



CAPTURED STATE:

*The Human Cost of the Taliban's
Corruption and Kleptocracy*

By Natalie Gonnella-Platts

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About the Series

Captured State is a series of three reports published by the George W. Bush Institute that explores how the Taliban have relied on corrupt and kleptocratic behavior to consolidate power in Afghanistan. The report series examines Taliban corruption, the disproportionate impact on women, girls, and other vulnerable communities, and the role of foreign enablers in perpetuating the Taliban's kleptocracy to identify new and underutilized policy options to advance peace, stability, and freedom in Afghanistan.

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Due to ongoing safety and security concerns in Afghanistan and the sensitive nature of these reports, some experts we spoke with cannot be cited publicly. Though we are unable to name them here, the project team remains incredibly grateful for the contributions of these individuals to this effort.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The state capture of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2021 has created a haunting situation for the vast majority of the country's population, especially women and children. Fundamental to the Taliban's vicious pursuit of power is the systemic use of corruption and kleptocracy, which often manifests at the expense of Afghan lives.

At a time when [60% of the population](#) needs lifesaving humanitarian assistance, the Taliban's abuse of international aid and barbaric exclusion of female Afghans from society have left millions of families without food, heating, and other essential items. Gender-based violence (GBV), forced and early marriage, and child labor rates have rapidly climbed because of the Taliban's exploitation of state resources and widespread assault of the Afghan people. Vital services like health care and education – and the communities who need them most – have been neglected and cruelly manipulated for the expansion of power and personal wealth. Simply put: Taliban leaders and their loyalists directly benefit from the suffering of Afghan women and children. International enablers – both state and nonstate actors – are empowering this use of corruption and kleptocracy and, ultimately, the suffering of the Afghan people.

It doesn't have to be this way. The global community – in partnership with courageous Afghan advocates – has the ability to change this tragic state of affairs. Far more must be done to support the Afghan people from the Taliban's widespread brutality. Though leverage has changed, the United States, its allies, and the broader global community still have a role to play.

Our recommendations:

- The United States and United Nations member states must collaboratively enforce harsher penalties on Taliban leaders responsible for Afghanistan's gender apartheid and other human rights abuses.
- The U.N. and national governments should formally expand the definition of apartheid to include gender-based discrimination and segregation.
- Governments, intergovernmental organizations, and philanthropic foundations should increase support for women-led organizations in Afghanistan.
- Governments and intergovernmental organizations must include a wider range of Afghan stakeholders in all convenings, hearings, and negotiations focusing on the future of Afghanistan. These opportunities include, but should not be limited to, congressional and parliamentary hearings, regional and ministerial summits, and U.N.-hosted forums.
- Media and philanthropic organizations should support Afghan-led civil society initiatives that address information gaps and collect data on women and girls.

INTRODUCTION

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has created a scenario often described as hell on earth for the most vulnerable populations.

Wasting no time in violating the rights of Afghans and instituting dozens of backward edicts focused on the subjugation of female citizens across every facet of society, the Taliban have regularly proven that little has changed since they first came to power in the 1990s.

Central to their pursuit of obedience and control is the strategic utilization of corruption and kleptocracy, much of which plays out through the suffering of women and children across the country.

The international community must confront the Taliban's ability to profit and flourish at the expense of the Afghan population. While other countries have rightly responded with unified statements of condemnation and economic and financial penalties, they need to focus now on more targeted and individualized pressures.

Meaningful action is critical, especially as the Taliban have yet to walk back a single oppressive policy enforced on the Afghan population, despite existing global consequences, such as sanctions.

“People who do not care about mass killing do not care about corruption.”

– *Sima Samar*

Former Afghan Minister of Women's Affairs

Rather, thanks to their use of corruption and kleptocracy, Taliban members continue to profit and expand their influence amid widespread abuse. And it is women and children who are paying the ultimate price.

American and international leaders, intergovernmental organizations, financial institutions, and philanthropic organizations can better support Afghans and global security at large by responding more fully to the Taliban's use of corruption and kleptocracy and the ways in which Taliban at all levels are profiting at the expense of the Afghan people.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

Corruption and kleptocracy are not victimless crimes. The lack of accountability in authoritarian systems typically renders underrepresented and disadvantaged populations, such as women, even more vulnerable to these abuses of power.

If the [core responsibility](#) of government is to care for its people, the Taliban have wasted no time in confirming their inability and indifference to lead. [Early assurances](#) of measured behavior and respect for the rights of all Afghans have been nothing more than hollow words as the Taliban have doubled down on their extremist ideology.

