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## The Impact of Taliban Policies on Women's Mental Health and Social Identity

**Gagandeep Kaur**

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Punjabi University Patiala

Email, gkaur3379@gmail.com

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**DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20111609>**

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 22-04-2026

**Published:** 10-05-2026

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**Keywords:**

*Afghan Women, Taliban Policies, Mental Health, Social Identity, Gender Oppression*

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### ABSTRACT

Since the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in August 2021, Afghan women have experienced severe restrictions on education, employment, and mobility. These policies have not only affected their social roles but also deeply influenced their psychological well-being and identity. This paper examines the impact of Taliban policies on Afghan women's mental health and social identity. The paper discusses the how systemic gender-based oppression, social isolation, and fear have created conditions of widespread anxiety, depression, and loss of self-worth among women. The study also explores how the ban on education and employment has reshaped women's sense of identity, forcing many to redefine their roles within families and communities. The paper analyzes both the psychological and social dimensions of this crisis. The paper discusses the urgent need for mental health support, gender-sensitive policies, and global solidarity for Afghan women. The paper concludes that without women's inclusion and empowerment, Afghanistan's social and mental well-being will remain fragile, affecting the entire nation's development and stability.

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### Introduction

After the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan entered a new phase of political and social transformation. One of the most visible and painful outcomes of this change has been the drastic decline in women's rights and social participation. The Taliban government imposed a series of



restrictive policies that limit women's freedom to study, work, travel, and participate in public life. These restrictions have reshaped not only women's daily experiences but also their mental health and sense of identity in society. Women who were once teachers, journalists, students, and leaders suddenly found themselves excluded from public spaces. Schools and universities were closed for girls beyond grade six, female employees were dismissed from government jobs, and women were banned from most forms of employment except in healthcare. Even visiting parks, gyms, or traveling without a male guardian became forbidden (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Such policies have turned Afghanistan into one of the most gender-segregated countries in the world, creating a sense of collective trauma among women. Mental health in Afghanistan was already fragile due to decades of conflict, displacement, and poverty. However, the Taliban's gender policies have made the situation much worse. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, there has been a sharp rise in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress among women since 2021 (UNAMA, 2023).

Many women describe feeling "invisible," "hopeless," and "disconnected" from their communities. The loss of purpose, social recognition, and autonomy has damaged their emotional well-being and self-esteem. Social identity the way individuals define themselves based on their social roles and group membership has also undergone major change. Under the Taliban's gender ideology, women's identity is primarily defined through domestic roles such as motherhood and care giving. For educated or urban women who had developed professional and civic identities during the previous two decades, this sudden return to confinement feels like erasure. The suppression of women's voices in education and media has also limited their ability to express themselves or influence public discourse.

### **Ban on Girls' Secondary and Higher Education**

One of the most important and widely criticized actions by the Taliban government is their decision to stop girls from going to school after primary education. In September 2021, just weeks after taking power, the Taliban announced that secondary schools would be closed to girls. In December 2022, they went further, banning women from universities entirely (UNESCO, 2025). This made Afghanistan the only country in the world where women are officially prohibited from attending university. The scale of this deprivation is staggering. According to UNESCO (2025), approximately 2.2 million Afghan girls are currently out of school as a direct result of Taliban policies. Millions more have been prevented from enrolling in or completing university programs. The educational ambitions of an entire generation of Afghan women have been suppressed.



The psychological impact of this ban has been profound and well-documented. Education serves multiple roles in the life of young people: it is a source of knowledge and skills, but it is also a key site of socialization, peer connection, and identity formation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Students develop their sense of self partly through their membership in educational communities, their relationships with teachers and classmates, and their aspirations for the future. When Afghan girls are suddenly removed from this environment, they lose not only their education but also the social networks, daily routines, and future orientations that gave structure and meaning to their lives.

Afghan women and girls since 2021 consistently shows high rates of psychological distress associated with the educational ban. The conducted a cross-sectional study of women in urban Afghan areas and found significantly elevated rates of depression and anxiety among those who had been enrolled in school or university before the Taliban takeover. Participants reported feelings of hopelessness about the future, a loss of purpose and direction, and a sense of being trapped. Many described their situation using language of grief, as though they were mourning not a person but a life they had expected to live (Ahmadi et al. 2023).

