

# The Erasure of Women

An overview of women's rights under the Taliban:  
Erasure from public life, violence at home and online.

August 15, 2024.

## 1. Executive Summary

Three years after the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021, the situation for women and girls has worsened, with no indication of improvement. The Taliban's discriminatory policies towards women, and their strict implementation, amounts to a deliberate attempt to erase women from public life. These policies have resulted in the systematic exclusion of women from many public spaces in Afghanistan, including education, the work force, and even online. Most significantly, these policies have resulted in gender-based violence and femicide, an absolute erasure from female participation in Afghan life.

Following the Taliban's decision in March 2022 to ban girls from attending school beyond the sixth grade (ages 11-12), and the subsequent ban on women pursuing higher education in December 2022, a [reported](#) 80% of school-aged girls and young women in Afghanistan do not have access to education. Afghanistan is the only country in the world to have banned girls' education.

Between 2020 and 2023, according to the [World Bank](#), women's labour force participation rate fell from 16% to 5%. Afghan women have been restricted in the types of [government](#) positions they are allowed to hold, being banned from working in the civil service, and have been prohibited from working for [NGOs](#). As a result, the health sector, primary education, and limited opportunities in the private sector are the main [fields](#) in which women can find employment. Women also face numerous [challenges](#) hindering their professional growth and meaningful [participation](#) in the workforce, including strict rules on women's mobility without a mahram (male guardian), and [mandatory](#) face covering.

In January 2024, the Taliban initiated a campaign to [arrest](#) women and girls for non-compliance with mandatory hijab rules. Dozens of women and girls were taken into Taliban custody, with many reporting [degrading](#) treatment, [torture](#), and even [rape](#). The arrests led to widespread [fear](#) among Afghan women and girls, and reports of [families](#) preventing women and girls from leaving their houses due to safety concerns, as well as social stigma surrounding women held in Taliban custody.

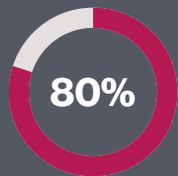
Despite increased restrictions on women's rights, women's protests remain active in Afghanistan. However, over the past three years, the number of outdoor protests sharply decreased, while 'indoor protests' in private spaces has risen, indicating that women are prioritising their safety amidst a wave of Taliban suppression and intimidation of protesters. In 2021, AW records showed that only 12% of women's protests took place indoors, which rose to 51% in 2022, followed by 80% in 2023. By 2024, 94% of all women's protests were taking place indoors. Moreover, AW note that female protesters tend to take increased measures to obscure their identities while protesting indoors, compared with previous years.

While the digital space remains important for providing opportunities for women to raise their voices, interact with the world beyond Afghanistan's borders, and seek educational and work opportunities, social media has also become unsafe, as Afghan women face increased online abuse and harassment.

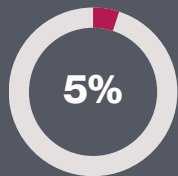
Taliban policies have resulted in a [reported](#) 25% increase in the rate of [child](#) marriage, and a 45% increase in the rate of early childbearing, alongside associated negative inter-generational social and economic consequences. Afghan women are at [risk](#) of experiencing domestic violence, and [stigmatisation](#) of rape survivors puts victims at risk of [incrimination for adultery](#), [detention](#), and even

[forced marriage to their rapist](#). Reports monitored by AW between January 2022 and June 2024 found that at least 840 women and girls were the victims of gender-based violence, many at the hands of the Taliban. Of these women and girls, at least 332 were killed. These figures likely significantly understate the scale of gender-based violence in Afghanistan, as these issues often go unreported, further underscoring the erasure of women and girls from Afghan society.

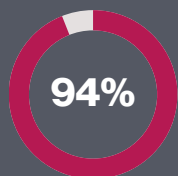
Despite the Taliban's discriminatory policies, and the precarious environment in which women now live in Afghanistan, Afghan women continue to resist the Taliban. They have established [libraries](#), [secret schools](#), and underground [beauty salons](#). Moreover, those in exile have launched campaigns, protests, and newsrooms, giving a voice to those severely suppressed inside the country.



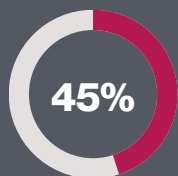
of school-aged girls & young women are not in school.



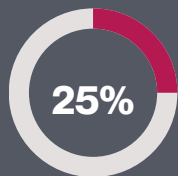
of women were employed in 2023, down from 16% in 2020.



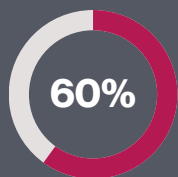
of female journalists in Afghanistan were unemployed by July 2023.



increase in the rate of early childbearing under Taliban rule.



increase in the rate of child marriage under Taliban rule.



of gender-based violence cases recorded by AW were perpetrated by Taliban members.



of cases of sexual violence against women and girls recorded by AW were perpetrated by Taliban members.

**100**

Number of decrees issued by the Taliban on women's rights since August 2021.

**45**

Number of miles (or 72 km) women are allowed to travel without a male guardian.

**463**

Number of active women journalists in Afghanistan in March 2023, down from 1,300 before the takeover.

**115**

Cases of sexual violence against women by Taliban members recorded by AW (Jan 2022 - Jun 2024).

**141**

Women or girls killed due to domestic violence as recorded by AW (Jan 2022 - Jun 2024).

**75**

Cases of GBV involving minors as the victims recorded by AW (Jan 2022 - Jun 2024).

**332**

Women and girls killed as a result of gender-based violence as recorded by AW (Jan 2022 - Jun 2024).

**152**

Women and girls wounded as a result of gender-based violence as recorded by AW (Jan 2022 - Jun 2024).

**287**

Cases of arrest, detention, abduction or forcible disappearance of women and girls as recorded by AW (Jan 2022 - Jul 2024).

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## 2. Introduction

Since returning to power in August 2021, the Taliban have issued [around a hundred](#) decrees on [women's rights](#) in Afghanistan, severely limiting women's access to education, employment, public spaces and services, and the legal and justice system. Women's right to equal participation in [public and political affairs](#), [freedom of expression](#), and [freedom of movement](#) have also been restricted by Taliban edicts, ultimately resulting in the systematic erasure of Afghan women from public life, plunging them into the constraints of domestic life challenged by [poverty](#), increasing rates of [domestic violence](#), and [mental health crises](#).

