to education, healthcare, employment and livelihoods, the right to peaceful assembly and a range of others. This systematic oppression and persecution of women has been termed as Gender Apartheid¹ by the UN and the international community.

In a move emblematic of their concerted efforts to systematically persecute women, one of the first acts of the Taliban immediately after taking charge of the government, was to abolish the Ministry of Women's Affairs, replacing it with the Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV). The MPVPV was an agency known by the population during the first Taliban regime in the 1990s for the enforcement of an extremist interpretation of Sharia law and barbaric public punishments, including public stonings.²

The Taliban announced the planned return of the MPVPV when it formed its interim government in September 2021 and the Ministry of Vice and Virtue was housed in the previous Women's Affairs Ministry Building.³ Despite initial promises of respecting women's rights, these decisions followed the same pattern as the previous regime

of the Taliban. Initially the Taliban's takeover had garnered some support among Afghans, with people claiming that Taliban 2.0 would be different from their first regime in the 1990s and that they would bring peace and prosperity to the country. Social media monitoring carried out from 2021 to 2022 in the Afghanistan Civic Media Observatory⁴ at Global Voices, showed the proliferation of pro-Taliban narratives, that included narratives claiming that the Taliban would respect women's rights. But Afghan WHRDs were sounding alarm bells even before 2021 in regard to the threat of the Taliban retaking control and the resulting repercussions. This fear was especially poignant among older women who lived through the horrific first regime and young women who had grown up hearing the stories of persecution, torture and repression that their mothers and female relatives faced in the 1990s.

One immediately notable implication of these repressive policies and ambitions as it pertains to women and girls was the sharp rise in early marriages. The spiralling levels of poverty faced by families as women were denied the right to livelihoods, together with entrenched cultural norms, resulted in parents being forced to make unthinkable choices to feed their children. Families have also pointed to fears of violence and abduction (sex trafficking or forced marriage) of young daughters by the Taliban, as another factor propelling the increased practice of marrying

1 UN Press Statement in 2023. <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15421.doc.htm>

2 Source : The New York Times : Stoning of Afghan Adulterers: Some Go to Take Part, Others Just to Watch (1996). <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/11/03/world/stoning-of-afghan-adulterers-some-go-to-take-part-others-just-to-watch.html>

3 Source : Human Rights Watch : For Afghan Women, the Frightening Return of 'Vice and Virtue' Situation Worsening Every Day (2021). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/29/afghan-women-frightening-return-vice-and-virtue>.

4 Global Voices, Afghanistan Civic Media Observatory Data-set (2021 to 2022): <https://airtable.com/appqRb2zz0cSHf2oB/shrJ0cYKBwPaS49Pk/tbl0mAl8W2guAWtTU/viWC3RAPLAHSW8nTw?blocks=hide>

young daughters to men inside and outside the country.¹ One respondent shared:

“Child marriage and early marriages increased so much since 2021. Everyone is afraid that their young daughters would be taken away by force if found to be single...there is great panic. Families are agreeing to marriage proposals very quickly. Girls are also being married off to really old men, just to enable them to leave the country. “

A Woman, 27, CSO worker in Kabul.

As the Taliban regime solidified their power, other threats intensified. The Ministry issued several directives to control the dress, appearance, behaviour and movement of men and women in the country. The decrees included the imposition of mandatory veiling, requiring Afghan women to be covered from head to toe, except their eyes, when out in any public space, mandating the presence of a mahram, or male guardian when travelling beyond a certain distance, mandatory beards and traditional Afghan clothing for men and more.

Even in this context, the Vice and Virtue Law issued on 31st July 2024 marked a distinct and troubling milestone in the consolidation of Taliban surveillance and in the lengths taken in their systematic human rights violations. It is the first attempt to codify the 100+ directives and decrees issued by the MPVPV, as well as outline in detail the responsibilities² of the members of the Ministry, known widely as the Morality Police or Amr Bil Maruf. It illustrates the increasing power and influence of the Ministry and the Taliban's steady transformation from a militant group into a formal institution, with laws curtailing women's freedoms becoming a key instrument of the state machinery.

Findings

In the context of this climate of increasing institutionalization of extreme gender persecution and Gender Apartheid, respondents to our research overwhelmingly share the view that the PVPV laws are simply a continuation of the Taliban's wider assault on women's rights, and consistent with a policy approach which started in 2021 with the closing down of educational institutions for women and girls. Our analysis, and the perspectives of the respondents we spoke with, indicates that rather than a clear point of departure in Taliban policies, the introduction of the PVPV laws stands as an example of their efforts to formalize and codify what has already been a central tenet of their ideology, and one that they have intentionally wielded to differentiate themselves from progressive norms shared globally. Respondents also felt that the PVPV laws are setting the stage for further, more extreme restrictions that will take away the few remaining freedoms that women and girls still have in the country, leading to a situation where the Taliban will have complete control over the private and public lives of Afghans, particularly women.

While data shows that there is a degree of variance in the severity of the Taliban's enforcement of gender discrimination across provinces in Afghanistan, with some women gaining access to finite educational opportunities³ until last year, the new PVPV laws have put in place a more strict system of monitoring and enforcement that has instilled heightened fear in the minds and hearts of both Afghan men and women. Six months since it was issued, our analysis shows that the laws and their institutionalization have had far reaching implications not only for the actual autonomy of women to exercise daily routines and access basic needs, but has had an insidious and deep impact on their sense of self, their security, and their hope for the future.

1 Source : Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty : Afghans Increasingly Marrying Off Young Daughters To Avoid Forced Unions With Taliban (2022). <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-early-marriage-avoid-taliban/32157525.html>

2 Source : Observer Research Foundation Report “Codifying ‘virtue’ and ‘vice’: Institutionalisation of the Taliban’s rule (2024). <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/codifying-virtue-and-vice-institutionalisation-of-the-taliban-s-rule>.

3 For example, there are numerous reports of the existence in some provinces of community based education opportunities, secret schools remaining available to women who attended discreetly (Ghani, 2024). And research respondents from Kabul and Balkh shared that computer training centres, english language classes were operating in secret in their provinces.

Recurrent Themes

1. Heightened Surveillance

Throughout the research process, participants across the provinces and from diverse backgrounds repeatedly spoke about their perceptions of heightened surveillance as a key theme. A phrase we heard with remarkable consistency across our interactions was “*har taraf Maruf*” (the Maruf are everywhere). *Maruf* refers to the *Amr Bil Maruf*, the local name for the morality police working under the MPVPV to monitor the streets, enforce the laws and punish infractions. Women shared that while the laws on veiling, dress and access to public spaces were in place prior to August 2024, what changed with the new law was the degree of enforcement. According to our respondents, the number of morality police officers on the street has increased since then and women who step out of their houses without a mahram or without the veil mandated by the Taliban are stopped, harassed, threatened and in some cases also arrested and detained.