The ban on education has also had severe effects on women's social identity. Being a student, a learner, a future professional, was a central part of the identity of millions of Afghan girls and young women. The removal of this identity has left many without a clear sense of who they are or what their role in society might be. For those who had already completed some higher education, the ban on employment compounds this identity loss: they possess qualifications that they are now forbidden to use. Underground and informal educational networks have emerged as a response to the ban. Women and girls in many Afghan cities participate in secret classes held in private homes, and online platforms have provided some access to international educational resources. However, these alternatives are limited in reach, and participation carries real risks of discovery and punishment. The existence of these networks nonetheless speaks to the deep value Afghan women place on education and their determination to maintain it as part of their identity even under repression (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

### **Restrictions on Employment and Workforce Participation**

Alongside the ban on education, the Taliban's systematic exclusion of women from the workforce has had enormous consequences for women's well-being and identity. Initially, the Taliban allowed women to work in limited sectors, particularly healthcare, citing practical necessity. However, over time the restrictions expanded dramatically. By April 2022, women had been removed from most government jobs. In December 2022, the Taliban banned Afghan women from working for NGOs. In April 2023, this



ban was extended to include women working for United Nations agencies operating within Afghanistan (Al Jazeera, 2023).

The economic consequences of this exclusion are severe. Many Afghan households depend on women's income, particularly those headed by widows or women whose male relatives are unable to work. The sudden removal of women from the workforce has pushed many families deeper into poverty. However, the psychological and identity-related consequences are equally significant. Work, like education, is not only a source of income but also a key component of how adults understand themselves and their place in society. For professional women, their careers were central to their sense of self-worth, competence, and social contribution. Women who had spent years training as doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, and journalists, and who then practiced these professions, had developed strong professional identities. To be suddenly told that they cannot work, not because of any failing of their own but simply because of their gender, is deeply damaging to self-esteem and psychological well-being.

Amnesty International (2025) documented numerous cases of professional women in Afghanistan experiencing severe psychological distress following the imposition of employment bans. Many described a profound sense of purposelessness and worthlessness. The concept of self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to achieve goals and contribute meaningfully to society, is central to mental health and well-being (Bandura, 1997). The Taliban's employment restrictions systematically undermine women's self-efficacy by removing the contexts in which they can demonstrate competence and make meaningful contributions. Financial dependency is another dimension of harm caused by employment bans. Women who had been economically independent found themselves suddenly reliant on male relatives for all financial support. This dependency not only creates material hardship but also shifts power dynamics within households in ways that can increase vulnerability to domestic violence and other forms of abuse. Research from conflict and post-conflict settings consistently shows that women's economic empowerment is closely linked to their safety within the home; its removal increases vulnerability (World Bank, 2022).

### **Mobility Restrictions and the Mahram Requirement**

The Taliban have also imposed severe restrictions on women's freedom of movement. Women are required to be accompanied by a male guardian, or mahram, for any travel beyond their immediate neighborhood. They are prohibited from traveling on their own in vehicles, from taking long-distance trips without male accompaniment, and in some provinces, from leaving their homes altogether without a male escort (UN Women, 2025). Dress codes requiring women to cover their faces and bodies fully are



strictly enforced in public, and violations can result in harassment or punishment. These mobility restrictions have far-reaching consequences for every aspect of women's lives. The practical effects include difficulty accessing healthcare, visiting family members, attending any available educational programs, and conducting basic daily business. Women who live in households without a suitable male guardian, including widows, women with disabled or absent husbands, and women whose male relatives have fled the country, are particularly severely affected and may be essentially confined to their homes.

