



GENDER ALERT NO. 2



Women's rights in Afghanistan one year after the Taliban take-over

15 August 2022

Photo: UN Women

Introduction

This Gender Alert documents how changing dynamics in Afghanistan are impacting women's rights and gender equality one year after the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan on 15 August 2021. This Alert builds on the first Gender Alert issued by UN Women on Afghanistan in December 2021.¹

The Taliban's position on women's rights has been central to its worldview and vision for society – from its first period of rule (1996-2001), its position at the peace table in Doha and now, its contemporary practices and vision for Afghanistan. This Gender Alert draws on secondary data published in the past year and insights from UN Women visits across provinces in 2022, and has found that the Taliban has not substantively changed its position on women's rights. Women are systematically excluded from public and political life, and restricted in their access to education, humanitarian assistance, employment, justice and health services. In short, women and girls' lives and prospects are confined to the home.

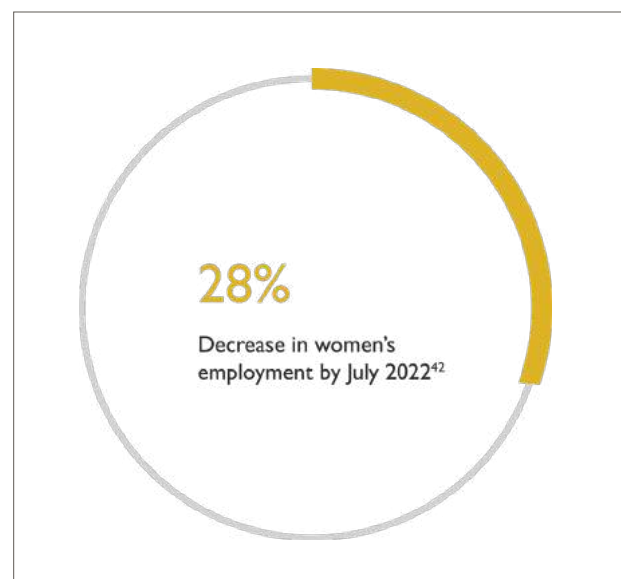
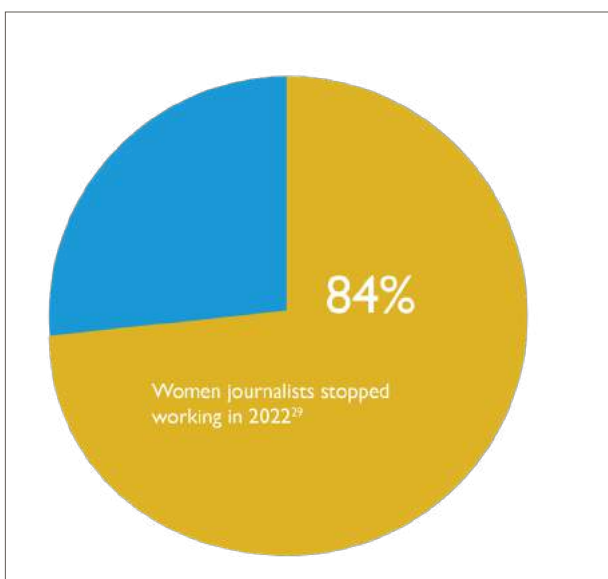
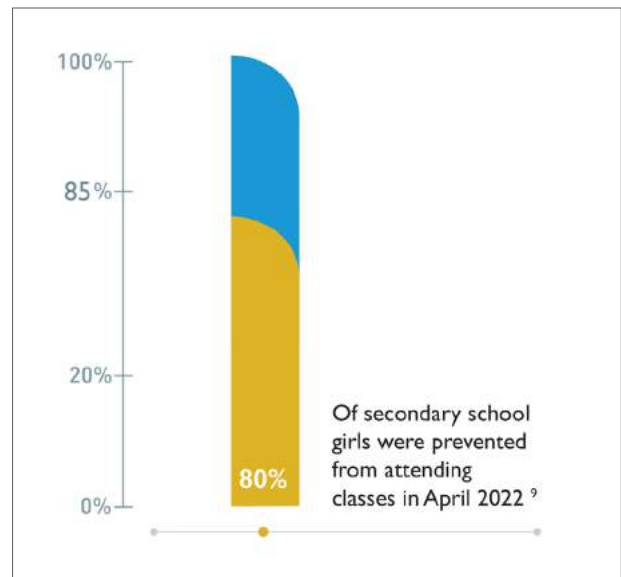
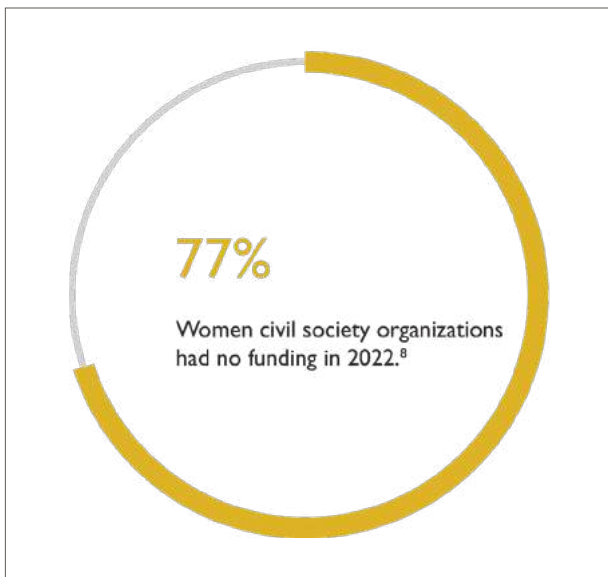
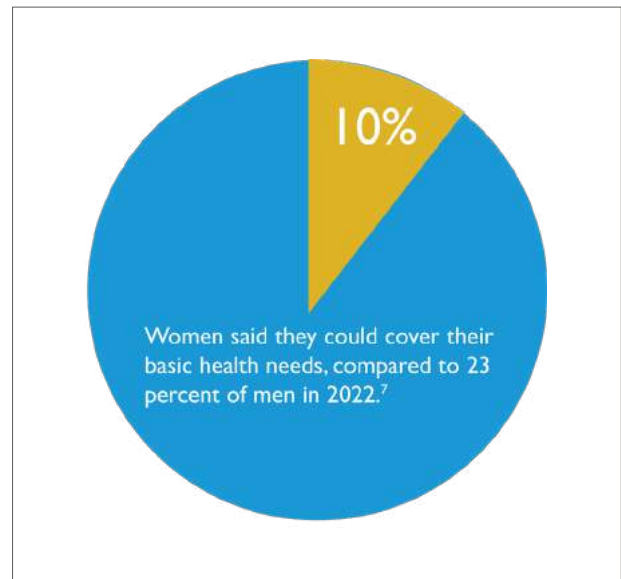
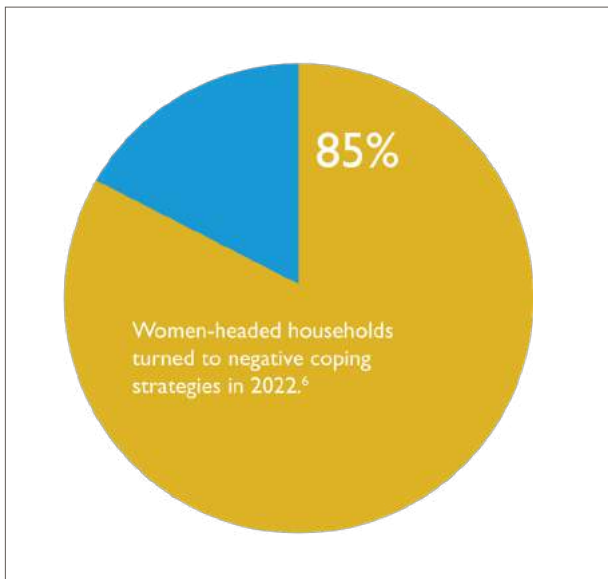
The short- and long-term costs of these drastic reversals on women's rights are tremendous. Suicides rates among women have reportedly increased; mortality rates, including maternal mortality are expected to rise; and overall economic losses due to the erosion of women's employment are estimated at up to USD 1 billion (5 percent of GDP).² The combined effect of gender-segregation requirements and a lack of educated women will be far-reaching, shutting women out of public life, access to services, knowledge.

