

This edition of the Spotlight on social impact (November 2022 to February 2023) highlights three themes:

- theme 1: access restrictions for women and girls to protection, education, and employability
- theme 2: restrictions on women's social life and public presence
- theme 3: Taliban civil policies and social initiatives

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OVERVIEW

Following their takeover of Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban has introduced a series of restrictive policies aimed at limiting the rights and freedoms of Afghan women and girls (HRW 18/01/2022). Women have since been denied the right to move freely and access education. They face restrictions to work, increasing gender inequality and discrimination and affecting entire families throughout the country.

Besides curtailing women's rights, these policies have severely affected women's ability to earn a living, contributing to financial hardship and limiting their role in the Afghan society more widely (UN Women 15/08/2022). Prior to the takeover, women had become critical breadwinners in Afghan families, especially in women-headed households. As a result, more than 28.3 million people – especially women and children – are currently in dire need of assistance to survive the threat of famine, economic hardship, poverty, and a harsh winter (OCHA 23/01/2023; WHO28/12/2022).

There were three key observations made during the reporting period (November 2022 and February 2023).

First, the Taliban restricted women's recourse to safety from violence. Examples include the closure of protective shelters and the restrictions on women from attending schools and universities (AI 27/07/2022; HRW 22/03/2022). These will leave innumerable women more exposed to violence and abusive relationships and, in the longer term, lead to damaging growth and development prospects for the country as essentially half of its potential workforce will remain uneducated.

Second, the Taliban moved to further limit women's visibility in the public sphere by introducing new restrictive measures, including the closure of gyms, parks and baths to women, affecting their wellbeing and health conditions.

Third, the Taliban adopted a number of civil and social policies, some discriminative against women. For example, the Taliban started relitigating old court cases against new codes that tended to favour husbands and did not seek to actively protect women's rights. They also introduced policies on the right to decide marriage, but while these were theoretically aimed at improving women's agency, they were rarely enforced. The Taliban also attempted to introduce beneficial social policies ensuring

the access of households to coal, a critical fuel for most households in Afghanistan, which instead led to negative unintended consequences during implementation.

About this report

The Spotlight on social impact in Afghanistan identifies themes emerging from information on Afghanistan that have or are likely to have a social impact. The report focuses on issues that influence the daily lives of Afghans and that could have a large, unexamined effect on the humanitarian response. Where possible, considerations for specific groups and locations have been made.

The themes in each report are chosen based on their current or potential impact on people as observed over time. The updates seek to support the humanitarian community's understanding of the groups of people facing challenges in meeting their needs and those most exposed to protection concerns.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis presented in this report is based on the following:

- a secondary data review of published and unpublished information in and on Afghanistan
- the daily monitoring of relevant indicators logged in the ACAPS qualitative database
- discussions with people directly affected by these policies.

The secondary data review and preliminary conversations with Afghans were used to develop an initial list of potential themes, which were then clarified during joint analysis sessions with the ACAPS research team and subject matter experts. Afterwards, a shorter list of themes was selected with consideration to their potential or actual impact on people's daily lives.

LIMITATIONS

There is limited up-to-date independent data on Afghanistan available, and the report builds on relatively new internal databases and networks, limiting the current ability to identify trends over time. While the emphasis on qualitative data makes it difficult to compare or aggregate data, it allows for a more nuanced narrative where the perspectives of the Afghan people are incorporated, and over time, longer-term trends will likely become apparent.

Spotlight on social impact between July-October 2022: recap and update

Theme 1: movement restrictions in Afghanistan

The Mahram requirement has been in effect since August 15, 2021, requiring that women have a male guardian (a Mahram) to traverse a distance of more than 72km. Recent efforts to reform the requirement, such as allowing women to travel with a letter of consent from their guardians, have not succeeded (ACAPS 13/12/2022). As at 17 January 2023, the decision that allowed female healthcare workers to return to work required them to comply with Shari'a law, including the Mahram requirement for travel. The Mahram requirement hinders some female healthcare workers from working and prevents some female patients, particularly those in labour who require midwifery and obstetrics care, from accessing healthcare at all times. Médecins Sans Frontières is currently studying a suspected rise in involuntary home birthing because of the Mahram requirement (Howard and Krishna 08/03/2023).