The law gives extensive discriminatory powers to the morality police to ascertain wrongdoing and punish the transgressors with verbal warnings, fines or even prison time. It goes one step further by mandating that community and family members also act as enforcers leading to policing even within homes, a theme that is further addressed below. According to this law, the enforcement of

the law can be undertaken by any individual in society who is “capable” and if two individuals who are deemed “trustworthy” make a report, it is enough to bring in prosecution.¹ Overall, these developments contribute to a widespread climate of surveillance, mistrust and fear, which may be an additional aim of the policy. As one woman described:

“When I go out, my father is worried about me leaving the house, and I am stressed about leaving the house even with my full hijab. These changes started with my family, and the changes that came to me personally, when I see checkpoints, I adjust my hijab and put my phone away to pass them [sic].”

A woman FGD Participant in Kabul.

One of the issues with the law is its vagueness², as it is littered with subjective terminologies³ open to multiple interpretations, which gives sweeping arbitrary power to the enforcer to label any behaviour or act as an offence based on their interpretation, bias and agenda. The law says that the enforcers are to follow the principles of “Fairness and Kindness” but these terms are neither defined nor explained. This leaves much scope for the laws to be weaponized by Taliban officers to target individuals even based on their own personal enmity or bias. Research participants

1 The PVPV law details out the duties of official enforcers while also giving power to community members to make reports and undertake policing (Rafi, 2024).

2 For example the law provides enforcers with the power and responsibility to prevent things like usage of phones and devices to record animate objects, prevent the neglect of obligatory fasts or disobey one’s parents, all of which are private practices. The law does not provide information on how the enforcers will be able to determine any of these violations have occurred, which leaves broad space for misuse (Afghan Analysts Network, 2024).

3 Source : Durham University Article The Taliban’s harsh new ‘vice and virtue’ laws are a throwback to the oppression of the 1990s (2024) <https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/current/thought-leadership/2024/08/the-talibans-harsh-new-vice-and-virtue-laws-are-a-throwback-to-the-oppression-of-the-1990s/>

say that enforcement of the law is not uniform. One may be able to go out to the local market without a mahram on some days but be stopped and harassed the next for not having a mahram with her. This uncertainty gives rise to greater anxiety, fear and a sense of insecurity. Women across provinces highlighted this theme.

“The De Facto Authority¹ has said that if you travel beyond 22 km, you need a mahram but they don’t follow this. If you leave the house, they ask for mahram.”

A 30 year old woman from Nangarhar Province.

“It is dangerous to even go to the market without a mahram. It is a big problem especially when we want to buy personal things that we cannot purchase in the presence of a man. But that is not possible. One day, I went to the market to buy something for myself. I went without a mahram. The De Facto Authority said that if you don’t have a mahram, you can go with a child or go with two women together. That is okay. But you cannot be out alone.”

A woman, 30, in Kunar Province.

“Within the city, I can go out without a mahram but if I want to travel outside the city, there is checking at every checkpoint where the DFA asks for the ID and checks if there is mahram [sic]”

A woman, NGO worker in Jawzjan Province.

We heard multiple reports that the behaviour and enforcement varies according to the temperament of the morality police and the identity of the woman in question. Morality police may even switch focus in the middle of an interaction, as the narrative below highlights.

“Everyday there is so much control about hijab and mask... We had gone to the bazaar (market), these same guys (morality police) came, I was wearing a mask and hijab, they stopped me and asked – why is your hijab so thin? My nephew told them – “This covers her whole body, what is the issue?” but they said – No, why is your mask so thin?”

A woman, 20, in Bamyan Province.

It is not only the morality police or Amr Bil Maruf that the women believe that they require to be cautious of. Research participants report the extensive nature of the Taliban’s intelligence system that makes them feel that they are constantly under surveillance. Participants share that the Taliban has spies among the people, who report incidences of people breaking their laws, to the authorities. Respondents recount incidents where apparent reports made to the Taliban about beauty parlours operating in secret, about community gatherings, women’s rights discussions led to sudden interventions by the Morality Police or Taliban authorities, resulting in threats, physical violence inflicted on concerned people through public beatings and arrests. As one of the respondents said:

“I went with my mother to a parlour. We crossed the street, we saw a lady who was going into the parlour, the DFA came and beat the lady with the durrat (belt) and threatened the parlour workers. Saying this is haraam (forbidden). If you don’t close down the shop, we will arrest you... Some parlours are operating in hiding. There are no banners, they hide the name, working and operating from home. Taliban had found out about the parlour..someone had reported it. Some people in Afghan society have this issue that they don’t like women going to parlours or following what they believe are western cultural traits. [sic]”

A woman, 33, in Kunar Province.

¹ De Facto Authority : Used to signify the Taliban and is an abbreviation that is commonly used in the non profit sector in Afghanistan.

Participants believe that the people who spy for or report things to the Taliban can belong to two groups. One being the ultra conservative members of society, who were always critical of women's rights and agreed with the Taliban's restrictions on women. They disapprove of women leaving their homes, taking up jobs or going to places like parlours, gyms or institutions, which they consider to be forbidden. Second are people who are forced to join the Taliban due to dire economic circumstances and are as a result compelled to follow their orders against their own wishes and report against those who break the laws. This poses a threat not only for women, but even for CSOs and NGOs who attempt at organizing women- focused activities. As two male CSO workers shared with us. They further mention that workers like themselves have to be extremely careful when selecting beneficiaries, localities and spaces to undertake activities in, since it can threaten their own safety.

"We had a woman carrying out some community activities. Suddenly Maruf came during lunch break and for 2 hours they investigated our staff on why this activity was happening and what we are sharing with women... It is a big challenge organizing women focus programs because there are female Taliban agents who come to the gatherings and report. We get calls from intelligence. They call and ask- What activity are you doing there? Their spy is everywhere. Taliban agents are everywhere. [sic]"

A male NGO worker from Northern Region of Afghanistan.

"We were having a women focused activity, building awareness on womens' rights. But Maruf was invited by the community people, to check on our activity. They saw 50 women in the activity with the banner. The house owner where the activity took place was investigated and community elders were also called and asked why they allowed this program to happen."

