



**Aramesh: آرامش**  
Mental Health for Young Afghan Women

# Young **Afghan women's** narratives about the negative impacts of the Taliban's restrictive policies on the **mental health** of women and girls in Afghanistan



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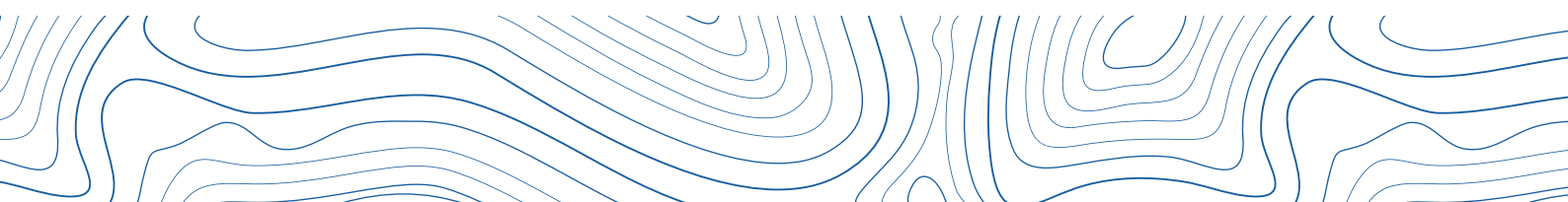
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# Introduction

Today, millions of girls and women in Afghanistan face daily struggles with trauma, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Under the Taliban regime, many feel confined, isolated, and silenced due to the prohibition of education beyond grade six, bans on university, and severe restrictions on employment, freedom of movement, and independent travel. Recently, the Taliban issued a decree further barring women from studying in medical institutions, exacerbating their sense of hopelessness.

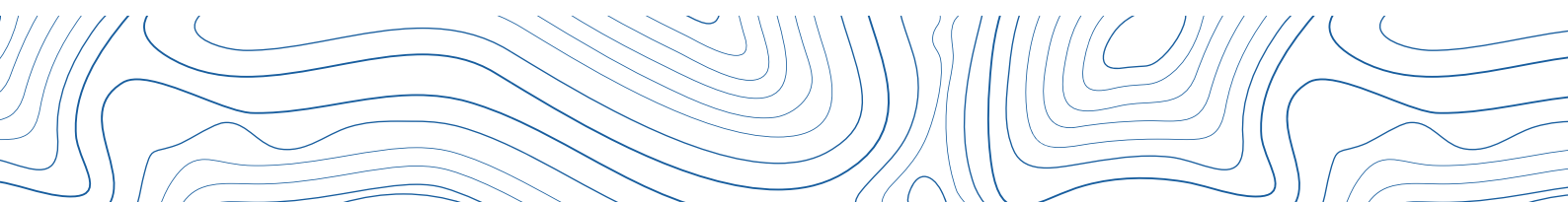
In response to this dire situation, Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) launched the Aramesh Program, an initiative designed to help young women process their experiences, build resilience, and develop healthy coping mechanisms to avoid resorting to violence, conflict, or self-harm.

Through the Aramesh Program, APT has supported 60 young women by offering trauma-healing sessions, one-on-one mentoring, group discussions to share experiences and strategies for overcoming challenges, and leadership training. The program also established a robust support network across Balkh, Herat, Kandahar, and Nangarhar, fostering connections among young women facing similar hardships and extending support to their families and communities.

This document is a compilation of articles on the mental health situation of women and girls in Afghanistan, written by young women who were trained under this project. These reflections also offer thoughtful recommendations to improve the mental health and well-being of Afghan women and girls, with the aim of inspiring policymakers to take meaningful action.

This initiative and the publication of participants' reflections would not have been possible without the leadership of Sofia Ramyar, Director of APT, and Abdul Rahman Jalil, the Program Manager.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our dedicated trainers—Rezwana, Maria, Layqa, Fouzia, Mozhdha, Mursal, Muzhdha, and Fazila—whose expertise and mentorship were instrumental in guiding the participants and supporting them in crafting their powerful reflections.



## Barriers to Women's Mental Health in Afghanistan

The deteriorating mental health of women in Afghanistan is a result of decades of war, social instability, low education levels within the country, and the current government's restrictions on women's education. Additionally, environmental problems, lack of healthcare services, economic decline, and cultural constraints have led Afghan women to face significant challenges. The effects of prolonged wars have not only caused physical harm but have also had serious psychological consequences, particularly for women. Afghanistan's fragile political situation, restrictions on women's rights, and cultural barriers have subjected women to numerous serious issues. This situation has led to an increase in cases of depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses among women. This paper aims to explore the impact of war, cultural barriers, and the lack of healthcare services on the mental health of women in Afghanistan.

**1. The Impact of War and Violence:** For decades, Afghanistan has been embroiled in continuous conflict. War and insecurity have caused women to experience psychological distress due to the loss of family members, physical violence, and forced displacement. As a result of the psychological effects of war, many Afghan women suffer from severe mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. According to a study, 80% of Afghan women experience symptoms of mental illness during periods of war, which has a significant impact on the well-being of their families and communities. (Rahimi, 2021)

**2. Cultural and Social Issues:** In Afghanistan, societal and cultural norms prevent women from defending themselves and accessing mental health services. Afghan women not only fall victim to domestic violence and ill-treatment but are also deprived of mental health treatment. The violation of women's rights, family problems, early marriages, or forced marriages, polygamy, and the devaluation of women in society exacerbate their mental health issues. The lack of awareness about women's rights, low literacy levels, and the absence of education further contribute to the mental health challenges faced by women. These cultural pressures create a persistent mental health crisis for women. (Safi, 2020)

**3. Issues in Education and Training:** Education and training are of vital importance in any society, and in Afghanistan, these areas have been hindered over the years, particularly for women. Gender-based discrimination in education, limitations on women's education such as behavioral norms, and the expectation that women contribute heavily to domestic responsibilities contribute to the mental health problems Afghan women face. In addition, the lack of self-confidence among women exacerbates the issue. It is essential to create conditions where women can access education and become financially independent in the future. As the saying

goes, "Educating a man is educating an individual; educating a woman is educating the world."

**4. Issues in Healthcare:** In Afghanistan, the healthcare system has been largely focused on treating physical illnesses, with little attention given to mental health. Women, in particular, are unable to access the necessary mental health services due to the lack of female doctors and limited mental health resources. According to one study, only 10% of Afghan women have access to mental health services in their communities. (Kakar, 2019)

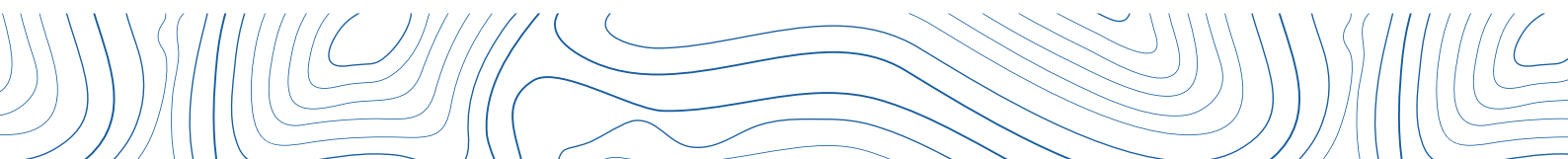
**Conclusion:** Women's mental health in Afghanistan is facing serious barriers due to the impacts of war, cultural constraints, and a lack of healthcare services. To address these barriers, international support, government reforms, and changes in social norms are essential. Improving mental health care for women will not only enhance their lives but will also benefit the community from a health and economic standpoint. Therefore, focusing on women's mental health and combating mental illnesses is crucial for Afghanistan's future stability and progress. One of the key reasons for Afghanistan's underdevelopment is the lack of attention given to women. Recommendations:

1. The low level of education and awareness in Afghanistan is a significant cause of these challenges. It is essential to focus on raising awareness among Afghan citizens. When the mindset is changed, the entire community can become more positive.