The deterioration of women's rights under the Taliban has been illustrated by the country ranking lowest on the World Economic Forum's [Global Gender Gap Index in 2022](#) and [2023](#), making Afghanistan, once again, the [worst place in the world to be a woman](#). The UN has also argued that systemic gender oppression under the Taliban is "[so severe and extensive](#)" that it may [constitute](#) a crime against humanity.

Since its establishment in October 2021, Afghan Witness (AW) has collected, recorded and, where possible, verified online reports and claims of violations of women's rights shared on social media or reported by Afghan media. AW's monitoring and monthly assessment of the situation for women and girls in the country shows a steady downward trend over the last two and a half years. This report is intended to be a sample of Taliban restrictions, demonstrative of the systematic erasure of women from Afghan public life over the past three years.

## 3. Erasure of women and girls from education

Since their return to power in 2021, Taliban authorities have restricted women and girls' access to education. The de facto authorities effectively banned girls from education beyond the sixth grade, by only reopening [secondary](#) schools for boys, in line with policies from the group's previous rule in Afghanistan. Women were also barred from [higher education](#), with some exceptions.

Girls above primary school age are permitted to study in madrasas (religious schools), and as of 2023, in some provinces, are reportedly allowed to [study health sciences](#) and attend medical institutes for nursing, midwifery, and dentistry. However, these opportunities appear to be dependent on local authorities' interpretation of Taliban restrictions. In some cases, girls' access to education has been curtailed based on [their age and height](#). Moreover, AW observed that some private educational centres accused of violating Taliban rules were reportedly [shut down](#) for failure to comply.

### **Access to education dependent on local authorities: regional restrictions**

In February 2024, Taliban authorities in [Khost](#) issued an [official](#) letter [banning](#) local media from accepting phone calls from women and girls, and accused local private radio stations of "promoting moral corruption" by broadcasting school lessons or social programmes for girls.

In April 2024, the Taliban [reportedly turned](#) some girls' schools in Takhar into madrasas. Similarly, in

Herat in November 2023, some girls' schools were [allegedly](#) shut down due to the presence of male teachers. On 14 November 2023, Afghanistan International [reported](#) that the Taliban [closed](#) and sealed at least [seven](#) private [schools](#) in Herat,<sup>1</sup> as shown in the image below.

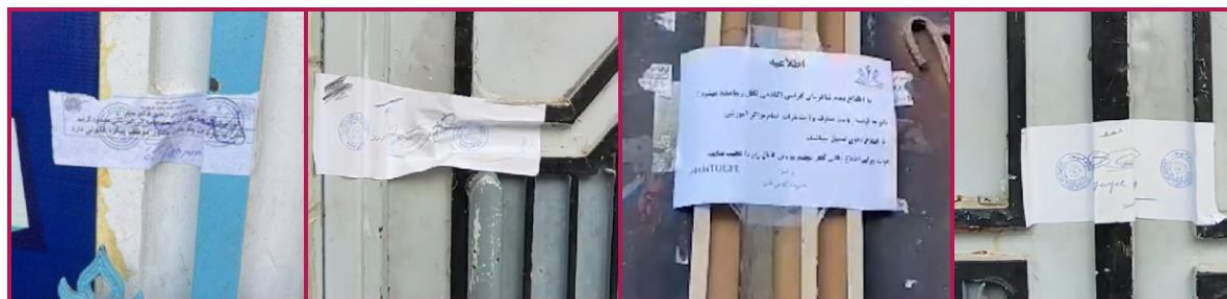


Figure: Official Taliban [seals](#) at the [doors](#) of private educational institutes in Herat.

On 28 January 2023, a letter issued by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) [surfaced](#) on social media, ordering private universities and higher educational institutes not to enrol female applicants in university entrance exams until further notice, adding that violations would result in legal penalties. Despite the prohibition of girls enrolling in university entrance exams, AW was able to verify through local sources that in May 2023, the MoHE distributed entrance exam applications to male and female applicants in five provinces: Faryab, Sar-e Pol, Jowzjan, Balkh, and Samangan.

Moreover, girls' access to higher education via entry examinations often depends on the subject of study and decisions of local Taliban authorities. On 3 May 2023, state-owned Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) [reported](#) that the Ministry of Public Health organised an entrance exam in health sciences for more than 3,000 male and female applicants in Balkh province. [According](#) to the Taliban's Head of Public Health in Balkh, 65% of applicants were female, and more seats had been given to women due to the rising death toll among women in remote villages, where female healthcare providers are scarce. However, in Kandahar, one of the institutes providing training in midwifery and health sciences to women, was closed for a second time in [November 2023](#).<sup>2</sup> In [other instances](#), the Taliban did not allow female medical students to participate in exit exams administered by Afghanistan's Medical Council, which allow medical students to pursue specialisation and gain their medical licence.

In February 2024, the Taliban [announced](#) that women were allowed to enrol in public medical institutes. Previously, in January 2024, the Taliban National Examinations Department [reportedly](#) started the registration of applicants for the recruitment test in health posts, and emphasised that women who do not observe the full coverage required by the Taliban do not have the right to participate in the exam, which was to be held in two separate places segregated by gender, at Kabul University for male applicants, and Ghazanfar Educational Institute for female applicants. AW could not independently verify these claims.

### **Suspension of educational programmes led by international NGOs**

<sup>1</sup> These schools offered English, German and computer lessons. Afghanistan International made no mention of the ages of the girls who attended these schools.

<sup>2</sup> Following the ban on women attending higher education in December 2022, female students in Kandahar were called back to study midwifery and health sciences in [May 2023](#).

According to [Tolo News](#), 178 organisations were running educational programmes across Afghanistan, including 60 foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in 2023. The restrictions on NGO-run educational programmes followed the Taliban's [ban on female NGO workers](#) in December 2022, which triggered international condemnation. At the time, AW analysis revealed that the ban was welcomed by the pro-Taliban community online, who accused women working at those organisations of “espionage” and “spreading immorality.”

In June 2023, Taliban authorities reportedly ordered foreign NGOs and charities to suspend their activities providing education in the country. According to [KabulNow](#), sources from UNICEF, Save the Children, and ACTED confirmed they had been ordered to suspend operations in Sar-e Pol and Faryab provinces. Similar restrictions were previously reported by [Azadi Radio](#) in April 2023, when the Taliban allegedly issued a decree that closed NGO-run schools in Kandahar and Helmand provinces. Despite the ban on girls' secondary education, [Etilaatroz](#) reported that these education centres continued to hold classes in core subjects such as literacy, languages and maths.

