

ARTICLE 13

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in other areas of economic and social life in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the same rights, in particular:

- a. The right to family benefits;
- b. The right to bank loans, mortgages and other forms of financial credit;
- c. The right to participate in recreational activities, sports and all aspects of cultural life.



“It’s like having a flower, or a rose. You water it and keep it at home for yourself, to look at it and smell it. It [a woman] is not supposed to be taken out of the house to be smelled.”

—Syed Ghaisuddin, Taliban Minister of Education, on why women must not leave their homes¹

“It’s a magical place to go because you see families laughing and picnicking and enjoying themselves. And that’s what the Taliban have just taken away—the ability of families to enjoy a day out together, with the women in the family being part of that.”

—Heather Barr, Human Rights Watch, on the Taliban banning women from parks²

“[I] miss sports almost as if it is one of my children. From time to time, I go to where I’ve concealed my mementoes. My tears flow as I look at my appreciation letters, cups and medals.”

—Afghan woman member of the national ping-pong team who is now denied the ability to compete by the Taliban³

Introduction

Article 13 of CEDAW addresses the elimination of discrimination against women in the economic and social spheres. It obligates States Parties to ensure that women enjoy equal rights with men in areas such as access to family benefits, financial services—including bank loans and mortgages—and participation in cultural and recreational activities,

including sports. Article 13 underscores the importance of guaranteeing women equal access to resources and opportunities that enable their full participation in public life.

By affirming women’s rights in both formal and informal sectors of social and economic life, Article 13 reinforces the broader objectives of CEDAW and complements provisions related to education,

employment, health, political participation, and private life. Its core principle lies in ensuring that women are not disadvantaged or excluded based on gender, thereby promoting the full realization and indivisibility of human rights.⁴

During the Republic period, Afghan women and older girls, particularly those living in urban areas, experienced increased gains and freedoms in their economic lives. Women and girls—particularly in urban areas—also experienced notable growth in social freedoms, including greater autonomy in mobility and personal expression. Freedom of movement was a central element of women’s public participation and social engagement.

Urban women were more likely to navigate public spaces independently and exercise choice in matters such as dress, often with less reliance on male guardianship or mahram⁵ accompaniment. In contrast, women and girls in rural areas continued to face significant restrictions rooted in conservative customs and patriarchal norms. Despite national legal protections guaranteeing freedom of movement regardless of gender—including for domestic and international travel, emigration, and repatriation—rural women frequently required male permission for routine activities and were expected to be accompanied by a mahram. The requirement to wear the hijab or burqa also remained more strictly enforced in rural regions, where traditional gender roles persisted with greater intensity.⁶

The divergence between urban and rural experiences underscores the uneven impact of legal and social reforms across geographic and socio-cultural contexts in Afghanistan. While legal frameworks under the Republic formally upheld women’s right to movement, the extent to which these rights were realized in practice varied considerably, shaped by localized interpretations of gender norms and community expectations.^{7,8}

Bathhouses, or *hammams*, hold cultural and practical significance in Afghan society, functioning as gender-segregated spaces used for both hygiene and social interaction. For many Afghan households, particularly those lacking access to adequate home heating or water-heating infrastructure, bathhouses provided essential facilities—especially during the winter months—where women could bathe in a warm environment.

Beyond their hygienic function, bathhouses served as important communal spaces for women and girls, offering a rare environment free from male oversight where they could relax, socialize, and foster interpersonal connections.⁹ These spaces also played a central role in women’s participation in social and cultural life, including the female-only components of weddings and religious celebrations. Moreover, bathhouses enabled women to fulfill religious obligations under Islamic law, including ritual purification after menstruation, childbirth, and sexual activity. As such, bathhouses represented not only a practical space for health and hygiene, but also key sites of female sociability, cultural expression, and religious observance in Afghanistan.¹⁰

Public parks and picnic areas have long held cultural and social significance in Afghanistan, serving as cherished communal spaces for leisure and familial gatherings. For women and girls in particular, these environments offered a rare and valued opportunity to participate in public life within a socially acceptable framework. During occasions such as the spring holiday of Nowruz, parks became important sites for socialization, where women and girls could engage in family celebrations, interact with peers, and experience a degree of freedom not typically available in other public settings. These spaces allowed women and girls to read, sing, and express themselves in a relaxed atmosphere, often free from the threat of harassment or social scrutiny. As such, parks functioned not only as recreational sites but also as important arenas for women’s and girls’ presence in public life, providing a measure of visibility and autonomy within a context of prevailing gender restrictions.¹¹

In certain urban areas of Afghanistan, particularly in Kabul, cafés and restaurants functioned as important social spaces where women and girls could engage in leisure and social interaction with relative freedom. These venues provided environments in which women and older girls could associate with male peers without the immediate threat of social censure or punitive consequences. In some instances, women and older girls felt sufficiently at ease to remove their hijab, reflecting a temporary suspension of normative gender expectations.