2. Afghanistan is one of the countries with a significant economic crisis. To address this, the international community should lift the sanctions imposed on Afghanistan's wealth and banking system. These sanctions have had a severe impact on ordinary people, especially women and children, even though the current government is not facing any direct issues because of these sanctions.

3. Afghanistan, with a history of over 5,000 years, continues to be one of the most underdeveloped nations in the world. The primary cause of its backwardness has been frequent revolutions. The international community should work to ensure that Afghanistan's political stability and development are supported by ending revolutionary cycles and establishing appropriate paths of engagement with the current Taliban government. When a society overcomes backwardness, it acknowledges the rights of every individual, meaning that if a society is independent, its people will also benefit.

4. We urge the current Afghan government to appoint scholars who understand





Islamic teachings, as they know that Islam condemns actions such as expressing distrust towards women, denying their right to education, making false promises, treating women as inferior, allowing unnecessary polygamy, and neglecting judicial matters.

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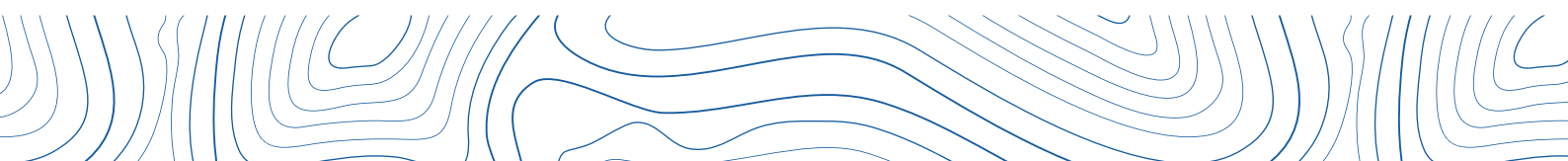
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## How Afghan Women Cope with Experiences of Psychological Trauma

Afghan women face persistent challenges, including severe psychological trauma and gender-based violence. Factors such as prolonged war, insecurity, cultural traditions, societal restrictions, forced and child marriages, and domestic violence, exacerbated by recent social and political upheavals, have intensified these issues. Psychological and gender-based trauma is among the most unbearable forms of violence and torture, which demand urgent attention.

### Impact of War:

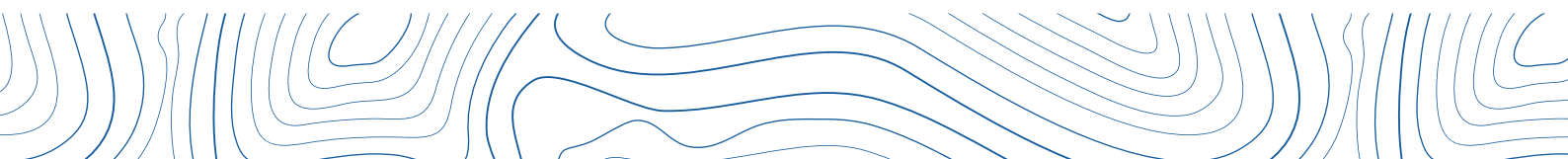
War affects all members of society, but women bear a disproportionate burden. Prolonged conflict often forces women to assume familial responsibilities, subjecting them to significant psychological stress. Afghanistan's extensive history of warfare has deeply affected Afghan women, leaving them with enduring mental health challenges.

### Cultural and Social Constraints:

Afghanistan remains one of the most traditional societies where violence against women is deeply entrenched. Persistent silence about this issue has normalized violence, turning it into a societal norm. The rigid cultural and tribal traditions restrict women's roles to domestic and familial duties. Stringent societal restrictions, including strict dress codes and educational bans, further isolate women from active participation in public life, exacerbating depression and other psychological issues. The persistence of such restrictions is often linked to factors such as poverty, lack of education, misinterpretation of Islamic teachings, and oppressive legal frameworks. For instance, many girls face psychological distress due to educational restrictions. According to Herat Regional Hospital's specialized mental health service, the increasing constraints on women and girls have led to a rise in mental illnesses. Khadija Akbari, a 22-year-old medical student at Herat University, sought psychological support after suffering from mental health issues following the closure of universities by the Taliban (Radio Azadi, 2022).

### Forced and Child Marriages:

Forced and underage marriages remain prevalent in Afghanistan. Over the past two years, economic hardship, social pressures, and fears of forced marriages imposed by the Taliban have compelled families to marry off their daughters against their will. Many of these marriages occur before the girls reach the age of 18. According to



the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), forced and underage marriages have significantly increased, with 35% of girls married before 18 and 17% before 15 since 2021. Between December 2022 and February 2023, 578 cases of forced marriages were reported, including 361 underage marriages (Khama Press, 2023).

The severe economic downturn since the Taliban takeover has further exacerbated the issue. Many families, struggling with poverty, resort to marrying off their young daughters. Suraya Mohammadi, a 15-year-old from Sofyan Laghmani village in Parwan, was forced into marriage at age 14 due to her family's financial hardship (Radio Azadi, 2023).

### **Sexual Violence:**

Sexual violence remains a pervasive problem in Afghanistan, worsened under Taliban rule. A report by a women's advocacy organization indicated that the Taliban perpetrated 132 cases of sexual violence against women and girls between September 2023 and September 2024 (Etilaat Roz, 2024).

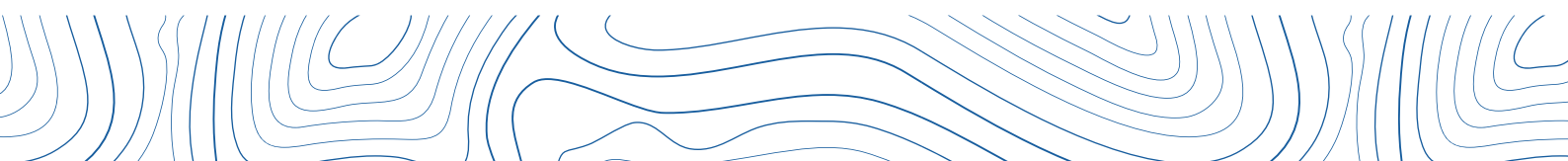
### **Domestic Violence:**

Domestic violence in Afghanistan ranges from physical abuse to killings and other violations of basic human rights. In patriarchal households, men often perpetrate violence as fathers, brothers, husbands, or even sons, considering women as subordinate. Physical violence such as beatings, killings, verbal abuse, child marriages, and the sale of daughters are common.

### **Recommendations and Strategies:**

To mitigate these challenges and address the root causes of violence against women, the following measures are recommended:

1. **Education and Awareness:** Broad educational campaigns on women's and children's rights, respect for individual and social rights, and the harms of forced marriages and violence are crucial. Raising awareness about the consequences of child marriages and sexual violence can help reduce their prevalence.
2. **Economic and Social Empowerment:** Increasing educational and employment opportunities for women and girls can foster independence, helping them avoid precarious situations such as forced marriages or abuse.





3. Promoting Women's Participation: Encouraging women's involvement in various sectors, especially media, and recognizing their contributions can bolster their societal standing.

4. International Cooperation: Collaboration with international organizations and human rights bodies to combat violence against women, uphold their right to education, and implement international human rights commitments can strengthen national strategies.

5. Social and Psychological Support for Survivors: Providing access to psychological, medical, and legal support services is essential for survivors' recovery and mental health rehabilitation.

