



Gender Analysis of the Situation in Afghanistan

September 2022

Introduction

In the year since taking power, the Taliban have systematically adopted a number of restrictive measures undermining women's fundamental human rights, including their [mobility](#), [access to education](#) and [employment](#), and freedom of speech and [expression](#). The Taliban's focus on controlling women's lives, has in fact, been [characterized](#) as "one of the most notable aspects of the de facto administration to date." Coupled with the dire [humanitarian crisis](#), [economic collapse](#), and several [climate-related disasters](#), on the whole, women have significantly less access to food, medical care, employment, and education than a year ago, with no indication that the situation will change in the near future.

In June, the Security Council's 1988 Sanctions Committee [removed](#) two Taliban [education](#) ministers from the [travel ban exemption list](#) over their continued closure of girls secondary schools. In August, exemptions to the travel ban for all remaining Taliban officials [expired](#) due to disagreement amongst Security Council members on whether to further renew them given the Taliban's repressive policies toward [Afghan](#) women. Recently, after some delay, the UN Secretary-General appointed new senior leadership for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Roza Otunbayeva, as Special Representative and Markus Potzel as Deputy Special Representative.

This policy brief draws on the work of the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS)¹ as part of its BISHNAW initiative.² In July³ and August⁴ 2022, DROPS surveyed 4,641 women across 17 provinces regarding their views on the prevailing security conditions as well as their priorities in the context of the ongoing human rights, economic and political crisis.⁵ DROPS further facilitated focus group discussions with 133 women who are participants in existing DROPS Women Peace Circles in 10 provinces to discuss the results of the survey and gain deeper understanding regarding their perspectives.⁶

Women's human rights

"In the past, a woman used to go to the city freely but now she must wear her clothes the way it has been defined by the government, keep distance from others, and if she comes home late, she must be with a chaperone. I don't have a brother or father; how can I have a chaperone? [...] [W]hen we go shopping, we are chased by soldiers, and they talk about our clothes. We should be treated like human beings; not as slaves who do not have any rights, we have the right to live, [but] they do not consider us as half of this society."

– Focus group participant, Jowzjan Province, August 2022

Protecting and promoting their rights continues to be the most important issue for Afghan women, over a year since the Taliban's takeover.⁷ The **rollback of women's human rights is visible in nearly every facet of public and private life** and has resulted in a pervasive sense of fear. Only half of the women surveyed, stated that they could leave their homes with some sense of safety,⁸ which seems to be directly influenced by the restrictiveness with which the Taliban implemented its measures locally.⁹ Young women, in particular, were more likely to express reticence to leave their homes. The Taliban's policies and public statements regarding women's role in public and private life were also perceived as impacting their lives at home; the UN has documented an [increase](#) in domestic violence. Participants emphasized that this increase in domestic violence means that there is "neither security at home or outside."¹⁰ Several focus group participants highlighted that the deteriorating situation for women has led to an increase in [suicides](#). Women surveyed noted that they have heard that the Taliban do not look favourably on women who report instances of domestic violence,¹¹ and, coupled with the restrictions on travelling and lack of access to basic resources, this has trapped women in unbearable situations in which they feel like they cannot "talk or breathe"¹² without the permission of men.

The [directive](#) that women must be accompanied by a chaperone or mahram when traveling outside the home was raised many times by focus group participants as a measure that undermines their basic dignity as humans but also a [fundamental barrier](#) to their ability to access essential medical care, retain employment, and conduct their daily lives.¹³ The effects of this

requirement are compounded by the impact the war has had on the population, not least because of the tens of thousands of men who have been [killed](#) or injured over the last two decades. Participants repeatedly emphasized that many women cannot fulfil the requirement simply because they do not have a male relative who can serve as chaperone.¹⁴ One respondent noted that when she conveyed to the Taliban that she does not have a brother, and that her father is one of the [80%](#) of Afghan adults with a physical or mental [disability](#), the response was “it’s not our problem, it’s yours.”¹⁵

Even when abiding by the Taliban’s policies, women spoke of the uncertainty they faced and the [inconsistency with which local Taliban members enforce such policies](#), providing examples of harassment even when they were following the rules:

“I was going to one of the districts with my brother, they took us out of the car several times and **they [did not believe] that it was my brother. [T]hey said that I should tell the truth, otherwise it won't be good for us.** [We were questioned] for two hours.” – Focus group participant, Diakundi Province, August 2022

Similarly, another respondent shared: “when we go to work, we take our mahrams with us, [but] even then, [the] Taliban don’t trust us and they [send people to check] what we are doing there.”¹⁶

