

# AFGHANISTAN

GENDER COUNTRY PROFILE 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The Afghanistan Gender Country Profile provides gender analysis and recommendations to the European Union (EU) to set policy priorities and identify key objectives for the EU in Afghanistan under the Gender Action Plan in External Action 2021-2027 (GAP III). The document provides a snapshot of the current situation regarding gender equality in Afghanistan across the six GAP III thematic focus areas, using research and data publicly available as of December 2023. This process included analysis of previous legal and institutional frameworks adopted under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001-2021) and current decrees, policies, and practices introduced by the Taliban since it seized power of state, which have fundamentally changed the status of women and girls and gender equality.*

## Key findings

In recent decades, Afghanistan has consistently ranked among the lowest scoring countries in various global indices, across a variety of gender equality indicators – due to deeply entrenched inequalities between men and women countrywide, and particularly in rural areas. Although the 20-year period of democratic rule between 2001 and 2021 saw significant development of laws, legislation and policies enshrining gender equality and women’s rights, this hard-fought progress has been swiftly rolled back by the Taliban following its military victory and takeover of the country in August 2021.

Since that time, the Taliban has systematically targeted the fundamental rights and freedoms of women and girls, via a tightly woven patchwork of decrees, policies, and practices. This litany of edicts continues to dictate attire, curtail freedom of mobility, and restrict access to education and professional opportunities – effectively erasing the voices and perspectives of women and girls from public spaces and impeding realization of their inherent human rights. Key international actors – including UN Member States, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, and the Chair of the Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls – have used terms such as ‘gender apartheid’ to describe the dynamic prevailing on the ground. To its core, the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan is dire.

Among an array of telling insights, the Gender Country Profile brings to light four findings of particular note.

**1. Afghanistan is currently facing multiple, overlapping crises – economic, humanitarian, climate, and political, each of which is interconnected and exacerbated by the growing women’s rights crisis.** The current policies and practices of the de facto authorities (DFA) discriminating against women and girls are converging with decades of institutionalized gender inequality to compound and worsen the impact of the other crises faced.

These policies and practices curtail women’s and girls’ independent mobility, limit their educational and employment opportunities, and exclude them from influencing decision-making on issues critical to their well-being at the household, community, provincial and national levels. Taken together, this

## GAP III Thematic Focus Areas

1. Ensuring freedom from all forms of gender-based violence
2. Health, including promoting of sexual health and reproductive health and rights
3. Strengthening economic and social rights and empowering girls and women
4. Advancing equal participation and leadership
5. Integrating the women, peace and security agenda
6. Addressing the challenges and opportunities related to climate change, migration and digital transformation

increases their vulnerability to the complex web of overlapping crises, sets back their economic and social resilience, and ultimately disempowers them in all spheres of decision-making. Women’s rights are the thread that runs through all key crises facing Afghanistan today, and is therefore critical to sustainably resolving and mitigating their impact.

**2.** Although there is currently no conventional legal framework in effect in Afghanistan, **there is an increasingly tightly interwoven patchwork of written and verbal decrees, policies, and systematized practices with gender discrimination and mass oppression of women at their core.** The purpose and impact of such DFA edicts restricting women’s rights are mutually reinforcing, whereby the logic of one decree builds off another; that is, one decree is often used to justify the adoption or expansion of another.

Afghan women are affected on all levels, with restrictions targeting women’s personal autonomy and dignity (e.g. independent mobility, educational opportunities) and their leadership role in both the public sector (e.g. via the ban on women working for NGOs) and the private sector (e.g. via removal of women’s faces from television and voices from radio).

**3.** Since August 2021, **the operational space for national and international organizations – across all sectors – has been severely eroded and DFA decrees continue to restrict women-focused and gender-related programming, as well as gender mainstreaming** related to non gender-targeted interventions. Restrictions have led to a significant reduction in the scope and space for women-led and gender-focused civil society organizations (CSOs).

Those gender equality and women’s empowerment (GEWE) stakeholders still operating in Afghanistan must navigate a complex and hostile environment in attempting to preserve access to services and life-saving programming for women and girls, as well as advance prospects for members of these groups to once again enjoy the full spectrum of their rights.

**4.** Taken together, **the situation in Afghanistan demands women-led, gender-transformative and evidence-based approaches** to ensure that programming and initiatives across the country neither exacerbate pre-existing sources of social inequalities, nor normalize or entrench current inequalities or ongoing rights violations. Gender data and statistics, gender analysis, and action-oriented research on the situation for women in Afghanistan are crucial for these efforts. Long-term efforts are also required to

target behavioural change, and address harmful gender norms and stereotypes being entrenched by discriminatory DFA decrees, policies and practices.