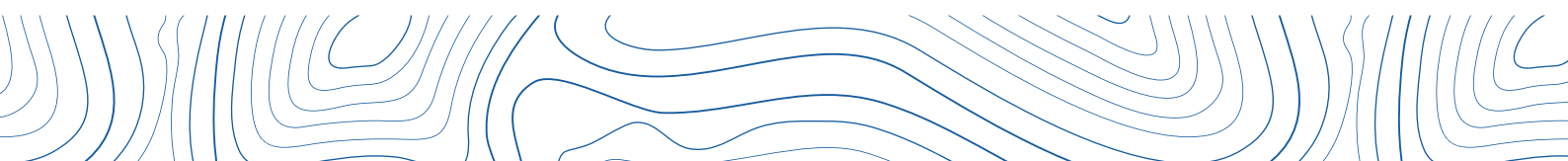
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## The Impact of School and University Closures on the Mental Health of Afghan Women and Girls

Afghan women, renowned for their courage, bravery, and resilience, have always been a symbol of strength worldwide. However, today, they face a tragedy of such magnitude that it is not just about fighting for their rights; they are unable to even raise their voices. Why is this the case? Are you ready to understand and acknowledge the reasons behind it?

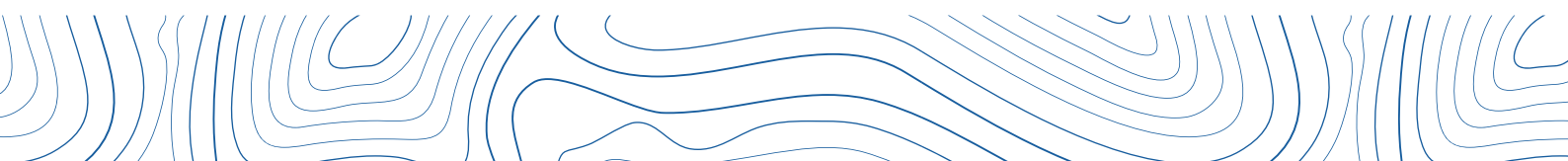
The dates 15/08/2021 and 20/12/2022 are dark and tragic moments that crushed the dreams, hopes, and aspirations of Afghan women in an instant. These dates have had a profoundly negative impact on their mental and emotional health, and to this day, Afghan women continue to experience extreme psychological distress. This situation is worsening day by day, and all Afghan women are witnessing it.

The closure of schools and universities has led Afghan women to face numerous mental health issues, such as severe depression, stress, anxiety, loneliness, deteriorating emotional health, sadness, insomnia, and others. As a result, women are experiencing some of the worst days and circumstances of their lives. The aim of this paper is to raise awareness among international communities and countries about the limitations, mental health struggles, problems, and challenges faced by Afghan women, and to seek their assistance.

Afghanistan is one of the countries whose people have endured severe psychological distress due to decades of war and conflict, and now, women are particularly targeted. They can no longer make sound judgments about their lives, which could lead to a great misfortune for all of Afghanistan. Due to the lack of education, women lose their sense of self-worth, leading them to face a range of challenges and diseases, including severe depression. Depression is a serious mental disorder that brings significant changes in an individual's feelings, thoughts, and behavior, and it also destroys their sense of happiness, replacing it with feelings of fatigue and exhaustion. Mental health specialist Jamshid Rasa stated in a published article in 2023 that when we prevent someone from doing something they enjoy, it clearly results in psychological trauma, one of which is severe depression, with 59% of Afghan women affected by it. Afghan women are experiencing this condition.

Following depression, anxiety is another mental disorder that involves a vague sense of fear, restlessness, and worry. People suffering from anxiety, often referred to as anxious individuals, are constantly restless in their minds. They cannot focus on their daily tasks. Afghan women and girls are currently suffering from this disorder.

A study related to mental health, published by Ahmad Niazi and Abdul Qadeem Mohammadi in September 2024, states that 71.94% of women are affected



by anxiety. This percentage indicates that Afghanistan is facing a massive crisis, and future generations of Afghans will also be greatly impacted. When mothers experience poor mental health, their children also suffer the consequences.

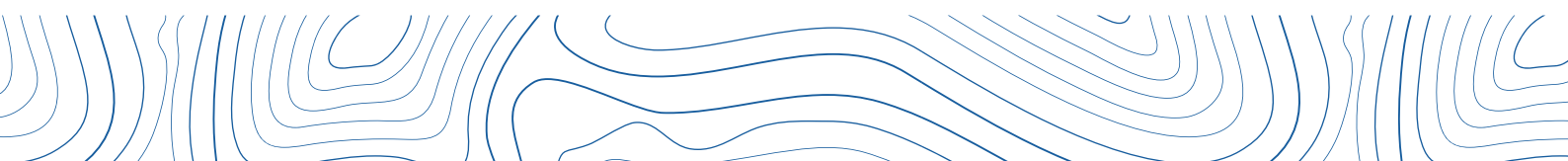
In addition to these conditions, many women experience feelings of loneliness and hopelessness, and they are anxious about their future. For instance, Saida, a 10th-grade student, dreams of becoming a doctor but is worried that she will not be able to achieve this goal due to the lack of schooling. Saida said, “We are deeply affected by the closure of schools. Education is the right of every girl.” As a result of the closure of schools and universities, many women and girls are being forced into early marriages, and as a result, many girls resort to suicide. A significant portion of patients seeking help from mental health doctors in Afghanistan are women and girls who have been subjected to numerous unjust restrictions and are unable to continue their education or work. Fereidoun Azhand, a writer, stated in a report on 15/06/2024 that the Washington Post explored the state of mental hospitals in Afghanistan. According to the Washington Post, most of the patients in these hospitals are women and girls. Dr. Azim, an Afghan mental health specialist, stated that many of these girls and women fear they will never return to their jobs or education. They suffer from isolation, anxiety, and depression.

Although the situation for women in Afghanistan was far from ideal before the Taliban took control, over the last two years, women and girls have been entirely excluded from society and are facing complete deterioration. To the extent that their fundamental rights are no longer recognized, and their hopes and dreams are shattered.

Here, we would like to hear the voice of an Afghan woman whose dreams were crushed after the closure of universities. Laika Rahimi, a student in the Faculty of Medicine at Kandahar Mirwais Nika University in 2021, shared her story:

“I was one of the top students at my university, and I aspired to become a skilled surgeon in my country. However, when the Taliban issued a decree regarding the closure of universities, and we were prevented from taking exams, from that moment on, I developed a deep hatred for life. Since then, I have been experiencing various psychological and emotional challenges such as anxiety, stress, insomnia, loneliness, losing hope over small issues, crying easily, and detaching myself from everyone. I often think that the Taliban’s return must be a dream, and I wish we could continue our education. Not only me but thousands of girls and women are suffering from various mental health issues.”

In conclusion, after the closure of schools and universities in Afghanistan, 90% of Afghan women are suffering from serious mental health problems, and they describe their mental health as bad or very bad. Of these, 71% are affected by



anxiety, and 59% by severe depression, along with other issues like hopelessness, loneliness, sadness, insomnia, stress, and deteriorating mental health. If these problems are considered normal and no urgent action is taken soon, no one will be able to prevent the impending mental health crisis in Afghanistan. This will be a great injustice to the human and civil rights of Afghan women.

Let us take practical steps for the education and well-being of Afghan women.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Our request from the international community is to provide online education opportunities for Afghan women and girls until schools and universities reopen.
2. Provide mental health education for students until schools and universities resume.
3. In the second step, urgent action should be taken to reopen schools and universities, and the international community should unite to support and empower Afghan women, ensuring their rights are protected and their voices heard.
4. Afghan women no longer need charity from the international community, but rather, urgent action should be taken against the Taliban's policies.
5. We call on all international countries to invest in the importance of education for girls in Afghanistan.
6. The international community should work to assure the current government in Afghanistan that progress cannot be made without the participation of women, and if their basic rights are not granted, this government will never be recognized.