A male NGO worker from the Eastern Region of Afghanistan.

"There are many people who spy for the Taliban and now many women are also cooperating with intelligence groups. Even now I am afraid if the neighbours will hear me. Even within my family we are not talking about these meetings or work. Some people are also doing this for very little money, to spy for the Taliban. Poverty is the reason. Joblessness and suffering."

A woman from the Central Region of Afghanistan.

These testimonies point to the pervasive sense of fear that is cultivated in this repressive environment, which has led to distrust among the community, breakdown of social fabric and further sense of isolation for women, who are the most vulnerable.

Reports about the Taliban's strong surveillance have also been reported by multiple news outlets like Reuters¹, and a report issued by Amnesty International in 2023 talked about Taliban's plans of creating a large scale camera surveillance network in Afghanistan's cities. Amnesty International had reported that the Taliban planned to install 62,000 security cameras around Kabul and other areas citing "national security", a move that human rights collectives feared would enable the regime to further crack down on protestors and infringe upon the rights of Afghans in public spaces, particularly women and girls.²

1 Reuters 2023 report titled : Taliban weighs using US mass surveillance plan, met with China's Huawei. <https://www.reuters.com/world/taliban-weighs-using-us-mass-surveillance-plan-met-with-chinas-huawei-2023-09-25/>

2 Amnesty International 2023 report titled : Installing thousands of cameras risks creating total surveillance state. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/08/afghanistan-installing-thousands-of-cameras-risks-creating-total-surveillance-state/>

In December 2024, AMU TV reported ¹ that the Taliban had installed 350 security cameras across Baghlan Province. News reports from October 2024, also showed video footage of women being arrested and put in trucks for violating dress codes, by the Taliban authorities in Kabul following heightened surveillance in the city.² Reports published in February 2025 show that the Taliban has completed installing 90,000 security cameras in Kabul ³, pointing to the intensifying surveillance and monitoring system being put in place.

2. The Economic Burden

Economic distress remains one of the most pressing concerns in Afghanistan. A UN report from March 2024⁴ stated that since Taliban took power in August 2021, Afghanistan's economy has contracted by 27%, unemployment has doubled and only 40% of all Afghans have access to electricity.

Every one of our research respondents, irrespective of gender, ethnicity and region, unanimously agreed that the economic condition of their families had deteriorated drastically since the Taliban took power. While almost all women who were working had lost their jobs, their male family members who were working with the previous government, or with foreign agencies, offices and media houses also became unemployed and were confined to their homes. Some women respondents were still able to run tailoring centres, small bakeries or online tutoring classes from their homes but they explained that the income was minimal and constant harassment from authorities along with the fear of getting punished hindered their work. Job scarcity and unemployment was brought up by both men and women as a major issue. Research

participants shared that at the moment there is such scarcity of jobs in the country, that even the highly qualified men in their families have to take up jobs as clerks, daily wage labourers or shopkeepers to earn a living. Women expressed that the responsibility of providing for larger families and protecting the women also put enormous mental strain on the men. Reduced financial means also meant families were not able to hire any help, putting the extra burden of care work on the women, ensuring they would have less time to devote to any online classes or self care activities.

When schools and universities were closed down for women, a large number of women had turned to midwifery and nursing training, as shared by our respondents, since it was one of the few avenues still open for women to get an education and work. Many young women and girls were working as nurses and midwives in hospitals and health clinics and earning for their families. But the December 2024 Taliban decree, ordered for women to be banned from these courses as well, putting the lives and futures of many in jeopardy.⁵

“My daughter was studying midwifery earlier. When it was banned, she came home depressed. She did not eat for many days and felt hopeless.”

A woman, 51, in Baghlan Province.

In December 2022, the Taliban had banned women from working with NGOs.⁶ But our research findings show that women NGO workers in Kabul and many provinces in Northern, Eastern and Western regions were still able to discreetly continue working and NGOs were undertaking

1 AMU TV report dated 23rd December 2024 titled .Taliban install hundreds of security cameras in Baghlan. <https://amu.tv/145731/>

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

3 BBC News report dated 27th February 2025 titled : Inside the Taliban's surveillance network monitoring millions .<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjev9kzxeqqo>

4 UN Report from 7th March 2024. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147387>

5 BBC report from 3rd December 2024 titled “Afghanistan: Women suspended from midwife and nurse training”. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwy3l1035nlo>

6 BBC report from 24th December 2024 titled “Afghanistan: Taliban ban women from working for NGOs”. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64086682>

their activities through advocacy with local Taliban authorities and religious leaders. But in December 2024, the Taliban's Ministry of Economy issued a letter threatening to close down all NGOs and INGOs that were employing women in Afghanistan, causing panic among NGO workers.¹ Some women are still able to work as teachers in primary schools and women's madrasas, but they get paid very little money. Also since the PVPV law came into effect the restrictions on female teachers have also reportedly increased. As one respondent shares :

"The PVPV law has made the situation worse, they have put more restrictions on female teachers, who are now almost ready to leave their jobs. There is purdah in primary schools... It is a huge issue and restrictions have increased. Doing work is getting more and more difficult. The NGO order has spread far and wide. Women are in depression."

A woman NGO worker in Laghman.

Many respondents who used to work prior to 2021, said that they still had support from their families to take up work, but remote job opportunities were few and for few CSOs and NGOs that were still hiring women, the mandatory requirement of a mahram, to comply with current laws, acted as a great hindrance. Since able-bodied adult men in families, who could serve as their mahram were few, and they were busy trying to work to support the family, they were unable to accompany the women for their jobs. This posed a greater issue especially for families that had no men, or where fathers were old, sick or disabled.

"I have one brother. He cannot accompany me everywhere. If I get a job, 2 people will have to work for one salary. When will my brother work to support us, if he keeps accompanying me? All jobs demand mahram and I don't have any, and that's why I cannot get a job. Plus someone has to be there to take care of the family."

A woman, 30, in Nangarhar.

It is interesting to note that some male research participants highlighted economic distress to be the singular, distinct, most pressing issue in the country right now. They shared that if economic distress, poverty, unemployment could be solved, all other issues would also get resolved on their own. They did not make a connection between economic distress and erosion of women's rights.

"Economic insecurity is the cause of disturbance and issues in the household. If the economy gets better, these issues of violence against women and domestic violence will be solved."

A male research participant from Nangarhar Province.

On the other hand most female research participants claimed that the restrictions on women was the primary issue, since the banning of women from education and work had led to decrease in household income and thus poverty and economic distress.