Methodology: The Gender Alert was developed using secondary data, analysing developments since 15 August 2021. A rapid desk review of literature was undertaken. The analysis contained in this Gender Alert presents indicative trends as they relate to women's rights and gender equality, rather than providing exhaustive information. Direct quotes from Afghan women have been anonymized to protect their identity.

¹UN Women. 2021. Women's Rights in Afghanistan: where are we now?. Gender Alert No. 1.

²UNDP.2021. Afghanistan: Socio-Economic Outlook 2021-2022.

Snapshot: Gender equality data in Afghanistan



GENDER GAP

- Afghanistan is ranked 156th out of 156 countries by the Global Gender Gap Index 2021.³

HUMANITARIAN

- Numbers in need of humanitarian assistance:
 - January 2021: 18.4 million people - including 4.1 million women and 4.7 million girls.⁴
 - January 2022: 24.4 million people – 5.5 million women and 6.3 million girls.⁵
- January 2022: 85 percent of women-headed households turning to negative coping strategies, compared with 62 percent of male-headed households.⁶
- Just 10 percent of women said they could cover basic health needs, compared to 23 percent of men.⁷

WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY

- Approximately 77 percent of Afghan women civil society organizations had no funding and are no longer running any projects in 2022.⁸

EDUCATION

- Girls graduating: In 2021, 22,375 (or 12.5 percent out of 179,000) female secondary school students took the national university entrance exam.
- Girls out of school: As of April 2022, 80 percent of secondary school girls (850,000 out of 1.1 million in 2021) were prevented from attending classes.⁹

EMPLOYMENT

- In 2020, women made up 18.8 percent of the employment sector (compared with 81.2 percent for men). This may have already decreased by as much as 28 percent (compared with a 12 percent decrease for men).¹⁰
- Unemployment rate:¹¹
 - 2021: 13 percent
 - 2022: estimated to reach up to 40 percent

Freedom of movement

“Back then [before 15 August 2021], I had no fear when I left home. I had no fear that someone would stop me on the street and ask me why my veil is black, or red or white, [or] that someone would stop me to see what is on my phone.”