## Key principles and recommendations

In the face of such profound, institutionalized gender inequality and restrictive, hostile operational environment on programming related to GEWE, it has become imperative for international and national actors and donors to adopt a measured and principled approach to humanitarian and development initiatives in Afghanistan. The importance of operating carefully in line with the “for women by women” principle cannot be overemphasized.

This is particularly important at a time where political, economic and humanitarian issues are increasingly decoupled from women’s rights and gender equality – being addressed as separate rather than overlapping and mutually reinforcing issues – and where commitments to international law, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Violence Against Women and other central gender policy frameworks, such as the women, peace and security agenda, are being deprioritized, overlooked, or simply disregarded. A measured approach will include prioritizing agreed-upon principles, including establishing accountability measures, to ensure their operationalization.

The Gender Country Profile puts forward four key principles which should guide any interventions in Afghanistan:

### 1. COMMIT to strengthening women’s civil society organizations (WCSOs), including through provision of long-term, flexible funding to registered and unregistered entities.

**a. Provide funding to strengthen organizational capacities of WCSOs** to enable their work to continue and adapt to evolving contextual dynamics, including by reducing administrative burdens and by making funding procedures and conditions more flexible.

**b. Develop and implement strategies and criteria to mitigate the negative impacts of DFA policies on WCSOs**, including by identifying and verifying CSOs that are genuinely led by women, despite operating in a context where the boards and leadership of women’s organizations are increasingly male only.

**c. Facilitate coalition-building among WCSOs** with a view to supporting the resilience of the women’s movement and identifying entry points to support the reopening of women-led organizations and networks that have ceased operations.

### 2. INVEST at least 30 per cent of all funding to Afghanistan in supporting initiatives that directly target gender equality and women’s rights, and that no gender-blind interventions are supported.

**a. Adopt the globally understood minimum percentage of funding for gender as a “principal objective”** Gender Equality Marker (often 15 per cent) as a “floor” – not “ceiling” – of 30 per cent, given the unprecedented nature of the women’s rights crisis in Afghanistan.

**b. Develop and agree among international actors upon a rigorous model to ensure gender as a “principal objective” projects are prioritized** and, equally, that no gender-blind interventions are supported in Afghanistan.

**c. Design and implement monitoring and reporting frameworks which clearly outline gender-related programming outcomes,**

outputs, budget allocations and expenditures, to enable tracking of GEWE commitments and achievements.

**d. Prioritize funding of interventions based on needs identified through rigorous gender analysis** per area of intervention.

### 3. ENSURE actions undertaken do not inadvertently contribute to or exacerbate normalization of discriminatory DFA policies, norms, or values – including strengthening DFA structures that could inadvertently repress women and girls, in addition to other segments of the population, through programming that implements measures to mitigate security as well as reputational and ethical risks.

**a. Recognize and mitigate the impact that DFA bans are having on women and girls**, including by ensuring the full participation of Afghan women in all phases of programming, investing in gender-responsive funding, and prioritizing gender data collection to ensure standardized evidence-based, human rights-oriented, and gender-sensitive programme design.

**b. Ensure that Afghan women’s participation in decision-making is directly and indirectly supported at all levels**, including by ensuring that women are: consulted in all decision-making processes; present in all international delegation meetings with the DFA; supported to directly negotiate between the DFA and Afghan women and to establish women-only decision-making and advisory structures.

**c. Commit to “principled engagement” in any interactions on Afghanistan** to measure the costs and benefits of engagement with the DFA and mitigate any harm to women and girls stemming from the normalization of relations.

**d. Include costs in project budgets that create an enabling environment for women’s participation**, including costs for mahram, childcare (including facilities), additional office space for women-only spaces, and other accommodations.

### 4. EMBED human rights, especially women’s rights, as a cross-cutting theme across all humanitarian action and basic human needs interventions, from the design to implementation and monitoring of all programming. Human rights are foundational and supportive to sustainably resolving the multiple crises severely impacting Afghan life.

**a. Ensure that non-discrimination, particularly of women and girls, is embedded across all areas of intervention**, including design and risk assessment. Where risks related to discrimination are identified, robust mitigation measures are required to ensure that the initiative does not entrench nor exacerbate sources of inequalities.

**b. Put in place special measures to support the participation of women and other socially excluded groups** to ensure their equal participation in the design, implementation and monitoring of activities.

