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Unseen and Unheard: Women's Struggles in Afghanistan's Ongoing Crisis

Women in Afghanistan are enduring immense suffering. Since the Taliban returned to office, the progress made toward women's rights has been pushed back decades. The Taliban enforced severe restrictions, forcing women into their homes and keeping them from going to public spaces. Women are treated with disrespect, often oppressed by men under the rule of the Taliban. Beyond violating their basic human rights, these restrictions affect household stability, food production, and access to nutrition making women's oppression a central driver of food insecurity across Afghanistan.

The Taliban is a group that emerged in 1994 intending to make Afghanistan an Islamic state with their own intense version of religious laws. Many of their members were former Mujahideen fighters who are now known for their human rights abuses, especially toward women and girls. Under Taliban rule, restrictive gender policies structurally limit women's access to education, employment, healthcare, and food systems (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Shariah is derived from the Quran, the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad, and the interpretations of religious scholars, forming the moral and ethical framework of Islam rather

than a rigid legal code. The Quran guides a path for moral living but does not have a fixed system of laws. Since seizing control of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, the Taliban has forced its own rigid interpretation of Sunni Islam, leading to the breakdown of religious freedom across the country with restrictions disproportionately targeting women. Although the Taliban claims to be implementing Shariah law, many Islamic scholars argue that their policies exceed its boundaries and contradict the long-standing values that were once in place. While some interpretations of the Shariah support women's rights and autonomy, the Taliban's version severely restricts women's freedoms, misusing religion to justify political control.

Following their return to power, the Taliban claimed that women would have “rights within the boundaries of Islamic law.” (Wolf), yet their policies severely restricted women's education, employment, movement, and public presence. In June 2023, Taliban officials further stated that their policies created a “comfortable and prosperous life according to Islamic Shariah” (Wolf), despite clear evidence to the contrary. The Afghan Constitution was suspended, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs was replaced with the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, and women were ordered to remain at home, prohibited from long-distance travel without a mahram, and subjected to strict dress codes. Women accused of violating these rules were arrested, detained, and denied legal representation. These policies allowed institutionalized discrimination, removed women from the public, and established a system of state-enforced control over women's bodies, mobility, and autonomy.

Even before the Taliban's takeover, Afghanistan faced high levels of gender-based discrimination, particularly within intimate partnerships. Under Taliban rule, these conditions have worsened as women's protection centers have shut down, eliminating safe spaces for survivors of abuse. Domestic violence, food and financial dependence, honor killings, and psychological abuse have become normalized within private and public life. Women face not only physical harm but also severe mental and emotional consequences including isolation, loss of autonomy, and social exclusion. As one woman from Nangarhar stated, “The Taliban's rule policy has unfortunately normalized various forms of abuse, including physical, mental, and financial abuse of women” (Ahmadi). This normalization of violence further entrenches women’s vulnerability, reinforcing cycles of poverty, dependence, and social marginalization. Beyond the immediate physical and emotional harm, these restrictions carry profound economic consequences. With only seven percent of Afghan women working outside the household in 2024, limitations on women and girls are projected to cost the Afghan economy nearly $920 million between 2024 and 2026, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UN News). This loss of female participation not only deepens poverty but also weakens household food security and long-term economic stability across Afghanistan.

Healthcare conditions in Afghanistan have significantly worsened under Taliban rule. By September of the previous year, only 17 percent of Afghanistan's World Bank-supported healthcare facilities were fully functional. According to a Human Rights Watch report from May 2021, decades of conflict left widespread unmet needs for contraception, prenatal and postnatal care, cancer treatment, and routine screenings such as mammograms (Lee). Under Taliban enforcement, women's access to healthcare has come close to nonexistent, contributing to severe

maternal and child health consequences. Afghanistan now has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world, and thousands of Afghan women die each year from pregnancy complications, many of which are preventable (UNICEF). With a maternal mortality ratio of 638 deaths per 100,000 live births and a ranking of 169 on the Gender Inequality Index, systematic neglect of women's health limits women's participation in society and undermines population stability (UNICEF). These outcomes not only devastate families but also weaken the nation's workforce, reducing long-term economic productivity, and place additional strain on already fragile food and healthcare systems.