Theme 2: policy on beggars in Kabul

In 2022, the Taliban introduced a policy aimed at providing state assistance to beggars in Kabul, including financial support, vocational training, medical care, and shelter for children in need. As at March 2023, the Beggar Collecting Committee in Kabul reported gathering more than 29,403 beggars from various parts of the city, with 12,459 (42.37%) women and 13,020 (44.28%) children among them. Out of the 29,403 beggars, 17,759 (60.40%) were considered 'professional' or not eligible for assistance (FDPM Twitter 06/03/2023). Those defined as 'professional' beggars are often in their situation because of poverty and a loss of income, leaving begging as their only means of survival instead of a career choice. Kabul residents reported that the number of beggars is increasing every day and that the policy has not succeeded in eradicating begging; the only difference is that people have started begging from house to house instead of on the streets out of fear of being reprimanded (RFE/RL 23/02/2023).

Theme 3: policy on vendors in Kabul

The Taliban reimplemented the previous Government's policy to centralise and manage street vendors in Kabul, aiming to provide vendors with a designated space to sell their goods. That said, in January 2023, the Taliban ordered hundreds of vendors in Takhar province to close their booths. This was considered an abrupt decision that surprised vendors who had paid their permit fees just days before. Aside from the damage to the livelihoods of the salesmen, the closure also inconvenienced locals who depended on these vendors for their daily necessities. Some vendors claimed that the Taliban acted unfairly and exploited their financial situation by not only taking the permit fees without providing services in return but also leaving them without any place to continue vending (Kabul Now 08/01/2023).



THEME 1: ACCESS RESTRICTIONS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS TO PROTECTION, EDUCATION, AND EMPLOYABILITY

Closure of protection centres and shelters for women and girls

In the first year of their government, the Taliban shut down almost all safe houses and shelters where female victims of gender-based violence (GBV), including abuse, forced marriages, battery, and rape, were seeking refuge after escaping their abusers (AI 27/07/2022). Upon seizing control of Kabul, the group also repurposed the Ministry of Women's Affairs into the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which has since been constantly creating new restrictions concerning women (AI Jazeera 18/09/2021). The move has raised concerns among women's rights advocates, who fear that the Taliban will impose stricter Islamic law and curtail the rights and freedoms of women in the country. The Taliban also eliminated systems that prevented and addressed GBV, such as by discontinuing the specialised courts and prosecution units that enforced the 2009 Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women (OHCHR 17/01/2023). UNAMA documented 87 cases of violence against women and girls from August 2021 to June 2022, including two honour killings on grounds of unacceptable acts. None of these incidents of violence were legally prosecuted (UN Women 15/08/2022). The inability to deliver justice to victims not only compromises their safety but also perpetuates the cycle of GBV and abuse, discouraging victims from seeking help and reporting such cases to authorities.

Impacts

Limited access for women to essential support services

Women who experience violence or abuse are often reluctant to seek help out of fear of retaliation, cultural stigmatisation, or a lack of knowledge about their legal rights. A culturally conservative society such as Afghanistan's accentuates these reluctances, and women's protection centres play a vital role in providing a safe and supportive environment for women to escape abusive situations, alongside access to essential services to help them rebuild their lives (IWPR 11/03/2015). In the immediate wake of the Taliban takeover, the Women for Women organisation reported a daily increase in the number of women seeking refuge at their protection centre, often arriving with severe injuries, such as broken bones and internal damage from severe beatings (NYT 04/09/2021). The closure of these centres prevents victims from receiving the necessary support and services that they need to heal from the trauma of domestic violence. This includes counseling and medical care, which are essential for helping women to cope with the emotional and physical effects of abuse (HAWCA 07/05/2016). Before the closure, the protection centres also used to provide a range of services, including

advice on legal proceedings, legal counselling, representation in court, assistance with filing legal documents, training and development sessions, and many more vital services to victims of violence (IDLO 25/06/2014). Although the system had its flaws, it was able to assist and support numerous women in Afghanistan every year to navigate the complex legal system, assert their legal rights, and seek justice (AI 06/12/2021). Upon the closure of these centres, women are likely to feel trapped and unable to leave their abuser, putting them at risk of further abuse.

Homelessness

The closure of women's protection centres has resulted in a lack of secure accommodation options for them (AI 27/07/2022). Victims of domestic violence, rape, or forced marriage have become trapped and are unable to leave their abusers as they face no alternative solutions. Survivors who flee their homes are often not welcomed back by their families and can become victims of 'honour killings'. After the closure of the centres, some women were sent back to their families, sometimes with a written assurance from their abusers (with no follow-up guarantee) that they will not mistreat the women again (RFE/RL 26/09/2021). Others who did not have anywhere to go were sent to prison (TNH 20/04/2022). The fear of returning to their abusers, combined with a lack of safe and affordable housing options, leaves these women in a precarious situation and at heightened risk of homelessness and continued abuse. They are unable to move and earn money without the guardianship of men. They are at risk of further harm, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, and post-traumatic stress. Through these policy choices, Afghanistan is creating a new and precarious community of citizens trapped in desperate situations from which they are unable to escape.