Women respondents shared that they felt that the economic distress and loss of employment has had far reaching consequences in their domestic lives. Many respondents were the breadwinners in their families before the Taliban took over. They were respected by their family members and had greater influence on decision making. Losing their job has negatively impacted their position within the family and has led to greater conflict within the household.

"Before the Taliban came, I think I had power in my home. I had a voice. They listened to me when I talked about some problems. They accepted me and my advice. I could make decisions on my own, because I was the breadwinner of my family. If I said something, they listened. Now if I share my ideas or say something, they don't give importance, They say – Now you don't have authority. It is because I have no economic role in my family right now. [sic]"

¹ Aljazeera report from 30th December 2024 titled "Afghanistan's Taliban rulers say will close all NGOs employing women." <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/30/afghanistans-taliban-rulers-say-will-close-all-ngos-employing-women>

A Woman from Herat Province.

Respondents report that the economic distress has also increased the threat of forced and early marriages for young women. With no clear prospects for the future, economic distress in the family and rules that mandate the presence of a mahram, the threat of forced marriage looms large for young women who don't have a very supportive family.

I think about the future, I will get married by force, to a conservative man who doesn't want his wife to work. Because my father wants me to get married, because he says – you are not doing anything, you should then get married and have children.

When I was working, (my mother has passed away), it was good for the family because I was earning money, everyone was happy. Now that feeling is not there and I have lost that position and respect I had in my family.

A woman, 19, in Laghman Province.

"I fear being forcefully married. My father is old and for the sake of financial burden lessening, he may get me forcefully married to someone in the future. [sic]"

A woman, 25, in Badakhshan Province.

Research participants also report hearing stories or witnessing incidents of women being forcefully married by Taliban men in some provinces. Although they say that these incidents are not common everywhere, it adds to their sense of insecurity and fear. With no decision making power or rights, mothers also fear for the future of their daughters.

"I am afraid of forced marriage, because I live in a province where women have less rights. So if a man comes to my house to forcefully marry one of my daughters, I am afraid that I will not be able to stop them. "

A woman, 51, in Baghlan Province.



Case Study

Syeda*¹ , Northern Region of Afghanistan.

Syeda is a 22 year old Uzbek girl living in the northern region of Afghanistan, with her mother, 2 sisters and a younger brother. She was in her first year of university, studying Economics and Banking when the Taliban took over and banned women from higher education. She used to teach Math and English at an education institute, but it also came to a halt. Her younger sister was also unable to continue her education due to the ban. Currently only her youngest two siblings go to school.

Her father previously worked with an international organization during the republican regime and was the primary breadwinner in the family. When the Taliban took over, the family feared that his life would be at risk. So her father fled to Turkey, leaving his family behind. He currently takes up small jobs there to support himself. The little money he is able to save, he sends home to his wife and children.

The dire economic circumstances forced Syeda and her family to look for other livelihood opportunities. Along with her mother, she started tailoring work at home. They put up a banner outside their house to advertise their tailoring business, but the Taliban officials took the banner down. She now faces difficulty getting customers since she cannot advertise their work.

Along with dire economic circumstances, the PvPv laws have also restricted her and her family members' mobility. Since her father is absent, she has no mahram to accompany her. Her brother is only 8 years old and too young to be her mahram. As a result she cannot travel or go out when needed. The mandatory veiling rule has created further hurdles. Syeda says that she never wore the veil before 2021 but the Taliban's rules have forced her to wear the long veil and mask to cover her entire self. Her mother suffers from breathing issues and cannot wear the mask. But the fear of harassment over breaking dress codes prevents her mother from stepping out of the house. Although Syeda disagrees strongly with these rules, the fear of punishment has forced her to comply. She has firsthand witnessed women being threatened and arrested for not wearing a mask or having a bit of their hair be visible under their veil. Syeda fears that as an unmarried woman, if she is imprisoned then her honour will be tarnished in front of her community.

"Personally I don't want to confront them (the Taliban) because I am afraid if I do something against them, they may abduct me. I follow their rules and the fear is stopping me from speaking up. If a young girl like me gets abducted and then imprisoned for more than 2 days, the family and society will talk about my reputation and honour and people can speculate that I was raped."

She believes that only a change in the regime/government can improve the situation for her and other women.

¹ *Name changed for security reasons.

3. Intersectional Vulnerabilities

Findings show that there are broad inconsistencies in the enforcement of Taliban's new rules in different provinces of the country. All research respondents shared that although the laws and decrees were issued from the central Taliban leadership, their enforcement and application in different provinces depended heavily on the governor in the province and members of the provincial MPVPV office. It is also dependent upon the demographic of a particular province. As respondents explained:

"If female beneficiary is involved in a project, it is not acceptable to DFA, especially in more traditional provinces like Paktia, southern provinces, Kandahar, Helmand, they won't allow the project to be signed and implemented. In some provinces like Herat, Bamyan, there is no issue. They agree and allow it. There is a difference. In Pashtun dominated provinces there is more restrictions but in Tajik and Hazara province, there is not much of a problem."

A male NGO worker in Kabul.

"Ruling is different. In Badakhshan, the restrictions are very strict and new policies are strictly being implemented, but there are other areas like Mazar-E-Sharif where not all policies are being strictly implemented."

A male NGO worker from Badakhshan.

Respondents feel that in some provinces which are dominated by other ethnic groups like Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks, the restrictions may be slightly relaxed, whereas it is more strict in Pashtun dominated provinces and also in those provinces where Taliban had a stronghold even during the republican government era. They feel that the difference in implementation also varies from the cities to the villages, with the latter experiencing more control from the Taliban.

"It is true that the Taliban control in Jawzjan is weaker than in some other provinces like Nangarhar and Kandahar, but it is only inside the city, but in village there is lot of control, and there is more pressure from the government. [sic]"

A woman respondent from Jawzjan.

Respondents from certain provinces like Logar and Kandahar, which had been Taliban stronghold areas, even during the republican government, shared that their lives had not changed much since the Taliban took over, since they had the same restrictions and rules even before. The only difference they said they experienced since 2021 was the worsening economic situation and the degradation of the quality of education in the country which made them worried for their children and their future.

Some respondents and experts assert that ethnic identity is a key factor that determines the degree of implementation and imposition of the laws. They believe that the crackdown and restrictions may be more intense in ethnic minority dominated areas where the resistance to Taliban's rules is higher, but in some cases those regions also have some finite opportunities and resources available for women which are not available elsewhere.