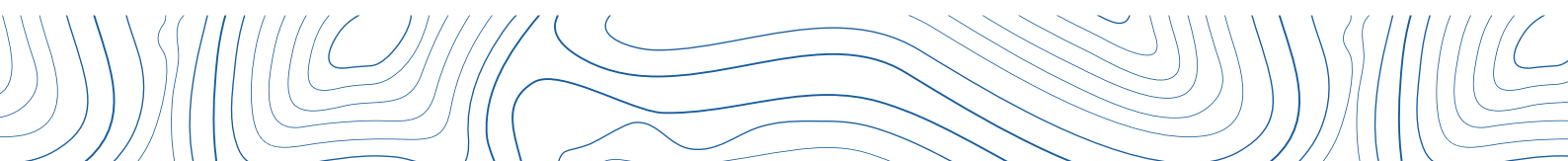
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## The Impact of the Taliban's Oppressive Actions on the Mental Health of Young Afghan Women

The Taliban's oppressive measures since their takeover in August 2021 have severely impacted the mental health of young Afghan women. As the world watches, these women face unprecedented psychological challenges due to stringent restrictions on their daily lives. This article explores key mental health crises, including depression, anxiety, trauma, and isolation, exacerbated by the systematic denial of education, employment, and public life for women. Many young women now feel hopeless and disconnected from their futures.

### A Testimony of Loss and Despair:

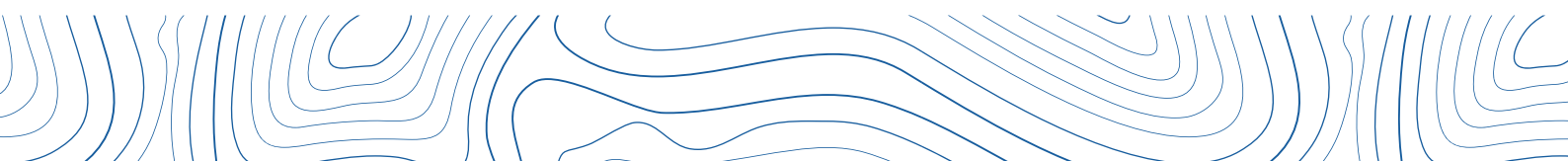
"I used to love colorful dresses this spring and thought to myself that I should buy more floral clothes to live cheerfully. But now, looking at my wardrobe, I realize I don't even own a simple black dress to wear. It hasn't even been a year since I started to enjoy independence, happiness, and freedom. I was experiencing life's beautiful moments, especially traveling to different cities, which is one of the most enriching experiences a person can have. Meeting kind and diverse people, engaging in teamwork, and creating beautiful memories. But from now on, we may have to live in the confines of our homes, never seeing the colorful world again.

Makhmood Dowlatabadi's words resonate with my state of mind: 'In these alleys and nights that seem to have no morning, I feel like I am vanishing.'"

These are the words of Homa Khoshvakht, a young Afghan student in her twenties, written in tears 25 days after the regime change. Homa was a high-achieving and ambitious girl, working hard and studying at night school. However, with the Taliban's takeover, all her dreams vanished overnight. Like many other girls, she now thinks hopelessly about unattainable aspirations, mourning for herself and her fellow women while shedding tears.

### A Nation in Fear:

The scenes of thousands rushing to Kabul airport, abandoning their homes with only the clothes on their backs to face an uncertain future, symbolized the nation's terror of a group whose brutality they had witnessed firsthand years before. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the restrictions on women have grown harsher by the day. From closing schools and universities to imprisoning protesting women and silencing their voices, these measures have driven women further into mental distress. Yet, the Taliban have not stopped there, striving to deprive women of even their most basic rights. One example is their latest law mandating





that women cover their entire bodies. Article 13 of this law, announced by the Taliban's Ministry of Justice and published in the official gazette, states that women must cover their faces to prevent "sedition." It further declares that a woman's voice, whether singing, reciting poetry, or even reading the Quran, is considered part of her "awrah" (body to be concealed).

### **Mental Health Crises Among Women:**

Joint reports from organizations like UN Women, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) show that the Taliban's draconian measures have significantly harmed the mental well-being of women and girls in Afghanistan. According to the United Nations, 90% of women and girls describe their mental health as poor or very poor, and most report worsening psychological conditions every three months.

During a United Nations Security Council meeting on September 18, Sima Bahous, Executive Director of UN Women, stated that 64% of women surveyed reported feeling unsafe leaving their homes alone, mainly due to Taliban harassment.

Mariam (a pseudonym), a young university student, attempted suicide after the Taliban banned girls from education. She is now undergoing psychotherapy.

Dr. Amal, a psychologist, explains:

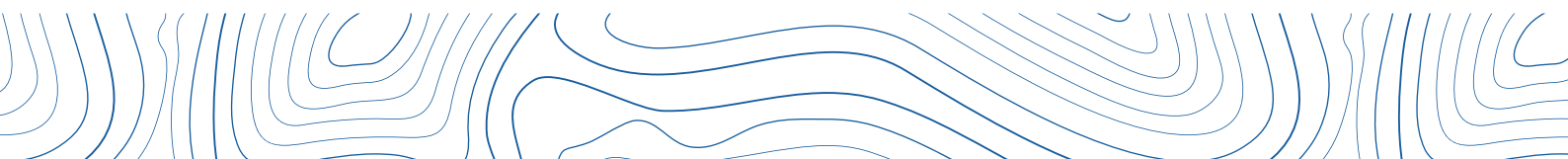
"We are facing a widespread suicide epidemic in Afghanistan. This is the worst condition we have ever seen, and the world is barely paying attention to it or speaking about it."

Mehr, a former university professor who has attempted suicide twice, shares her story:

"The Taliban closed universities for women, so I lost my job. I used to be the breadwinner of my family. Now, I cannot afford my expenses, which has deeply affected me.

Being forced to stay home, I faced pressure to marry. All my plans for the future were destroyed. I felt completely lost, with no purpose or hope for the future, which led me to attempt ending my life."

### **Key Mental Health Challenges Among Young Women**



According to a BBC report, the following mental health issues have surged among young Afghan women:

1. **Depression and Anxiety:** Severe restrictions on education and employment have caused despair, anxiety, and a sense of worthlessness. Deprivation of fundamental rights like education and work has intensified these feelings.
2. **Isolation and Social Withdrawal:** The widespread ban on women's participation in public life has led many young women to experience social isolation, worsening depression, demotivation, and low self-esteem.
3. **Anger and Hopelessness:** Extreme restrictions on personal and social life, including mandatory full veiling, bans on travel without a male companion, and cultural pressures, have triggered deep anger and hopelessness.
4. **Family and Social Pressures:** Losing economic and social independence has left many women dependent on families and men, increasing psychological pressure.