These examples highlight the extent to which it is not only the Taliban’s restrictions on women’s ability to leave their house without a chaperone that is harmful, but the **violence and the *threat of violence used by the Taliban in trying to enforce compliance*** that takes its toll, causing intense mental and psychological stress. Participants noted that if women do not follow the Taliban’s rules, it is the male head of the household who will be [punished](#), which has led to stress and conflict within households.¹⁷ The constant surveillance and harassment of women, even when they are acting in accordance with the Taliban’s own policies, combined with the [disappearances, killings, and other violence](#) targeting women, has led to a climate of fear for women.¹⁸

The zealotry with which the Taliban have sought to control women’s ability to freely travel was highlighted as exemplar of the **Taliban’s preoccupation with controlling women** over any other issue, with one participant noting:

“Instead of dealing with macro security issues, **they are more concerned with restricting women**; the only thing which gives them peace of mind is stopping women if they go somewhere without a chaperone.” – Focus group participant, Balkh Province, August 2022

Another participant summed up the issue, stating that they were being repressed simply because of their gender:

“**The Taliban is only focused on women**, what women do, what they wear, only women are their enemies [...]. **We are guilty of being women.**” – Focus group participant, Jowzjan Province, August 2022

Human security

“**Security means prosperity and comfort and no war. [...] Just because we are not hearing any terrifying voices of gunfire or explosions [does not mean that] we have security. When there is unemployment, poverty and the school gates are closed for girls, this is called insecurity. When I want to leave my house, [...] I can't do that. [...] We cannot say we are safe [when] the fate of our government changed overnight, and along with it our future.**” – Focus group participant, Baghlan Province, August 2022

Although active fighting between the Taliban and the ANDSF ended with the Taliban takeover in August 2021, resulting in an overall decrease in political violence, focus group participants highlighted how the [targeting of civilians](#), which has increased since October 2021, as well as the lack of human security means that **violence and insecurity continues to be a pervasive characteristic of the lives of women in Afghanistan**.

While a slim majority of respondents to the survey reported “improved security” overall, universally, women clarified that security can only be considered as improved when viewing security extremely narrowly.¹⁹ Focus group participants repeatedly emphasized that to them, security is much more than the absence of the obvious markers of war, such as bombings.²⁰ They underlined that since the Taliban took power, its **repressive policies denying women of access to employment, education, and the ability to freely access basic resources, combined with the humanitarian and economic crisis** have resulted in a complete lack of social, economic, psychological and emotional security.²¹

“Security is not possible at all. [...] [What we have in Afghanistan is] **fear and terror, and whether you like it or not, you are forced to give up your rights. Give up your education and give up your freedom to [stay alive].**”
– Focus group participant, Herat Province, August 2022

Women in every focus group raised that unemployment, closure of schools and being prohibited from moving freely were directly contributing to the lack of security.²² The near constant strain of not knowing if they will be able to afford basic needs, such as food, or receive help if faced with a threat, was central to the lack of security felt by women.²³ One participant noted:

“[W]hen there is **unemployment, poverty and the school doors are closed for girls, this is called lack of security.**” – Focus group participant, Baghlan Province, August 2022

Respondents highlighted that the lack of human security was not only fundamentally undermining their own sense of safety, but was a key cause of current violence, specifically emphasizing that much of the current **violence is directly related to the economic crisis**. For instance, women from communities where there is increased robbery and theft identified lack of access to basic resources as the main driver, with one participant noting:

“[A]rmed robbery has increased because of **poverty and hunger which forces people to do anything in order to get food.**” – Focus group participant, Diakundi Province, August 2022

While respondents regularly highlighted how this type of violence is a cause for concern, women also noted that if the economic situation improved, then robbery and theft would reduce. Rather, it is the violence perpetrated by the Taliban against civilians, particularly those perceived as failing to abide by Taliban directives which was highlighted by participants as a far greater threat to their safety and security.²⁴ Participants from every province spoke of killings, disappearances, assault, and harassment by Taliban soldiers, providing anecdotal examples of ways in which women were harmed while undertaking basic tasks, such as travelling to the market or walking in the park.²⁵ Some focus group participants further drew a straight line between the lack of security and the **crackdown on civic space and freedom of expression**.²⁶ One focus group participant noted that anyone perceived as opposing the Taliban is at risk:

“Civil society members and people who [raise their voice against] [...] the Taliban [are at risk of] **targeted killings [...] to keep [them] silent.**” – Focus group participant, Balkh Province, August 2022

Another woman from Bamiyan noted:

“How can we say that security has improved? [T]here was a time when the girls used to raise the voices of **the people to be heard by the government but today, they can't raise their own voice**, today they are staying at home, so we can't say that there is security.” – Focus group participant, Bamiyan Province, August 2022

Women from multiple provinces noted the **threat facing individuals and their families associated with the previous government**, something that has been regularly [documented](#) by the [UN](#) and [civil society](#).

