



Futures in the Balance:



**Taking Action to Ensure
Afghan Women's & Girls'
Rights Under Taliban Rule**

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As Afghanistan marks one year since the Taliban took control, the humanitarian and human rights situation in the country is devastatingly grim, particularly for Afghan women and girls. Severe food insecurity, an economic crisis, human rights abuses targeting women and girls, and overt gender discrimination have brought Afghanistan to the brink of humanitarian collapse and eroded decades of progress towards development and gender equality. The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and the international community's shift in attention and resources to the conflict in Ukraine continue to exacerbate the breakdown of safety, rights, and assistance for Afghan women and girls. As this situation further deteriorates, the U.S. must show leadership and take action to mobilize the international community to center gender equality and human rights in all diplomatic, development, peacebuilding, and humanitarian engagement in Afghanistan.

THE DEVASTATING IMPACT OF THE TALIBAN'S HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES AGAINST AFGHAN WOMEN & GIRLS

Country-wide food insecurity impacted [95 percent of Afghans](#) by early 2022 and [nearly 19 million people](#) continue to face massive shortages of food as of August 2022. Almost [12 million](#) Afghan women and girls require urgent humanitarian assistance and [nearly 100 percent](#) of female-led households are not getting enough to eat. Due to economic and security challenges, humanitarian organizations—especially local and national groups—continue to face hurdles getting assistance into and around the country during a time when at least [70% of households](#) are unable to meet their basic needs. Taliban-imposed restrictions on and harassment of female aid workers also remains an obstacle to ensuring aid reaches Afghan women and girls in need and that it is delivered in a manner that is safe, culturally appropriate, and aligned with best practices.

A key factor driving the humanitarian catastrophe and creating obstacles for the humanitarian response has been the devastating [economic crisis](#). Unemployment, poverty, and food prices have risen dramatically, particularly affecting Afghan women and girls. Simultaneously, dire warnings issued in advance of the U.S. withdrawal from women's rights activists inside and outside of Afghanistan about the drastic rollback of Afghan women's and girls' political, economic, and social rights have come to fruition. While prior to the Taliban takeover, women comprised [22 percent](#) of Afghanistan's workforce, Taliban restrictions on movement—such as [requiring a male guardian](#) (maharam) outside the home and the demand that [women cover their faces in public](#)—are inhibiting women from participating in the workforce, exacerbating the economic strain on women and their families, and intensifying humanitarian needs. [Additional policies](#) undermining Afghan women's and girls' freedoms of movement and assembly, such as the violent crackdown, forced disappearances, imprisonment, and torture of [women protestors](#), and the [reestablishment of the Ministry of Vice and Virtue](#), are forcing them to withdraw from economic, social, and political life. Afghan women belonging to ethnic minorities, such as the [Hazaras](#) and [Tajiks](#), experience double discrimination, as do [lesbian, bisexual or transgender women](#) in light of explicit Taliban pledges to target LGBTI people.

The confluence of these factors is resulting in many families increasingly resorting to [negative coping mechanisms](#), such as selling their young daughters into marriage and forcing children to work. The Taliban's continued [ban on girls' secondary education](#), despite their international assurances to the

contrary, makes it the only country in the world to deny girls this right and further increases the risks of child and forced marriage and early, unsafe pregnancy. Afghan women and girls are also experiencing an increased risk of [gender-based violence \(GBV\)](#), including intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual assault. Indeed, [nine out of 10](#) Afghan women experience at least one form of GBV in their lifetimes.



Against this backdrop, the sharp decrease in development assistance and other international funding has severely limited the work of Afghan women leaders and local women's rights organizations. While the local organizations that still operate serve as essential drivers of aid distribution, the shutdown of funding has led to the closure of services critical to women and girls, including programs to address GBV that were largely supported by U.S. Government aid and now almost entirely ceased. The implications are alarming—by May, [only 9%](#) of those programs targeted for GBV prevention and response activities in 2022 had been reached and as of August, [only 0.3%](#) of the GBV funding appeal was met. Other essential services for women and girls previously offered by local service providers such as [sexual and reproductive health care](#) also face severe challenges due to both shortages in funding and Taliban-imposed requirements [banning women from seeking health care](#) without a male guardian or with male medical staff.