– Afghan woman, 2022.¹²

On 7 May 2022 the de facto authorities issued a directive requiring all women to wear Islamic hijab and fully cover their faces except the eyes when outside the house. The most effective form of Islamic hijab, the directive noted, was not to leave home except in cases of necessity.¹³ Violations of this decree lead to punishment of male relatives – essentially making male relatives responsible for enforcing the hijab decree.¹⁴ This directive reinforces the dominance and control of men over women’s lives, and deepens prevailing discriminatory narratives that women are inherently vulnerable, require protection and can provoke sinful behaviour if they do not follow the dress code. Earlier decrees related to freedom of movement, escalating in severity, included requiring a mahram (male relative chaperone) to travel with women for any trips further than 45 miles from home¹⁵ or on any domestic or international air travel,¹⁶ hijab requirements,¹⁷ and various decrees requiring gender segregation in public spaces.¹⁸ These restrictions remove women’s agency where gains in women’s access to public life were just starting to take hold. Women living with disabilities and female-headed households are the most impacted by the mobility restrictions.

In practice, restrictions on women’s freedom of movement often go beyond what is prescribed in decrees. Women report that families, communities, and employers are pre-emptively limiting movements of women and girls. This demonstrates how fear of consequences for transgression can be enough to separate women from men, ultimately relegating women to the private sphere and reinforcing the norms that justify this exclusion.

³World Economic Forum. 2021. The Global Gender Gap Index 2021 rankings.

⁴OCHA. 2020. Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan.

⁵UNGA (United Nations General Assembly). 2022. Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security, 7.A/76/862-S/2022/485, 15 June 2022

⁶Gender in Humanitarian Action Group Afghanistan. 2022. Rapid Gender Analysis (forthcoming).

⁷Ibid.

⁸Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group Afghanistan. 2022. Research on Challenges, Barriers and Opportunities for Women led CSOs in the Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Crisis.

⁹Education Cluster. 2022. Afghanistan: Back to School – Situation Update (April 2022).

¹⁰ILO. 2022. Employment Prospects in Afghanistan: A Rapid Impact Assessment. ILO Brief. January 2022.

¹¹UNAMA. 2022. Briefing to the United Nations Security Council by Acting SRSG, Ramiz Alakbarov. 23 June 2022.

¹²All direct quotes are from UN Women field visits in 2022. No geographic location is specified to protect the identities of Afghan women.

¹³Clarke, K., Rahimi, S. ““We need to breathe too”: Women across Afghanistan navigate the Taliban’s hijab ruling”, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 1 June 2022.

¹⁴United Nations. 2022. Afghanistan: Taliban orders women to stay home; cover up in public.” Women, 7 May 2022.

¹⁵Decree issued on 26 December 2021. France24. “No trips for Afghan women unless escorted by male relative: Taliban”.

¹⁶Decree issued on 26 March 2022: France24. “Taliban ban Afghan women flying alone in latest setback on rights”.

¹⁷Placards first observed on 9 January 2022: Lalzoy, N. “Taliban stuck banners across Kabul to recommend hijab for women”, 10 January 2022.

¹⁸Decree issued on 26 February 2022 that universities must have gender segregated classrooms: Al Jazeera. “Afghan public universities reopen with gender segregated classes”, 26 February 2022; decree issued on 28 March 2022 that amusement parks in Kabul must be gender segregated: Hindustan Times. “Taliban’s segregation rules for Afghanistan’s amusement parks: men on 4 days, women on 3”, 28 March 2022.

Participation in public and political life

“Unfortunately, life, studies, and education – all at the same time – have lost their colour.”

– Afghan woman, 2022

The representatives of the de facto authorities are men; almost exclusively from the Pashtun ethnic group. Women have been removed from public service positions – except where they cannot be filled by men in education, health, and certain elements of policing – in some cases, being asked to send male relatives to replace them.¹⁹ A 3 day gathering on 30 June 2022 of around 4,500 clerics and leaders chosen by the Taliban fully excluded women with the argument that women would be sufficiently involved through the presence of their sons, husbands and fathers.²⁰ Pre-existing norms around male leadership have thus been consolidated and legitimized, dismantling inroads women have made into public life in the past decades.

The Ministry for Women’s Affairs (MoWA) – including its provincial offices – and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) were abolished in September 2021 and May 2022, respectively, de-activating the country’s gender-equality and women’s-rights machinery. The Taliban reinstated the de facto Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV), tasked with enforcing the edicts issued to ensure compliance with the Taliban’s interpretation of Islamic law. The de facto MPVPV has taken over the former MoWA building in Kabul and the Departments of Women’s Affairs across the country, sending a powerful signal that there is no room for women or entities tasked with taking gender equality forward.

Women’s civil society

“We raised our voice, therefore women’s voice has not been silenced.”

– Afghan woman 2022

Women’s civil society has been significantly impacted since the Taliban takeover. Many women’s rights and women-led civil society organizations have closed in the past year. Most high-profile women’s rights leaders, from all walks of life, fled the country following the fall of Kabul, creating a leadership vacuum. Reports indicate

that 77 percent of women civil society organizations are no longer running any projects in 2022.²¹ Women-led organizations that continue to operate face intimidation and threats, significant cash and banking issues, constraints around registration, challenges around limitation of movement, and operational restrictions given the sensitive nature of human rights-related work.²²

On 8 September 2021, the de facto Ministry of Interior banned demonstrations that did not have prior permission. Nevertheless – and in tandem with the steady and systematic regression on women’s rights – women have been at the frontlines of protests in Kabul and beyond. Women as well as journalists at these protests have consistently been met with threats, violence, arrest, detention, and torture.²³ In response to these measures, women’s groups and leaders have increasingly resorted to advocacy at indoor gatherings and on social media.²⁴

Women who fled the country are also mobilizing to keep global attention on women’s rights: from briefing the UN Security Council and Human Rights Council and reporting on issues using data from women on the ground, to forming coalitions to strategize on how best to influence the Taliban and lobby the international community to put women’s rights at the centre of their engagement. Women leaders have expressed frustration at the international community’s reluctance to make women’s rights a prerequisite for engagement with the de facto authorities. Women leaders have also raised concerns when all-male delegations from the international community meet the Taliban.²⁵ Inside and outside of the country, Afghan women have not accepted the status quo and are finding ways to hold the Taliban to account on women’s rights.