**c. Ensure that engagement in humanitarian action and human rights are constructed as mutually reinforcing strategies**, and are not perceived as mutually exclusive or conflicting pursuits. This includes through coordination at various stages of programming, gender data collection availability, maximizing the scope and impact of gender-responsive programming.

**d. Create targeted funding opportunities for women-led and youth-led organizations** and build their capacity, skills and knowledge with a view to increasing their opportunities in developing programming that cuts across sectors, to the benefit of all Afghan women and girls.

# KEY FACTS AND FIGURES

## I. Gender-based violence

A 2018 SURVEY<sup>1</sup> ON INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE SHOWED THAT OUT OF WOMEN AGED BETWEEN 15-49...



**50.8%** nationwide had experienced such acts at least once in their life.



In some provinces, incidences of violence were significantly higher, with **92%** of women having experience violence at least once in their lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

IN 2023, CHILD MARRIAGE DATA<sup>3</sup> FROM AFGHANISTAN SHOWED...



**28.7%** of women aged 20-24 were married before age 18.



**9.6%** of women aged 20-24 were married before age 15.

STATISTICAL MODELLING<sup>4</sup> SHOWS THE BAN ON AFGHAN GIRLS' EDUCATION AFTER GRADE SIX IS CORRELATED WITH A...



**25%** increase in the rate of child marriage.



**45%** increase in the rate of early childbearing and associated negative inter-generational social and economic consequences.

1. Estimates made in 2017 by the Central Statistics Organization in Kabul are captured in the UN Women Global Database on Violence against Women, available at: <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/asia/afghanistan#1>

2. This was the case in Herat and Ghor provinces: Central Statistics Organization. 2015. Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey. Kabul: Ministry of Public Health.

3. UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund). 2023. *Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey 2022-2023*.

4. UN Women. Forthcoming. Statistical modelling.

5. Ibid.

6. Ground Truth Solutions. 2022. *Protecting and improving healthcare: Community insights from Afghanistan*. Awaaz Afghanistan, WHO. June.

7. 2020 is the most recent year for which data are available. Afghanistan's maternal mortality rate was 620 deaths for every 100,000 live births: WHO. 2022. Maternity Mortality Ratio. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.MMRT?locations=AF>.

## II. Health and reproductive rights

IN 2022...



**10%** women



**23%** men

were able to cover their basic health needs.<sup>6</sup>

Already in 2020, Afghanistan had one of the **highest maternal mortality rates** in the world.<sup>7</sup>



The ban on education for girls and women after primary school is estimated to be associated with an increase of the risk of maternal mortality by at least **50%**.<sup>8</sup>



Approximately, **24,000** women give birth in hard-to-reach places in Afghanistan each month.<sup>9</sup>

A SURVEY CONDUCTED BY BISHNAW IN MARCH 2023 INDICATED THAT...



**68%** of respondents knew at least one woman or girl who had suffered from anxiety or depression.

**8%** of respondents knew at least one woman or girl who had attempted suicide.<sup>10</sup>

## III. Strengthening economic and social rights and empowering girls and women

WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

BETWEEN JUNE 2021 AND THE END OF 2022, EMPLOYMENT RATES DECREASED BY<sup>11</sup>...



**25%** for women



**7%** for men



On average, **more Afghan households have boys working than women working**, demonstrating the gendered nature and impact – on women, boys and girls – of the norms and decrees in place.<sup>12</sup>



IN 2021, ONLY...

**5%** of women had a personal bank account... compared to **15%** of men.<sup>13</sup>

8. UN Women. Forthcoming. Statistical modelling.

9. OCHA. Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023.

10. DROPS. 2023. *Bishnaw survey March 2023: Impact of Taliban restrictions on Afghan women's economic conditions and mental health*.

11. ILO. 2023. *Employment in Afghanistan in 2022: A rapid impact assessment*. ILO Brief, March 2023.

12. The average household in Afghanistan has 6.6 members, of whom 1.6 work, mainly men (1.19). The other working family members comprise adult women (0.15) and children (in practice, mostly boys: 0.23 compared to only 0.03 of girls): UNDP. 2023. *Afghanistan Socio-Economic Outlook 2023*.

13. The World Bank. 2021. *The Global Findex Database 2021: Financial Inclusion, Digital Payments, and Resilience in the Age of COVID-19*.

## ACCESS TO EDUCATION

AS OF APRIL 2023,



**80%** of school-aged girls and young women – **2.5 million people** – were out of school, including a cohort of

**1.1 million** secondary school-aged girls.<sup>14</sup>



**Over 100,000** female university students were banned from education in December 2022.<sup>15</sup>

BETWEEN 2019–2022, PRIMARY SCHOOL ENROLMENT REDUCED BY...