PERSISTING PROBLEMS WITH U.S. GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Despite supportive rhetoric, the U.S. response to the crisis in Afghanistan has failed to make the rights and protection of women and girls a priority and has lacked a critically needed gender lens. While it is the only country in the world to have passed comprehensive [women, peace, and security \(WPS\) legislation](#), the U.S. neither advocated for the Taliban to meaningfully include women in any diplomatic delegations nor were they meaningfully included in the U.S.'s own delegations during dialogues with the Taliban prior to withdrawal. Warnings from Afghan women leaders and activists about a Taliban return and the impact this would have on their rights were unheeded.

Following the collapse of the Afghan government, the U.S. Government largely failed to evacuate the Afghan women leaders it had supported, financed, and partnered with during 20 years of engagement. Priority was placed on those in the [Special Immigrant Visa \(SIV\)](#) pipeline, with eligibility requirements effectively resulting in a pool of applicants that was overwhelmingly male. In fact, only an estimated [6-10%](#) of SIV primary applicants are women. For the women who were evacuated, many anecdotally reported that conditions at "lily pads" in third countries or "safe havens" in the U.S. left them vulnerable to sexual harassment and GBV with very few systematic mechanisms to effectively mitigate or prevent such abuses or access support. Other concerns included the poor access to specialized medical services, such as sexual and reproductive health care and mental health care.

To address some of the public criticism regarding the U.S.'s handling of the particular concerns of Afghan women, the State Department appointed a Senior Advisor for Women and Girls Issues within the Department's Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE) team and a Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights. The State Department also launched a consultative platform for Afghan women and civil society in early August 2022 to provide broader opportunities for the U.S. Government to engage a range of stakeholders. However, to effectively shape key policy positions and elevate a gender lens in the U.S.'s response to this ongoing crisis, these roles and the consultative mechanism need additional resources and political support.

Time for Action:

U.S. Responsibility Toward Afghan Women & Girls

The U.S. and the international community have made various commitments to uphold the rights of Afghan women and girls; however, their actions since the Taliban's takeover have yielded nominal results. While not unlimited, the U.S. can exert significant leverage to influence the Taliban's treatment of women and girls and address the pressing humanitarian and human rights crises. The U.S. must urgently prioritize the following:

1 Full restoration of women and girl's rights, including their right to education, employment, movement, participation in public life, and freedom from violence. Reversal of Taliban policies that undermine respect for these rights should be raised in all engagements and be a pre-condition of formal recognition. The U.S. should also use its influence on the UN Human Rights Council to advocate for an accountability mechanism for the human rights violations and crimes being committed against women and girls.

2 Accountability for Afghan women's rights as part of diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, including elevating the U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights as well as other key U.S. officials to demand:

- Achievement of benchmarks on women's rights and a quota of Afghan women's representation, including from civil society, with full, equal, and meaningful participation on Taliban delegations as essential to diplomatic engagement;
- Inclusion of gender equality and women's rights as a standing agenda item at all diplomatic engagements with the Taliban; and
- Termination of the travel ban exemption for all Taliban officials currently under a travel ban and pushing for additional Taliban officials and entities responsible for rights abuses to be subject to targeted measures until they have reversed policies that undermine respect for women's and girls' rights.

3 Equitable and non-discriminatory distribution of humanitarian aid, including ensuring that relief services reach Afghan women and girls, as well as all marginalized and vulnerable groups throughout the country. The U.S. should fully fund and scale programs that effectively support livelihoods, food security, GBV, health, education, and peacebuilding with a gender-lens, and:

- Require gender analysis and consultation with Afghan women and girls in both urban and rural areas in the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of programming;
- Provide flexible funding and surge support, including direct grants to local women's rights organizations and the deployment of gender advisors, to address barriers to women and girls receiving food aid, healthcare, and GBV services; and
- Ensure full, consistent access for female humanitarian workers by negotiating directives assuring their ability to provide unimpeded assistance, and increasing funding and pressure for humanitarian organizations to recruit, hire, and support Afghan female staff.

4

Urgently addressing the economic crisis that threatens the collapse of the Afghan economy. While U.S. sanctions and asset freezes rightly seek to ensure that aid does not fall into Taliban hands, the devastating financial and humanitarian impact of Taliban rule on the Afghan people requires immediate action from the U.S., including:

- Leveraging diplomatic channels at multiple levels to reinstate women's rights to work, travel, and move freely to restore their ability to participate in the economy and generate income;
- Supporting innovative initiatives, including possible public-private partnerships, to expand employment opportunities and livelihoods for Afghan women;
- Developing creative Afghan-led solutions in partnership with Afghan economists, women's rights organizations, and other civil society groups to transparently utilize the \$7 billion in seized Central Bank assets to stabilize the economy, ease the cash crisis, and invest in an equitable and inclusive Afghan economy and society; and
- Replenishing and resuming development assistance that is currently on hold, recognizing the ways in which the pause in development assistance is driving humanitarian needs and contributing to the economic crisis, and moving away from a humanitarian-only response while ensuring that this assistance equitably supports the needs of the Afghan people.