The psychological effects of enforced immobility are significant. Freedom of movement is linked in psychological research to a sense of autonomy, independence, and personal control, all of which are foundational to mental health and well-being. When individuals lose the ability to move freely through their environment, feelings of confinement, helplessness, and anxiety tend to increase. In the context of Afghanistan, where women are already experiencing multiple other forms of oppression, mobility restrictions add another layer to a cumulative experience of control and subordination. The mahram requirement also carries powerful symbolic significance beyond its practical effects. It encodes a legal and social statement that women are not trusted to be in public spaces without male supervision, that they are inherently vulnerable or potentially inappropriate without male oversight, and that their presence in public is conditional upon male permission. This message is deeply harmful to women's sense of dignity and autonomy. Social identity theory suggests that the way others treat us, and the roles that social systems assign to us, significantly shapes our own understanding of who we are (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A system that defines women as fundamentally requiring male control communicates a message about their worth and capacity that can be internalized and become part of women's self-concept. UN Women reports that many Afghan women describe their restricted mobility as one of the most psychologically oppressive aspects of Taliban rule. The inability to visit friends and family, to go to public spaces for recreation or social interaction, or simply to move through the world as a free adult has profoundly intensified feelings of isolation, depression, and loss of self (UN Women 2025).

### **Exclusion from Media, Civic Life, and Public Spaces**

The Taliban's restrictions extend to the elimination of women's presence in public discourse and civic life. Women have been removed from positions in government, from public media roles, and from civil society organizations. Female journalists have been forced out of their professions. Women's voices no longer appear on television or radio in most contexts. There are no female members of the Taliban's government, and there are no formal mechanisms through which women can participate in or influence public decision-making (UNAMA, 2022). The exclusion of women from public life has profound effects



on both individual identity and collective social norms. At the individual level, women who had careers in journalism, politics, civil society, or media have lost roles that were central to their professional and personal identities. These were women who saw themselves as agents of change, who contributed to public discourse, who influenced how their society understood itself and its future. The removal of these roles constitutes what might be called a form of social death, a situation in which a person is still physically alive but their recognized social role and contribution have been eliminated.

At the collective level, the absence of women from public life sends a powerful message to younger generations about what roles are available to them. When girls grow up in a society where no women are visible in leadership, media, or civic roles, it shapes their understanding of what is possible for someone of their gender. Research on role models and aspirational identity consistently shows that visible representation matters for young people's development of ambition and self-concept (UN Women, 2024). The systematic removal of women from public visibility in Afghanistan thus has long-term consequences for the social identity of girls who are growing up under Taliban rule. Women are also excluded from parks, public sports facilities, and most forms of public recreation. These restrictions reduce their opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and the kinds of informal community engagement that contribute to psychological well-being and social belonging. The cumulative effect of exclusion from education, employment, public spaces, and civic life is a social world in which women are effectively invisible, confined to domestic roles and private spaces, and cut off from nearly all sources of social recognition and meaningful contribution.

### **Impact on Mental Health: Anxiety, Depression, and Trauma**

The mental health consequences of Taliban policies are severe and well-documented. Afghanistan's mental health situation was already challenging before 2021, given decades of armed conflict, displacement, poverty, and insecurity. However, the specific and targeted nature of gender-based restrictions has created a distinct mental health crisis for women that go beyond the general trauma of conflict. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA, 2022) and multiple independent researchers have documented sharp increases in depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation among Afghan women since the Taliban takeover. Their cross-sectional study that depression and anxiety were significantly more prevalent among women who had previously been employed or enrolled in education and were now unable to continue (Ahmadi et al. 2023). The sudden and total nature of the loss, combined with the lack of any prospect for improvement, creates conditions of what



psychologists call learned helplessness, a state in which individuals come to believe that no action they take can improve their situation, leading to passive withdrawal and depression (Seligman, 1975).

Many Afghan women interviewed by human rights organizations describe their mental state using phrases that reflect a deep loss of hope and purpose. They report feeling invisible, as though they no longer exist as full persons in the eyes of their society. They describe a sense of being erased, of having had their future stolen, and of living in a kind of suspended existence in which time passes but nothing meaningful can happen. These descriptions are consistent with clinical presentations of major depressive disorder and with the psychological literature on chronic oppression and identity threat. Suicidal ideation and self-harm have also increased, according to reports from healthcare workers still operating in Afghanistan. In a context where women have limited access to mental health services, where talking about psychological distress may be stigmatized, and where there are few formal support mechanisms, the likelihood that distress will go unaddressed and worsen over time is high. The Afghan mental health system, never robust, has been further weakened by the Taliban's restrictions on female health workers, making it even more difficult for women to access care (Amnesty International, 2025).