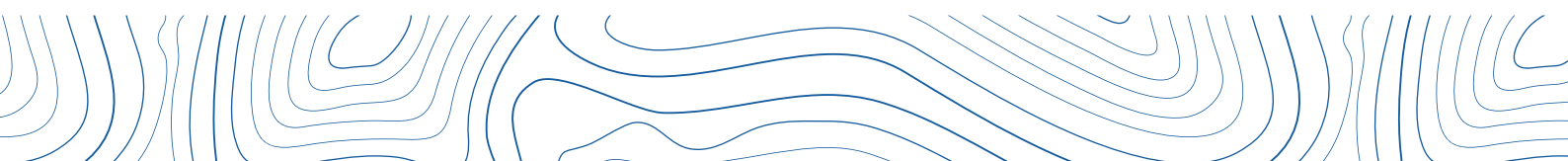
### **Addressing the Crisis:**

The mental health crisis facing young Afghan women under the Taliban's oppressive regime is severe and widespread. The loss of personal freedoms, anxiety from constant surveillance, trauma from violence and repression, and the isolating nature of their circumstances have created a mental health emergency.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Expand Access to Mental Health Services and Counseling:** Ensure culturally sensitive and accessible services, particularly in remote areas.
- **Reintroduce Educational Opportunities:** Provide online and vocational education programs to empower women, fostering independence and improving psychological and economic well-being.
- **Raise International Awareness:** Encourage global organizations to allocate resources and implement impactful strategies to address Afghanistan's mental health crisis.
- **Support Grassroots Organizations:** Offer technical and financial assistance to organizations actively advocating for women's welfare.
- **Create Job Opportunities:** Encourage women's participation in arts and vocational fields to earn a livelihood, reducing stress and depression.

Sustainable, long-term mental health programs are essential to help these women regain autonomy, security, and hope for the future. The international community must recognize this urgent need and ensure that Afghan women receive the care



and resources they need to recover and rebuild their lives.

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Yogita Limaye: BBC journalist specializing in Afghanistan affairs

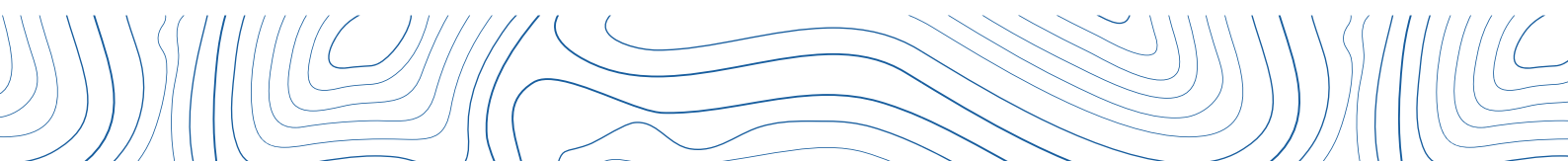
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## **The Need for Investment in Women's Mental Health in Afghanistan**

Mental health issues are those pains that arise as a result of cumulative difficulties. Most patients conceal their mental health issues either voluntarily or due to external pressures.

In recent years, many developed countries have made efforts to encourage individuals, including well-known personalities, to talk about their mental health struggles and seek treatment. However, in countries like Afghanistan, discussing mental illnesses or seeking counseling remains hidden due to fear of judgment and shame. Statistics show that women in Afghanistan suffer from mental health



problems more than men.

Due to prolonged wars, political instability, poverty, migration, harmful cultural practices, educational restrictions, and family and social limitations, people in Afghanistan are facing severe mental health challenges. These dire conditions have deeply affected women's mental and physical health, their family relationships, and their social and economic participation.

Currently, 614 million women and girls live in war-torn regions, including Gaza, occupied Ukraine, Haiti, Sudan, and Afghanistan. This number continues to rise as geopolitical conflicts, climate change, health, and food crises intensify. When a crisis hits, women and girls face the risk of gender-based violence, loss of property, and income. In such vulnerable conditions, women and girls' living conditions are nearly eight times worse than those of men, and they suffer from food insecurity across all regions of the world. Still, financial and supportive infrastructures continue to fail women.

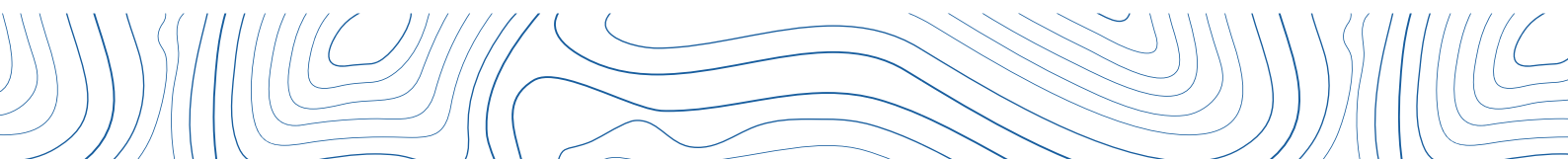
In war-torn countries, due to the economic crisis, women's organizations play an essential role in offering vital services to their communities. As highlighted by five inspiring women, investing in women is the pathway to a healthier planet, peaceful societies, and a just economy (BBC, 2024).

Considering the above factors, investment in this area is essential to address the following challenges:

- **War and Violence:** Afghanistan has faced many years of internal and external conflicts. For 46 years, Afghan people have witnessed various sufferings, challenges, wars, internal and external migrations, and so on. In the capital Kabul and some provinces, armed conflicts have resulted in devastating situations, where families, including men, women, and children, have been affected by bombings and rocket attacks. As a result, many have lost their lives or been injured. Is it possible for those who survive such traumatic events to avoid mental health issues?

Gender-based violence and domestic violence are prevalent, and these women are often suffering from deep depression, stress, anxiety, and emotional wounds.

1. **Social Limitations:** Due to harmful cultural practices, there are restrictions on women's education, work, leisure, and social participation. Many women feel isolated and lose their sense of ownership over their lives, which contributes to the rise in mental illnesses.



2. Lack of Access to Mental Health Services: In Afghanistan, mental health and women's empowerment services are limited and under threat. Women have very limited access to these services. Investment in this sector can bridge these gaps and provide women with treatment options.

3. Social and Economic Setbacks: Afghanistan is a third-world country struggling with various challenges. However, if women receive mental health support, they can become more active in family, social, and economic activities, thus playing an important role in the progress of their families, communities, and the nation.

4. Unhealthy Child Rearing: Investment in women's mental health is crucial, as women form half of the society and raise the next generation. Mothers with mental health disorders are often unable to provide proper physical and mental care for their children, which negatively impacts the future generations.

5. Educational Restrictions: In today's global society, Afghanistan's women are enduring immense suffering due to political instability, misuse of Islam, and harmful cultural practices. They face constant pressures, from being mistreated by family members to having their access to education, jobs, and leisure restricted. In recent years, the doors to education have been closed for many women, and there have been prohibitions on work and leisure activities. In such conditions, women are facing severe mental health challenges, and some are even driven to suicide.

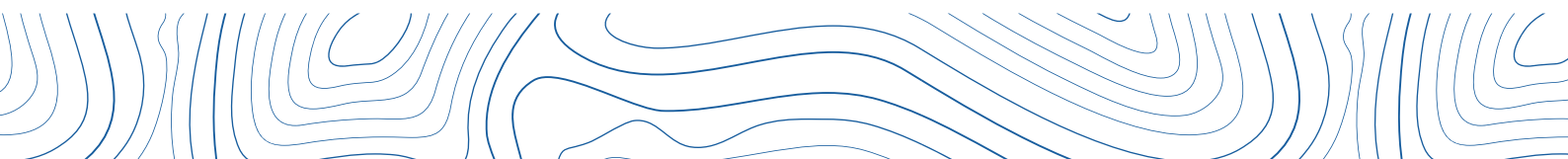
Due to these factors, investment in the mental health of women in Afghanistan is necessary. This includes creating opportunities for women's training, online schools, university lessons, seminars, and support in job creation, which can help them recover from mental health disorders.

In summary, mental health care for women is essential for their well-being, family stability, and social progress. It is a foundational value for the development of societies and nations.