Disrupted coordination with Jirgas

In some parts of Afghanistan, local authorities rely on traditional dispute resolution techniques, such as the assignment of shuras and jirgas (tribal councils or elders), to avoid the prolonged legal proceedings and expensive legal fees associated with the formal court system or as an alternative to the lack of court in their districts (USIP 21/04/2006; DW 15/03/2017). Before the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, there was a well-defined distinction in the type of cases where jirgas and shuras were involved. These tribal elders often resolved civil law cases, such as those pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and land (USIP 16/02/2010; CR 01/06/2018). In recent years, they have increasingly been handling criminal cases, including murder, injury, and robbery (UNAMA 01/12/2013; AIHRC 03/2019).

The protection centres used to work closely with jirgas to ensure that women's rights were upheld and that their voices were heard (VOA 10/12/2021). The collaboration aimed to protect and advance women's rights, whether in traditional or formal justice systems, and provide legal advice and support to the jirgas, helping them make informed decisions based on the relevant laws and regulations (IDLO 25/06/2014).



This collaboration was crucial in promoting gender equality and improving access to justice for women, much of which has disappeared under the Taliban, resulting in a shift away from these dispute resolution mechanisms and leading to a deterioration of women's rights and legal protections in the country.

Education ban for women and girls

Upon taking control of Kabul, the Taliban stopped girls from attending school past the sixth grade. In March 2022, the Taliban were expected to reopen all schools in Afghanistan, ending the seven-month de facto ban on girls from attending secondary school. Instead, they reversed their decision, citing the need for policies that adhered to "Islamic law and Afghan culture" before allowing girls' schools to resume operations (HRW 22/03/2022).

The people of Afghanistan, the international community, and human rights organisations met the ban with widespread condemnation. In August 2022, UNICEF calculated that the deprivation of education for girls was leading to a loss of at least USD 500 million for the Afghan economy (UNICEF 14/08/2022). The Secretary General of Amnesty International has stated that they considered the ban discriminatory and unjust (AI 14/10/2021).

In December 2022, the Taliban officially declared that all girls were banned from attending any public and private schools and universities, making Afghanistan the only country worldwide with such restrictions (WFP 24/01/2023; BBC 21/12/2022; Hafiz Ziaullah Hashemi Twitter 20/12/2022). The closure of schools and universities for girls has created an uncertain future for many students and their families. The lack of clarity on when these schools and universities will reopen has left many students in limbo and uncertain about their future educational opportunities.

In January 2023, the Taliban announced that girls up to the sixth grade (aged 12 and under) would be allowed to attend school in accordance with Islamic values in the new academic year due to start in March (Al Jazeera 23/03/2023). That said, they did not commit to reopening schools for girls above the sixth grade and for female university students (Gawharshad Media Twitter 09/01/2023). On the first day of the academic year (22 March), girls up to the sixth grade started attending school again (RFE/RL 05/03/2023; BBC 07/03/2023). Secondary and university students remained out of school, including many who had already missed significant amounts of schooling because of previous restrictions including COVID-19 rendering them unable to pursue their education further. While many attribute the Taliban's decision to a strict adherence with an interpretation of religious dogma, women's rights activists say the Taliban's growing limitations on women are aimed at preventing them from assembling to coordinate resistance against the ruling regime (The News 14/11/2022; Huff Post 14/03/2023; Jurist 11/02/2022).

Impacts

Gender inequality

The Taliban's decision to deny girls and women access to educational opportunities limits their overall potential and reinforces discriminatory customs within Afghan society. Achieving gender equality and ending poverty requires providing all individuals with access to quality education and opportunities throughout their lives (UNESCO 24/01/2023).

From essentially zero in 2001, the number of girls enrolled in primary education surged to 2.5 million in 2018, narrowing down the gender gap at the primary education level to a female-to-male ratio of 40:60. Similarly, the number of women in higher education grew twentyfold, from 5,000 in 2001 to over 90,000 in 2018. The literacy rate among women also doubled from 17% in 2001 to 30% in 2018 for all age groups combined (WB accessed 24/10/2022; UNESCO 10/09/2021).