The concept of chronic stress is relevant here. Research consistently shows that sustained exposure to stressors, particularly those that are uncontrollable and unpredictable, produces elevated levels of cortisol and other stress hormones, which over time damage both physical and mental health. The Taliban's policies create precisely this kind of chronic, inescapable stress. Women cannot predict when new restrictions will be announced, cannot control the circumstances of their confinement, and have no legal or political recourse within the Afghan system. This sustained exposure to uncontrollable adversity is a well-established pathway to severe and lasting psychological harm. Children's mental health is also affected, particularly that of girls who are growing up with no access to school, no models of female professional life, and no exposure to the wider world. The developmental consequences of this deprivation for an entire generation of Afghan girls are potentially enormous and will shape Afghan society for decades to come.

### **Impact on Social Identity: Erasure and Reconstruction**

Social identity refers to the way individuals understand and define themselves in relation to the social groups and roles to which they belong. Social identity theory is one of the foundational frameworks for understanding how group membership shapes self-concept, self-esteem, and behavior. According to this theory, individuals derive significant aspects of their identity from their affiliations, social roles, and the groups to which they belong. When these affiliations are removed or threatened, individuals may



experience identity threat, a psychological condition that can lead to distress and motivate efforts to restore a positive sense of self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

For Afghan women, the Taliban's policies represent a systematic and total identity threat. Women who had built identities as students, professionals, journalists, athletes, or civic leaders have had these identities taken away by external force. They have not chosen to leave their roles; they have been expelled from them. This involuntary nature of the identity loss is particularly damaging, because it leaves women unable to use their own agency to manage the transition. They cannot tell themselves a story in which they chose to step back from their professional role for positive reasons. Instead, they are forced to confront the fact that a political authority has declared them unsuitable for the roles they had occupied.

The Taliban's gender ideology imposes a specific alternative identity on women: that of wife, mother, and domestic caregiver. This is not an inherently negative identity, and for women who chose it, it can be deeply meaningful. However, when it is imposed by external authority as the only permissible identity, and when it replaces identities that women had actively chosen and worked toward, it represents a profound violation of autonomy and self-determination. Many Afghan women, particularly those in urban areas who had advanced education and professional careers, experience this imposition as a fundamental assault on who they are. However, the Taliban's policies are remarkable in their totality: they have simultaneously removed women's identities as students, employees, civic participants, media figures, and mobile, autonomous individuals. This total assault leaves very few alternative sources of identity on which women can draw. Some women have responded to this identity threat by engaging in identity reconstruction, finding new or modified ways to maintain a positive sense of self within the constraints of Taliban rule. This might involve redefining one's role as a mother to include educational and nurturing dimensions that feel meaningful, finding value in maintaining household and family well-being, or privately maintaining one's professional or intellectual identity through reading, writing, and informal teaching (Human Rights Watch, 2023). These strategies reflect the human capacity for resilience even in extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

### **Resilience Strategies of Afghan Women**

Despite the extraordinary severity of their situation, Afghan women have shown remarkable resilience and creativity in resisting oppression and maintaining their sense of agency and identity. Understanding these resilience strategies is important not only for appreciating the strength of Afghan women but also for informing the kinds of support that international organizations and civil society groups can most



effectively provide. One of the most significant forms of resistance is the underground education movement. Across Afghanistan, women and girls have established secret schools in private homes, often at considerable personal risk. Teachers who continue to educate girls do so knowing that discovery could lead to severe punishment. Despite this risk, these networks have reached thousands of students who would otherwise have no access to education. The existence of these schools reflects not only a commitment to learning but a determination to maintain the identities, connections, and hopes that education represents (UNESCO, 2025).

Digital technology has become another critical tool for Afghan women's resilience. Many women use the internet and social media to access educational resources connect with communities of support, document human rights abuses, and engage in digital activism. Afghan women activists and journalists who have fled the country continue to report on conditions inside Afghanistan, amplifying the voices of those who cannot safely speak publicly. Some women inside Afghanistan use encrypted communication tools to maintain connections with the outside world and access information that is otherwise unavailable to them (UN Women, 2025). Informal economic activity has also emerged as a response to employment bans. Women who are prohibited from formal employment have in many cases turned to home-based work, including crafts, tailoring, food production, and other activities that can be conducted within the domestic sphere. While these activities are far more limited and less remunerative than formal employment, they represent an effort to maintain economic agency and contribution, and thus some sense of professional identity.