Media

The Taliban has issued various rules aimed at removing media freedoms and excluding women from public broadcasting comprehensively, including their faces, perspectives, and their needs. On 21 May 2022, a nationwide order targeted women journalists, requiring them to cover their face when on air.²⁶ Male journalists showed solidarity at two news stations by initially wearing facemasks alongside their women colleagues.²⁷ The broadcasting of drama, entertainment, and music has also been restricted through guidelines issued on 21 November 2021²⁸ - likely to reverse gains made during the past decades to shift

¹⁹Ahad, Z. “Send us a man to do your job so we can sack you, Taliban tell female officials”, 18 July 2022, The Guardian.

²⁰Reuters, “Men will represent women at gathering for national unity”, 29 June 2022.

²¹Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group Afghanistan. 2022. Research on Challenges, Barriers and Opportunities for Women-led CSOs.

²²Ibid.

²³Amnesty International. 2022. Death in Slow Motion: Women and Girls Under Taliban Rule. London: Amnesty International

²⁴Rukshana. “Indoor female protest held in Afghanistan”, 16 July 2022; Siddique, A. “Safe Spaces’: After Taliban Crackdown, Afghan Women Take Their Protests Home”, 8 December 2021. Gandhara.

²⁵This has been expressed in meetings convened by UN Women in the capital and in the provinces since the fall of Kabul. Afghan women outside of the country have also expressed this anger in their engagements in international fora.

²⁶United Nations. 2022. Afghanistan: Taliban orders women to stay home; cover up in public.” Women, 7 May 2022.

²⁷This has reportedly not continued as the de facto authorities subsequently pressured the media outlets to cease: Comment made during UN Women convened focus group discussion on 26 June 2022. Binesh, B. “All TOLONews Presenters, in Solidarity With Women, Cover Faces”, 22 May 2022, TOLONews.

²⁸Qaane, E. 2022. Regime Change, Economic Decline and No Legal Protection: What has happened to the Afghan media?. Afghanistan Analysts Network. Rights and Freedoms, 7 March 2022.

away from harmful social norms, including regressive gender values and practices. By early December 2021, some 43 percent of media outlets had closed and 84 percent of women journalists and media workers (compared with 52 percent of men in the sector) had stopped working amid an environment of harassment, violence, and censorship.²⁹ Estimates in December 2021 put the number of women journalists at 410 (compared with 3,950 men), down from a total of 2,490 (compared with 8,290 men) six months earlier. The broader impact of the repression and censorship of the media is that women journalists are rendered invisible; as a result, content that reinforces women's rights and gender equality is systematically erased.

Social media has provided a safer, alternative space for women, including women journalists, to engage publicly and advocate for women's rights, although it is not entirely devoid of issues as many women report threats and intimidation online. The move online has effectively, and to some degree, safely, allowed women activists to stage and document indoor protests. Although social media provides a crucial and one of the last remaining platforms for women, there is still a need to remain anonymous, both to avoid attention from the de facto authorities, as well as to mitigate online harassment and abuse for what is perceived as transgressive social behaviour. This security concern still creates barriers for women to meaningfully contribute to debate and influence content online.³⁰

Education

“My daughters are at home because schools are closed for them. My dreams for their future are all shattered.”

– Afghan woman, 2022.

Contrary to prior commitments, on 23 March 2022, the de facto authorities announced that secondary schools would remain closed to girls. No meaningful steps have been taken to reopen secondary schools for girls to date. These restrictions directly and systematically exclude 1.1 million girls from secondary education.³¹ While girls continue to attend secondary school in some districts, the absence of a systematic, national policy hampers universal access to education and ultimately contributes to the broader architecture that curtails women's rights and confines them to their homes. Economic difficulties, re-

strictions on women and girls' freedom of movement, and insufficient numbers of women teachers all contribute to limiting girls' access to education, even at a primary school level. Roughly 36 percent of teachers across all levels were women in 2018, boosted by a higher percentage in urban areas.³² Where girls are not in school there is an increased risk of exploitation and abuse, including child and forced marriage.³³

Women's access to university, though not officially restricted, is constrained by gender segregation and strict dress codes. Broader gender-specific mobility restrictions, as discussed above, also create significant obstacles for women and girls to independently access classrooms. Where universities cannot implement gender-segregation guidelines, women – not men – are disadvantaged. Many women have either stopped attending or opted not to enrol in university as they do not feel comfortable or safe due to restrictions targeting them. Pressure from family and community also contributes to girls opting out of university-level education.³⁴

Health services

The health system is plagued by service gaps and inequalities, including access issues in rural areas, shortages of staff, supplies and equipment, and limited specialized care for women, particularly around reproductive health.³⁵ Gender segregation has been applied to some men and women health workers, who are prohibited from communicating with each other and are limited to treating patients of the same gender as themselves.³⁶ Nutrition sites report that in some districts there are no women nurses in 86 percent of their centres and no women doctors in 71 percent of their centres.³⁷ This shortage of women health workers is particularly critical in addressing the urgent needs and rights of at-risk and crisis-affected women and girls.³⁸ In early 2022, only 10 percent of women said that they could cover their basic health needs with the services available to them (compared with 23 percent of men).³⁹ Afghans with restrictions to their movement – women, people living with disabilities, vulnerable and at risk communities – face the highest barriers to accessing health services.