Female employment levels in Afghanistan have sharply declined since the Taliban assumed power in 2021. Women were banned from working in non-governmental organizations, including international aid organizations that previously played a major role in healthcare delivery, education, and humanitarian aid. This sudden exclusion removed a source of income from homes and weakened essential service systems. Banning women from work has also become a significant barrier to poverty reduction, particularly in a country where 96 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Societies that restrict women from the workforce consistently experience higher poverty rates and slower economic growth.

The percentage of women working in Afghanistan has fallen from 11 percent in 2022 to a mere 6 percent in 2024, despite women’s longstanding contributions to economic and agricultural development. Afghan women have historically played vital roles in livestock care, daily processing, crop production, small-scale trade, including exporting goods such as carpets, hides, karakul skins, and wool. Prior to the Taliban's return, women managed an estimated 57,000 small and medium-sized businesses and frequently engaged in self employment including farming and

garment repair to support their families. The restrictions plus the worsening agricultural and livestock conditions have created severe challenges for women farmers. This is especially alarming given that agriculture takes up about 33.48 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product, and women constitute a critical part of the agricultural workforce. By excluding women from both formal employment and agricultural labor, the Taliban has reduced food production, destabilized rural livelihoods, and intensified national food insecurity.

The systematic erosion of women's rights under Taliban has directly intensified food insecurity throughout Afghanistan. Women play a central role in household food production, preparation, and nutritional decision-making, particularly in rural areas where agriculture is the primary source of survival. As women are excluded from employment, education, and agricultural labor, household incomes decline and families lose the ability to grow, purchase, and distribute food. These restrictions weaken household resilience and disrupt national food systems, placing women and children at higher risk of hunger and malnutrition. United Nation agencies report that millions of Afghans currently face acute food insecurity, with female-headed households experiencing disproportionate levels of hunger and nutritional deficiency. Food insecurity in Afghanistan is therefore not solely a result of conflict or economic collapse, but a direct consequence of gender-based restrictions that undermine food production, nutrition, and long-term stability.

Although Afghanistan’s economy recorded modest growth of 2.7 percent in 2023 the first increase since the Taliban's return in 2021 deep and structural economic challenges remain. In the past year, political uncertainty, an ongoing economic crisis, shrinking international aid, and climate disruptions have compounded existing vulnerabilities, limiting the economy’s ability to

regain momentum. Subsistence insecurity worsened in 2024, reversing some gains made in 2023 and unfortunately affected populations, particularly women, internally displaced persons, and returnees (UNDP, 2024). As Afghanistan heavily relies on foreign assistance, reductions in international aid are likely to have a significant impact on humanitarian operations and the delivery of basic services (UNDP, 2024). These economic pressures are reflected in life satisfaction, which has sharply declined from 4.76 in 2010 to 1.28 in 2022, indicating widespread hardship across the population (Data for Afghanistan, 2022). During a visit to an earthquake-affected community in Herat, UNDP Regional Director Kanni Wignaraja emphasized that long-term recovery depends on restoring household and local economies, as families cannot survive indefinitely without stable income, shelter and access to basic necessities (UN News, 2023). Without lifting restrictions on women and supporting inclusive economic participation, Afghanistan's recovery remains fragile and unstable.

As a young teenage girl growing up in the safety and comfort of the United States, learning about the realities Afghan women face has reshaped my understanding of hardship and privilege. Addressing this crisis requires not only accountability but sustained support. One realistic and effective solution is for the international community—particularly the United States and European nations—to strengthen accountability mechanisms by using tools such as the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and the European Union's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime to target Taliban leaders responsible for systematic gender persecution. These efforts should be reinforced through international legal action, including the anticipated cases at the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, where countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Australia, and Canada have announced plans to challenge the Taliban

for gross violations of women's rights under the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. At the same time, accountability alone is not enough. Organizations such as UN Women play a critical role in supporting Afghan women by helping them stay safe, build skills, earn livelihoods, and access essential services. Programs like UN Women's Rebuilding the Women's Movement demonstrate a practical, sustainable approach by funding grassroots women-led organizations across all 34 provinces, preserving safe spaces and empowering over 16,000 women through education, training, and economic support. Additionally institutions like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation can exert moral and religious pressure by publicly challenging Taliban policies that contradict both Islamic values and international human rights norms. By combining legal accountability, targeted sanctions, and sustained investment in women-led initiatives, the international community can move beyond symbolic condemnation and help restore dignity, stability, and opportunity for Afghan women and girls.

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