"Here in Kabul, there is a lot of control and check points. Every Monday and Wednesday, the Maruf will come and control all Hazara areas, but there is still less control than in some provinces. Because resistance is high here, they have some open things for women... There are some education centres in public spaces, where girls are going for learning English and computer. But some science subjects are taking place in hiding, in people's homes. [sic]"

A woman respondent from Kabul.

There are inconsistencies in how the enforcement of these rules are experienced and felt by people, which is majorly associated with their gender, ethnic identity and age. Our data shows that women with multiple marginalized identities face greater vulnerability when it comes to Taliban's laws and policies. Age is an additional factor. Young women are subjected to greater restrictions, policing and harassment by the Taliban, compared to older women who are above 45 years of age and are treated with more respect.

"I am more than 50 years old, so I face no issue regarding mahram. I can go alone to visit sites. I sometimes receive messages, voices that ask me to be aware of my activities and be careful. But that is it. There is no other concern or issue in Herat for me."

A woman NGO worker in Herat.

Female headed households are extremely vulnerable. Under the current laws, families without male members report that they cannot find a stable source of income with some families not having any income at all, surviving solely on aid. For women in these homes, going outside has become a challenge and travelling outside the city/village has become impossible. One respondent said

"I have three biggest challenges: My husband is nowhere to be found. Second, my life is in danger because my husband was in the military and lastly I am in poverty and I need financial support. I have no job, no source of income. I live in my neighbour's house with my two young children. "

A woman respondent in Kabul.

Ethnicity plays another important role. People from Hazara, Tajik, Uzbek communities and particularly women who are doubly marginalized, felt that the Taliban authorities were using the laws to particularly target them and members of their community. Women who were working

as members of the previous government shared that when the Taliban took over, they did not immediately fire the current employees. Rather they waited for a few months to get all the information from them about the previous work of the ministry and then replaced them with their own people. Some respondents allege that it was only the Hazara, Tajik and Uzbek employees who were replaced while Pashtuns were allowed to keep their posts.

"The entire government is in hand of the Pashtuns, they removed other ethnicities from all government positions. In the beginning they kept them, once they learned all information, they fired them... they did not fire Pashtuns from the Ministry who worked with the Republic. Only Hazaras, Tajik, others were removed. [sic]"

A former woman court judge from Afghanistan, now living in exile.

Women from ethnic minority communities claim that there is great ethnic discrimination when it comes to getting jobs. Taliban has only hired Pashtuns in their government, with few Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks being hired in lower ranks. Although the issue of job scarcity is shared by all respondents, some claimed that in the limited job opportunities available, Pashtuns get a greater advantage while other ethnic groups are unfairly discriminated against, despite being competent.

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

A woman, 51, in Baghlan Province.

An Afghan law expert and women's rights activist shared that the Taliban use the mahram issue to unfairly target women from ethnic minority groups and women who they believe are against Taliban. The law is weaponized to punish and scare those who oppose the regime and their rules. Differentiated treatment for an additional layer of discrimination have been reported in other qualitative studies as well, including the Women's Regional Network's Community Conversations Report published in 2024 which noted that the presence of the Maruf and checking are more frequent in Hazara dominated areas and that Hazara women face disproportionate arbitrary detentions for dress code violations.¹

Another extremely vulnerable group that remains in Afghanistan are the families of men and women who were working with the previous government. Families where members worked with the previous government, either in the Ministry, army or police force, face heightened risk and have to live life with the constant fear of being discovered and arrested/killed by the Taliban. And this fear is not unfounded. We were able to speak with many women, some of whom worked in the Ministries while some whose fathers and brothers were in the military. The respondents shared that they and their families have to live in hiding out of fear of being discovered and then arrested or killed by Taliban. They report hearing about, or witnessing incidents even in recent times of Taliban targeting and killing people who were associated with the previous regime. Recent reports of Afghan refugees from adjacent countries like Pakistan, also show that these former employees of the republican government continue facing risk and insecurity in other countries.*

"I know a family, where the woman was a police officer in the previous government. The Taliban followed her and killed her in her house, in front of her children and husband."

A woman, 19, in Laghman Province.

"Taliban is following the Republic government employees. Targeting and looking for them. To arrest them. Even my family is not safe there (in Afghanistan). My nephew was arrested twice by the Taliban. I saw such terrible photos of him. He is being targeted because of me and my position."

A former court judge from Afghanistan, now living in exile.

This fear has led to a situation where the men also cannot apply for work and neither can they act as mahrams for their sisters, daughters, leading to extremely restricted mobility, heightened anxiety and financial troubles.

"My father and brother were in the army during the previous government. I was working as a professor at university, working with NGOs and also in court as a lawyer. After 2021, we were afraid of being targeted. So we moved to a different province. My brother went to Europe..., from Iran to Germany... Now he is sending money and that is only support. No one has a job now. We do not engage in community life, out of fear. We stay quiet and keep to ourselves. My other brothers who are educated, cannot get a job. They are afraid of safety and someone reporting them to the Taliban if they find out their previous work. "

A woman from NorthEastern Region of Afghanistan.

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

A woman in the Eastern Region of Afghanistan, who was a part of the previous government.

¹ *The Continuum of Insecurity and Violence: Voices of Afghan Women in Pakistan. (2024)

A woman in the Eastern Region of Afghanistan, who was a part of the previous government.

Highly educated women share that they cannot apply for jobs in CSOs or other sectors and are reluctant to even socialise or talk to their neighbours, out of the fear of being reported. This has led to a heightened sense of isolation among them.

“One brother of mine went to Europe Illegally. Since that brother was in the military, he felt fearful and left. Our family members do not engage in community life, out of fear. That is why we stay quiet and keep to ourselves.”

A woman in Kunar Province.



Respondents from Hazara and Tajik communities reported that people from their communities are unfairly targeted by the Taliban for working with the previous government, but our interviews with Pashtun men and women who worked with the previous government show that they face similar fears.

“There is more pressure on Uzbeks and Hazaras. Since they don’t have relations like Pashtuns with the Taliban. They burnt an Uzbek man alive because he was a member of the opposition. If he was Pashtun they would not do this.”

A woman, 22, in Jawzjan Province.

Case Study

Shabana*, Southern Region of Afghanistan

Shabana is a 29 year old Pashtun woman living in a province in the Southern Western Region of Afghanistan. Shabana worked as a Defence Lawyer with the previous Republican government, to support IDP women and children, along with refugees, and women who were victims of GBV. She worked with national and international organizations to protect the rights of women and refugees in the country. Along with her work, she was pursuing an MBA degree when Kabul fell to the Taliban in 2021, leaving her Masters incomplete.