Beyond their role as spaces for relaxation, cafés also served as informal hubs for youth and women’s civic engagement, fostering dialogue, networking, and forms of cultural expression that challenged dominant patriarchal and conservative norms. These

settings became symbolic sites of resistance, where women and girls asserted autonomy and negotiated their identities within an increasingly restrictive socio-political context. The significance of such spaces was frequently documented and expressed through social media, where urban Afghan women and older girls highlighted the role of cafés in supporting female independence, self-expression, and community formation.¹²

Before the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, women working in offices and female entrepreneurship in Afghanistan had been on the rise. By 2020, women were active in professional offices and the workforce. Women made up 21 percent of all Afghan civil servants and held 16 percent of managerial positions. Women comprised 6 percent of middle and senior management positions. Sixty-eight women were members of the national parliament (27 percent of parliament), with 9 holding deputy-minister or minister positions. In 2020, there were 280 women judges, more than 500 women prosecutors, and 21 percent of the defense counsel were women. There were more than 1500 women in the armed forces, and more than 3100 in the police forces. Women comprised nearly half of the medical profession and were prominent in the media and airline industries.¹³ A 2020 survey conducted by the Afghanistan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry found that "26 percent of the 2,471 formal/licensed businesses owned and run by women were registered between the years 2017-2020," with half of these entities in "non-traditional sectors for women."¹⁴ Additionally, the survey reported that women owned and ran over 56,000 informal businesses throughout the country that generated over 130,000 jobs.¹⁵

Women's participation in Afghanistan's traditionally male-dominated service industry steadily increased, especially in urban areas. Women began working as baristas, waitstaff, and, in some cases, as owners and managers of cafés and restaurants. These establishments often served as safe spaces for female clientele, fostering a sense of community and autonomy. Despite these advancements, women in the service sector frequently faced harassment, intimidation, and social stigma by individuals and groups opposed to women's public presence and economic independence.¹⁶

Before August 2021, increasing numbers of women and girls were actively engaged in sports, and many Afghan girls' and women's sports teams were

formed. Afghan women achieved international visibility through their involvement in sports. Female athletes represented Afghanistan in various international competitions across a range of disciplines, including basketball, wheelchair basketball, football (soccer), handball, cricket, athletics, cycling, martial arts, and volleyball. Their participation not only demonstrated the expanding role of women in public life but also challenged prevailing gender norms by asserting women's presence in traditionally male-dominated arenas on a global stage.¹⁷

Freedom of Movement

Freedom of movement is essential for Afghan women and girls to engage in economic and social life. Upon returning to power in 2021, the Taliban's official restrictions—such as requirements to wear specific clothing items, being accompanied at all times by a mahram¹⁸ in public, and for taking transport—have significantly limited women and girls' ability to participate in economic and social life.¹⁹ Such measures have been wide-ranging in scope, targeting women and girls' mobility, attire, access to public places and specific services, and independent economic activities. These restrictions have caused significant fear among Afghan women and girls and contributed to their exclusion from the economic and social life and public sphere.

In December 2021, the Taliban banned vehicle owners from giving rides over 72 km to women without a mahram²⁰ and indicated that women who seek to use any transport must wear a hijab.²¹ Subsequent restrictions concerning road transport have further constrained women's mobility. In May 2022, the Taliban stopped issuing women drivers' licenses. They prohibited unaccompanied women from using public transport nationwide on May 29, 2022,²² and banned women from taking taxis without mahrams in Kandahar Province on May 27, 2022²³ and Jawzjan Province on November 27, 2022.²⁴ The Taliban's countrywide ban on issuing driving licenses to women was announced on May 5, 2022.²⁵ In April 2023, the Taliban decreed that the Taxi Drivers' Union of Kandahar city must ensure that no women are allowed to ride inside the car and instead must ride in the vehicle's trunk. If the woman had a mahram with them, he could ride inside the car.²⁶