### **Silencing advocates for girls' right to education**

A number of claims recorded by AW in 2023 also suggested that the Taliban actively targeted individuals who advocated for women and girls' education. Ismail Mashal, a university [professor](#) and manager of a private university, publicly advocated for women's access to higher education by [distributing books](#) in the [streets](#) to support ongoing education, and [tearing](#) up his degrees on live TV in solidarity with women following the Taliban's ban on women accessing higher education. On 2 February 2023, he was reportedly [arrested](#) and [beaten](#) by Taliban forces; a month later, he was [released](#) on bail, and immediately hospitalised for “vomiting blood and mental health conditions.” He was since reported to be [wheelchair-bound](#) and living in an “unfavourable mental state.”



*Figure: Professor Ismail Mashal distributing books in the streets ([left](#)), available to women ([middle](#)). Following his arrest he was confined to a wheelchair ([right](#)).*

In March 2023, Matiullah Wesa, prominent education activist and founder of PenPath, a civil society movement which actively promotes girls' education in Afghanistan, was also [arrested](#) by Taliban forces for “propaganda against the government.” Wesa was [released](#) from prison in October 2023,



after spending eight months in Taliban custody.

Even small-scale dissent resulted in severe penalties. In November 2023, a civil activist was reportedly [arrested](#) for criticising the Taliban over the closure of girls' schools in a comment on Facebook.

Despite the restrictive environment surrounding learning for women and girls in Afghanistan, limiting their capacity to learn and advance their careers, millions [continue](#) to [seek access](#) by [learning in secret](#), joining [underground educational programmes](#), and applying to [study abroad](#).

#### 4. Erasure of women from the labour force

Shortly after seizing power in August 2021, the Taliban implicitly [banned](#) women from attending their jobs in the civil service,<sup>3</sup> claiming the ban as a “temporary procedure.” Three years later, it remains in place, and in June 2024, the Taliban [announced](#) that all female employees who were no longer actively working would receive a [monthly salary](#) of AFN 5,000 (the equivalent of GBP 50.45),<sup>4</sup> regardless of their former position, qualifications, and experience. The confusion that ensued following this announcement resulted in the temporary withholding of salaries to female employees across numerous government departments, and subsequent reactionary protests held by female healthcare workers and teachers.

Additional Taliban decrees have been implemented preventing women from working for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and limiting their opportunities in the private sector, leaving only a limited number of sectors in which women are permitted to work.

#### Ban on women's work at local and international NGOs

On 24 December 2022, the Taliban Ministry of Economy issued an [official letter](#) that ordered all female employees of NGOs in Afghanistan to stop attending work until further notice. The ban triggered a strong [backlash](#) from NGOs and aid agencies in Afghanistan. Despite this, in April 2023, the Taliban [expanded](#) the ban to include female UN staff in the country. As a result, the UN [announced](#) the cessation of its operations in Afghanistan; however, in May 2023, the UN [retracted](#) the decision and announced a resumption of its operations in the country.

Prior to the ban, Afghan women reportedly [accounted](#) for 35 to 40% of NGO staff. According to a [UN Women survey](#) from January 2023, [70%](#) of these women were the breadwinners in their families. Following the ban, these women found themselves unemployed, sidelined from leadership positions, and isolated; many of them now face poverty and an uncertain future. In a March 2023 [interview](#), Seema,<sup>5</sup> a former staff member of an NGO in Kabul, told AW about the situation: “After losing my job for the second time in late December [2022], I relived the trauma of the return of the Taliban.”

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<sup>3</sup> Women's participation in the Afghan civil service before the Taliban takeover was around 27%, with a target by the former Afghan government to reach 30% by 2020.

<sup>4</sup> As per the conversion rate on 5 July 2024.

<sup>5</sup> A pseudonym for privacy concerns.

## Women in the private sector

In the context of the Taliban's restrictions on women's work in public and non-governmental sectors, the private sector remains one of the only places for women in the workplace. The Taliban has also [claimed](#) to support women's participation in the private sector. Despite claiming to support women-led and owned businesses, in July 2023, the de facto authorities [issued](#) a one-month notice period for beauty salons to shut down. The announcement triggered widespread condemnation, with [critics](#) claiming the move would result in the loss of livelihood for 60,000 women across the country. On 19 July 2023, a group of women, [reported](#) to be hairdressers, [protested](#) against the order in front of beauty salons in Kabul's Police District (PD) 10. The Taliban [responded](#) to the protest with aerial gunfire and the use of water cannons, as seen in the images below.



Figure: Women [protesting](#) the decision to close beauty salons in Kabul, and the Taliban's [reaction](#) [34.5352111, 69.1714159].

Furthermore, women entrepreneurs face considerable challenges as a result of Taliban-issued restrictions, such as the [requirement](#) of a mahram (male guardian) for women to travel distances beyond 45 miles (approximately 72 kilometres). In March 2022, businesswoman Sakeena<sup>6</sup> [told](#) AW: "I frequently have to travel to Laghman province because most of my employees are based there, but I now have to take one of my sons with me whenever I travel." She added such incidents required her to take her sons out of school when needing to travel.

Data on female labour force participation rates, published by the [World Bank](#), found that the percentage of the female population (aged 15 and above) in the workplace had fallen from 16% in 2020 to 5% in 2023. Moreover, [International Labour Organisation](#) data found that on a quarterly basis, female labour force participation rates were consistently falling under the Taliban. Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme [published](#) a report in 2024 noting that women's employment had decreased by nearly half in 2023.

The Taliban's restrictions on women's socio-economic rights have had [severe negative impacts](#) on the personal lives of women, as well as the role of women in society, increasing their dependence on male family members while also contributing to increased poverty and restricted economic growth.

<sup>6</sup> A pseudonym for privacy concerns.

Despite these limitations, women continue to pursue the scarce opportunities available in the private sector, as well as in the fields of primary education and health care.

## 5. Erasure of women from media

The Taliban have not banned women from working in the media; however, the implementation of severe restrictions on the media and female journalists have contributed to the erasure of women from the sector. Restrictions include nationwide and local level decrees, as well as [measures](#) implementing gender-based segregation that limit women's [participation](#) in TV shows and [radio programmes](#), which also restrict women's [access to information](#) and [freedom of movement](#).