Maternal mortality rates for women and girls are expected to rise due to restricted mobility for pregnant women as well as midwives, and the rise of child marriage and as-

²⁹Reporters Without Borders. 2022. “Act quickly to protect Afghan journalists, RSF tells new UN special rapporteur.”, 11 April 2022.

³⁰Comments made during focus group discussions with Afghan women on 16, 21 and 26 June 2022 convened by UN Women.

³¹As of 16 April, only certain districts across eight provinces continued to provide secondary education for girls: Afghanistan Education Cluster. 2022. Back to School Situation Update: April 2022; UNGA. The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security.

³²UNESCO. 2021. The right to education: What's at stake in Afghanistan? Paris: UNESCO; Clarke, K. 2022. “Who Gets to Go to School? (1): What people told us about education since the Taliban took over”, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 26 January 2022.

³³UNICEF. Girls increasingly at risk of child marriage in Afghanistan, 13 November 2021.

³⁴Amnesty International. Death in Slow Motion: Women and Girls Under Taliban Rule.

³⁵Human Rights Watch. 2021. “I Would Like Four Kids — If We Stay Alive” Women's Access to Health Care in Afghanistan.

³⁶Raha. 20 July 2022. “Taliban impose new gender segregation regulations on hospitals in Kabul.” Rukhshana, 30 July 2022.

³⁷UNICEF-AWEC. 2022. Quarterly Safety Audit Report: January-March 2022.

³⁸UN Women. “The rights and needs of women and girls must be at the centre of the humanitarian response to the earthquake in Afghanistan”, 1 July 2022.

³⁹Gender in Humanitarian Action Group Afghanistan. 2022. Rapid Gender Analysis (forthcoming).

sociated likelihood of early pregnancy. Mental health outcomes are bleak due to economic stressors, lack of support services, displacement, social trauma, and exposure to protracted conflict. In 2022, 72 percent of households reported a behavioural change in at least one household member.⁴⁰ Stressors for women include a sense of hopelessness given their lack of political and social possibilities. Stressors for men include the experience of combat and being unable to provide for their families due to high unemployment and food insecurity.

Employment

“For now, I see no hope.” – Afghan woman, 2022.

Restrictions confine women to the home, prohibit them from entering de facto authorities buildings, and broadly contest their presence in public spaces. Before 15 August 2021, 17 percent of women participated in the labour force nationwide; this decreased by 16 percent by the end of October 2021 (compared with a 6-percent decrease for men during the same time period).⁴¹ Under current mobility restrictions and safety concerns, women’s employment was projected to decrease by as much as 28 percent by July 2022.⁴² Employment restrictions have targeted women in the public service (except for roles which cannot be filled by men in health, education, and policing) and, to a lesser degree, in the private sector, varying by region, sector, and workplace. Ultimately, the past year has created a disabling environment for women to fully participate in the workforce – private and public alike.

Although gender-specific restrictions are generally more difficult to enforce in the informal and agricultural sectors, limitations on women’s freedom of movement and increasingly intolerant attitudes towards women in public spaces have the potential to decrease women’s labour in these sectors. In remote and isolated rural areas, women play a key role in the agricultural sector, tending to livestock and daily subsistence more broadly.⁴³ Thus, restrictions on women’s mobility will put communities at risk, many of whom are already facing acute food insecurity. Restrictions on freedom of movement, particularly the mahram requirement, risk eliminating possibilities of employment for women-headed households. In January 2022, almost 100% of women-headed households faced insufficient food consumption; and 85 percent of female-headed households surveyed reported turning to

drastic coping measures – limiting food intake, borrowing food – compared with 62 percent of male-headed households.⁴⁴

Humanitarian assistance

In 2022, 24.4 million people, including 5.5 million women and 6.3 million girls, are in need of humanitarian assistance.⁴⁵ Approximately 7.400 people were displaced in 2022 due to conflict, of whom 80 percent are women and children who need humanitarian assistance.⁴⁶ In the midst of this complex crisis, a 5.9-magnitude earthquake hit eastern Afghanistan in June, levelling entire communities, killing 1.000 and injuring more than 1.500, many of whom were women and girls.⁴⁷

Obstacles to women and girls’ access to humanitarian assistance stem from the gendered vulnerabilities and current mobility and social restrictions targeting women and girls. Access to aid is limited due to gender segregation at and on the way to distribution points and mahram requirements, lack of required civil documentation, and mobility constraints related to increased risks of gender-based violence (GBV) and unmet sanitation and healthcare needs. Compounding these barriers are the impact of gender-specific mobility restrictions that impact women humanitarian workers who are vital to ensuring that humanitarian assistance reaches the most vulnerable groups, in both planning and distribution roles. Due to these restrictions, women are at risk of being excluded from life-saving humanitarian assistance, creating another layer of inequality.

An Afghan Women’s Advisory Group comprising of nine Afghan women leaders from across the country was established by the UN to advise on the humanitarian response, including how to best respond to the specific needs of women and girls, and engage with the de facto authorities on gender-related issues.⁴⁸ A national-level de facto committee was established on 7 May 2022 to monitor humanitarian aid delivery by the de facto Ministry of Economy.⁴⁹ No concrete and transparent channel currently exists for direct engagement between Afghan women’s civil society – or indeed any Afghan women – and the de facto authorities at the national and sub-national levels. Without such a channel, the needs, perspectives, and expertise of women risk being obscured in any humanitarian response.