A woman who was forced to ride in the trunk of a taxi due to Taliban restrictions in Kandahar city recounted her story to journalists:

“It was on the third day of her daughter’s visit that Mahgul, [age] 54, realized they needed to take her to the hospital, as her stomach ache was worsening. So Mahgul, who lives in the Damaan district of Kandahar, set out with her daughter, Rana, and her 4-year-old grandson. It was a hot 15-minute walk to the taxi station. Once there, they couldn’t find a taxi driver willing to take them to the hospital. Finally, one said he’d take them but they had to ride in his vehicle’s trunk. Mahgul, her daughter, and her grandson climbed on board and sat next to a 10-kilogram gas cylinder. A few minutes later, the driver stopped to pick up three more women, who also crammed into the small space, with the weight of the trunk’s hood resting on their backs. ‘We struggled to breathe, our clothes, even my burqa, were soaked in sweat from the intense heat. My daughter clung to the gas cylinder, groaning in pain,’ Mahgul recounted. After 90 minutes, they reached the hospital. While Rana was treated, Mahgul realized she was having a skin reaction as well as heat burns due to travelling for so long in such a confined space in the extreme summer heat of Kandahar. ‘It was extremely hot inside the trunk. We were wearing black hijabs and chadors. The air was completely trapped. My entire body was soaked with sweat, and I felt like I was burning,’ she explains.”²⁷

Taliban authorities use violence against women and girls they perceive as non-compliant with mahram restrictions. Amnesty International and UNAMA reported that women who appear in public without a mahram risk harassment, beatings, and arrest by Taliban members.²⁸ Notably, Taliban enforcement practices are sometimes stricter than the edicts demand.²⁹ For example, local Taliban have told some women that they need a mahram to travel shorter distances than stated in the decree, whereas women in other areas have said the local Taliban does not allow women to move outside their homes without a mahram.³⁰

Women without a mahram are not allowed to move through Taliban checkpoints, even in urgent situations, or when accompanied by other women.³¹ Since August 2023, women in Bamiyan have been prevented from going through Taliban checkpoints unaccompanied by a mahram, and the Taliban

forces women back into their homes if they are not accompanied.³² Taliban actions restricting access to transport without a mahram include preventing women in Kandahar, Sar-e Pol, Jawzjan, Ghor, Baghlan, and Herat Provinces from accessing taxis without a mahram.³³ The Taliban have instructed bus drivers in Kandahar to deny entry to women without a mahram.³⁴

Since March 2022, Taliban policies have prevented women from traveling outside of Afghanistan without both a mahram and a reason deemed legitimate by the Taliban.³⁵ To illustrate, in August 2022, the Taliban banned female students in Kabul from flying abroad without a mahram.³⁶

Logistical difficulties associated with mahram requirements include the fact that the men serving as mahrams must be able to travel, have funds to support the travel of both people, and incur economic costs of lost work opportunities. Additionally, the well-founded fear of enforcement by the Taliban of both women and men has resulted in many women being confined to their homes.³⁷ Single women and women without access to a mahram are locked out of social and public life.³⁸

The Taliban are also making efforts to prohibit older girls and women from going to restaurants and cafes, an important part of female socializing in cities. In Herat, in January 2022, and Takhar, in March 2023, café and coffee shop owners were ordered not to serve older girls or women unless they were with a mahram. In April 2023, the Taliban Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice banned unmarried women entirely from restaurants. In May 2024, the Taliban required couples to show their marriage certificates to allow the wife to eat together in a restaurant.³⁹

A 23-year-old woman engineering student in Kabul, who is now forced out of school by the Taliban, spoke about how Taliban restrictions have made being outside the home and accessing specific social activities in public places difficult:

“We don’t enjoy going out anymore because there are so many restrictions. For example, they tell us where [we should] and where we should not go. They tell us not to go where men are [present] in places like Qargha or Paghman [favorite picnic spots on the outskirts of Kabul]. Both places are restricted for women [on their own] ... This is why I prefer to stay home. About a

month ago, I went to Qargha with my family; we were in the car when the Taliban told us to go to a place where there were no men. It's the same with restaurants. Most of the time, they enforce restrictions so that families must eat in a dark and secluded place inside the restaurant."⁴⁰