Social networks and community support have played an important role in sustaining women's mental health and identity. Even within the constraints of Taliban restrictions, women find ways to connect with neighbors, relatives, and friends. These informal networks provide emotional support, information sharing, and a sense of community that helps to counteract the isolation imposed by Taliban policies. Research on resilience in conflict settings consistently highlights the importance of social connection as a buffer against psychological harm. It is important to acknowledge these resilience strategies without romanticizing them or using them as a reason to minimize the severity of the crisis. Afghan women's resilience is real and admirable, but it should not become a justification for reduced international attention or support. No amount of individual or collective resilience can fully compensate for the systematic removal of rights and opportunities. The existence of underground schools is not a solution to the educational ban; it is an imperfect response to an unjust policy that must ultimately be changed.

### **International Response and Global Solidarity**



The international community's response to the Taliban's treatment of women has been one of widespread condemnation but limited effective action. The United Nations, through multiple agencies and special envoys, has consistently and strongly condemned the Taliban's gender-based restrictions. In June 2023, a United Nations special rapporteur explicitly characterized the Taliban's treatment of women and girls as constituting gender apartheid, a term that carries significant moral and legal weight (United Nations, 2023). This characterization places the Taliban's policies in the same category as South Africa's apartheid regime in terms of their systematic, state-sponsored nature. International organizations operating in Afghanistan have faced the difficult challenge of continuing to provide humanitarian assistance in a context where the Taliban's restrictions on female employees undermine their operations. The Taliban's ban on women working for NGOs and UN agencies created a situation in which many humanitarian programs could not reach their intended female beneficiaries, because the cultural context requires that services be delivered by women (Al Jazeera, 2023). Some organizations have withdrawn programs in protest; others have attempted to negotiate exemptions with Taliban authorities with limited success.

The global Afghan diaspora, particularly the community of educated Afghan women who have fled the country since 2021, has played an important role in maintaining international attention to the crisis. Afghan women activists, politicians, and civil society leaders in exile have testified before international bodies, engaged with media, and organized advocacy campaigns aimed at keeping Afghan women's rights on the global agenda. Their voices have been essential in ensuring that the situation inside Afghanistan is not forgotten amid other global crises. However, critics argue that international response has fallen short of what the situation demands. Economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure have not led to any meaningful change in Taliban policies toward women. The humanitarian crisis affecting all Afghans, driven by economic collapse and drought, has absorbed much of the attention and resources that might otherwise focus specifically on women's rights. And the geopolitical complexities of engaging with a government that no state officially recognizes have limited the options available to the international community.

## **Conclusion**

The Taliban's policies toward women and girls represent one of the most severe and systematic cases of gender-based oppression in the contemporary world. The totality of their restrictions, covering education, employment, mobility, public presence, and civic participation, has created a situation that the United Nations has described as gender apartheid. The consequences for Afghan women's mental health and social identity have been profound, including widespread depression, anxiety, PTSD, suicidal ideation,



and a deep loss of the identities and futures that women had built for themselves over the previous two decades. This paper has argued that these consequences must be understood not only as individual tragedies but as the predictable and systematic results of specific policies. When a state removes from women all access to education, employment, public life, and autonomous movement, it produces psychological harm at both the individual and collective level. Social identity theory helps us understand why this is so: because human beings derive their sense of self from their roles and group memberships, the removal of these by external force constitutes an attack on identity itself.

At the same time, Afghan women's resilience must be recognized and supported. The existence of underground schools, digital activism, informal economies, and mutual support networks demonstrates that women are not passive victims but active agents who are fighting, under extraordinarily difficult conditions, to maintain their dignity, their identities, and their futures. The international community owes it to them to support these efforts and to maintain sustained pressure for the restoration of their rights. The situation of Afghan women under the Taliban is ultimately not only Afghanistan's problem. It is a test of the international community's commitment to gender equality and human rights as universal values. Without women's inclusion and empowerment, Afghanistan's prospects for sustainable peace, development, and social well-being are severely compromised. The world must not look away.

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