Since the Taliban's takeover, women and girls have seen their agency and well-being suffocated. Dozens of restrictive edicts are in place to erase their presence across every facet of society. With few exceptions, the Taliban have barred women from most sectors of the workforce; adolescent girls and

Corruption

cor·rup·tion

The abuse of perceived authority for private gain.

Kleptocracy

klep·toc·ra·cy

The systematic capture of the state and its resources by political actors for private gain.

young women cannot attend school; and freedom of movement is nonexistent if you are female.

Journalists, artists, musicians, and activists have been targeted and, at times, silenced. And former [government officials](#), [security forces](#), advocates, and ethnic and religious [minorities](#) have been brutally hunted by the Taliban and other extremists with [few, if any, repercussions](#).

Taliban leaders have also made quick work of exploiting regional and international relationships for personal gain over the lives of the country's most vulnerable populations. Worse still, the Taliban have again shown that they aren't simply indifferent to human suffering, but actively pursue it to expand their ideological influence as well as their personal financial standing.

Crudely manipulating faith and culture, the [Taliban regularly contend that women and girls' participation](#) in public life is [at odds](#) with Islam and Afghan values. But both Islamic teachings and Afghan culture – especially in the last century – demonstrate a different story. Moreover, [Islamic scholars](#), [activists](#), and [leaders](#) of other [Muslim-majority countries](#) agree that gender-based exclusion in education, employment, and public life [isn't justified](#).

Women, girls, and other advocates who have courageously defied the regime's assault on freedom of expression have faced violent reprisals, [including beatings](#), [detention](#), [torture](#), and [death](#).

In the midst of a crippling economic crisis, around 90% of the population faces poverty and malnutrition, with rates above “emergency thresholds” in all but nine of the country's 34 provinces, [according to the World Food Program](#). This includes 4 million women and children experiencing severe daily hunger. Nearly half of all children under 5 and a quarter of expecting and breastfeeding mothers are expected to need vital nutrition support over the next year. “Children bear the brunt of it,” [stressed UNICEF representative Fran Equiza](#) in May 2023.



Begging women wait to receive alms in front of a bakery shop in Parwan province north of Kabul, Afghanistan, Thursday, May 19, 2022. (AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi)

[Afghan moms](#) face the increasing [likelihood](#) of avoidable pregnancy complications, a trend that's more horrific because it follows two decades of unparalleled progress among low-income countries in confronting maternal and infant mortality. At least 167 Afghan children die every day from preventable illnesses – all of which could be treated and cured with access to quality health care, the right medicines, and trained medical staff – according to [UNICEF](#) and [WHO](#) estimates.

But the Taliban have made access to these lifesaving necessities often impossible – especially for women and children. Moreover, a [mental health crisis](#) among women and girls in Afghanistan [has exploded](#) as a result of the Taliban's repression and rising rates of poverty.

In the two years and counting since the Taliban's return to power, the situation in Afghanistan has become nothing short of desperate for most communities across the country. But clearly neither Taliban leaders nor their foot soldiers are suffering.

"I haven't seen a starving Taliban fighter on TV; they all seem to be fat, dumb, and happy.... I see a lot of starving Afghan children on TV, so I'm wondering where all this funding is going," John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) [testified](#) before the U.S. House of Representatives Oversight Committee in April 2023.

Though corruption and kleptocracy were a [significant challenge](#) in Afghanistan under the previous government, before the Taliban's return to power, Afghan women achieved more than most women's movements did elsewhere around the globe in 20 short years, directly contributing to the advancement of human rights, education, economic opportunity, and well-being for their families and their communities.

WHY AUTHORITARIANS AND OTHER ILLIBERAL ACTORS TARGET WOMEN

There's a vicious logic at play when autocrats strategically undermine the status and well-being of more than half a country's population.

Combined with corruption and violence, the subjugation of women and girls is a [strategic weapon](#) used by illiberal actors for the purposes of expanding authority, individual wealth, and control.

Women are a vital force in the growth of peaceful and prosperous societies. In many ways, the active participation of women in societies is a direct counter to democratic backsliding and the expansion of extremism and poverty. Accountability, security, good governance, economic development, and social welfare all improve when women have active roles in their communities and countries.

Gender equity is one of the most powerful influences that exists to counter growing threats to freedom worldwide.

That's why the Taliban, like many other authoritarian regimes, are intent on the brutal oppression of women and their children and, even more callously, the ways they can profit off their distress.

“What you do to your women is what you do to your state.”