Education disruption risks progress towards gender equality and further entrenches traditional gender disparities, reinforcing patriarchal norms that view women as inferior citizens whose roles should be limited to household chores. While staying at home, women and girls likely experience difficulties in reattending school or rejoining education, resulting in long-term consequences for their economic and social empowerment. This could perpetuate a cycle of poverty and inequality and have knock-on economic impacts by reducing the number of workers in critical sectors, such as education, healthcare, and social services (WB accessed 04/04/2023).

"My aspiration was to become an honourable and truthful doctor willing to sacrifice some material benefits to help others. I had a fervour for serving my community and desired to make a constructive difference in people's lives. But I am concerned that the interruption in my studies caused by COVID-19 and ensuing school closures have resulted in my forgetting a significant portion of what I had learnt in school. I fear that this may make it challenging for me to catch up once schools reopen" (ACAPS discussions with Afghan high school student 20/02/2023).

Vulnerability to protection threats

Schools and universities equip girls with knowledge about their rights, the resources available to them, and the necessary skills to make informed choices about their lives. Education can help reduce their vulnerability to exploitation, abuse, and violence (WB accessed 10/02/2022). Research indicates that "when girls learn how to read, write and do sums, they lead longer,

healthier lives. They are much less likely to become child brides or teenage mums and are also less likely to suffer domestic violence” (The Economist 19/08/2021). As the situation in Afghanistan continues to become more uncertain and volatile and the girls remain kept away from education, there is a potential risk of a rise in violence against women and in the prevalence of child marriage, affecting the health situation of women and girls and limiting their future opportunities (IRC 25/08/2021; UNICEF 12/11/2021; UNFPA 11/02/2021; HRW 04/09/2013).

Disconnection from society and mental health issues

Schools and universities provide an important social network for women and girls. They offer a safe space for girls to build relationships with their peers and to access mentorship and support systems. The closure of these institutions can limit their access to these networks, leading to a loss of social connections and support. The lack of social interaction and engagement can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, which can have a negative impact on their mental wellbeing (WHO accessed 29/02/2023).

“I feel alone and disconnected with the world around me, like I have no sense of purpose and direction. Despite being initially left behind in my studies, I was determined to pursue education and enrolled in a literacy school that allowed people of all ages to learn. Although it was located far from my home, my passion for learning pushed me to walk the distance. My goal was to become a doctor, inspired as I was by a 50-year-old man who graduated from university, but despite my aspirations, I currently feel incapable of fulfilling my dreams. This situation weighs heavily on me, and I long for a way to make a positive contribution to my destitute family’s wellbeing while also fulfilling my own aspirations” (ACAPS discussions with Afghan student 16/02/2023).

On average, one or two women take their own lives daily because of a range of reasons, such as limited opportunities, mental health issues, and societal pressure (UN 01/07/2022). Research conducted with 214 university students in Afghanistan, titled “Mental Health and Suicidality in Afghan Students after the Taliban Takeover in 2021”, found that nearly 70% of the participants experienced clinically significant symptoms of depression, and more than a third (38.6%) reported significant suicidal ideation or behaviour. With insufficient professional healthcare and societal stigma surrounding mental illnesses, many people resort to relying on antidepressants as a form of self-medication, leading them to unknowingly consuming ineffective or dangerous medications (Business Insider 03/10/2021).

Restrictions on female NGO staff members

After taking control of Kabul, the Taliban enacted restrictions against women pursuing work in a variety of sectors, including NGOs and the public sector. Following a period of negotiations, they eventually gave permission for some NGOs to allow their female employees to come back to work – with the condition of complying with certain Islamic values, including wearing a hijab, having gender-segregated offices and transportation, and being accompanied by a Mahram while travelling (HRW 04/10/2021; Reuters 13/09/2021). Negotiations around extending permissions to allow all organisations, including the public sector, were underway when the Taliban declared a new decree on 24 December 2022 banning all female NGO and INGO personnel from fulfilling their duties (UNICEF 03/02/2023). In April 2023, the Taliban expanded their ban on Afghan women working for NGOs to encompass the UN’s mission (UN 04/04/2023). While initially the ban impacted Nangarhar province, almost 3,300 UN staff members, approximately 400 of whom were female employees, refrained from reporting to the office until the Taliban provides clarification regarding their decision (DW 05/04/2023; BBC 05/04/2023).