⁴⁰REACH. 2022. Mid-Year Whole of Afghanistan Assessment: April 2022.

⁴¹ILO. 2022. Employment Prospects in Afghanistan: A Rapid Impact Assessment.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. 2022. FAO Afghanistan Newsletter: 1st Quarter 2022.

⁴⁴WFP.2022. Food Security Update: Round Five, January 2022.

⁴⁵UNGA. 2022. Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security, 7. A/76/862-S/2022/485, 15 June 2022

⁴⁶OCHA. 2022. Snapshot of Population Movements: January to July 2022; UNHCR.2021. “UNHCR warns Afghanistan’s conflict taking the heaviest toll on displaced women and children.” UNHCR, 13 August 2021.

⁴⁷REACH. 2022. Media Bulletin: July 2022.

⁴⁸UNGA.2022. The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security.

⁴⁹UNGA. 2022. The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security.

Violence against women and girls

Violence against women and girls in Afghanistan is a pervasive problem, with reports suggesting nearly nine out of ten women have experienced at least one form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime.⁵⁰ Since August 2021, infrastructure to seek support in addressing GBV has been dismantled, and the remaining institutional avenues to address GBV have presented dangers for women, girls and service providers. Since 15 August 2021, risk factors have worsened: confinement of women to the home; mahram requirements; displacement; economic pressure; erosion of women's rights; and regressive gender norms. Furthermore, growing male hegemony across all sectors has meant that people feel more entitled to perpetrate violence against women and girls, especially given the lack of functional accountability mechanisms. The increasingly dangerous and hopeless situation for women and girls has contributed to a reported increase of suicides among women.⁵¹

Child and forced marriages have increased in the past year despite a decree issued by the de facto authorities in December 2021 opposing forced marriage.⁵² Drivers include economic pressure, lack of educational and professional prospects for girls, and the reported practice among Taliban officials of forcibly marrying women and girls themselves, which leads families to pre-emptively marry off their girls and women.⁵³ Girls who are forced into marriage face increased risk of GBV perpetrated by their husbands and in-laws, as well as limitations in accessing reproductive health, and lower levels of completed education.⁵⁴

The system that aimed to provide support and justice to survivors of GBV, and which had previously served thousands of women and girls each year,⁵⁵ has collapsed. Personnel qualified to deal with GBV within the legal and judicial system have been removed or fled the country; and civil society organizations providing essential support services have largely been shut down and face severe operational constraints.

Access to justice for women and girls in this context is almost non-existent. Court cases of family law and violence against women are being increasingly diverted to

informal justice mechanisms. Between August 2021 and June 2022, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) received 87 reports of violence against women and girls, including two honour killings, none of which were processed through the formal justice system.⁵⁶ Informal justice systems do not have a survivor-centred or do-no-harm approach, thus the risk of re-traumatization is high. They also lack safeguards for fair processes and can reinforce power imbalances and inequities. Further, dependence on male relatives for both financial means and travel outside the home severely limits opportunities for reporting domestic violence, particularly when the perpetrator of violence is a family member. Where reporting occurs, women and girls risk arrest and prosecution for so-called moral crimes,⁵⁷ which is a further strong deterrent. Without avenues for women and girls to seek help and referrals, there is an increased risk that they remain in life-threatening situations.

Justice and accountability

“I ask the international community to listen to Afghan women; we need to be heard and the world needs to stand in solidarity with us more than before.”

– Afghan woman, 2022.

The justice system has in large part been dismantled, to the disproportionate disadvantage of women and girls. Institutional safeguards ensuring fair trials and monitoring bodies have been dissolved, including the AIHRC and the Afghanistan Independent Bar Association, as well as specialized judicial infrastructure aimed at ending violence against women. With a lack of institutional oversight and no clarity on the applicable legal framework, individual interpretation of the law has increased. In a male-dominated environment, arbitrary interpretation and application of the law risk enforcing harmful patriarchal norms and promoting impunity for violations of women's rights. In this ambiguous legal environment, women are at increased risk. There have been some potentially encouraging reports of judgements by the Taliban clarifying women's rights, including their right to inheritance according to Islam; furthermore, a December 2021 decree has in principle banned forced marriages, and protects a widow's right to inheritance and a woman's right to

⁵⁰Global Rights. 2008. Living with Violence: A National Report on Domestic Abuse in Afghanistan; UNAMA, OHCHR. 2009. Silence is Violence: end the abuse against Afghan women. Kabul: UNAMA.

⁵¹It was recently also reported that one or two women are committing suicide every day in Afghanistan: United Nations. In Afghanistan, women take their lives out of desperation, Human Rights Council hears. 1 July 2022.

⁵²UNICEF. Girls increasingly at risk of child marriage in Afghanistan, 13 November 2021. Afghanistan de facto Ministry of Information and Culture. 2022. “Special decree issued By Amir Al-Momenin on women's rights”, 3 December 2021.

⁵³Amnesty International. 2022. Death in Slow Motion: Women and Girls Under Taliban Rule.