– Valerie Hudson

Author and Professor of Political Science at Texas A&M University's Bush School of Government and Public Service



Afghan women, who have seen their rights diminish day by day, demonstrate in the center of Kabul, Afghanistan, Aug. 13, 2022. Photo by Oriane Zerah/Abaca/Sipa USA (Sipa via AP Images)

While leverage against the Taliban’s atrocities may seem limited, the world can do much more to support the Afghan people. This requires more direct action to confront the Taliban’s use of corruption and kleptocracy as well as the state and nonstate actors who continue to enable the Taliban in acquiring and safeguarding these assets.

“Those who harbor intolerance will never be good partners.”

– Said Jawad

Former Afghan Ambassador to Russia (2021-2022); the United Kingdom (2017-2020); and the United States (2003-2010)

THE IMPACT OF CORRUPTION AND KLEPTOCRACY ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN

The Taliban’s use of corruption and kleptocracy impacts women and children in a multitude of ways. Some of the most prominent examples include abusing humanitarian assistance, gender-based violence and other human rights abuses, and the erosion of essential services.

Humanitarian assistance

The U.N. launched the [largest ever aid appeal](#) in support of a single country in 2021 in response to the dire situation in Afghanistan, labeled the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.

[Around US\\$80 million arrives in Afghanistan](#) every 10-14 days via [humanitarian cash shipments](#) in an [effort to infuse](#) essential [economic liquidity](#) and critical support for the Afghan people. These funds are deposited into a private bank, where U.N. agencies and partners can access the resources to pay for necessary expenditures.

Additionally, other funding streams supporting everything from local to international nongovernmental organizations flow into the country to pay for staff, goods, and other needed services by way of more informal financial infrastructure. These informal channels include cryptocurrency and Hawala, a traditional money-transfer system used in the Muslim world that involves payment to an agent who then coordinates with a remote associate to pay the final recipient.

From heating and housing to food assistance and medical care, these resources literally keep Afghan families alive. But for the Taliban, these resources have also become a means to fortify power and prosperity. Humanitarian assistance is increasingly being used as a means of funding for Taliban members and loyalists, as documented by an increasing number of independent reports, including from SIGAR and *Zan Times*.

“The Taliban appear to view the U.N. system as yet another revenue stream, one which their movement will seek to monopolize and centralize control over,” the U.S. Institute for Peace (USIP) noted in a [July 2023 analysis](#) on the Taliban’s manipulation of foreign aid.

Taliban members have found a wide variety of ways to divert cash and [humanitarian supplies](#). This has allowed them to influence local distribution networks, [reward supporters](#), establish shadow nongovernmental organizations, and even commandeer critical supplies already distributed to needy community members, as detailed in the first paper of this series.

Overall, aid access for women remains a huge concern, especially as most aid dollars flow through the U.N. system: “According to multiple U.N. officials across different agencies, the Taliban have effectively infiltrated and influenced most U.N.-managed assistance programming,” according to the [July 2023 SIGAR report](#) to Congress. This has become the “main barrier” to assistance access for highly vulnerable beneficiaries.

As SIGAR’s Sopko [testified before](#) House Foreign Affairs Committee in November 2023, “Taliban officials routinely pressure U.S. partners to hire Taliban allies, insist that U.S. partners contract with Taliban-affiliated companies, dictate which Afghans should receive U.S. aid, demand payoffs from U.S. partners before a project can begin, divert U.S. food aid to Taliban soldiers, and tax recipients of aid once it is delivered.”

Those most in need of assistance are deplorably left without access, a double blow when coupled with the regime’s institution of gender apartheid.

Taliban harassment, [intimidation](#), arbitrary [detentions](#), and [acts of violence](#) against aid workers have steadily increased since 2021, capped by outright bans on Afghan women from working for nongovernmental organizations and U.N. agencies in December 2022 and March 2023. These edicts bar more than half the population from accessing one of the only remaining means to support themselves and their children.

“The de facto authorities have been routinely interfering in humanitarian operations by requesting excessive information on humanitarian workers and beneficiaries and restricting their activities in ways that are contrary to humanitarian principles,” according to a [letter](#) from U.N. experts in December 2022 condemning the Taliban’s interference in critically needed humanitarian resources. “The barring of women employees is the last straw, and a unified response is required,” noted the special rapporteurs,

“The only way women can survive is via aid, and yet the Taliban are stealing one of the only lifelines that remains to keep women and children alive.”

– Zahra Nader

Journalist and founder of Zan Times

independent experts, and working groups that presented the letter.

About [93%](#) of organizations were unable to access women in need of support following the January 2023 ban on female nongovernmental organization employees, a UN Women survey examining aid access showed.

The Taliban's exploitation and gender apartheid policies have caused many nonprofits to cease operations completely over the past year. Those who remain are often forced to pay high taxes and/or contribute toward other kickbacks (like cars) that wholly benefit the Taliban.