A snap response study by Gender in Humanitarian Action revealed that after the ban, 75% of the 87 entities surveyed, including the UN, INGOs, national NGOs, and women-led civil service organisations providing humanitarian assistance, reduced or halted their activities. Some vital services, such as food aid, nutrition, healthcare, and primary education, resumed a month later with verbal promises from the Taliban (UN Women 12/01/2023). A follow-up in late March 2023 surveyed 129 respondents, and 30% reported being able to operate, with 31% of female respondents working from home (UN Women 26/03/2023). While this data suggests a stabilising situation, the percentage comes from only three INGOs and women-led organisations, indicating that the ability of women to access certain services remains severely curtailed. According to a study, over 3,000 of the 8,000 people employed by the International Rescue Committee in Afghanistan and over 90% of the medical staff of Médecins Sans Frontières at the maternity hospital in Khost province are women (Essar et al. 27/02/2023). The ban not only reduces the provision and quality of humanitarian services but also increases unemployment rates for women and affects the lives of many families.

Impacts

Inability to meet the specific humanitarian needs of women

Female staff of NGOs have a unique understanding of the cultural, social, and religious context of the community they serve, enabling them to provide more nuanced and effective services for people in need, particularly women and girls. Pre-existing gender segregation and cultural sensitivities have put female responders at the forefront of screening, identifying, and assisting women in need of assistance (AI 12/01/2023). The absence of female staff will



result in a lack of gender sensitivity in the provision of services, resulting in women in need hesitating to seek help. According to the UN, the ban will severely impede NGOs' ability to provide life-saving aid and essential programs to Afghans, particularly services such as pre- and post-natal care and infant care that women exclusively provide. Pregnant women and infants will be left without access to healthcare, resulting in preventable deaths (UN 27/12/2022; STC 27/12/2022).

Female staff members of NGOs often provide a safe space for women to share their experiences of violence or discrimination (IRC 25/08/2021). Victims often feel more comfortable speaking with a woman than with a man. This implies that if women who experience violence or discrimination cannot access secure and confidential spaces to share their issues and receive prompt support and assistance, they may lose confidence in the system and become more discouraged to seek help or report incidents of violence. This can normalise violence against women, leading it to be perceived as an accepted part of culture or society, which not only increases the number of unreported cases and incidents of violence but also perpetuates the problem.

Negative impact on gender-sensitive programming and the effectiveness of response projects

Banning women from working in NGOs not only affects the implementation of gender-specific projects but also limits the inclusivity and effectiveness of the response of the organisation. Women are an essential part of humanitarian operations; they bring their specific perspectives, understanding, and experiences essential to the implementation of programmes that meet the needs of diverse communities and gender groups (CARE 16/01/2023). The ban on female staff affects the effectiveness and relevance of NGOs, resulting in a narrow focus and limited understanding of the needs of affected populations.

The monitoring and evaluation of NGO projects is crucial to ensuring the effective delivery of services. Many NGOs receive funding from donors and government organisations that require strict monitoring and evaluation policies. In Afghanistan's conservative society, women have access to populations that men cannot reach (UK Parliament 19/01/2023). Without female staff, NGOs may not be able to monitor the progress of gender-specific projects, such as projects focused on children where mothers are essential interlocutors (UN Women 08/02/2023).

The absence of female staff for NGOs can also affect complaint mechanisms. Women and girls may not be willing (or allowed) to speak to male staff and consequently may not be able to file complaints or register problems.

Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the UN focuses on eliminating gender inequality and empowering women and girls worldwide (UN accessed 01/03/2023). The ban on women from working in NGOs will prevent the humanitarian community from achieving this goal in Afghanistan.

THEME 2: RESTRICTIONS ON WOMEN'S SOCIAL LIFE AND PUBLIC PRESENCE

Repeated policies targeting women from accessing schools and universities, public parks, and public baths have severely affected their health and wellbeing, limited their role in the economy, compounded nationwide poverty, and limited civil society's ability to respond to the Taliban's rule. These policies are steadily shrinking the space that women in Afghanistan can inhabit, leading to a stifling situation that is making women disappear from society.

Ban on women from parks and gyms

In early November 2022, the Taliban's Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice banned women and girls from entering any park or gym to prevent people from disregarding gender separation regulations and gender-specific dress codes (Al Jazeera 10/11/2022; VOA 24/12/2022).

Impacts

Decline in women's health and wellbeing

Denying women and girls access to facilities has serious consequences on their health and wellbeing, as it restricts their ability to engage in physical activity and socialise with others.