### Restrictions on TV appearances for female journalists

In November 2021, the Taliban [banned](#) women from appearing in TV dramas and entertainment programmes. The same directive, issued by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Evil (MoPVPE), [requested](#) women to observe hijab when on air. Then, in May 2022, the Taliban made it [mandatory](#) for female TV presenters to cover their faces. The same rule applies to women appearing on TV programmes as guests. This was followed by reports in 2024 by the Afghanistan Journalists Centre ([AFJC](#)), [Amu TV](#) and [Independent Persian](#) that MoPVPE officials had called for female TV moderators to appear fully veiled with niqab, covering their faces except for their eyes.

### Restrictions on female journalists' freedom of movement and access to information

Although there are no decrees prohibiting female journalists from attending press conferences, AW has observed [reports](#) of the Taliban denying female journalists participation at conferences and official events. In May 2022, the Taliban's Department of Information and Culture in Herat province [reportedly](#) banned female journalists from attending a meeting held by the department. Moreover, female journalists have claimed that they are not allowed to interview government officials, and that Taliban officials [refuse](#) to talk to them.

The Taliban's policies towards women's freedom of movement have impacted female journalists' work, as they [reportedly](#) need to be accompanied by a mahram to attend news conferences (if allowed to attend), and they are allegedly [prohibited](#) from reporting from the scenes of events. In an [interview](#) with AW in January 2024, Mariam,<sup>7</sup> a female journalist, claimed that Taliban forces always take her into custody when she is filming in public. She recalled a Taliban police officer telling a colleague that he "could just use two of your [his] bullets on them and make it easy."

Taliban restrictions, coupled with the country's economic downturn, have led to a gradual erasure of women from the media. According to the figures [provided](#) by International Media Support (IMS), the number of active female journalists and media workers decreased from 1,300, before the current Taliban control of Afghanistan, to only 463 (as of March 2023). According to a [Tolo News](#) report from July 2023, 94% of female journalists in Afghanistan were unemployed as a result of Taliban restrictions.

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<sup>7</sup> A pseudonym for privacy concerns.

While women’s participation in the media is decreasing inside the country, Afghan women in exile have successfully launched women-focused newsrooms, providing focused reporting on the situation of women and the LGBTQ+ community in Afghanistan. Zan Times, founded and run by Zahra Naderi, a renowned Afghan journalist in exile, [launched](#) an [interactive map](#) in April 2024, documenting the killing, disappearance, and arrest of ‘public’ women – defined as those working or studying outside the home. The map, created in partnership with AW, is an ongoing archive of incidents dating back to September 2021, and documents the disappearance of one woman, the killing of 14, and the arrest of 34.

## 6. Erasure of women from public space: Hijab requirements and freedom of movement

In December 2021, only four months after seizing power, the Taliban [issued](#) a directive limiting women’s freedom of movement by requiring women to be accompanied by a mahram to travel distances beyond 45 miles (approximately 72 kilometres). The directive, issued by the Taliban’s MoPVPE, has since been implemented across the country, and has significantly affected various aspects of women’s lives, including shifting power relations within their families, strengthening male authority and control over women’s lives and choices, as well as perpetuating the gradual erasure of women from public life.

In May 2022, in an official ceremony [held](#) at the MoPVPE, the Taliban issued a new [decree](#) ordering women to cover their bodies and faces, suggesting that women who failed to abide by the hijab should be punished, while their guardians should be “imprisoned for three days.” The document also noted that “women working in government offices who do not observe the hijab should be fired.”

These restrictions were widely observed in the media sector. The figure below shows the appearance of female Tolo News presenters in July [2021](#), prior to Taliban control of Afghanistan, and after complying with the de facto authority’s clothing restrictions in [2022](#). As of July 2024, AW note that Tolo News no longer appears to have women presenting news segments.



*Figure: Progression of Tolo News female news presenters’ appearance in [July 2021](#) (left), after the implementation of the Taliban’s decree mandating the covering of women’s faces in [May 2022](#) (middle), and the noticeable absence of women as presenters in 2024.*

AW have also recorded several [reports](#) of women and girls being denied access to public facilities, services, and spaces for alleged failure to adhere to hijab regulations or to be accompanied by a mahram. The incidents include women being denied access to [transportation](#), such as taxis; women being denied access to public spaces, such as [shrines](#), [hospitals](#), and [government offices](#); women being [stopped](#) from travelling abroad; as well as incidents of [violence](#) and intimidation.

### **Strict implementation of hijab rules and detention of women and girls**

As the Taliban suppress voices protesting against their policies and restrictions, they appear to have intensified their attempts to implement their control over the past year, in particular, the enforcement of restrictions around women's mobility and clothing. In January 2024, the Taliban [arrested](#) women for violating hijab rules in various [areas](#) of Kabul city, in predominantly Shia communities. Afghan media also reported women and girls' arrests in [Balkh](#), [Baghlan](#), [Kunduz](#), [Takhar](#), and [Bamyan](#) provinces.



*Figure: Groups of women being [arrested](#) and put into Taliban [vehicles](#) to be taken into [custody](#) in Kabul on 7 January 2024.*

The arrests were accompanied by numerous claims of [degrading](#) treatment whilst in custody, including [torture](#) and [rape](#). According to news reports, these arrests led to widespread [fear](#) among Afghan women and girls, many of whom are now afraid to leave their homes. Moreover, many [families](#) reportedly no longer allow their wives and daughters to leave their houses due to the threat of arrest and social stigma surrounding women held in Taliban custody.

## **7. Erasure of women from public protests**

Women-led protests have taken place since [17 August 2021](#) as a non-violent form of resistance against the Taliban's control of Afghanistan. The demonstrations, mainly led by women's protest movements, have largely continued in the form of indoor protests, with the first recorded in October 2021, as well as intermittent outdoor protests. Afghan women have continued to protest despite a context of increased Taliban [restrictions](#), intimidation, violence, [arbitrary arrest](#), and alleged mistreatment and [torture](#) of women protesters. Moreover, in an effort to suppress protests, in September 2021, the Taliban reportedly [issued](#) a quasi-ban on protests and slogans that had not received official approval.

## Declining outdoor protests and censored indoor protests

Although AW recorded 46 outdoor women’s protests in 2023 and 2024, this total was lower than observed in 2021 and 2022, with the frequency plummeting towards the start of 2024. AW records show that as of the time of writing, the last outdoor demonstration held by a protest movement took place on 8 March 2024, International Women’s Day. On this date, a [video](#) posted on X showed women marching on a road chanting slogans and holding placards. According to [media reports](#), members of the Independent Coalition of Afghanistan Women’s Protest Movement held the protest in Taloqan City, Takhar. The group appeared to be small, comprising fewer than 10 women, protesting in a road with no traffic or other people, possibly to assure their safety. The graph below shows the decrease in outdoor protests, and the increase in indoor protests, between August 2021 and June 2024.