Meanwhile, families go without food, fuel, and other basic necessities as women's needs and experiences are ignored and undermined by the Taliban's exploitation of humanitarian assistance and the group's [actions](#) to stifle the nonprofit sector.

Food aid reserves received under the previous Afghan government – like [grain from India](#) – were redirected by the Taliban when they took power, as a means of payment for public sector employees via a “food for work” program. Priority for participation in many cases goes to existing Taliban supporters.

Aid workers have documented parallel instances of corruption across diverse provinces, though much of the direct interference with humanitarian assistance has occurred in local capacities. Patterns of intimidation and abuse by Taliban members for the purposes of pilfering humanitarian assistance for personal gain and influence have repeatedly been documented in dozens of interviews by [Zan Times](#) with local citizens across eight Afghan provinces.

The Taliban continue to manipulate the situation.

– Habib Khan

*Journalist and Founder of
Afghan Peace Watch*

The *Zan Times* investigation included examples of Taliban members removing previously distributed aid packages from the homes of those who received them. Taliban interference through the mandated addition of households (often loyalists) on pre-vetted aid distribution lists – despite many of these obligatory additions failing to meet need criteria – has also been widely documented. Examples of this type of aid abuse were provided in direct discussions with nonprofits by the author as well as documented in recent analysis by SIGAR, *Zan Times*, and others.

“If we refuse to comply, employees are threatened, detained, and even beaten on baseless charges,” one aid worker reflected on [NPR](#).

For ethnic minorities like the Hazara, seizures of essential resources by the Taliban have [also included housing](#), resulting in the [forceful eviction and displacement](#) of hundreds of families.

The Taliban are quite literally stealing food, cash, shelter, and other desperately needed essentials from the vulnerable Afghans who need them most. The clear priority for Taliban members at all levels of the regime's hierarchy is the preservation and expansion of status rather than the preservation of life.

“The Taliban have one policy, and that is to say ‘no’ to women,” Zahra Joya, Rukhshana Media founder and a gender equity activist, told the author.

The international community must remember that women and children are victimized further every time the Taliban prevent an aid dollar from reaching intended beneficiaries.

This trend has only grown with the passage of time and the shift of global attention elsewhere. Between January and May 2023, the Taliban's intrusion in the work of nongovernmental organizations operating in country contributed to “a steady decline in humanitarian access.” This includes a 32% increase in

“incidents,” compared with the same timeframe in 2022, according to the July 2023 [SIGAR report](#).

Meanwhile, levels of hunger are so grave that desperate women are forced into [begging on the streets](#) and [outside bakeries](#), [selling their children](#) and/or [organs](#), and other forms of exploitation, according to reports from multiple media outlets including *The Guardian*, NPR, and Rukhshana.

The economic hardship resulting from most women’s inability to work outside the home or access humanitarian aid has caused many families to face an unimaginable decision: whether to send their children to labor under unsafe conditions in coal mines, garbage dumps, [brick factories](#), and [street markets](#) or at other physically intensive jobs. Child labor and other forms of exploitation have been a longstanding concern in Afghanistan, but current economic challenges and the inaccessibility of humanitarian assistance along with [record levels](#) of poverty and food insecurity have [exacerbated](#) the practice.



A 4-year-old Afghan girl sleeps after work in a brick factory on the outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistan, Aug. 17, 2022. (AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi)

One in four children reported being asked to work outside the home to support their families in a Save the Children [survey](#) published in September 2022. It also showed that only 3% of families were able to meet basic needs. Well over a million Afghan children are currently engaged in some form of child labor in Afghanistan, both [Save the Children](#) and [UNICEF](#) estimates reveal.

Like other superficial promises, the Taliban previously expressed a desire to eliminate child labor, but current data show the opposite has actually occurred. For example, take the [coal sector](#), where a small-statured child can more easily maneuver tunnels and other small spaces than an adult. The Taliban [benefit](#) from this as [demand is growing](#) both internally and from neighboring countries like China, [Iran](#), and [Pakistan](#). Most of the children navigating these dark, narrow mine shafts work 10 hours a day or more, contributing to the 10,000 tons of coal that the Ministry of Mining and Petroleum reports are being exported daily, according to an [NPR analysis](#).

Violence against women and children

Violence against women and girls, long endemic in Afghanistan, has worsened significantly because of Taliban corruption and kleptocracy.

Talibs across all levels of the regime's hierarchy are eagerly spending money on bride prices to acquire wives. Women are a marker of status and authority for the Taliban and many other ideological groups built on corruption and patriarchy.