The effect of Taliban restrictions directly affects women's and girls' engagement in economic and social spheres. A 2023 MSF report found that some women in Kabul who have tried to ride in shared taxis without a mahram have "sometimes [been] requested to sit in the back seat of the car and cover the cost of all three seats," which can make transport prohibitively expensive.⁴¹

Taliban transport restrictions have had a deleterious effect on women healthcare workers, as they have impeded their ability to engage economically and provide healthcare. In a 2022 report from the Johns Hopkins Center for Public Health and Human Rights and Johns Hopkins Center for Humanitarian Health, 59 percent of surveyed women health workers indicated that they had been stopped and harassed by the Taliban because they did not have a mahram. They reported this harassment had contributed to their "lack of safety" while traveling to and from their healthcare jobs.⁴² Taliban agents have made taxi and bus drivers fearful of transporting unaccompanied women.⁴³ The consequent increase in wait time for transportation, in conjunction with harassment, "sometimes resulted in [women health providers] being late to relieve colleagues or depriving women and children of care."⁴⁴

Despite official Taliban edicts indicating that women 'only' needed a mahram to travel more than 45 miles, some women have reportedly had "to walk long distances to work or...[have been] unable to get to work at all because bus and taxi drivers have been told they are not allowed to pick up single women."⁴⁵

Mahram requirements have also made it difficult for girls to travel to school.⁴⁶ In a 2022 Amnesty International report, a teacher in Kunduz indicated that girls cannot always find a mahram to accompany them on their commute.⁴⁷ A January 2024 report found that mahram restrictions have increased unaccompanied women's risk of harassment and abuse while traveling to receive and pick up humanitarian aid at distribution points.⁴⁸

Taliban restrictions not only limit women's ability to move freely in public but also reduce their access

to specific places and services in social and cultural life, such as public baths. The Taliban closed public baths for women in Balkh Province on December 29, 2021⁴⁹ and in Badghis Province on November 6, 2022.⁵⁰ Then, in November 2022, the Taliban's Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice ordered that women-only bathhouses were "un-Islamic" and ordered all of them to close around the country. The General Directorate of Craftsmen and Trade reported 1,136 public bathhouses countrywide, approximately 20 percent of which were women-only.⁵¹ Public baths were "a critical resource for girls' and women's hygiene, particularly those with specific hygiene needs, such as pregnant or breastfeeding women, children, and young girls during their menstrual cycles."⁵² Poor menstrual hygiene can result in "reproductive and urinary infections, increased spread of infection, and long-term infertility and birth complications."⁵³

In September 2023, in Helmand province, the Taliban Department of Information and Culture informed media outlets not to invite women to their programs without first obtaining their permission. The Department has also warned women and girls against using Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and other social media tools. These edicts were also delivered through Imams in mosques on behalf of Helmand's governor and the Department.⁵⁴ The Taliban banned women and girls from calling radio stations in Khost, Kandahar, Paktia, and Paktika provinces.⁵⁵

Taliban measures threaten to increase gender-based violence and harmful practices and strengthen harmful gendered social norms. Interviewees in a 2022 Amnesty International report indicated that mahram restrictions may increase the rigidity of gender norms, increasing the control that male family members exercise over the movement of female family members and cementing a gendered division of labor within families. Additionally, participants in focus group discussions in a February 2024 report by the Overseas Development Institute noted that in cities, people were now "more inclined towards an earlier age of marriage" for their girls after girls lost the ability to travel alone. Child marriage dramatically decreases girls' ability to participate in social life and limits their opportunities for economic involvement.⁵⁶

Economic Life

Starting on September 11, 2022, the Taliban rolled out a series of decrees that restricted and eventually forbade women from working in offices. Women were instructed to send their male relatives in their place to work in offices, and women were ordered to stay in their homes.⁵⁷