### Indoor vs Outdoor Womens Protests in Afghanistan

Number of indoor and outdoor women led protests in Afghanistan, between August 2021 and June 2024.

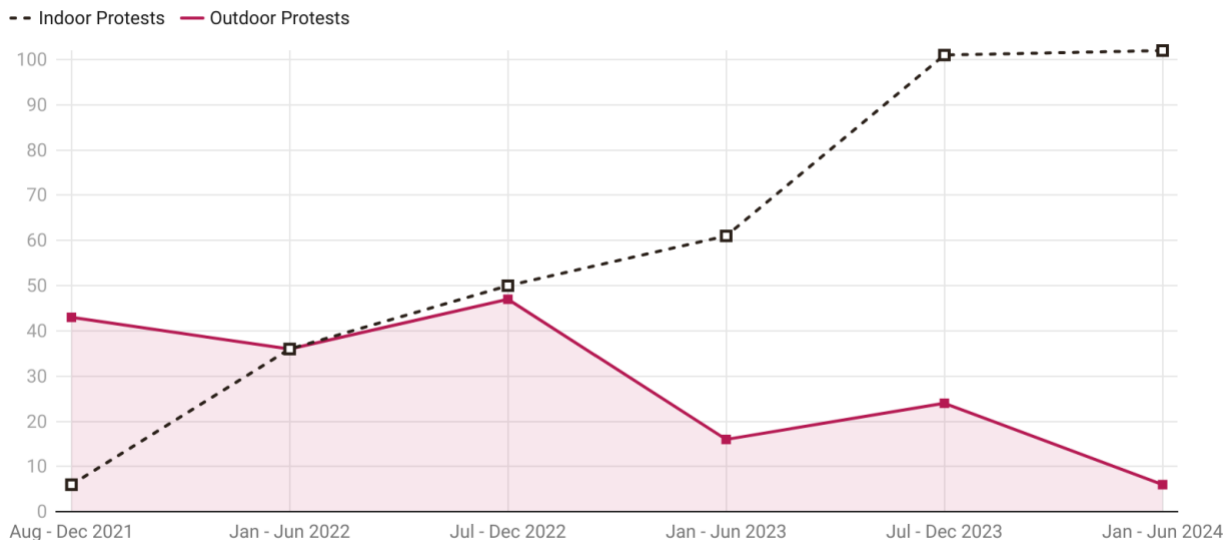


Chart: Afghan Witness · Created with Datawrapper

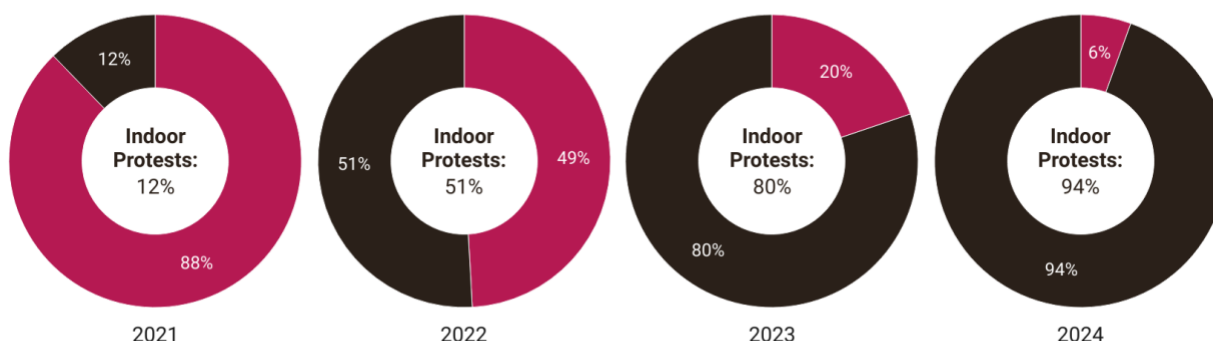
*Figure: Number of women’s indoor versus outdoor protests from August 2021 to June 2024, showing an increase in indoor protests and a decline in outdoor protests over time.*

In 2021, women-led indoor protests accounted for just 12% of the cases observed, compared to 2024, when 94% of the observed women-led protests were held indoors, as seen in the graph below. Over the past three years, Afghan women have gradually been choosing to protest and voice their opinions against the Taliban administration in more private environments, likely in an attempt to avoid being identified, arrested, or even killed.

## Indoor vs Outdoor Women's Protests in Afghanistan

Percentage of indoor and outdoor women led protests in Afghanistan, between 2021 and 2024.

■ Outdoor Protests ■ Indoor Protests



Source: Afghan Witness • Created with Datawrapper

Figure: Percentage of women's indoor versus outdoor protests from 2021 to 2024, showing an increase in indoor protests (from 12% in 2021 to 94% in 2024) and a stark decrease in outdoor protests (from 88% in 2021 to just 6% in 2024).

Although there has been a rise in the frequency of indoor protests, female protesters increasingly fear identification and persecution by Taliban authorities. In addition to protesting indoors, more participants have been observed covering their faces and obscuring their identities when conducting demonstrations. Below are images of women's indoor protests on International Women's Day in 2023 and 2024, demonstrating the shift towards increased self-censorship.



Figure: Comparison between women with faces uncovered in indoor protests on International Women's Day in 2023 (left), and obscuring their faces in 2024 (right).

### Detention and abuse of female protesters

The decrease in women's outdoor protests is likely linked to the Taliban's use of [intimidation](#), [violence](#) and [arbitrary detention](#) of female protesters. AW records show the alleged detention of 21 female protesters between March and November 2023 alone. Among those reported to have been detained were [Wahida Mahrami](#), [Neda Parwani](#), [Zholia Parsi](#), [Bahara Karimi](#), [Parisa Azada](#) and [Manizha Siddiqi](#). Although all of these protesters were reportedly released, including Siddiqi, whom

the Taliban [sentenced](#) to two years in prison,<sup>8</sup> some activists were claimed to have been [hospitalised](#) following their release, due to [alleged](#) torture in Taliban custody.