Though a December 2021 [decree](#) by the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, gave the perception that forced marriage was outlawed, risk of early marriages has [jumped significantly](#) in the country over the last two years.

The United Nations [defines](#) violence against women and girls as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women and girls, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. Violence against women and girls encompasses, but is not limited to, physical, sexual, and psychological violence occurring in the family or within the general community and perpetrated or condoned by the state.”

The fact that corrupt Taliban members can afford to spend significant sums on acquiring wives has created the ironic dynamic of causing bride prices to climb, according to Dr. Valerie Hudson, author and Professor of Political Science at Texas A&M University's Bush School of Government and Public Service. This Neanderthal practice of essentially “buying women” increases financial pressures on other men in society (especially lower-level Taliban fighters) who want a wife, further incentivizing corruption and human rights abuses.

“You give legitimacy by what you can give these men.... When you are not able to do so, you lose power.”

– Valerie Hudson

Author and Professor of Political Science at Texas A&M University's Bush School of Government and Public Service

The Taliban's acquisition of wives – often through force and the manipulation of a family's desperation – is also leveraged to collect on debts or bolster support from loyalists. A [Wall Street Journal](#) examination of the Taliban's use of forced marriage described the current reality as often amounting “to kidnapping and rape.”

Unable to feed their families or access lifesaving humanitarian assistance because of corruption, [distraught parents](#) have even made the [agonizing choice](#) of [selling their children](#) (mostly their daughters, [infants](#), and [unborn babies](#)) in an attempt to ward off starvation and repay debts. As Hudson described bluntly, “the minute there becomes food insecurity, your daughter becomes a commodity.”

With few education and employment prospects available to young women and adolescent girls because of the Taliban's gender apartheid, fearful families have also pursued forced marriage as a means to safeguard their daughters and sisters from Taliban acquisition. “During the previous government, when girls were attending schools and universities, the rate of forced marriages had decreased. Now they are rising again,” a former government prosecutor [told](#) *The Guardian*.

“Credible reports” of female children, some “as young as 20 days old” offered up for future marriage were documented by [UNICEF](#) shortly after the Taliban's return to power in 2021. And [Voice of America](#) reported that “in the [first] eight months since the Taliban took control of the country, more than 120,000 children are feared to have been bartered for some sort of financial incentive, according to an analysis made by several aid agencies.”

Women and girls forced into marriage face significant risks to their health and well-being. These include, but aren't limited to, sexual assault and exploitation; marital rape; forced labor and domestic servitude; human trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence; lack of choices and access to health and reproductive services; early pregnancy and [pre- and postnatal complications](#); and [mental health challenges](#).

If you're not going to school, you are going to be married.

– Pashtana Durrani

Advocate and Founder, Learn Afghanistan

Perhaps the most vicious paradox in the horrifying treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan is the fact that the Taliban are spending significant resources on acquiring spouses as status symbols while forcing expectant mothers – including adolescent girls – to face the [grave odds](#) of surviving childbirth.

Furthermore, access to justice for gender-based violence survivors (including those coerced into early and forced marriage) has been essentially [dismantled and replaced](#) with an archaic interpretation of Sharia law that often rewards abusers. In the version of “justice” practiced by the corrupt and misogynistic Taliban, [crimes](#) against women are often tolerated and at times incentivized.

Women's shelters and safe houses have been [looted](#) and seized by Taliban members for other purposes, and/or [shuttered](#). Thousands of women – many survivors of horrific acts of domestic abuse – have seen their [divorces nullified](#). Those who have remarried since their separation now live in fear of being punished for their second marriage, which the Taliban view as adultery, a crime punishable [by stoning](#). Others have been [forced back](#) into the homes of their abusers, ordered to marry their rapists, lashed in public, or imprisoned for falsified crimes including “running away from home” and “prostitution.”

Many of these women and girls face additional threats of harassment, assault, arrest, and femicide, a vicious cycle of revictimization. Arrests of women attempting to flee gender-based violence have risen, according to multiple accounts from survivors, lawyers, and social workers [published](#) in the *Washington Post* in January 2023.

Erosion of essential services

Two years into their current reign, the Taliban have demonstrated that they are incapable of governing.

While some influencers in the international sphere have given the Taliban credit for their swift ability to collect taxes and institute a façade of security and order, most of these actions have solely benefitted the regime and their loyalists rather than the Afghan people at large. As a result, essential government services and the populations who need them most have not only been ignored but intentionally undermined or exploited for personal gain by the Taliban.

Regardless of early promises for diversity and inclusion in [government roles](#), the Taliban have been quick to reward those most loyal to their objectives with civil service employment and authority.