The Taliban's actions and restrictions make it nearly impossible for self-employed women to run their businesses. While the Taliban has not completely shut down all women-owned businesses,⁵⁸ their restrictions have both indirectly and directly created a hostile environment for self-employed women to carry out economic activities. Taliban policies have targeted self-employed women's economic activities and seek to limit women's ability to participate in economic life. The Taliban banned women's beauty parlors around the country; closed down women-run bakeries in Kabul in December 2022;⁵⁹ forbade female tailors in central Daikundi Province⁶⁰ from sewing men's clothes and interacting with men either as customers or employers in November 2022;⁶¹ closed women-run dressmaking shops in Kabul, telling their owners to "work from home" in November 2022; and shut down five women-run cafes in Herat city in November 2024.⁶² In October 2023 in Faryab Province, the Taliban ordered private videography/photography companies not to hire female employees for work at wedding ceremonies, ensuring no images of uncovered females could be taken.⁶³

95 percent of Afghan women have no access to formal banking, credit, or financial services.⁶⁴ The Taliban have ordered gender segregated banking services in several provinces.⁶⁵ For example, in March 2023, in Balkh province, the Taliban segregated banking services based on gender.⁶⁶ In Herat, women coming to the bank are searched by male guards and then must wait in a dark room, full of old files, with no electricity, to be called for their turn to see a bank teller.⁶⁷

Micro-credit programs funded by external donors for Afghan women exist. However, their reach is limited. A 2024 study by UNDP found that only 2 percent of women surveyed had ever received a loan from formal or micro-credit financial services, and most women received personal informal loans from family, friends, and other businesses.⁶⁸

The Taliban's violation of women's right to movement has limited women and girls' access to markets and basic services. In 2023, the OCHA-coordinated Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment surveys found that only 27 percent of women and girls in male-headed households said that they could travel to markets alone,⁶⁹ a 21 percent decline from 2021.⁷⁰ Women in rural areas had even lower unaccompanied access to markets, with only 14 percent reporting market access.⁷¹

Mobility restrictions on women and men buyers and sellers have limited women's access to markets⁷² by erecting practical and financial barriers.⁷³ For example, multiple female IDPs in the Barikab settlement near Kabul⁷⁴ said they were forced to rely on male relatives to buy their business supplies or sell their products at Kabul and Qarabagh markets. The women also reported difficulties negotiating contracts for their businesses.⁷⁵ In Majboor Abad, an informal settlement of Afghan returnees from Pakistan outside of the city of Jalalabad (Nangahar province), where women are subjected to fewer mobility restrictions, women business owners are nonetheless wary of the Taliban deciding they are coming too often or for no good reason to the market and determining they are engaging in "inappropriate behavior."⁷⁶

The Taliban has taken direct action to limit women's self-generated economic activities. They closed women's tailoring shops throughout Mazar-i-Sharif city (Balkh province) in October 2023, declaring that the women tailors could only operate in the Noor Market in an area they designated only for women.⁷⁷ The Taliban also ordered at least 30 female shopkeepers at the City Walk market in Mazar-i-Sharif to close their shops in January 2023.⁷⁸ The shops were allegedly shut down by the Taliban due to women working with men and not wearing the restrictive version of hijabs.⁷⁹ The Taliban opened a women-only market in Balkh province in March 2023, but female vendors said that its distant location made it difficult to attract enough customers to make a profit.⁸⁰ Some women shopkeepers in the women-only market had to close their shops due to the lack of sales.⁸¹

To illustrate, a woman tailor in Kabul spoke about how Taliban restrictions have negatively affected her business:

"The mass arrests of women under the Taliban's pretext of an 'improper hijab' is not the only fear

that Parisa has to deal with every morning when she leaves her home for work. The 37-year-old sits idly behind the desk in her shop with no customers. Since the Taliban crackdown on women's clothing began in January, Parisa says her days mostly pass like this because fewer girls or women are leaving their homes. The mother-of-three has been selling women's accessories in a Kabul shopping center for four years. 'These imposed restrictions completely prohibit women and girls from going outside. Their families don't allow them to go out,' she says. 'There are no sales. We are paying the business rent, electricity, and water bills from our own pockets... If it continues like this, I'll have no choice but to close the shop. But this shop is my only source of income, which the Taliban are now taking away from me with their restrictions. I don't know what to do,' she says. 'Women are now completely excluded from society. They used to at least go out shopping, but now they are not even able to do even that. There is no one listening to us.'"⁸²