It was clear from the focus groups that beyond these trends, the types of violence that were increasing were often influenced by specific factors at the local level. One such factor was the presence of large populations of certain [ethnic and religious groups](#), as one participant emphasized:

“Target[ed] killings, targeted explosions against the Shia community and the Hazara people show that **security is not equal for all citizens.**” – Focus group participant, Balkh Province, August 2022

Although this violence was carried out by ISIL (Da'esh), participants emphasized what has also been articulated by the [UN](#), that the Taliban has failed to deter or prevent such attacks.

Recommendations

- The Security Council must state its unequivocal support for the protection and promotion of the full range of women's human rights in accordance with international human rights law; swiftly and publicly condemn the adoption of regressive policies that undermine those rights, whenever they occur; and express unwavering solidarity and support

for the work of women human rights defenders, peacebuilders, journalists, and civil society representatives, and hold perpetrators accountable for any violation of these rights.

- The Security Council must demand the Taliban immediately and unconditionally repeal all restrictions on women's rights, particularly related to restrictions on women's freedom of movement, access to employment, and access to education and respect the full spectrum of women's rights in accordance with obligations under international law.
- The Security Council must reinforce the importance of UNAMA having the resources and political support to fully implement its robust mandate, including in regard to promoting, protecting and advocating for human rights, including women's rights, and gender equality.
- Senior UN leaders, including within UNAMA, must be guided by core human rights principles and a commitment to gender equality, in all their work, and further, ensure that quarterly reporting and all briefings to the Security Council include clear and detailed analysis of all violations of human rights, especially the rights of women, girls and marginalized communities, trends and patterns of gender-based violence, and efforts to support women's full, equal and meaningful participation in all peace and political processes. Regular consultation with diverse Afghan women civil society is imperative.
- The international community must ensure that progress in Afghanistan is measured using metrics that are holistic and take into account removal of discriminatory policies targeting women and girls; participation of women in governance and peace and political processes; and the implementation of measures to reduce poverty and hunger, including particularly for women-headed households, as well as gender-based violence.

¹ The Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS) is an interdisciplinary and independent think-tank based in Kabul that conducts evidenced-based research, policy trainings and advocacy.

² BISHNAW, which translates to "listen" in *Dari*, is a digital initiative developed by DROPS that systematically captures Afghan women's opinions at the provincial level on economic, political, social and security issues on a monthly basis which is fed into international Track I discussions to ensure women's opinions are reflected in all policy decisions relating Afghanistan.

³ DROPS, through its BISHNAW initiative, surveyed 2,082 women in July 2022.

⁴ DROPS, through its BISHNAW initiative, surveyed 2,559 women in August 2022.

⁵ DROPS, through its BISHNAW initiative, surveyed women located in Balkh, Bamiyan, Badghis, Baghlan, Daikundi, Farah, Faryab, Helmand, Herat, Jowzjan, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunar, Nangarhar, Panjsher, Paktika and Takhar.

⁶ DROPS, through its BISHNAW initiative, facilitated focus group discussions with DROPS Women Peace Circles in Balkh, Bamiyan, Baghlan, Daikundi, Farah, Faryab, Jowzjan, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunar, Nangarhar, Panjsher, Paktika and Takhar.

⁷ BISHNAW, July 2022.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ BISHNAW, Focus Group Discussion with DROPS Women Peace Circle in Daikundi, August 2022.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ BISHNAW, Focus Group Discussion with DROPS Women Peace Circle in Bamiyan, August 2022.

¹² BISHNAW, Focus Group Discussion with DROPS Women Peace Circle in Herat, August 2022.

¹³ BISHNAW, Focus Group Discussion with DROPS Women Peace Circle in Baghlan, Balkh, Bamiyan, Daikundi, Farah, Faryab, Herat, Jowzjan, Kandhar, and Paktia, August 2022.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ BISHNAW, Focus Group Discussion with DROPS Women Peace Circle in Baghlan, August 2022.

¹⁶ BISHNAW, Focus Group Discussion with DROPS Women Peace Circle in Bamiyan, August 2022.

¹⁷ BISHNAW, Focus Group Discussion with DROPS Women Peace Circle in Daikundi, August 2022.

¹⁸ BISHNAW, Focus Group Discussion with DROPS Women Peace Circle in Baghlan, Balkh, Bamiyan, Daikundi, Farah, Faryab, Herat, Jowzjan, Kandhar, and Paktia, August 2022.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ BISHNAW, Focus Group Discussion with DROPS Women Peace Circle in Baghlan, Balkh, Daikundi, Herat, August 2022.