"As a 58-year-old woman, I am facing the challenges of diabetes, high blood pressure, and stress. My doctors have advised me to walk for at least an hour every day to help alleviate these health issues. In the past, I used to enjoy walking in the park and chatting with other women who also dealt with similar health concerns, including finding good doctors and managing our diets and emotional wellbeing. These conversations had become a source of support and encouragement for us, until the Taliban's ban on women from using the park shattered our routine. Although we hoped that explaining the importance of regular exercise, especially for women like us who are dealing with health issues, would make us an exception, we were disappointed to know that the Taliban's policy applies to all women and girls regardless of their age or health concerns" (ACAPS discussions with woman 12/02/2023).



Detrimental impact on children's physical, mental, and social development

The ban also affects child development, as it is most often women who accompany children to parks. Parks and funfairs have long been a staple of childhood experiences and play an important role in children's development (UNICEF 26/07/2021). These spaces offer a wealth of opportunities for children to learn, grow, and have fun, such as by playing with friends and participating in team-building activities. These interactions can be particularly valuable for children struggling with social skills, as they offer a supportive and inclusive environment in which to practice and improve (Lumiere 15/01/2020). Strong social and emotional skills are critical for future professional success and have a profound impact on a person's overall wellbeing, social progress, happiness, and even longevity (UNESCO 01/03/2018). With less opportunity for interaction and collaboration, children may struggle to develop the social and emotional skills they need to succeed in life.

"My four-year-old grandson is always eager to go to the park, and he often asks me why we haven't been going lately. As much as I'd like to explain the true reason to him, I struggle to find a way to make him understand at his young age" (ACAPS discussions with elderly women 13/02/2023).

Economic impacts

The implementation of the ban could also affect the livelihood opportunities that exist around leisure activities. The ban makes it less attractive for small and medium enterprises, especially those women-owned, to consider operating their businesses. More widely, it affects the growth of the service industry in Afghanistan, with a decrease in the employment created through servicing middle-class consumers enjoying sport or leisure activities. The ban also limits economic growth and impedes further investment in this sector. A cofounder of a major amusement park in Afghanistan, who invested USD 11 million and employs over 250 people, is concerned about the potential closure of the park and its detrimental effect on his investment and his employees' livelihoods (The Guardian 10/11/2022). A shopkeeper selling women's clothes and jewelry at a park also shared with ACAPS that the closure of parks to women has not only affected their sales but also led to damage on the production side, where mostly women were employed to make the clothes (ACAPS discussions with shopkeeper 10/02/2023).

The closure of baths

In January 2022, the Taliban banned women from using bathhouses in several northern provinces of Afghanistan, citing concerns about morality and security (The Guardian 07/01/2022). This ban was later expanded to Kabul in November 2022, resulting in the closure of many bathhouses in the city. In Afghanistan, the use of public baths is a common practice, particularly among women and girls who may not have access to running water and heating facilities in their homes. These public baths serve as a critical resource for women's hygiene, providing them with a safe and clean space to bathe (ICG 23/02/2023; BBC 21/12/2022; The Peninsula 13/11/2022). The ban on public baths has left women and girls with limited options for bathing and hygiene.

Impacts

Negative impact on health and hygiene

The closure of public baths will have far-reaching social and economic impacts on the lives of women in Afghanistan. As per the latest Whole of Afghanistan Assessment, 79% of families stated lacking adequate water supply to fulfill their daily requirements, including for drinking, cooking, bathing, and personal hygiene (REACH 20/09/2022; UNICEF 20/11/2022). Three years of consecutive La Niña weather conditions have also resulted in drought, and record-breaking freezing winters have reached temperatures of -34°C (NASA 29/11/2022; The News Gauge 20/01/2023). These extreme weather conditions have resulted in households not having access to running water.

"Despite the harsh winter conditions, we manage to heat water in the samawar [a traditional water heating stove] and take a shower at home every other week or so. It is undoubtedly challenging, but we make do by gathering papers and other combustible materials to burn on the Samawar to warm up the water. During winter though, the bathroom remains uncomfortably cold, making it difficult to take a shower, especially for our children" (ACAPS discussions with household affected by the closure of public baths 20/02/2023).

A family of 12 (8 of whom were girls and women) shared with ACAPS that they have faced significant difficulties this year as a result of the harsh freezing cold.



“We rely entirely on public water pipes, and [this year] we have experienced three separate incidents of frozen pipes, each lasting over a week. This has made it impossible for us to access water even for cooking, cleaning, or bathing. Even though we have tried to borrow water from our neighbours, managing it for our large family has been a daunting task. To make matters worse, the closure of public baths has left us with no other option but to reduce our bathing frequency” (ACAPS discussions with household affected by the closure of public baths 27/02/2023).