Additionally, widespread harassment and intimidation from Taliban police and from some male shop owners has led to a decrease in women-run businesses.⁸³ Religious police in Lashkar Gah city in Helmand Province routinely keep the women's market under surveillance, seeking to catch women who are shopping alone. They then "subject these women and girls to humiliation, insult, and mistreatment."⁸⁴ Taliban authorities have also told market vendors to prevent women from entering their shops.⁸⁵ In September 2022, authorities detained and beat shopkeepers at a women's market in Kandahar that allowed women into their shops.⁸⁶ The Taliban closed shops in Mazar-e-Sharif in October 2022 for selling items to women not wearing Taliban-sanctioned hijabs.⁸⁷ Additionally, Taliban religious police are "regularly inspecting CCTV cameras in women-owned businesses in Herat city to enforce strict hijab requirements."⁸⁸

The impacts of Taliban restrictions on women's ability to pursue self-employed economic activities are significant. Around 29 percent of the 117 women-owned firms surveyed for a March 2024 World Bank report indicated that they were permanently or temporarily closed, "a significant disparity compared to surveyed men-owned firms."⁸⁹ The report found their closure was directly related to the Taliban's restrictions on their economic activities.⁹⁰ Additionally, in comparison to men-

owned businesses, women-owned firms reported a significant deterioration of their security at work.⁹¹

Freedom of Expression in Dress and Appearance

Taliban policies requiring women and girls to wear hijabs or other specific clothing items in public settings also inhibit their freedom of movement and freedom of expression. On May 7, 2022, Taliban authorities ordered Afghan women and girls of "reproductive age" to wear "proper hijab" and cover all parts of their face besides their eyes in the presence of unrelated men.⁹² The Taliban stated that "the best way to observe hijab is to not go out unless it's necessary."⁹³ In some locales, the Taliban imposed stricter clothing requirements. In January 2024, the Taliban ordered girls and women to wear burqas in Paktia province and black hijabs, face masks, and gloves in Farah province, and prohibited girls and women from wearing white pants and shoes in Logar province, and warned that those who ignore the orders will face harsh consequences.⁹⁴ Even women and girls traveling with a mahram have been subjected to harassment from Taliban authorities. Religious police have reportedly "employed loudspeakers from moving vehicles or within crowds to critique women and their mahram, focusing on elements such as clothing choices, hijab styles and shoe colors."⁹⁵ In November 2022, the Taliban ordered male tailors in central Daikundi province to stop taking measurements for and making women's clothing.⁹⁶ In November 2023, the Taliban ordered male tailors in Herat province to stop making women's clothing.⁹⁷

Women and girls have also faced violence and repression, including arbitrary arrest or detention, threats, beatings, torture, and inhuman treatment⁹⁸ from the Taliban for appearing in public without Taliban restrictions reflected in their dress. In November 2021, when clothing restrictions were not perceived as compulsory, a woman in Takhar Province⁹⁹ was "beaten with an iron rod by a Taliban agent at a checkpoint for not wearing a black niqab or a burka."¹⁰⁰ On July 17, 2023, Taliban authorities in Herat province told taxi drivers and three-wheeler operators that "drivers would be detained and imprisoned" for having female passengers who were not wearing a full hijab.¹⁰¹ Since August 26, 2023, women in Bamiyan province have been taken back to their homes by the Taliban from checkpoints if they do not have the required hijab.¹⁰²

Taliban officials in Bamiyan publicly lashed two young women on September 24, 2023, for violating hijab requirements, and assaulted two young women for wearing white shoes.¹⁰³

In January 2024, Taliban authorities escalated their enforcement of clothing and dress restrictions in Kabul, Bamiyan, Baghlan, Balkh, Daikundi, and Kunduz provinces.¹⁰⁴ The UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan verified that many women were “arbitrarily deprived of their liberty” as part of this crackdown, which disproportionately targeted Hazara women and girls.¹⁰⁵ Women and girls were publicly arrested, taken in police vehicles, and detained, where some were subjected to threats, intimidation, and physical violence.¹⁰⁶ Detainees were denied any access to any legal representation and were only released after a male family member agreed that they would follow the Taliban code of dress.¹⁰⁷ Taliban dress restrictions are also being used to regulate how women and girls decorate their bodies. On May 8, 2023, a Taliban official in Kandahar told security agents at inspection checkpoints to interrogate women and girls who were wearing makeup or had henna on their hands.¹⁰⁸