5

Direct flexible funding to Afghan women's rights organizations and Afghan women leaders to continue critical functions, such as operating shelters for GBV survivors and at-risk women and girls, distributing humanitarian relief, and supporting women human rights defenders, including by:

- Establishing direct grants to Afghan women's organizations to enable them to continue operations and avoid harassment and closures under Taliban regulations;
- Restoring development programs previously funded by the U.S. Government that were paused or shut down entirely, including programs supporting Afghan women's and girls' rights and organizations focused on delivering assistance to Afghan women and girls; and
- Partnering with women's funds and trusted multilateral mechanisms, in consultation with a diverse Afghan women leaders and women's rights organizations, to support their distribution of aid coupled with other services, such as advocacy, awareness raising, engagement in activism, peacebuilding, economic recovery, and development planning.

6

Ensure the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has the leadership and political support to implement the gender components of its mandate. The U.S. should leverage its role on the UN Security Council to ensure a UNAMA reset that holds the mission and the incoming Special Representative to the Secretary-General (SRSG) accountable for:

- Partnering with a diverse range of Afghan women human rights defenders and women-led organizations to consistently demand the restoration of women's and girls' rights;
- Restoring UNAMA's political leadership and full implementation of its WPS mandate, including as part of its dispute resolution functions, and championing gender equality in humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development action; and

- Advocating for UNAMA's close coordination with the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan and ensuring his findings and recommendations are reflected throughout UNAMA's work.

7

Expansion of evacuation and resettlement for Afghan women human rights defenders and other at-risk or marginalized groups, such as Hazara women and LGBTI individuals. The U.S. should:

- Increase evacuations of at-risk women and their families and expand visa categories to establish humanitarian parole or a priority visa category for vulnerable Afghan women; and
- Embed permanent gender advisors at facilities housing Afghan evacuees and those awaiting resettlement to implement formal protection mechanisms, including systematic GBV prevention, mitigation, screening, referral, and support and specialized health services.

Summary of Recommendations:

1

Full restoration of women and girl's rights, including their right to education, employment, movement, participation in public life, and freedom from violence.

4

Urgently addressing the economic crisis that threatens the collapse of the Afghan economy.

2

Accountability for Afghan women's rights as part of diplomatic engagement with the Taliban.

5

Direct flexible funding to Afghan women's rights organizations and Afghan women leaders to continue critical functions

3

Equitable and non-discriminatory distribution of humanitarian aid, including ensuring that relief services reach Afghan women and girls.

6

Ensure the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has the leadership and political support to implement the gender components of its mandate.

7

Expansion of evacuation and resettlement for Afghan women human rights defenders and other at-risk or marginalized groups, such as Hazara women and LGBTI individuals.

Conclusion

The progress Afghan women and girls made—with U.S. support and investment—in securing their rights and forging their equal place in society is recognized as one of the proudest achievements of the two decades prior to the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. Afghan women who became prominent leaders, often partnering with U.S. colleagues, were shocked that their warnings about the devastating consequences of a U.S. withdrawal were ignored. The ramifications of this are now cascading, as women predicted, throughout Afghanistan’s society and economy. Afghan women and their allies are demanding action to restore respect for their rights and to meet the humanitarian needs that disproportionately affect them – this requires concerted prioritization and political will by the U.S. Government. The Biden Administration and U.S. Congress must act now and put Afghan women and girls at the center of their diplomatic, development, and humanitarian engagement in Afghanistan. It is the U.S.’ moral duty, as well as in the U.S. national security interest, to counter the Taliban’s gender apartheid and advance security and prosperity in Afghanistan. One cannot be achieved without the other.

This policy brief was developed by the U.S. Policy Advocates for Afghan Women and Girls Working Group. For more information, please contact Gayatri Patel at the Women’s Refugee Commission, gayatri@wrcommission.org.



**Alliance for
Peacebuilding**



GIWPS Georgetown Institute for
Women, Peace and Security



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