She has 4 sisters and 2 brothers. 2 of her sisters were also working with different government agencies prior to 2021.

Two months after the Taliban took over, she was asked to return to her job and to provide all information regarding her work to the new authorities. But only a few weeks later the Taliban officials raided her house, confiscated her and her sisters' phones and threatened them saying they knew she and her family were against the Taliban.

Fearful for her safety she sought asylum and received admission from Germany. She went to Iran with her family to process her case. After staying in Iran for 6 months, her case was transferred to Islamabad, where they moved next. After another 9 months of waiting, she and her family members received their visas, but 14 hours before their scheduled departure for Germany, their flight got cancelled.

After being put on wait for another 6 months, their case was rejected, citing changes in Germany's policy. She did not have the financial means to follow up her case in Islamabad, as a result of which she and her family were forced to return back to Afghanistan in 2023.

Her family now has no source of income or earning members. They have to rely on their savings and borrowing money to survive. Her brothers work, but they have their own wives and children to support. Although her parents are supportive, Shabana feels that ever since she stopped working, her position in the home has diminished. Shabana is an active job seeker, but the strict mahram requirements, put in place by the PVPV laws have prevented her from applying to the limited available NGO or INGO jobs. Shabana also cannot leave her home easily out of fear for her security since she is afraid of being discovered by the Taliban. She tries to remain at home and participate in virtual meetings whenever possible.

Shabana suffers from depression but is unable to access mental health support since she fears her identity being exposed. She is afraid of being reported by her neighbours and tries to live cautiously. But Shabana actively collaborates with her trusted friends and community women to organize small gatherings, whatsapp groups to protest against the Taliban. She issues statements online, despite the risk that it poses to her. Despite all the dangers, she wants her voice and those of other Afghan women, to be heard. She yearns to work and study again. She wishes to finish her Masters.

"I feel like I am no different from uneducated people. I also cannot work. I see my brothers increasing their learning and going ahead in life but my place is stagnant. I am at the same place, with no job and no rights."

4. Impact on Family Dynamics

The Taliban's laws and decrees have not only impacted women, but have affected men and children negatively as well. The Vice and Virtue Laws have put several restrictions also on Afghan men, mandating traditional clothing, and growing of the beard. Men report also being targeted, beaten or threatened if they shave their beard or wear what Taliban deems to be "Western Clothes."

"I was imprisoned for one night. I was arrested for not wearing Afghan clothes. I also don't have a beard. I didn't shave. It is that I cannot grow a beard. "

A man, 27, working as a journalist in Jawzjan Province.

"The law implemented by the Islamic Emirate is enforced in our province in an obligatory manner. If someone violates it, they will be punished by the state and will face humiliation and disrespect. For example, if a woman goes to work without a guardian (mahram), she will be stopped at check posts and taken to the relevant police station, where her guardian will be required. She will be subjected to humiliation and will be made to pledge that she will not go to her job again. Similarly, if a man shaves his beard, he will have his hair cut in public, which will damage his dignity and honor."

A female FGD participant in Nangarhar Province.

The men also face punishment when the women in their families break any of Taliban's laws, like travelling without a mahram or not wearing the veil properly. They are given a verbal warning or beaten or arrested. This has created a heightened sense of vulnerability for families resulting in increased policing of women's movement and dress even within homes. Research participants report that the control of men over women in their families have increased in the last few years. But

the reasons differ. Some participants shared that a section of the men in their families and community were always conservative and disapproving of women not covering themselves fully, or going out to study or work. They were resentful earlier about the opportunities for education and employment that women were getting during the previous government. The Taliban's policies have thus made them happy, since it has given them the power and opportunity to restrict women and exercise greater control over them. The lack of proper justice and legal institutions in the country that can protect the rights of women have further emboldened these groups of men, leading also to higher cases of domestic violence and abuse.

"Since the Taliban came, most of the men in the community and even the family are happy with this situation, and some of them are even happy and have become more restrictive towards women and no longer allow us to go out or even go to school."

An FGD participant in Kabul.

"Our families and society try harder to follow these rules so that no problems arise. People try to live very quietly and quietly, but some use the situation to exert more pressure, for example, men who want to control women more. Since the fall of the republican government, our society and country have become more patriarchal, and women are more humiliated and punished by both the Emirati¹ government and their families."

FGD participant in Balkh Province.

The other majority of women participants shared however that the men exercise greater control over women out of fear for their own safety and well being. Men fear facing the punishment when women in their families are caught by Taliban for breaking laws and are also fearful about the damage to the family's honour if women are arrested or imprisoned by Taliban since they will

¹ Emirati here refers to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under Taliban rule. And the Emirati government refers to the Taliban.

be assumed to have faced sexual violence. Most families also now have only a single breadwinner, that is a man. The threat of losing that single source of income leads to further anxiety that manifests through greater control over women and restriction over their personal freedoms.

“Fear of their own safety, of being beaten and punished by the Taliban if their family women break rules, is the main reason men are imposing more restrictions on their women. Whenever females break a law, men are also imprisoned. They try to find anyone who is related anyhow with the girl and jail them, torture them. Be it brother, uncle, cousin or anything.”

A woman, 25 in Badakhshan Province.

The fear has even prevented men from advocating for women’s rights, some participants have shared.

“Lot of men like me, who are working with NGOs are afraid of situation. They are afraid to side with women. Even men talking about women issue face problem. They face arrest or quieting by authority. One of the private school heads, who tried to advocate for girls education, he is in jail because of this activity. [sic]”

A male NGO worker in Herat Province.

Children growing up in these households, also imbibing the constant stream of propaganda are also forming beliefs that women should be treated this way. Participants report about young boys in their families, attending schools and madrasas, coming home to share what they learnt, which mostly contains religious education modules that follow the interpretation laid out by Taliban.

“My very young nephew who attends Madrasa comes home and says- I am your mahram, you cannot go out of home. I will grow up and be your mahram.”

A woman from Nangarhar Province.



Case Study

Najma*, Northeastern Region of Afghanistan

Najma is a 25 year old Tajik woman, living in the Northeastern region of Afghanistan. Najma holds a bachelor's degree in Human Rights and was working as an enumerator with an organization during the republican regime. She has 5 sisters and 4 brothers. Two of her older sisters are married. Her father was working as a security guard for the government. When the Taliban came, both of them lost their jobs. She now works as a domestic help at her neighbour's house while her mother bakes and sells bread. She and her mother are the only two breadwinners in her big family. Two of her youngest sisters were studying in schools but had to stop when the Taliban banned education for girls above the 6th grade. Her brothers are continuing their education.