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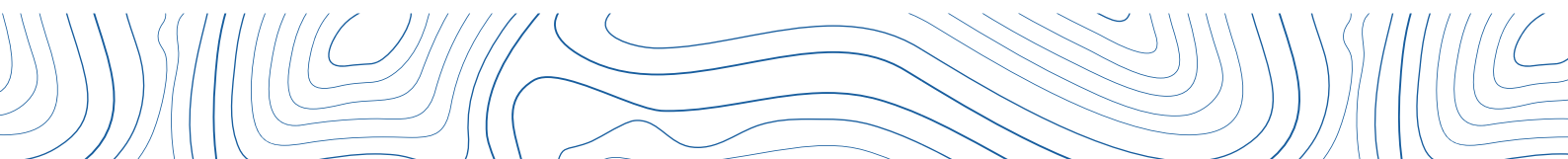
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## What Are the Key Factors Affecting Women's Mental Health in Afghanistan?

In Afghanistan, women face numerous challenges that have a significant impact on their mental health. The intersection of cultural, social, economic, and political factors creates a complex landscape in which Afghan women navigate their daily lives. This article aims to explore the key elements affecting women's mental health in Afghanistan and highlight the urgent need for mental health support and intervention.

**Conflict and Violence:** Decades of ongoing war and violence have caused widespread trauma, loss, and instability. Women are often directly exposed to violence, including domestic violence. The psychological impact of living in a war zone can be profound. Sudden political changes can lead to uncertainty and fear, exacerbating anxiety and depression among women. The lack of stability affects their sense of security. In Afghanistan, the political situation has a direct impact on women's rights and mental health. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 resulted in increased restrictions on women's freedoms, including education, employment, and healthcare. The uncertainty and fear surrounding political changes can further exacerbate anxiety and depression among women, deepening their mental health issues. Compared to three years ago, job opportunities for women have drastically decreased. Many women have lost their jobs, including female judges, prosecutors, and lawyers, who are now prohibited from participating in judicial decisions. Even when a female journalist from the regional Ariana News Channel started asking a



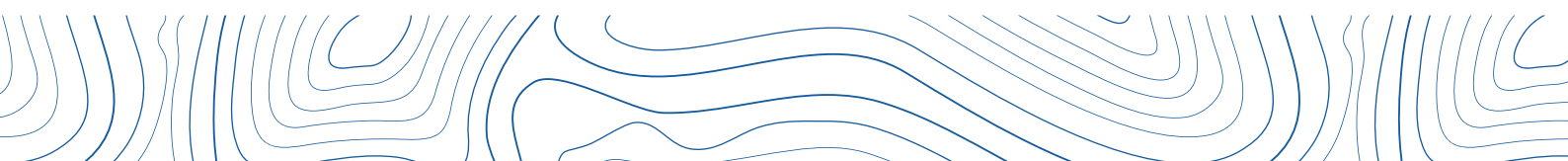
question, the broadcast was abruptly cut off for another minute until she finished. Following the Taliban's orders, all female journalists have been forced to cover their faces. Women have completely lost their value due to gender inequality.

**Economic Hardships:** High levels of poverty and unemployment can increase stress and anxiety among women, particularly those who are the primary breadwinners in their families. The lack of financial independence limits women's ability to escape abusive situations and mental crises. Losing autonomy and the inability to pursue work or education can lead to feelings of hopelessness, depression, and anxiety. The psychological toll of economic struggles affects women's mental health and well-being, limiting their ability to engage in economic activities. Many women may turn to the informal economy to earn income, engaging in activities such as sewing, handicrafts, or domestic work. However, these jobs often pay low wages, lack job security, and provide no social protection, leaving women vulnerable to exploitation. In summary, the economic challenges faced by women in Afghanistan are part of a complex interaction of social, political, and economic factors. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that prioritizes women's rights, education, and economic empowerment, while also taking into account the broader challenges facing Afghanistan.

**Access to Healthcare:** In Afghanistan, there is a significant lack of access to mental health services and healthcare in general. There is also a widespread lack of awareness and understanding about mental health issues. This lack of awareness prevents women from recognizing their mental health needs and seeking help. The healthcare system struggles with a shortage of trained mental health professionals and resources. Many women are either unaware of available services or face barriers to accessing them, such as distance, cost, and social stigma. The lack of support further exacerbates mental health issues, leaving many women to suffer in silence. In many areas of Afghanistan, cultural norms and traditions restrict women's mobility and autonomy, making it difficult for them to access medical care, as they are required to be accompanied by a male relative when seeking healthcare services. Gender roles often dictate access to facilities and resources. Afghanistan's healthcare infrastructure has been damaged by years of war, resulting in a lack of facilities, trained personnel, and medical equipment. Rural areas, in

particular, suffer from inadequate healthcare services, which disproportionately affects women, who may require maternal and reproductive health services.

**Child Marriage:** The high rate of child marriage can lead to pregnancy-related health risks and limit educational and economic opportunities, all of which can



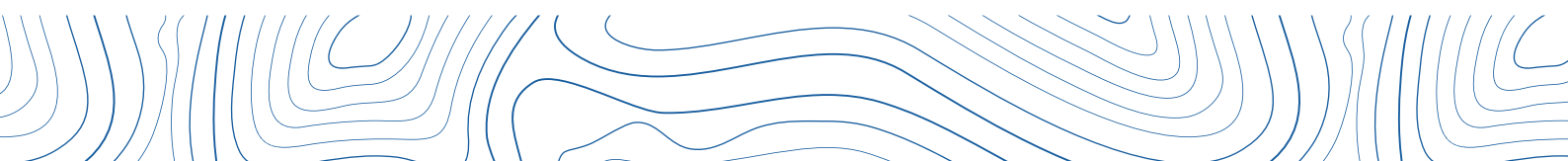
affect mental health. The consequences of child marriage are severe, impacting the physical and mental health of young brides, limiting their educational opportunities, and perpetuating the cycle of poverty and gender inequality. Despite efforts from international organizations and local activists to combat this practice, ongoing political instability and restrictive laws have made it difficult to implement meaningful change. In many Afghan communities, early marriages of girls are seen as a way to protect their future, preserve family honor, and reduce the financial burden on families. Child marriage has a significant impact on girls' education. Once married, many girls are expected to take on family responsibilities and may no longer have the opportunity to continue their schooling, which perpetuates the cycle of poverty and limited opportunities.

**Limited Representation:** Women's voices and needs are often underrepresented in decision-making processes, leading to policies that fail to address their issues effectively. While religious beliefs may provide support for some, they can also be used to justify discriminatory or oppressive practices that negatively affect women's mental health. These adverse conditions have stripped Afghan women of their rights, and their lack of representation in Afghanistan is a complex issue with deep historical, cultural, and political roots. Over the years, women's rights in Afghanistan, particularly under the Taliban's rule, have undergone significant changes. Currently, women's representation in Afghan society is extremely limited. Many women face restrictions on their mobility, access to education, and job opportunities. The international community has expressed concern, but ongoing political and security threats have made the situation even more critical.

**Recommendations: We call on the international community to:**

1. Develop joint programs that support women's mental health.
2. Provide scholarships or online learning services for Afghan girls.
3. Invest in education and awareness, prioritizing girls' education in Afghanistan.
4. Address gender-based violence through comprehensive programs, including legal, medical, and psychological support.
5. Enhance legal protection by supporting laws that protect women from violence and discrimination, ensuring that legal frameworks support their rights.
6. Establish legal assistance services to help women navigate the legal system and access justice.

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## Why Can't Women in Afghanistan Freely Express Their Mental Health Struggles?