One of the most prominent incidents of Taliban violence against female protesters was the arrest of female protester Tamana Zaryab Paryani, alongside her sisters, in January 2022. It also constitutes the first incident of the Taliban's chasing and targeting of female protesters, outside of protests, to be supported by [visual evidence](#). On the night of 19 January 2022, Taliban fighters [reportedly](#) raided the homes of several female activists in Kabul, including the home of Paryani, who had reportedly participated in a [protest](#) in Kabul that month in opposition to the mandatory wearing of the burqa. Paryani [filmed](#) herself inside her home, claiming that the Taliban was at her door. According to media [reports](#), Taliban fighters entered her house, arresting her and her three sisters.

Then, on 3 July 2024, Rukhshana Media<sup>9</sup> and the Guardian [reported](#) that they had seen a video of armed men gang-raping a female Afghan human rights activist inside a Taliban prison, allegedly on account of her participation in public protests.

## 8. Erasure of women from digital space

Facing increased restrictions and progressive erasure from public life, including the ability to demonstrate against the Taliban, many Afghan women have sought refuge in the online space to protest, find education and work opportunities, and interact with the world beyond Afghanistan's borders. However, AW's November 2023 [report](#) shed light on the ways in which gendered hate speech and abuse target politically engaged Afghan women (including journalists, women's rights activists, and former government officials) in the Dari and Pashto information environment online.

This report found that low-ranking Taliban and pro-Taliban accounts on X often shared gendered hate speech and abuse to undermine, shame, and discredit public-facing Afghan women. Many of these accounts also spread false or inflammatory information about the women online, and created impersonator accounts of known Afghan women, which were then used to spread disinformation and pro-Taliban narratives.

The Afghan women interviewed for the report mentioned how gendered hate speech and disinformation impacted their professional, personal, and social lives, as well as their mental health and physical safety. For fear of being targeted, harassed, and to avoid further abuse online, many limited their online participation, minimising online activity and engaging in self-censorship of content, contributing to their own erasure from digital space in Afghanistan. As a result, one female journalist told AW that she had faced repercussions in her career; she said that she had more limited access to online sources compared with male peers who had not limited their online activity.

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<sup>8</sup> Manizha Siddiqi was [released](#) on 6 April 2024 as a part of the Taliban's mass release and pardoning of prisoners on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr.

<sup>9</sup> A woman-led and women-focused media outlet in exile.



Gender-based hate speech is also spread by female-presenting pro-Taliban accounts. Although difficult to verify, in March 2024, AW [reported](#) the presence of several accounts on X with images of women and female usernames spreading and amplifying pro-Taliban propaganda, and at times spreading gendered hate speech against Afghan women, further reducing online safe space for Afghan women.

## 9. Complete erasure of women: Femicide and gender-based violence

Beyond specific edicts and policies limiting women and girls' freedom of movement, access to education, and access to work, the overall environment for women under the Taliban has shifted in Afghanistan. Numerous international organisations including [the UN](#) have linked restrictive Taliban policies to gender-based violence (GBV), [both in public and private spheres](#), including domestic and intimate partner violence, [and forced marriages](#), sometimes resulting in the deaths of women and girls – the ultimate erasure from Afghan society.

Between 1 January 2022 and 30 June 2024, AW recorded 700 claims involving GBV committed against 840 women and girls throughout the country, reported by social media users, journalists, activists, and media outlets, including 109 claims supported by images and footage. Of the recorded claims, the majority (422 of 700) involved Taliban members as perpetrators. AW also archived 116 videos and images showing [WARNING: GRAPHIC] [scenes](#) of [WARNING: GRAPHIC] [violence](#), where women and [WARNING: GRAPHIC] [girls](#) were the main [victims](#), including 45 geolocated visual materials.

The paragraphs below discuss the claims of different forms of GBV, including femicide – the killing of women and girls because of their gender. In addition to femicide, AW identified seven other categories of GBV, including sexual violence, domestic violence, arrests, use of arbitrary violence and torture (other than sexual violence), harassment, and threats (when a claim did not imply sexual harassment), house searches, and hostage taking. The claims classified as GBV did not include accidental killings and injuries.

According to these claims, a total of 840 women and girls were subjected to GBV in Afghanistan between 1 January 2022 and 30 June 2024; however, as GBV is often underreported, it is likely that this figure understates the scale of violence committed against women and girls in the country, further underscoring the true nature of the erasure of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban. As a result of various forms of GBV, at least 332 women and girls were reportedly killed, at least 152 were wounded, at least 287 were arrested, detained, abducted, or forcibly disappeared, and at least 75 were subjected to sexual assault or rape, including attempted sexual assault and attempted rape. Seven of whom were reportedly killed following the assault.

At least 75 of the recorded GBV claims involved minors among the victims. Many claims – at least 150 of the 700 – involved victims' family members as perpetrators, including husbands, parents, siblings, and other family members. According to these claims, abuse by family members resulted in 157 women and girls being killed (141) or wounded (16) due to domestic violence. AW also recorded 28 claims of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of women and girls in detention, which allegedly resulted in the killing (2) and injury (5) of at least seven women.