⁵⁴UNICEF. Girls increasingly at risk of child marriage in Afghanistan, 13 November 2021. UN Women has also received reports of these patterns from women-led civil society organizations across Afghanistan.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶It is understood that there is currently significant underreporting of violence against women and girls due to data gathering limitations, barriers to reporting, and an increasingly permissive environment. UNAMA. 2022. Human Rights in Afghanistan: 15 August 2021 – 15 June 2022. Kabul: UNAMA.

⁵⁷So-called moral crimes include actions that are perceived to transgress socially acceptable behavior and bring shame upon a family, such as zina (pre- or extramarital intercourse), and the act of ‘running away’ from home (farar az manzil). See: Aziz Hakimi and Masooma Sa'adat. 2020. Legal reform or erasure of history? The politics of moral crimes in Afghanistan, Central Asian Survey, 39:2, 255-271.

choose her own husband. While these are positive developments, they remain the exception and not the norm.⁵⁸

Former women judges, lawyers, and prosecutors have largely fled or been sidelined and replaced almost entirely by former Taliban fighters and madrasa (Islamic religious school) graduates who do not automatically have any legal training or expertise. The lack of women's representation and legally trained personnel in the justice system reinforces the sector's existing domination by men, and hinders access to justice for women and girls. There is an increasing reliance on informal justice, with courts referring in particular family law cases to informal dispute-resolution mechanisms.⁵⁹ This poses issues for women and other marginalized groups. Deeply embedded in patriarchal traditions, decisions in informal processes are presided over by men and reflect local norms; they often reinforce power imbalances and inequities rather than address them. Taken together, these developments risk setting the framework for a significant level of ongoing gender-based rights violations.

Conclusion

Despite initial ambiguity and assurances provided by the Taliban that it would protect women's rights through the prism of Sharia law, the past 12 months has seen previous years of progress on women's rights and gender equality fundamentally reversed. There is a systemic and institutionalized exclusion of women and women's rights witnessed. Decrees, statements, and practices related to women's rights have created an environment of fear and uncertainty, meaning that formal decrees are no longer needed; informal policing by families, communities and in the workplace are reported as commonplace by women. These developments have fostered a harmful shift in social perceptions towards women and girls that risks entrenching this institutional regression and reinforcing cultural norms that privilege men's leadership and restrict women to the household. The dismantling and censorship of civil society and the media – who previously played key roles in both sensitizing communities and holding the former government to account on women's rights – leaves the logic of discrimination unquestioned.

The year since 15 August 2021 has seen the near-erasure of women and girls from public life, and their full erasure from political life. Compounding this, Afghan women largely feel that the world has abandoned them. Restrictions on one set of freedoms often provide the basis for reversals on others, creating an interconnected and mutually reinforcing ecosystem of oppression that

subordinates women and relegates them to the private sphere. There are currently no indications that any of these fundamental rights and freedoms will be restored. Rather, the trend of the past year suggests further discriminatory and oppressive measures on women and girls will continue.

These ubiquitous restrictions on women's lives and accompanying increase in conservative cultural norms have directly caused an increase in reported suicides among women and girls.⁶⁰ The de facto authorities have created an environment where some Afghan women and girls see death as preferable to living under the current conditions where there is little hope in sight. Women have raised concerns over how many more women and girls are dying by suicide in their communities.⁶¹ With the sustained erosion of women's rights, diminished access to healthcare and women friendly safe spaces, alongside the reality that suicides are generally underreported globally, in Afghanistan these numbers are likely even higher than reported given the codes of family honour and shame. Suicide is a key indicator of how the lives of Afghan women and girls have changed for the worse, to an extent and at a pace that makes living unbearable for some.

The erosion of women's rights has been one of the most notable and consistent characteristics of the de facto authorities to date. It is clear that the Taliban's position on women's rights is central to their vision for Afghanistan, as evidenced by the growing architecture governing the lives of women.

⁵⁸Afghan Analyst Network (AAN). 2022. Policing Public Morality: Debates on promoting virtue and preventing vice in the Taliban's second Emirate. Kabul: AAN.

⁵⁹Internal survey undertaken by international entity with women-led civil society organizations on access to justice in 2022

⁶⁰United Nations. "In Afghanistan, women take their lives out of desperation, Human Rights Council hears", 1 July 2022; TOLONews, "Attempted Suicide Cases, Mostly of Women, Rise in Badakhshan", 15 May 2022.

⁶¹UN Women Afghanistan regularly convenes women-only spaces across the country - to hear directly from Afghan women and girls how their lives have changed as their rights have deteriorated.

Recommendations

- 1. Advocate for the return of the full spectrum of women's rights:** In a context where the rights of women and girls are restricted in every sphere of life, it is critical that efforts are undertaken to restore all rights. Prioritizing one set of rights for women and girls – such as the more socially accepted rights to education and health – over another risks setting a pathway that normalizes acceptance of women's inferior status and reinforces socio-cultural norms that underpin justifications for exclusion.
- 2. Invest in women – across all spheres of life:** Such investment is critical to transforming Afghanistan. Afghan women are forming new civil society groups to address community needs, running businesses, and providing health and protection services. Globally, women's civil society is the driver and engine behind gains in gender equality and women's rights. Now more than ever, concerted efforts are needed nationally and internationally to address the growing deficit of women's rights.
- 3. Invest in the women's movement:** Include Afghan women as equal partners to inform programming, advocacy, and policy priorities, ensuring that barriers that limit diversity are addressed. Build strategic partnerships delivering substantial, long-term, flexible funding to local and national organizations working on women's rights and gender equality.
- 4. Ensure inclusive assistance:** Conduct gender-sensitive needs assessments to understand the specific needs and barriers for women and girls, and marginalized groups. Ensure adaptive approaches to programming, building in specific and extraordinary measures to counteract the effect of the Taliban's restrictions and social norms on women's fundamental freedoms. This includes finding flexible and innovative ways to investing, supporting and advocating for the inclusion of Afghan women humanitarian personnel and partnerships with Afghan women-led local and national non-governmental organizations in both planning and delivery of humanitarian responses to ensure that life-saving aid reaches women and girls.
- 5. Meaningfully integrate the policy perspectives of Afghan women:** Support and facilitate Afghan women representatives to negotiate directly and meaningfully with the Taliban, and all other stakeholders. This includes engaging with the Taliban in ways that reinforce the priorities of Afghan women and the immediate restoration of their fundamental freedoms and rights, including by means of targeted leverage and conditional engagements.