Not accessing public baths is more likely to have a significant impact on the hygiene of certain groups, such as pregnant women, breastfeeding women, children, and young girls during their menstrual cycles. It may also lead to the spread of diseases, as these groups have specific nutritional needs and are more vulnerable to health complications (Sappenfield et al. 17/07/2013; Verywell Health 04/02/2021).

Negative impact on the financial and economic situations of households

The loss of jobs for bath attendants and others employed in the public baths add to the already high levels of unemployment among women in the country, not only resulting in a loss of income for these women but also contributing to wider societal poverty and marginalisation. To scrape by, some of the women who have lost their jobs in the public baths have taken on various low-paying occupations, such as serving as maids, cleaning houses, tailoring, and making handicrafts and food at home. They then rely on their children to sell their products on the streets to make a living (ACAPS discussions with former women’s bath attendants 19/02/2023 and 20/02/2023). This has further consequences on their education.

THEME 3: TALIBAN CIVIL POLICES AND SOCIAL INITIATIVES

The Taliban have defined several new policies theoretically intended to protect women’s rights, such as regarding their consent to marriage and the relitigation of divorce, but these policies are not systematically being implemented or compromise women’s rights granted by the previous Government. The subsidies that the Taliban promised in support of families during the winter months have also been inadequate.

Right to decide in marriage

Following the closure of protection centres and of the department of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW), concerns regarding the limited legal protection and assistance available to women in cases of violence or abuse have increased. To counter

such concerns, in December 2021, the Taliban announced a new decree on women’s rights that gives them the right to decide about their own marriage. It prohibits parents from accepting any money, known as sheerbaha or walwar, in exchange for their daughters, which has been qualified as exploitation and human trafficking (Zabihullah Twitter 03/12/2021). The decree still allows for the traditional Islamic practice of giving a mahr or bridal gift, the money or property a husband gives to his wife as part of the marriage contract (Medium 19/07/2020).

Despite the decree’s intention to safeguard women’s rights and provide protection against forced marriages, enforcing it will not be a straightforward process. There is a rise in child, early, and forced marriages given various factors, such as the economic and humanitarian crisis, limited opportunities for women and girls, and pressure from families and Taliban members (AI 27/07/2022; Global Issues 24/03/2023). It is worth noting that violence against women and these practices were already widespread under the previous Government even when both Shari’a law and a more formal legal framework were in place. The complexity to enforce the law and the inability to provide aid to victims undermine women’s safety and wellbeing.

Relitigation of divorces

The Taliban has decided to revisit cases that were settled during the previous republic Government. Their approach to revisiting cases is driven by the belief that their interpretation of Shari’a law will lead to a more just and fair legal system (TWP 04/03/2023).

This approach has sometimes resulted in the denial of women’s rights and access to justice. Some divorce cases have been overturned, and women’s voices have been silenced. Some decisions have been made in the interest of abusive husbands (VICE News YouTube 13/02/2022). Former judges and lawyers have reported that under the previous Government, ‘one-sided’ divorces were predominantly granted to women seeking to escape abusive or drug-addicted husbands. Since the collapse of that Government in 2021, divorced husbands, especially those with ties to the Taliban, have gained favour in divorce proceedings (TWP 04/03/2023).

The relitigation of divorces and legal separations may damage some families when men reassert their rights over custody of their children without the consent of women (The Guardian 08/09/2021). The lack of any gender-based considerations or support, alongside the complications women are currently facing in terms of engaging with society given wider restrictions around their movements and behaviour, mean that the courts are unlikely to take much consideration of women’s views.



Coal subsidies

In November 2022, the Taliban announced that they would provide a coal subsidy to people at lower prices as a means of providing access to a vital energy source for heating during the cold winters (Bakhtar News 25/11/2022). Afghanistan has struggled for a long time with energy shortages leading to widespread reliance on traditional biomass fuels, such as wood, animal dung, plastics, garbage, and coal (VOA 16/11/2019; Al Jazeera 25/11/2021).

When the Taliban took power, they increased the price of coal per ton to match international market values, likely in an effort to generate more revenue and assert control over the local coal industry (VOA 16/07/2022). Initially, they set the price of coal at USD 90 per ton, but they later raised it to USD 200 and then again to USD 280 per ton (AF Intl 16/07/2022).