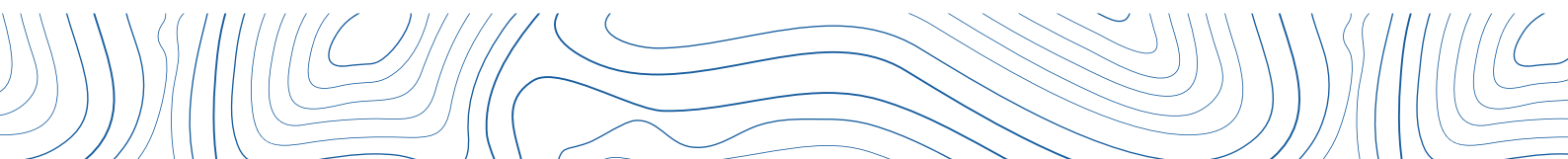
Women in Afghanistan have faced systemic suppression throughout various regimes, whether during the republic era or under the current Taliban regime. This suppression has intensified under the Taliban, with the world witnessing their continuous suffering. Afghan women have rarely been able to freely express their traumatic experiences. This article explores the mental health challenges faced by Afghan women, examining issues such as Taliban-imposed restrictions, a lack of psychological support, and cultural norms that perpetuate their silence.

In Afghanistan, the majority of people either lack access to mental health services due to restrictions or, if aware of such services, do not feel secure or free enough to utilize them. Multiple factors exacerbate this problem, including cultural stigma, a lack of awareness, and ongoing political and security instability. Many individuals are unaware of the existence of mental health clinics, counseling services, or helplines. Those who are aware often face significant barriers, such as social judgment, fear of retaliation, or physical constraints preventing access to necessary care.

Additionally, there is a widespread misconception that mental health issues only affect those who exhibit severe symptoms. Many believe that only individuals showing extreme behaviors, such as an inability to perform daily tasks or care for themselves, have legitimate mental health problems. Consequently, someone who can still walk, talk, and interact with others may not be seen as needing psychological support, even if they are struggling with significant emotional or psychological challenges. This mindset creates another barrier to seeking help, as individuals may ignore their needs or be dismissed by others despite their suffering.

Families often contribute to this problem. In many cases, families are not supportive when their children face mental health challenges. There is a general lack of understanding of mental health issues, and when children struggle, families may not view it as a valid reason to take them to a clinic. This lack of support, combined with existing barriers to mental health services, prevents many from accessing the care they desperately need. In a country where mental health services are rarely accessible, these societal attitudes further limit individuals' ability to recognize, understand, and address their mental health needs. This underscores the urgent need for increased awareness, education, and access to mental health care, particularly in a context like Afghanistan, where war, trauma, and ongoing instability make such support more critical than ever.

### Cultural and Social Barriers to Expression



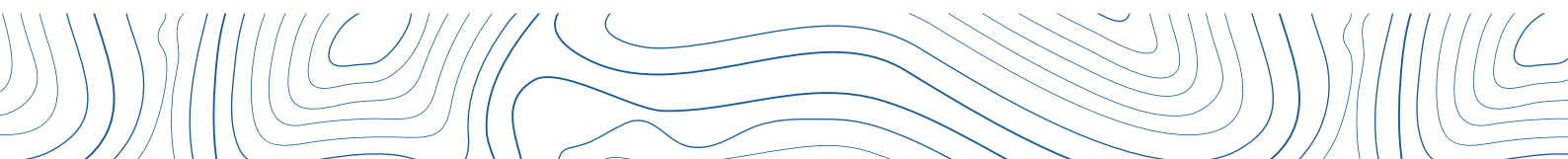
Afghan women are among the most vulnerable groups in society, constantly grappling with numerous challenges and restrictions. Over the past two years, successive crises have led to increased unemployment among working women. Many of these women, the sole breadwinners of their families, now face severe economic hardship after being forced to stay home. Historically, Afghan women have endured a wide range of challenges, from domestic and societal violence to severe restrictions on their rights to education and personal dignity. Today, the situation is even more dire for women heading households. Without familial support, job opportunities, or access to sustainable income sources, many are trapped in economic crises.

Deeply rooted patriarchal norms in Afghan society create further obstacles, making it difficult for women to speak openly about personal traumas, particularly in cases of sexual violence, harassment, or abuse. Women who attempt to discuss these issues face the risk of shame, loss of dignity, or even rejection by their families and communities. In many cases, fear of bringing dishonor to their family's silences women, especially in conservative or rural areas where social reputation and family honor hold significant importance.

Decades of war, conflict, and Taliban-imposed oppressive policies have caused widespread psychological trauma among Afghan women. Many women struggle with the emotional burden of losing their rights, being cut off from their communities, and witnessing violence. A lack of access to mental health services exacerbates their struggles, depriving them of the ability to process and express their experiences. The constant threat of violence and oppression adds to their emotional pressures, making it difficult to speak out, even in private settings. The sense of hopelessness and powerlessness that many women feel under Taliban rule deepens their isolation, making it harder for them to break free from the cycle of fear and oppression.

### **Family Control and Cultural Norms:**

Cultural norms also play a significant role in preventing women from expressing their traumatic experiences. Family restrictions and fear of consequences are key factors that limit Afghan women's ability to speak out. In many Afghan families, male relatives—fathers, brothers, and husbands—exert restrictive control over women's lives. These men are often seen as guardians of women's behavior and authority, which includes limiting what they can say and do. Women are often prohibited from sharing their experiences, especially if the trauma involves domestic violence or other forms of gender-based violence. Families prevent women from sharing their





stories out of concern that doing so could damage the family's reputation or honor in the community.

Speaking about traumatic experiences, especially when it involves conflicts with male relatives or community members, can lead to severe consequences. Women may face physical violence, social ostracism, or even forced marriage. In extreme cases, women who speak out about their traumatic experiences risk being killed, a threat that has led many women, girls, and their families to believe that silence is the only way to preserve their lives and family honor. The fear of life-altering consequences and family restrictions forces many Afghan women to internalize their suffering and hide it instead of seeking help or sharing their stories.

### **Recommendations:**

To address the multifaceted barriers faced by women in Afghanistan and empower them to share their experiences, the following steps are critical:

#### **1. Increase Access to Mental Health Services:**

Establish counseling centers and train mental health professionals to provide accessible care.

#### **2. Raise Public Awareness:**

Launch educational campaigns about mental health to reduce associated stigmas.

#### **3. Promote Family Support:**

Educate families on the importance of supporting members facing mental health challenges.

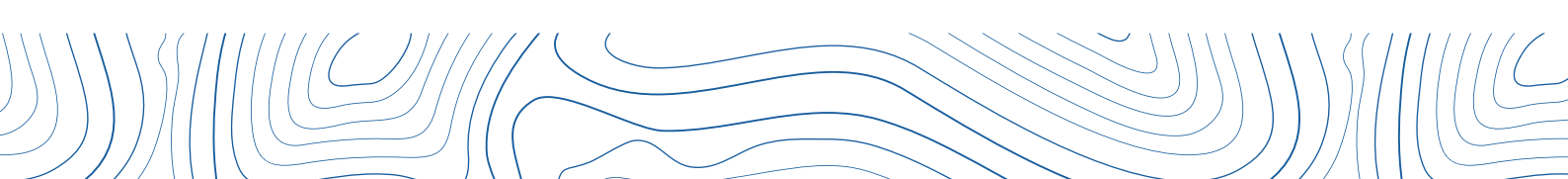
#### **4. Create Support Networks:**

Establish support groups for women to share experiences and provide online platforms for assistance.

#### **5. Ensure Personal Safety:**

Implement confidential reporting systems for domestic and social violence and provide safe shelters.

#### **6. Offer Educational and Employment Programs:**



Provide educational and job opportunities to women to help them achieve economic independence.

Breaking the chains of silence is crucial for Afghan women to begin their healing journey and reclaim their voices in a society that has long suppressed them.