Najma says that her life has become more difficult in recent times due to the strict mahram rules, because of which she is unable to go out of her house or get work. The economic distress in her family worries her since her siblings are young, father is too old and the few limited spaces which were open for women to work in, like healthcare, NGOs are also rapidly closing. The control exercised by her brothers and father on her has increased. She says that they treat her very strictly now, instructing her to not go out of the house, to avoid inviting trouble for the family. She suffers from depression and anxiety. It is the same with her mother and sisters, but they do not have access to mental health support. Despite being the breadwinner in the family, Najma is afraid that if the current situation persists, her father will forcefully get her married to someone, to lessen the family's economic burden. She feels hopeless and resorts to reading the Quran and talking to women around her, to ease her mind. She wishes to find some employment or remote work that can help her support her family. She feels the international community has abandoned Afghanistan and there is little hope for things to change.

"We cannot do anything. We have to accept that this regime is going to stay because the foreign countries have started accepting them and this acceptance shows that the Taliban will stay. We cannot do anything."

5. Community Perception and Resistance

Research participants report that although the more conservative and patriarchal section of the society has consistently supported the Taliban, that number has slowly decreased with people becoming more and more disillusioned with the regime. Those who had supported the Taliban when they first took power in 2021 with the belief that they had established security in the country, have now slowly turned against them, the reasons being the extreme economic distress, violation of women's rights and the Taliban's use of harsh punishments. Even people who were disapproving of women in their families working and studying, have become dissatisfied with the situation since women have stopped earning money and multi income large households have been reduced to single income homes, plagued with poverty and distress. Coupled with that the constant fear of the Taliban, the distrust among community members and escalation of new rules and restrictions on women with each passing day has left the community members feeling exhausted. Many participants claim that a lot of community members have been joining the Taliban not out of their own choice but due to compulsion since no other source of income is available to them.

"The first time the Taliban came, most people supported the Taliban in their community. Saying the Taliban got security. We don't have kidnapping or blasts now. But recently all people are very exhausted and all of people in different education levels, even children, feel exhausted. [sic]"

A woman, 29, in Herat Province.

"The ones who are supporting them are the ones working with them. They have no choice. If they don't support them, they will lose their job. Others who are not working with the government are not supporting them at all. They are all depressed, stressed and sad. It is evident by how they look. They cannot do anything about it."

A woman, 25, in Badakhshan Province.

However, currently there is no organized resistance or protest for the community to express their dissent against the Taliban. Respondents share that protests were common during the first two years of Taliban's rule where women and men organized demonstrations against closure of schools, universities and beauty parlours for women. They were met with harsh crackdowns by the Taliban. Protestors were arrested, tortured and also some report, killed or forcefully disappeared. Beyond that, women allege that continued protests did not bring any results and Taliban did not budge from their decisions or policies, leading to a state of complete hopelessness among the people. Women also believe that the international community has started accepting the Taliban and as a result any resistance from their end will be in vain. This has added to their collective sense of hopelessness and despair.

"We cannot deny that we are forced to accept certain realities. In Mirwais Hospital, when they attempted to stop girls from attending classes, protests emerged. Men tried to demonstrate and assert that girls also have rights. They even said that if girls were not allowed to take the exams, they themselves would not take the exams either. So, they tried to pressure the authorities to compel them to allow girls to sit for their exams, but girls were not given permission. After that, more protests arose demanding that schools be opened for girls; however, the Taliban fired at them with guns, injuring some and causing others to lose their lives. The laws issued by the Taliban are accepted and enforced by our people under the pressure they exert. Even in the places where we wanted to take exams, we were uncomfortable with our hijab, but the Taliban did not allow us to take the exams. In summary, the pressure is very high, and the problems are worsening. It is even stated that girls can only go to school up to the third grade, and grades 4, 5, and 6 will also be closed. So, what should we do? Who can we tell to solve our problems?"

A female FGD Participant in Kandahar.

Respondents feel that currently, through their officers and intelligence team, the Taliban is

exercising complete control over the population. Men and women both report that people are extremely scared of even speaking critically of the Taliban or resisting in any form. Further, a large number of Afghans, human rights defenders, leaders have left the country and civil society has been weakened. There is no one to organize and guide the community in forming an organized resistance. The PVPV law now forbids Muslim men and women from befriending, helping or imitating “Non-Believers” (non-Muslims), putting under threat the work of civil society organizations that employ foreign staff. Coupled with the December 2024 directive that built upon the decree passed in 2022, forbidding NGOs and INGOs from hiring women in Afghanistan, the civil society sector in Afghanistan is in a very critical stage. This has put under threat the very narrow avenue that people and especially women had access to, for support and expressing themselves.

But resistance exists despite the threats and fears. Women participate in and organize gatherings in each other’s houses, post statements on social media and take part in online meetings to express their dissent and resistance. Male and female journalists document and send stories discreetly, to media houses in exile. The threat of violence from authorities is still extreme, but women try to make use of other measures like using anonymous accounts on digital media platforms, organizing small gatherings in homes which cannot be detected to ensure their safety and continuing with their resistance.

“There is protest. Earlier people were taking part in protest, but we have experience that Taliban take aim, arrest and kill them. This happened in many cases. Women also protest, we write something on facebook, but we receive some advice from friends to not share this because it is not safe and Taliban will arrest us. We want to speak of our life and and talk against Taliban. We don’t feel afraid...But we indirectly protest. Last week we issued a declaration against the Taliban. In it we said that Afghan women are frustrated and we need jobs and need land/space and rights.

Sometimes we have some meetings online and we try to find a way to protest, that is safe and not very dangerous. Sometimes we have meeting and create groups and delete the groups after, for security. If we protest directly, Taliban will kill us. Sometimes we tried, but we get advice that it is not good. People running the government are not educated, we cannot argue with them. We write protest message on social media, hiding face and identity. In my opinion, Afghan woman cannot directly protest. The government does not listen. They are uneducated. [sic]”

A Woman Human Rights Defender in Herat Province.

WHRDs and other women leaders are also running small collectives to raise awareness about women’s rights and support vulnerable women across the provinces. These collectives are operating in secret but need support and resources to continue.