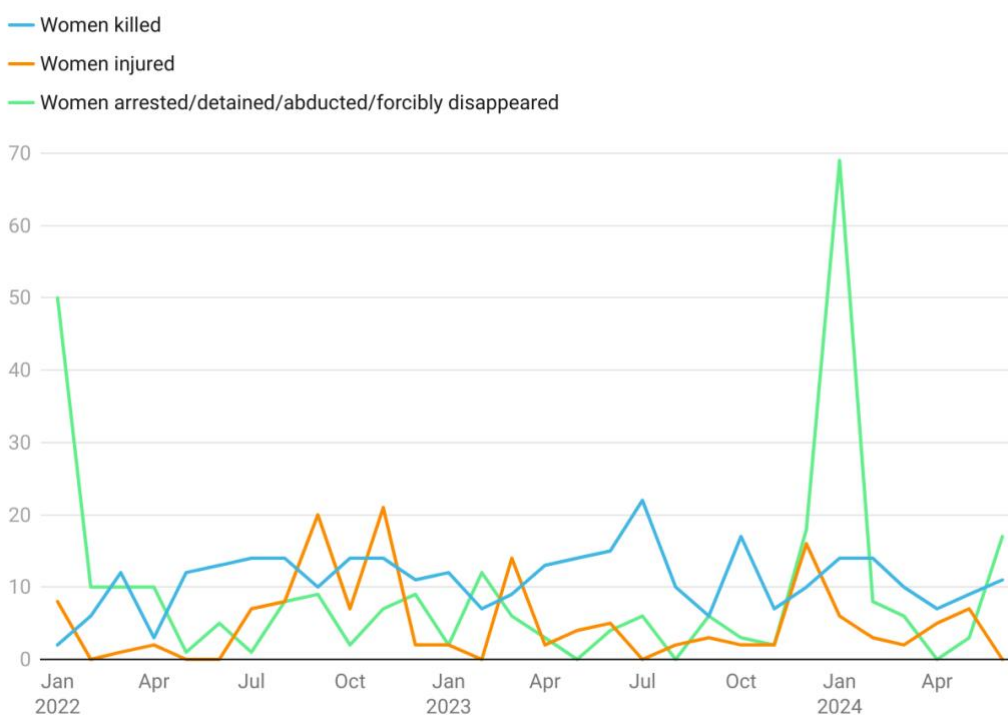
GBV claims are widespread across the country and occur frequently, being reported every week since January 2022, on average 23.3 times per month. The reported violence was committed by [family members](#), [WARNING: GRAPHIC] [intimate](#) [WARNING: GRAPHIC] [partners](#), [strangers](#), and the [Taliban](#) – at [home](#), on [the streets](#), [WARNING: GRAPHIC] [in parks](#), [in madrasas](#), at [schools](#), in [government](#) [WARNING: GRAPHIC] [offices](#), in [custody](#), and even at [weddings](#).

### Monthly distribution of recorded killings, injuries, and arrests

The graph below illustrates the monthly distribution of the reported number of women killed, injured, and arrested, detained, abducted, and forcibly disappeared in Afghanistan between January 2022 and June 2024.

### The reported number of victims

Monthly distribution of the reported number of women killed, injured, and arrested/detained/abducted/forcibly disappeared between January 2022 and June 2024.



Created with Datawrapper

*Figure: Monthly distribution of the reported numbers of women killed, injured, arrested, detained, abducted, and forcibly disappeared in Afghanistan.*

As seen in the graph above, reports of GBV peaked in January 2024 in connection with the Taliban’s [dress code arrests](#), which took place between [January and February 2024](#). The period marked the highest recorded number of women and girls who were allegedly arrested (69) within a single month since the start of AW’s monitoring of HRV claims in January 2022. During January 2024, AW also recorded numerous [media reports](#) of grave [WARNING: GRAPHIC] [mistreatment](#) in custody, including claims of [sexual violence](#) and [other forms](#) of [torture](#), [WARNING: GRAPHIC] [imagery](#) of

bruises, followed by [reports](#) of [suicides](#), and [stigmatisation by family](#) members following release. On the ground reports gathered by other organisations corroborated and described instances of abductions of groups of women and girls, humiliation, gendered and ethnic insults, sexual violence by Taliban members, including gang rape followed by suicide of the victim, and one suicide upon release from detention during the dress code arrests in January 2024.

AW observed two other peaks of GBV claims in July 2023 and October 2022. The claims recorded in July 2023 consisted of alleged HRV-related suicides, reports of domestic violence, forced marriages, and Taliban arbitrary violence, but did not appear to be linked to any specific incident. However, according to the content of claims recorded by AW, the spike in October 2022 appeared to be linked to violent repressions, violence, and arrests targeting women protesters in [Herat](#), [Kabul](#), and [Balkh](#). Moreover, the peak in arrests noted in January 2022 largely corresponds with [claims](#) of mass arrests of female judges alongside arrests of female protesters.

### **Reported victim groups**

Of the 700 GBV claims recorded by AW, 80 involved female protesters and activists. According to these claims, since January 2022, the Taliban arrested at least 57 female protesters and activists, while a further 17 were reportedly killed or wounded. These numbers are likely to be an underestimate of actual casualties and arrests – in February 2022, [Afghanistan International](#) alleged that since August 2021, the Taliban arrested and tortured at least 102 female civil and political activists.

Additionally, 33 claims involved women associated with the former [government](#), including former Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) members, [female relatives of ANDSF members](#), one [lawyer](#), one prosecutor, and one [WARNING: GRAPHIC] [prison guard](#). According to these claims, at least 50 women associated with the former government were arrested, detained, abducted, or forcibly disappeared, including [40 female judges](#). Moreover, two claims related to the female relatives of alleged resistance members.

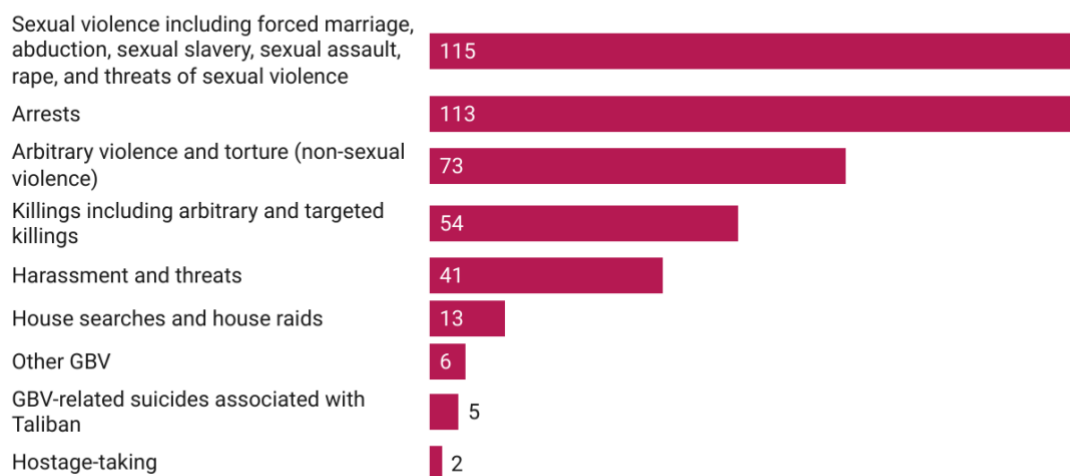
A further 39 claims involved women and girls belonging to religious minorities and non-Pashtun ethnic backgrounds, including at least 26 women and girls who were killed or wounded, and a further 22 who were arrested. AW also recorded 28 claims involving female teachers and students, seven claims related to the female vloggers, journalists, and media staff, and 14 involving female healthcare staff. Three claims involved [women belonging](#) to the [LGBTQ+ community](#), including transgender women. According to [Rainbow Afghanistan](#), since the Taliban takeover, lesbians and transgender women have been subjected to forced marriages and constituted the majority of suicide victims within the LGBTQ+ community.