Women report that measures such as the mandatory presence of mahrams and dress code requirements that limit women’s and girls’ freedom of movement and expression make them feel “suffocated, depressed, isolated, and worthless,” and contribute to increased suicidality.¹⁰⁹ Afghan women and girls “now account for three out of every four suicides and suicide attempts in the country.”¹¹⁰ According to a clinical psychologist, individuals arbitrarily deprived of their liberty and or abused, such as victims of the Taliban’s hijab crackdown in January 2024, face “pain and bodily symptoms..., emotional distress, anxiety, fear, and mistrust of other people.”¹¹¹ Measures restricting women’s and girls’ access to gyms, city and national parks, and historic sites where women and girls exercised and were able to move about to mitigate rising depression from Taliban restrictions,¹¹² as well as social isolation from mobility restrictions,¹¹³ threaten to exacerbate this mental health crisis among Afghan women and girls.

The responsibility of women’s male family members for “women’s adherence” to the Taliban’s decrees that restrict women’s and girls’ freedom of movement and expression may also increase male family members’ action to control their female kin’s daily lives. Such dynamics may increase the risk of SGBV and domestic violence.¹¹⁴

Water and Food

Mobility restrictions have affected women’s and girls’ access to water. In 2023, OCHA-coordinated surveys¹¹⁵ found that only 52 percent of women and girls in male-headed households can access a water point on their own, a 24 percent decline from 2021.¹¹⁶ This effect has been even more pronounced in rural areas, with only 39 percent of respondents in these communities reporting that women and girls had unaccompanied access to water.¹¹⁷ Additionally, the Taliban’s closure of public baths has limited Afghan women’s and girls’ ability to access washing facilities¹¹⁸ and blocked a critical resource for women and girls to maintain their hygiene. These impacts are particularly felt by rural women and girls who are less likely to have access to water near or inside their homes.¹¹⁹

Mahram restrictions have also limited women’s and girls’ access to food through requirements in some provinces that women and girls must be accompanied by mahrams when coming outside their homes. Fear of Taliban violence against women, girls, and their mahrams for any perceived infraction has caused many families to limit or prohibit women and girls from traveling outside their houses.¹²⁰ Some interviewees in a 2022 CARE report indicated that “they used to be comfortable going to markets to buy food,” but they now have “anxiety and fear about such movements.” The Taliban restrictions and checkpoints have limited women’s and girls’ travel and led them to outsource food-related outings to male family members.¹²¹

Participation in Sports and Recreation

Taliban actions and restrictions have ended women’s and girls’ access to sports and recreation. In September 2021, the Taliban enacted a sports ban for women and girls.¹²² They barred female athletes from any sports practices, activities, or competitions.¹²³ Taliban restrictions on women’s and girls’ ability to play and exercise have gone beyond those related to formal sports, banning women and girls from gyms and fitness facilities on November 10, 2022.¹²⁴ The Taliban have also banned women and girls from going to city and national parks in Herat,¹²⁵ Kabul,¹²⁶ Faryab, Bamiyan, and Balkh provinces.¹²⁷

The Taliban “announced...[a] ban” on women’s beauty parlors on July 6, 2023.¹²⁸ They forbid

women from eating at restaurants without mahrams in Takhar province on March 15, 2023,¹²⁹ and from eating at “restaurants with gardens or green spaces” in Herat Province on April 10, 2023.¹³⁰

Afghan women traditionally enact the sprinkling of water on their loved one’s graves to keep their memories alive, requiring routine visits and

caretaking.¹³¹ On May 4, 2023, Mawlawi Omar, the head of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in Kandahar, ordered all the provincial departments to prohibit girls and women from going to cemeteries, prohibiting them from even visiting and paying respects to the dead.¹³²

- 1 “Quotes By and About Women in Afghanistan,” U.S. Department of State, November 17, 2001, np. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/6186.htm>.
- 2 Ashifa Kassam, “Taliban ban women from national park in Afghanistan,” *The Guardian*, August 27, 2023, np. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/27/taliban-bans-women-from-national-park-in-afghanistan>.
- 3 Rukhsar Ahmadi, “My tears flow as I look at my medals: a sportswoman mourns her lost career,” *Zan Times*, March 28, 2023, np. <https://zantimes.com/2023/03/28/my-tears-flow-as-i-look-at-my-medals-a-sportswoman-mourns-her-lost-career/>.
- 4 Schulz, Patricia, Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, Beate Rudolf, and Marsha A. Freeman, eds. “The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and its Optional Protocol: A Commentary.”
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