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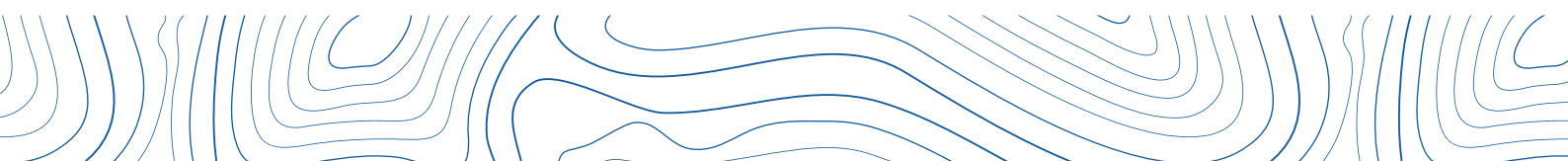
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## Why is There a Lack of Mental Health Services for Women in Afghanistan?

Mental health refers specifically to the state of emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Afghan women have long suffered from various mental health issues due to a range of factors. The deprivation of fundamental rights, particularly the right to education, has significantly worsened women's mental health. Many women, due to a lack of awareness and cultural stigma, are unable to seek help from psychologists and psychiatrists. Notably, the limited number of mental health centers in Afghanistan has posed a significant challenge to providing adequate mental health services to Afghan women. This article aims to explore the primary causes behind the lack of mental health services for women in Afghanistan and proposes potential



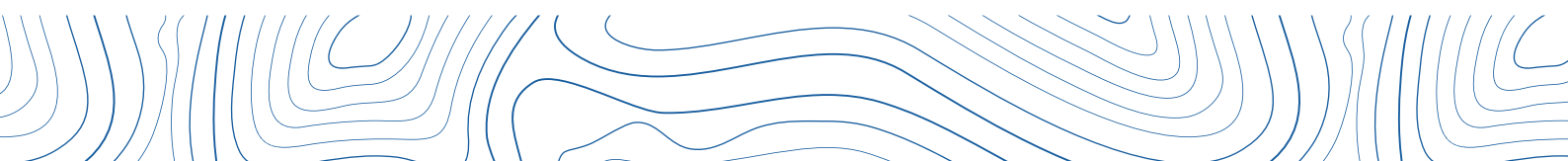
solutions to address the issue.

The effects of prolonged wars, the absence of trained mental health professionals, and insufficient funding for mental health services are among the main obstacles impeding the delivery of mental health services to women in Afghanistan. The mental health system in Afghanistan has faced numerous challenges under the shadow of prolonged conflict. War is recognized as a primary cause of mental health disorders among the Afghan population (Cardozo et al., 2004). From 1985 to 1992, nearly all mental health centers, including hospitals, were occupied by armed groups, leading to the mass departure of mental health professionals, including doctors and nurses. The few remaining professionals faced economic hardship and psychological trauma, rendering them incapable of performing their duties. During the first Taliban regime, mental health centers were reduced to a bare minimum, if not eliminated entirely.

After 2001, mental health centers began to slowly re-emerge. However, the impacts of the systemic collapse of mental health infrastructure remain evident. The psychological effects of war have been catastrophic, leaving aid organizations unable to provide mental health services to all sectors of society (Rahimi & Azimi, 2012, p.56). Women, as a vulnerable group in society who endured immense psychological pressure during the war, have been no exception. They continue to struggle with mental health issues and have been largely deprived of mental health services. Thus, war is a significant reason behind the lack of mental health services for women in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world and relies on humanitarian aid and donor organizations to sustain its essential systems, including the health system, particularly mental health. As a result, the severe shortage of financial resources has further diminished mental health services for all sectors of society, especially women. It should also be noted that the necessary attention has not been paid to establishing and providing mental health services, with only 2.1% of the government's budget allocated to mental health services. Due to the lack of sufficient funding, most mental health centers are concentrated in major cities, leaving women in smaller towns and rural areas without access to mental health services.

Currently, only two mental health hospitals are available for individuals with severe mental disorders, located in Kabul and Herat (Schwartz et al., 2023, as cited in World Health Organization, [WHO], 2022). Women often have to travel long distances to access these facilities. Unfortunately, most women are unable to make these journeys due to familial and societal restrictions, resulting in their exclusion from mental health services. Ultimately, insufficient funding for mental health services remains a critical challenge that hinders women's access to mental health care.



Afghanistan also faces a lack of resources and skilled personnel in mental health services. Following the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, the country suffered a severe shortage of healthcare workers, equipment, and infrastructure (Kovess-Mastery et al., 2021, p.1443). The absence of trained psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, psychologists, and social workers is a significant challenge that limits mental health services for Afghan women. Unfortunately, no specialized training centers for mental health professionals exist in the country. Additionally, there are only 320 hospital beds available in public and private sectors for patients with mental health conditions (World Health Organization, [WHO], n.d.). Moreover, there are only 60 trained psychiatrists in Afghanistan, and no trained psychiatric nurses are available. The nurses currently working in mental health facilities are general nurses who rely on self-taught skills gained through experience in the field (Rahimi & Azimi, 2012, p.57). Therefore, the lack of professional mental health staff is a significant factor contributing to the shortage of mental health services for women in Afghanistan.

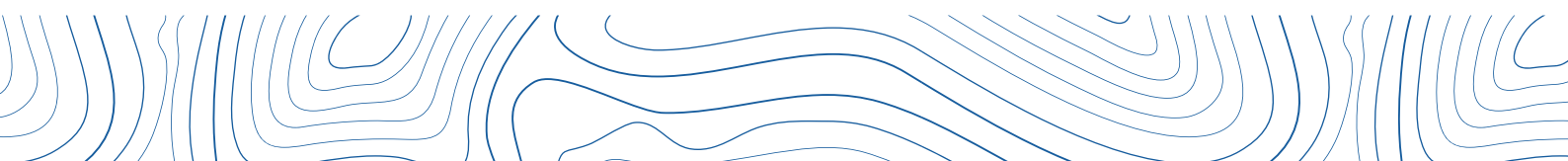
A significant portion of Afghanistan's population, with women comprising a large percentage, faces severe mental health challenges, including acute depression and anxiety. While this dire mental health situation continues to deteriorate, mental health centers for improving the psychological and emotional well-being of women in Afghanistan remain exceedingly limited. The most prominent factors contributing to the lack of mental health services for Afghan women can be summarized as follows:

1. **The Effects of Decades of War:** Continuous conflict has destroyed mental health centers, and the devastating psychological impacts of war have overwhelmed aid organizations, making it impossible for them to provide services to all sectors of society.
2. **Shortage of Trained Professionals:** The absence of specialized training facilities and a lack of qualified personnel in mental health has been a major barrier to providing services to women.
3. **Insufficient Funding:** The lack of adequate financial resources for mental health services has left women in rural and underserved areas without access to care. Afghanistan relies heavily on international aid to establish and sustain such services.

### **Recommendations:**

The following recommendations aim to address the shortage of mental health services for women in Afghanistan:

- **Increase Awareness:** The Afghan government should expand public awareness programs to address the stigma associated with mental health issues.



- **Referral Systems:** Healthcare workers should be instructed to refer individuals, especially women, suffering from depression and psychological issues to appropriate mental health services.
- **Innovative Access Solutions:** The government should explore cost-effective methods to deliver basic mental health services, such as teleconsultations via mobile phones, community-based initiatives, individual self-help programs, support groups, and incentives for mental health practitioners in rural areas.
- **International Support:** Donor countries should assist the Afghan government in strengthening the mental health care system, particularly for women, by improving training programs for mental health service providers and counselors.

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