6. Mental Health

Mental health concerns remain an extremely pressing issue in Afghanistan at the moment. A high percentage of women who participated in this study said that they suffer from some form of mental health concern or the other stemming from the current situation of unemployment, erosion of their rights and economic insecurity. Women report facing issues like depression, anxiety and hopelessness. The uncertain future in the country has put further strain on their mental health situation. Girls who have had to drop out of their courses and education journeys are particularly plagued by depression. Women report hearing about cases of suicide among young girls resulting from the policies and decrees of the Taliban.

Globally more than twice as many men die by suicide compared to women. And it was the same situation in Afghanistan till 2019.¹ But since the Taliban takeover, the number of women dying by suicide or attempting suicide surged. While the Taliban refused to release any data on this and even forbid healthcare workers from collecting this information, a report by the Guardian

1 The Week Report from 19th December 2023 titled ‘Afghanistan’s growing female suicide problem’.<https://theweek.com/health/afghanistan-female-suicides-problem>

dated August 2023 ,¹ which contained data from healthcare providers across 11 provinces in Afghanistan, showed that in 10 of the provinces, women and girls outnumbered men, as those who either died from suicide or attempted to end their lives coupled with increasing number of women seeking medical attention because of worsening mental health due to the restrictions posed by the Taliban.

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

A woman, 20, in Bamyan Province.

Earlier when university and schooling was shut down, girls had turned to midwifery and nursing training, as this was the only avenue still open, to access education and get employment. A large number of girls and young women were enrolled in these institutes and were practising also as midwives. But the 3rd December 2024 order by the Taliban to close down midwifery and nursing institutes across the country brought another wave of devastation to women.

"My daughter was studying midwifery earlier. When it was banned, she came home depressed. She did not eat for many days and felt hopeless. My other two daughters are also stressed. Looking at them is also stressful for me."

A woman, 51, in Baghlan Province.

Beyond their dreams and aspirations, women have also had to let go of the small freedoms and simple joys in their lives like singing, listening to music, or talking loudly. This has led to a stifling life and worse mental health crisis.

"I have lots of anxiety. I am depressed. The situation has changed very scarily. Before I had freedom, I could sing songs on the street. Now I am locked at home, I cannot go outside, or work or study..."

A woman, 20, in Bamyan Province.

The deteriorating mental health situation of women and girls have brought a wave of concern even among the men in the family. Many respondents share that fathers who were earlier not very supportive, have been encouraging daughters to go to madrasas, attend classes or learn tailoring, to keep them busy and prevent them from falling into despair or depression. This is however not the case for all.

The situation has also affected the mental health of men and children. Men report also facing depression and stress due to the economic crisis and restrictions by the Taliban.

On the other hand, respondents complain that the Taliban have banned music, celebration of many festivals. Children are growing up amidst this violent environment, amidst domestic strife, seeing unhappy mothers, being unable to afford things or take part in leisure activities. They are also constantly exposed to Taliban propaganda at schools, mosques and other institutions, which has a negative impact on their mental health.

Healthcare services and resources to help improve the mental health condition in the country were scarce prior to 2021 and are scarcer now, our respondents report. Families cannot afford going to clinics. CSOs organize mental healthcare camps which happen irregularly. Due to high level distrust and fear in the society, women are scared to share their concerns with the mental health practitioners in camps, clinics or elsewhere, afraid that the information may reach the Taliban. In the face of lack of medical support, women resort to reading the Quran, talking to friends, taking part in online sessions, and attending online classes to improve their mental health. But this solution is only temporary. Participants say that their mental health cannot change until their circumstances do.

1 The Guardian Report from 23rd August 2023 title 'Despair is settling in': female suicides on rise in Taliban's Afghanistan. <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/28/despair-is-settling-in-female-suicides-on-rise-in-talibans-afghanistan>

Case Study

Masooda*, Central Region of Afghanistan

Masooda is a 37 year old Hazara woman, living in a province in the Central Region of Afghanistan. Masooda used to work in the Ministry of Women's Affairs, before the Taliban took over. Her husband was working with the Afghan military. On 15th August 2021, as Taliban progressed towards Kabul, her husband came home saying he would have to leave the country, or else he would put himself and his family at risk. So he packed his bags and left, with plans of escaping to Iran. That was the last time Masooda saw him. Masooda has extended family members living in Iran, but none of them have been able to locate her husband. More than 3 years since he left, Masooda has not been able to contact him and doesn't know if he is dead or alive. She cannot share this problem with anyone as she is afraid that revealing her husband's identity will put her at risk. Masooda has two young boys. She has no source of income and no home. She lives with her two kids at her neighbour's house. They survive solely on humanitarian aid and donations that the community leader in her locality helps her access. Her children don't go to school or madrasa. She feels that her identity as a Hazara woman makes her more vulnerable. She says that her community is often targeted by different groups and the Taliban never takes responsibility for their protection. She witnesses a very high resistance towards Taliban's policies among her community, with women still organizing and participating in protests. But her fear and vulnerable situation prevents her from joining them. Around her, she sees men exert increasing control over women and ill treat them. In the market she has seen young girls getting arrested by the Taliban for wearing headphones or wrong colour shoes. She says this fear and the distress from her economic situation has had a terrible impact on her and her children's mental health. She has become extremely forgetful while her sons remain angry and upset. She does not have the means to access mental health support. She does not have the means to be happy. She is worried about her children's education and their future.

"I don't see a bright future for myself or my kids. If this continues in the next 5-6 years, they will have no future and that is worrying me a lot. And since this situation has been going on for the past many years I don't see a bright future for myself or kids. They are depressed and sad."

Conclusion

The report documents the voices of Afghan women- their concerns, their coping mechanisms as well as their resistance. The PVPV law is a clear step of systematizing gender persecution into the Taliban's governance which amounts to Gender Apartheid. As the world turns its eyes to the many proliferating crises worldwide, major halts of foreign aid occur and many states begin to normalize their relations with the DFA, the current humanitarian and human rights crisis in Afghanistan risks spiraling into an abyss which will have widespread regional and global consequences. Standing in solidarity with Afghan women is not a choice but a necessity in upholding global human rights. Specific recommendations which come from the ground and are detailed earlier in the report are essential to advocating to support Afghan women.

"The fundamental problem right now in Afghanistan is the political problem about the regime... If these people leave this country, I see myself getting happy. It is my hometown. I love it here.

But if they (Taliban) continue their rule, being alive is not feasible for us. It is hard to have a normal life here. What does this life mean to us? We cannot do basic things we like. Reading books, talking to friends, studying, everything is stopped. If this continues I would prefer to leave Afghanistan."

A woman, 20 from Bamyan Province.

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