Before the Taliban's return to power, women made up nearly [22%](#) of the workforce, including [21%](#) of the civil services, and [27%](#) of the Afghan legislative body, above the global average, according to World Bank data.

But from September 2021, women faced [bans](#) or other significant gender barriers on most forms of employment. Qualified civil servants, [administrators](#), and [educators](#) are being forcibly removed from their jobs and [replaced by Taliban members](#), many of whom [lack the education and expertise](#) for the roles they have been assigned, reports regularly document.

Basic infrastructure remains grossly underfunded or misappropriated in favor of strengthening the Taliban's wealth and control over society, despite the collection of [billions of dollars](#) in taxes, customs, and other revenues over the past two years. Communities in provinces throughout the country have seen a drastic rollback or complete closure of critical government services. This includes a realignment of priorities across many ministries, with an emphasis on propaganda, allegiance, and fear.

For example, the Taliban entirely dissolved the Ministry of Women's Affairs, [replacing](#) it with the [reestablished](#), ruthless Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.

The Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Affairs now prioritizes support for Taliban fighters, cutting or stopping payments for military widows and others who received it from the prior government, various accounts [show](#).

Families of Taliban suicide bombers have been honored and compensated by leadership in [highly publicized displays](#), while female-headed households are now [among the most vulnerable populations](#) in Afghanistan. Less than a year after the Taliban takeover, the World Food Program [classified](#) women-led homes as nearly "100% food insufficient," with many also facing displacement.

Perhaps one of the most concerning examples of the Taliban's abuse of country resources and its impact on women and children is the regime's unrelenting assault on quality education access.

“Good government is health and education.”

– *Sima Samar*

Former Afghan Minister of Women's Affairs

In addition to the outrageous ban on secondary and tertiary study for adolescent girls and young women in Afghanistan, the Taliban have made swift work of dismantling existing education infrastructure, including the widespread transition of secular schools into [religious madrassas](#).

Teacher training centers [have been](#) dissolved. State funds have been appropriated for the expansion of Islamic education. And everything from [public classrooms](#) to [privately owned companies](#) have seen their property and assets commandeered for the expansion of the madrassa system.

The Taliban have replaced contemporary subjects including science, mathematics, social studies, and languages from the national curriculum, with instruction instead revised to “maintain and expand their ideological interests. This includes the stated goal of planting “seeds of hatred against Western countries ... in students' minds,” according to [analysis](#) from *Hasht-e-Subh* and *The Diplomat*. None of this should be surprising, especially as the Taliban's name itself is derived from the Pashto word for “knowledge seekers” or “students,” and madrassas have long been a staple of the Taliban's strategy in proliferating their ideology, expanding their ranks, and establishing new generations of jihadis.

As during the Taliban's rise to power in the 1990s, the utilization and expansion of madrassas allow the Taliban to manipulate and indoctrinate young minds. By eliminating support for critical thinking, quality education, and freedom of expression, the Taliban are keen to once again grow a steady pipeline of young foot soldiers loyal to their brutal objectives in Afghanistan, [across the region](#), and around the world.

Additionally, the Taliban are using state resources to harass, humiliate, and intimidate students and education staff. This includes the removal and replacement of existing school administrators with religious stalwarts. “The Taliban's virtue and vice ministry has in some schools instructed principals to

examine the bodies of girls as young as 10 or 11 for signs of puberty – and to expel from school any girls who appear older or whose bodies are beginning to mature,” Belquis Ahmadi, Senior Program Officer at the United States Institute for Peace, [noted](#).

In addition to the blatant attack on educational access, the Taliban’s use of corruption and kleptocracy is also intensifying the bleak state of health care within the country. Again, women and children are enduring most of the fallout.

While medical access was by no means perfect before the Taliban’s return to power in 2021, “Afghanistan had made considerable progress over two decades in increasing the coverage of health services and improving some health indicators,” according to a 2022 article in [The Lancet](#).

Already teetering on the edge of a collapse because of the international withdrawal and deep reliance on international assistance, Afghanistan’s health care system faces serious staff and resource shortfalls as a result of the Taliban’s corrupt approach to governance and indifference to human suffering.

The Taliban have [prioritized](#) security and military spending over the most essential needs of the Afghan population, according to an analysis from *Zan Times*, even as an economic crisis has pushed more than half of Afghan households into acute food insecurity, growing instances of water scarcity, and rising rates of maternal and infant mortality and preventable diseases.

UNICEF [estimated](#) that in 2023, 875,000 children required treatment for severe acute malnutrition and 840,000 pregnant and breastfeeding mothers experienced acute malnutrition.