Timeline: developments impacting status of women and girls

SEPTEMBER 2021

- 7: De facto caretaker administration announced, which excludes women and abolishes the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Departments of Women's Affairs across the country.
- 8: Decree issued banning protests and slogans that do not have prior approval.⁶⁵
- 8: De facto Deputy head of Cultural Commission states that women will be banned from playing sport.⁶⁶
- 12: De facto Higher Education Minister states that women would be allowed to study and teach at university, but not alongside men.⁶⁷ He also announces that a new dress code will be introduced, and a review of the subjects to be taught.
- 17: Opening of schools for boys announced.⁶⁸

NOVEMBER 2021

- 22: Guidelines for Afghan media released, including a ban on television dramas that include female actors, and an order that women news presenters wear Islamic hijab.⁷⁰
- 27: The Taliban publicly says it has given women their rights, adding that they are working to improve the situation for girls' education.

JANUARY 2022

- 4: Press statement orders cafe owners in Herat not to allow women entry unless accompanied by a mahram.⁷⁴

MARCH 2022

- 23: Schools for girls' grade seven and up are scheduled to reopen, but instead are closed indefinitely.⁷⁷
- 26: The Taliban orders airlines via letter to stop women without a mahram from boarding domestic or international flights.⁷⁸
- 28: Gender segregation in amusement parks in Kabul announced.⁷⁹

MAY 2022

- 3: Driving schools ordered via letter to no longer issue driver licences for women.⁸²
- 4: Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission officially dissolved.
- 7: Women advised to stay home except in cases of necessity, during which they are required by decree to cover themselves with a hijab, including the entire face except the eyes.⁸³
- 21: Women TV presenters ordered in statement to cover their faces on air.⁸⁴
- 29: Women in Kandahar prohibited in press statement from using public transport unaccompanied.⁸⁵

JULY 2022

- 6: Private secondary schools in Samangan ordered to close girls' classes above grade 6.⁸⁹
- 7: Statement issued banning women from going to parks where park authorities cannot ensure segregation between men and women.⁹⁰
- 30: Men and women health care workers prohibited from communicating with one another or treating patients of the opposite gender in hospitals in Kabul.⁹¹

AUGUST 2021

- 15: Taliban takes full control of Afghanistan.
- 17: Taliban assures women of their rights "within the framework of Sharia law" in a press conference, adding that "no discrimination and violence will be committed against women".⁶²
- 24: Press statement released on temporary restrictions on women due to security situation.⁶³
- 27: Women healthcare workers advised in press statement to return to their work.⁶⁴

OCTOBER 2021

- 27: Secondary school reopened for girls in some provinces, namely Balkh, Kunduz, Jowzjan, Herat, Sar-e Pul, Zabul, and Bamyan.⁶⁹

DECEMBER 2021

- 3: Special decree on women's rights released, which sets out the rules governing marriage.⁷¹
- 26: Guidance issued prohibiting women from travelling further than 45 miles without a mahram;⁷² and another banning taxi drivers from accepting women passengers without a hijab and from playing music.⁷³

FEBRUARY 2022

- 12: Four Afghan women's rights activists released after enforced disappearance of one month and international attention.⁷⁵
- 26: Universities reopen with gender-segregated classrooms.⁷⁶

APRIL 2022

- 21: TikTok ban announced on Twitter, due to "immoral content" leading Afghan youth astray.⁸⁰
- 23: Universities segregated by timetable: three days per week reserved for female and male students, respectively.⁸¹

JUNE 2022

- 1: Female students in Ghazni in grades 4-6 ordered to cover their faces while commuting to school or face expulsion.⁸⁶
- 26: Students at Kabul University banned from listening to music and playing games in their dormitories and dining hall.⁸⁷
- 30: Taliban holds all-male gathering of 4,500 clerics and leaders in Kabul, which issues an 11-point declaration, including calling on the de facto authorities to "pay attention to the rights of minorities, children and women."⁸⁸ Taliban claim that men can sufficiently represent the views of female relatives.

AUGUST 2022

- 1: The de facto Minister of Vice and Virtue accuses the international community of trying to violate Afghan women's dignity under the guise of human rights, including by making them indecent and exposed.⁹²
- August, 13: A group of Afghan women protesters carrying a banner that read 'August 15 is a black day' demanding rights to work and political participation were met with violence by the Taliban in Kabul.⁹³

DISCLAIMER: Some of the sources and quotes used to prepare this Gender Alert have not been included in references in order to protect informants in line with the principles of «Do No Harm.» All data and quotes are fully anonymized. If you have any questions or comments on the Gender Alert, please contact UN Women at: media.team@unwomen.org.

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