### **Reported GBV perpetrated by Taliban members**

The chart below illustrates claims of GBV perpetrated by Taliban members (422) recorded by AW since January 2022, filtered by type, including: sexual violence, arrests including arbitrary arrests, arbitrary violence and torture in forms other than sexual violence, killings including arbitrary and targeted killings, harassment and threats, house searches and house raids targeting women's homes, GBV-related suicides associated with Taliban, hostage-taking, and other forms of GBV.

## GBV reportedly perpetrated by Taliban

Number of claims of GBV allegedly perpetrated by Taliban members recorded between January 2022 and June 2024, by type



Created with Datawrapper

*Figure: Number of claims of GBV allegedly perpetrated by Taliban members from January 2022 to June 2024.*

The chart above indicates that, based on media reports and social media users, including prominent figures, the type of GBV which was most frequently perpetrated by Taliban members was sexual violence (115). This was followed by arrests (113), arbitrary violence and torture, including violence against protesters (73), killings (54), and harassment and threats (41).

It is also noteworthy that Taliban members made up the majority (115 of 129) of the claimed perpetrators of reported sexual violence against Afghan women and girls.

### **Incrimination of survivors of GBV and threats to families of victims seeking justice**

Taliban policies and restrictions have also emboldened the further victimisation of survivors, where victims of GBV, regardless of their age, are incriminated for seeking justice and fleeing abusive and even life-threatening environments. Moreover, services and institutions that were previously available to survivors of GBV [have been dismantled](#), and women are subjected to public punishment for the “crime” of running away from home. Media reports and claims on social media also allege that the Taliban deny due process and forensic examination, and have used [arbitrary detention, violence, and threats](#) against victims’ families. Survivors of GBV committed by the Taliban and other actors were also observed to be at risk of further violence perpetrated by their [own families](#). Combined, the lack of access to justice and ongoing incrimination of survivors contributes to the further devaluation of women’s lives, the neglect of their safety and wellbeing, and their erasure from Afghan society.

While domestic violence constituted a serious issue in Afghanistan [even before the Taliban takeover](#), the system created by the Taliban benefits the perpetrators of domestic violence and contributes to their impunity, while [persecuting](#) their victims and [preventing](#) them from leaving unsafe

domestic situations [out of fear of punishment](#) and [imprisonment](#). In March 2024, the Taliban Supreme Leader vowed in an [audio message](#) to implement the [stoning](#) of women for adultery. It is also noteworthy that in March 2023, the Taliban invalidated numerous cases of divorce that had been previously settled under the previous government, spreading fear of [incrimination for adultery](#) among female divorcees who subsequently [remarried](#). More importantly, the decision created yet another threat for survivors of domestic violence coerced into reuniting with their former husbands, [marital rape](#).

### **Reports of sexual violence perpetrated by Taliban members including in detention**

AW recorded numerous [media reports](#) on the lack of access to a [fair trial](#), [torture](#) and [mistreatment](#) of female prisoners, [sexual violence](#) including rape and forced [marriages](#) in detention, and [abortions](#) among released female prisoners as a result of being subjected to rape whilst in prison.

AW recorded similar claims between April and May 2023, when prominent Afghan outlets reported incidents of sexual violence and torture in Taliban prisons in [Balkh](#), Jowzjan, Faryab, and Samangan provinces. [8am Media](#) spoke with former detainees who claimed that at least four female prisoners in Samangan province were shot after they “fell seriously ill as a result of repeated sexual assaults by the Taliban.”

Taliban authorities appear to maintain a culture of [impunity](#) for perpetrators, including forced marriages of underage girls to Taliban members. Between August 2022 and July 2023, Qari Saeed Khosty, the former spokesman of Minister of Interior Sirajuddin Haqqani, was [accused](#) of forcibly marrying, [raping, torturing, and beating](#) a medical student from Kabul, named as Elaha Delawarzai. Delawarzai also accused the Taliban of [sexually assaulting her](#) in the prison of the Ministry of Interior of the Taliban. In March 2024, she also claimed she was [threatened with death](#) by the Taliban and senior members of the Haqqani network. Despite the numerous accusations, in May 2024 [Aamaj News](#) reported that Khosty was appointed legal advisor to the Taliban’s Minister of Information and Culture.

The current Taliban judicial system also contributes to further victimisation of female survivors of GBV. Former female judges who remain in the country are [in hiding](#), and face active threats on their lives. At the same time, Taliban official statements continue to [deny reports from international organisations](#) regarding the sexual assault of women, instead claiming that under the Taliban, “women are protected from assault and harassment.” In February 2024, [8am Media](#) published an article claiming that Taliban members use forced marriage to engage in sexual slavery of girls and women in Kabul, including those of non-Pashtun ethnicities, as well as female relatives of those associated with the former government. AW also recorded claims of Taliban members’ attempts at sexual exploitation of women in vulnerable positions, e.g. those [facing poverty](#) and [imprisonment](#).

While many of these claims prove difficult to verify using open source methodologies, particularly as they take place in private and controlled settings, such as private homes and within Taliban custody, they likely constitute only a fraction of the violence committed against women and girls in Afghanistan. Although violence against women is not a new issue in Afghanistan, under the previous administration, mechanisms for recourse existed; under the Taliban, these mechanisms have all but disappeared, further reducing the space for women and girls to access justice.

## 10. Conclusion

Three years into the current Taliban control of Afghanistan, the situation for women and girls under the Taliban has worsened with no indication of improvement. The Taliban's policies towards women, and their increasingly strict implementation witnessed in 2023-2024, amounts to the deliberate erasure of women from all aspects of public life in Afghanistan. While many women resist and continue to protest, the vast majority do so from the relative safety of their homes, often while attempting to obscure their identity.

However, AW has observed that the online space has become increasingly fraught for women, with rising rates of gendered hate speech and abuse particularly targeting politically engaged and public-facing women, further entrenching their erasure from Afghan life. The continuous threat to women's safety limits how many are willing to come forward and demand their rights, both outdoors, indoors, and online. With restrictions on access to education, work, freedom of movement, and access to justice, the majority of Afghan women live in precarious circumstances, in an environment where serious human rights abuses, including gender-based violence and femicide, are on the rise, often occurring in the shadows with impunity.



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