Though the Taliban regularly claim that the West ultimately ignored and abandoned Afghanistan’s health care infrastructure, the vast majority of the country’s remaining medical sites are solely propped up by international support. This includes salaries ([paid by UNICEF](#)) for desperately needed health care workers as need only continues to grow.

But violence and intimidation, high taxes, and other financial demands on nonprofits and medical facilities; restrictions on women’s free movement; and shortages in trained health care staff have left many of the most critical patients without any chance of receiving the proper care necessary to survive.

Many international nonprofits and U.N.-backed programs have had to scale back efforts or leave Afghanistan entirely due to funding challenges and serious safety and transparency concerns stemming from the Taliban’s interference in humanitarian aid. This has further impacted [access to care](#) for many vulnerable Afghans, according to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

As a result of funding gaps and human capital and other resource shortages, “more than 260 clinics reportedly went out of service in June, depriving 2 million people of health care,” Voice of America [reported](#) in August 2023.

Because of widespread barriers, 88% of respondents to a Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) [survey](#) from 2022 reported they “delayed, suspended, or forewent seeking medical care and treatments.” About 52% believed that a relative had died “due to lack or delayed access to health care.”

At the same time, health care clinics have seen a considerable surge in need. UNICEF-funded health facilities alone saw a 15% to 50% increase in patients, according to a [Washington Post report](#). And over 300 districts across the country face significant levels of unmet needs – including nutrition, health care,

and water, sanitation and hygiene – according to the [Revised Humanitarian Response Plan \(June – December 2023\)](#) from the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

This, in turn, puts additional strain on remaining services. Doctors and nurses work absurdly long hours – with many going weeks and months without pay. Power cuts have increased in frequency, impacting [lifesaving medical equipment](#) like ventilators and infant incubators.



An Afghan woman feeds her sick son as he undergoes treatment in the malnutrition ward of the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital, in Kabul, Afghanistan, Feb. 24, 2022. (AP Photo/Hussein Malla)

In one of the most haunting reflections of the dire state of health care access in Afghanistan, distressed families have [turned to opium](#) and other [sedatives](#) as a cost-effective means to alleviate pain and hunger related ailments, even for children.

While health care workers in many instances have been granted waivers from the broad bans on women's employment, restrictions in education and workforce training are slowly eliminating women from essential medical roles. On several occasions, female medical students were [prevented](#) from taking final and exit exams required to practice as [doctors](#) or pursue specialties, recent UNAMA reports [show](#).

Make no mistake, the medical professionals who courageously continue to care for their patients amid overwhelming stressors and significant personal risks are nothing short of heroes. But the Taliban continue to do little to change health care outcomes for the better, directly affecting the lives of millions of children and women across the country, especially those in rural areas. And over the long term, this has a profound impact on medical services for the entire Afghan population, regardless of gender.

"We don't have equipment, and there is a lack of trained staff, especially female staff. When we are looking after so many in serious conditions, which child should we check on first? There's nothing we can do but watch babies die," an Afghan nurse identified as Sultani said in a 2023 [BBC report](#).

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health continues to [propagate a message](#) that the health system is not “in an emergency situation.” Yet, at the same time, senior Taliban leaders [have applied for and been granted](#) travel ban exemptions for medical treatment in countries like Turkey because adequate care wasn't available in Afghanistan.

THE WORLD HAS A ROLE TO PLAY

With no apparent remorse, the Taliban continue their daily assault on the lives of Afghanistan's people. And it is women and children who shoulder most of the impact.

Though international leverage has changed, the United States, U.N. member states, corporate and philanthropic institutions, and the international community at large still have roles to play, particularly in support of Afghan women and children.

Every day that passes without action to strengthen penalties and pressure on Taliban leaders only serves the Taliban. The policy recommendations outlined below provide ways key institutions and governments can more impactfully confront the Taliban's human rights abuses and the international actors who enable their nefarious actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States and U.N. member states must collaboratively enforce harsher penalties on Taliban leaders responsible for Afghanistan's gender apartheid and other human rights abuses.

Though leverage has changed since the international withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, mechanisms exist to hold individual Taliban members to account for their egregious violation of human rights. [With strength in numbers](#), U.S. leadership and multilateral cooperation are especially imperative.

The 35 countries (including the United States) that have adopted the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act should collectively designate the Taliban leaders responsible for gender apartheid and other human rights abuses. The [Global Magnitsky Act](#) allows the United States government (and other countries that have similar legislation) to impose targeted sanctions and visa bans on individuals responsible for corruption, kleptocracy, and human rights abuses.

U.N. member states that don't yet have a Magnitsky law on record should mobilize on the development and passage of similar legislation, again collaboratively designating Taliban leaders.