**18%** among boys



**12%** among girls<sup>16</sup>

Economic reasons were cited for primary school absences among...



**66%** of boys



**47%** of girls<sup>17</sup>



**80%** of girls with disabilities are estimated to be unable to attend school.<sup>18</sup>

## IV. Equal participation and leadership

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN AFGHANISTAN BEFORE THE TALIBAN



**26%** of employees in the Afghan civil service.

**9–12%** of top leadership positions across various sectors.<sup>19</sup>

This has decreased to **effectively zero**.



**27%** of seats for women in the lower house of the Afghan Parliament were previously reserved for women.

There are **zero** women in the de facto cabinet.

14. UNESCO. 2023. "Let girls and women in Afghanistan learn!"; as of December 2022, secondary school-aged girls in 21 out of 34 Afghan provinces had no access to education, while there were varying levels of access across the 13 remaining provinces: Education Cluster and UNICEF monitoring data as per OCHA. *Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023*.

15. UNESCO. 2023. "Let girls and women in Afghanistan learn!"

16. UNESCO. Forthcoming.

17. OCHA. 2023. *Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023*.

## V. Women, peace and security agenda



Women only attended **22%** of high-level formal and informal peace talks held between 2005–2020.<sup>20</sup>

MILITARY BUDGETARY ALLOCATION BY DFA<sup>21</sup>

USD 1.1 BN

USD 278.3 M

2021

2023

...representing almost half of all DFA revenues.<sup>22</sup>

## VI. Climate change, migration and digital transformation



Afghan women are **twice as likely** as men to be displaced due to eviction.<sup>23</sup>

IN 2022, THE DIGITAL GENDER GAP IN INTERNET ACCESS SHOWED THAT...



**25%** of Afghan men had Internet access,



compared to **6%** of women.

OF THESE WOMEN,



**9%** were in urban areas.

**2%** were in rural areas.<sup>24</sup>

18. Human Rights Watch(HRW). 2020. "Women with Disabilities Face Systemic Abuse: Barriers, Discrimination in Health Care, Education." News. 27 April.

19. National Statistics and Information Authority of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2021. *Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2020 44*, April, pp. 29–31. Kabul: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

20. Oxfam. 2021. "Leading the Way": Women driving peace and security in Afghanistan, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Yemen. Oxfam Briefing Paper. January.

21. Seerat, R. 2023. "Analyzing the Taliban budget for 2023-24: Prioritizing military spending over citizen welfare". Zan Times. 11 May; Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute. *Military Expenditure Database*. Accessed 21 September 2023.

22. Yawar, M. Y. 2023. "Taliban aim to boost Afghan security forces, anti-aircraft capacity – army chief." Reuters. Asia Pacific. 12 April.

23. UNHCR, UN Women. *Afghanistan Crisis Update*.

24. Nusratty, K. and S. Crabtree. 2023. "Digital Freedom Out of Reach for Most Afghan Women." Gallup Blog. Opinion. 8 March.

## 2021-2023 DECREES CURTAILING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The timeline of the DFA efforts to systematically curtail the rights of Afghanistan's girls and women includes (but is not limited to) the following main developments:

<b>2021</b>	<b>September</b>	Women are banned from playing sports.
		Dissolution of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and replacement with the de facto Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.
		Women government workers are asked to stay home from work.
	<b>November</b>	Women presenters and journalists are prohibited from appearing on television without a full face covering.
	<b>December</b>	Women are required to be accompanied by a <i>mahram</i> (male relative) when travelling distances of over 77 kms.
<b>2022</b>	<b>March</b>	Secondary education for girls is suspended beyond 6th grade.
	<b>May</b>	Women are required to observe "proper hijab", preferably by wearing a burqa or not leaving the home without a reason ("the first and best form of observing hijab").
	<b>August</b>	Women employees of the Ministry of Finance are directed to send a male relative to take their jobs.
	<b>November</b>	Women are prohibited from entering public baths, public parks, gyms, sports clubs and amusement parks.
	<b>December</b>	Afghan women are banned from working for national and international NGOs.
		Girls and women are banned from university education.
<b>2023</b>	<b>April</b>	Afghan women are banned from working for UN entities.
	<b>May</b>	Women doctors are banned from registering for the completion examination for specialization programmes at the de facto Ministry of Public Health.
	<b>July</b>	Beauty salons are ordered to close within one month.
	<b>December</b>	NGOs are banned from working on projects related to awareness-raising, conflict resolution, advocacy and peacebuilding.