These price hikes caused significant financial strain on local businesses and households relying on coal as a primary source of fuel for heating and cooking. Under their new policy in November 2022, the Taliban set the price per ton to AFN 9,000 (approximately USD 100) (Tolo News 26/11/2022). Each household needed to obtain a token for one ton of coal from their assigned Wakil Guzar or district representative and pay a fee of AFN 20 (approximately USD 0.20) for the token besides the AFN 9,000 to cover the government's cost for the coal. Once the token was obtained, recipients were required to visit a specific centre to collect their coal (ACAPS discussions with a Wakil Guzar in Kabul 15/02/2023). This policy was an attempt by the authorities to help those in need while gaining control of the national coal market, which is seen as an important source of income. It nevertheless generated a number of negative unintended consequences, including unemployment among coal sellers, increased health risks, and child labour.

Impacts

Impact on coal sellers in the open market

The policy hit coal sellers hard as they struggled to stay afloat amid price fluctuations in an extremely competitive market. According to a coal seller who spoke with ACAPS, the policy was implemented suddenly and had a negative impact.

“At the beginning of the year, traders had contracted all available coal and exported it out of the country, which led to a surge in the cost of coal within Afghanistan. Consequently, we had to purchase coal from wholesalers at extortionate prices. Before the policy was introduced, we were selling one ton of coal for AFN 15,000, and we had a solid customer base, but procuring the coal at higher costs have prevented us from lowering our prices to match the government's prices, resulting in a sharp decline in our customer base” (ACAPS discussions with households in Kabul 18/02/2023).

The reduction in their customer base means that sellers have to find alternative ways to sustain their livelihoods, with implications for their families' financial stability. The sudden policy change has created uncertainty and instability in the market, making it difficult for coal sellers to plan their future business operations. They may be hesitant to invest in their business or expand their operations from fear of another sudden policy change.

Unaffordability and poor quality of coal

While the lower prices are intended to increase the purchasing power of poor people, allowing them to afford the energy needed for heating, the price (AFN 9,000 per ton) has remained prohibitively expensive for the majority of people in need.

A person who spoke with ACAPS shared that “during this harsh winter season, I came across many households in Kabul that were unable to heat their homes because of the financial constraints tied with fighting to survive in the cold. These families not only lacked the financial ability to afford the coal supplied by the government but also did not have the means to put food on their tables” (ACAPS discussions with households in Kabul 15/02/2023).

Households are also dissatisfied with the low quality of coal being supplied by the government. The coal contains rock and soil, making it difficult to burn effectively. The coal does not have the required quality to be used for heating houses (Tolo News 05/02/2023; ACAPS discussions with households in Kabul 15/02/2023; 8am 31/12/2022). The disappointment and frustration of the Afghan people towards the Taliban's distribution bring to light the difficulties of ensuring access to essential commodities in the country and underscore the importance of quality assurance and fair pricing policies (ACAPS discussions with households in Kabul 17/02/2023).

Pollution and long-term health consequences

While coal may be an affordable and readily available energy source, it is unlikely to improve the lives of ordinary Afghans in the long run. The increased use of coal specifically with low quality can lead to indoor air pollution, particularly when used for cooking and heating in poorly ventilated spaces. It has also led to higher levels of pollution in bigger cities like Kabul (Amu TV 27/11/2022).

The use of coal can have detrimental effects on the health of households, specifically of women and children (WHO 20/01/2022). Among the general population, polluted air can cause respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, leading to increased mortality rates (TKG 26/12/2022; Tolo News 05/02/2023). It will affect not only people's physical health but also their economic wellbeing. The negative impact of coal use on the environment and public health will ultimately lead to increased healthcare costs and reduced productivity.

Child labour and child protection

The expanded use of coal may contribute to an increase in child labour. In Afghanistan, the coal mining industry is known to heavily rely on the labour of children who work in extremely hazardous conditions without adequate protection or safety measures (NPR 31/12/2022). Miners report that mines have become more dangerous because the Taliban do not follow the previous Government's approach of providing engineers to oversee toxic gas monitoring and supplying timber to reinforce tunnels that extend over long distances. Consequently, inexperienced miners unable to detect the warning signs of danger are working in less stable mines, resulting in more precarious situations (NYT 29/03/2022).

This exploitative practice in return for a low daily wage is exposing children to a range of health risks, which may lead to the loss of lives either through exposure to toxic substances or through accidents in mines (AF Intl Twitter 19/11/2022; FP 05/07/2022). Poverty and a lack of education are forcing many families to send their children to work as a means of survival. According to the latest Whole of Afghanistan Assessment, the percentage of Afghan families where a child is employed has increased from 13% in 2021 to 21% in 2022 for households with male heads and from 19% to 29% for those with female heads (REACH 20/09/2022).