Most importantly, the United States and others must apply greater pressure on existing allies who continue to enable Taliban corruption by way of travel waivers, access to regional and global markets, and the safeguarding of assets within their financial systems.

These actions would not only magnify the international community's ability to confront the abuse and corruption of the Taliban but would also deter other malign actors around the world.

The United Nations and national governments should formally expand the definition of apartheid to include gender-based discrimination and segregation.

Gender apartheid should be recognized as a crime against humanity within international and national legal frameworks. The global community has yet to formally expand the definition of apartheid beyond

race to reflect other severe forms of state institutionalized prejudice and exclusion based on identity. This minimizes global responsibility and limits legal and multilateral mechanisms available to counter repressive regimes built on systematic discrimination.

The Taliban have leveraged gender-based subjugation as a cornerstone of their repressive rule and are unrelenting in their dehumanization of Afghan women and girls. Of the dozens of restrictive edicts imposed on the Afghan people by the Taliban, approximately [two-thirds](#) focus on strategically undermining the rights and status of female members of society.

This policy of oppression on the basis of gender in many ways mirrors the egregious racial discrimination and segregation that existed in South Africa and South West Africa from 1948 to the 1990s. The U.N. Human Rights Council [stated](#) that the current situation in Afghanistan “constitutes gender persecution and an institutionalized framework of gender apartheid” in a July 2023 report.

Advocacy campaigns led by Afghan and Iranian women – like [End Gender Apartheid Today](#) – continue to do incredible work in driving this effort. As the Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Iran continue to expand on their repression of women and girls in their respective countries, global solidarity is needed now more than ever.

Governments, intergovernmental organizations, and philanthropic foundations should increase support for women-led organizations in Afghanistan.

One of the most impactful ways that the international community can stand behind their [condemnations](#) of the Taliban’s actions is by expanding support for women-led organizations that courageously continue their work in Afghanistan.

In the face of extreme gender-based oppression, personal security risks, and other human rights abuses, dedicated Afghans, including women-led organizations, continue to push to fill community voids in basic infrastructure, critical services, and essential needs.

However, many of these efforts are excluded from formal aid pipelines, partnerships, and capacity-building opportunities. About [77% of women’s organizations in Afghanistan](#) didn’t receive any funding in 2022, according to UN Women and the International Rescue Committee. Many were forced to cease existing projects or operations in their entirety.

The funding shortfalls that prevent these organizations from reaching vulnerable populations has dire consequences for the provinces they serve, particularly as the Taliban continue to repress the status and well-being of women and children. Moreover, lack of support from the international community undermines the organizations’ negotiating power with local Taliban leaders. This, again, undermines their ability to access key populations in need of assistance.

Governments and intergovernmental organizations must include a wider range of Afghan stakeholders in all convenings, hearings, and negotiations focusing on the future of Afghanistan. These opportunities include, but should not be limited to, congressional and parliamentary hearings, regional and ministerial summits, and U.N.-hosted forums.

The [vast majority](#) of peace negotiations on Afghanistan from 2005 to 2020 excluded female representation. While some space has been created for Afghan democracy and women’s rights advocates to be heard, more must be done to expand inclusion and representation.

Governments and international organizations have offered de facto recognition to the Taliban by yielding to their preferences and meeting exclusively with the group's representatives, often with male-only delegations. Going forward, global leaders must put words of solidarity into action by ensuring the presence and perspectives in international discourse on Afghanistan of those most impacted by the Taliban's return to power.

Women, ethnic and religious minorities, civil society leaders, and members of the Afghan diaspora should be invited to participate. Special representatives of governments and international organizations to Afghanistan should also regularly consult with a wide variety of Afghan stakeholders, prioritizing intergenerational, regional, and socioeconomic diversity.

Media and philanthropic organizations should support Afghan-led civil society initiatives that address information gaps and collect data on women and girls.

Taliban censorship, bans on freedom of expression, and waning international attention have [decimated journalism](#) and independent research in Afghanistan. Over the last two years alone, “more than 300 media outlets have closed, and many journalists and media activists have left the country,” according to [BBC News](#).

Amid the void, courageous Afghan-led outlets like [Zan Times](#), [Rukhshana Media](#), [Zawia News](#), and [Afghan Peace Watch](#) are doing tremendous work to fill information gaps and amplify the experiences of vulnerable Afghans across diverse provinces. This includes virtual trainings and mentorship programs in support of new and citizen journalists in addition to investigative reports and data collection efforts.

But these platforms and others like them cannot continue to do this vital work alone. Increased investment and opportunities for partnerships can lend an enormous boost to the capacity and reach of these important outlets, especially in their efforts to document the experiences of women and children and other marginalized populations.



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