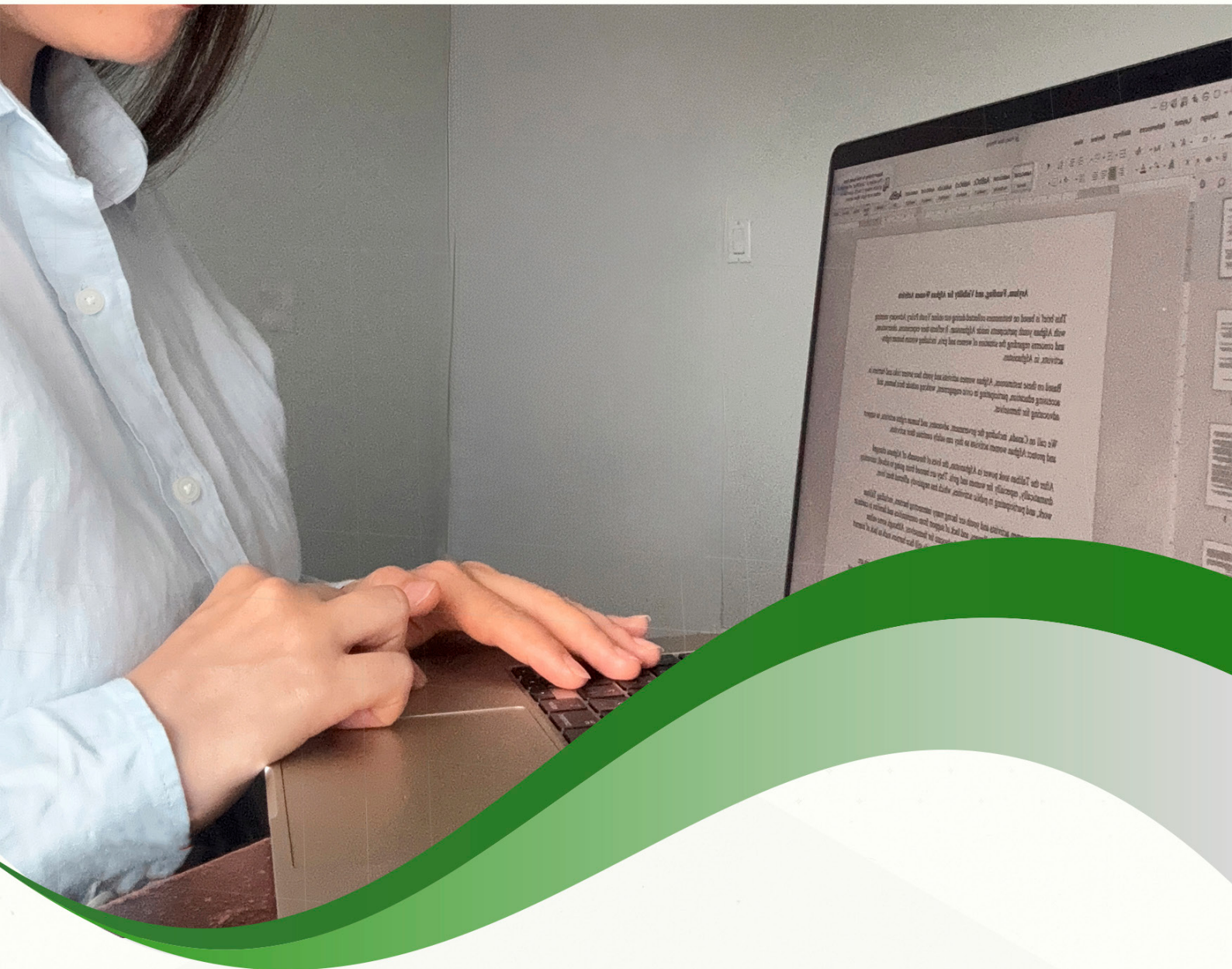




Afghans
For Progressive
Thinking (APT)



Policy Briefs Pamphlet 2026

Debate, Writing, and
Advocacy program

4th Edition

Table of Content

03 | Introduction

04 | About us

**05 | Integrating Afghan women's voices
into Canada's foreign policy**

**10 | Expanding safe educational pathways
for Afghan girls and women**

**14 | Asylum, funding, and visibility for
Afghan women activists**

**17 | Canada's role in advancing accountability
at the UN and international forums**

Introduction

In many ways, post-2021 presented an unprecedented challenge for youth, particularly young women, in Afghanistan. Today, their voices are silenced, their rights are stripped away, and their futures stolen under the repression of the Taliban regime. For over five years now, youth have been excluded from public life, and girls have been banned from education and employment. Yet they still continue to resist, advocate, and demand that the world not abandon them.

In this urgent context, Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) completed another cycle of its Advocacy and Writing Program, this time with Afghan youth based in Canada. They learned how to draft policy briefs, strengthened their advocacy skills, and connected with youth inside Afghanistan to document their lived experiences. At the end of the program, they drafted policy briefs that integrate the voices of Afghan youth into concrete and analytical recommendations. These briefs are now presented as a direct call to action aimed at Canada's decision-makers who hold real influence over foreign policy, asylum pathways, education programs, and international accountability.

This booklet presents four policy briefs authored by Afghan youth in Canada, highlighting the most pressing challenges in Afghanistan and the steps Canada can take to respond. The recommendations are designed to reach Global Affairs Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Members of Parliament, and Canada's representatives at the United Nations.

These briefs are not just words on paper—they are the voices of Afghan youth who refuse to be silenced, directed at Canada's leaders who have the power to make a difference.

This publication would not have been possible without the leadership of Ajmal Ramyar, Head Executive of APT, and Abdul Rahman Jalil, Project Manager. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Caitlyn O'Flaherty for facilitating the writing sessions, helping participants express their ideas, and editing the policy briefs. We also thank Lindsey Jones-Renaud for facilitating the advocacy sessions and providing invaluable feedback on policy brief drafts. A special thanks to Yazdan Mirdad for designing the booklet, and to Mursal for creating the posters that visually amplify the voices and messages of Afghan youth.

About Us

Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) is a youth-led nonprofit organization in Afghanistan that actively addresses human rights crises, with a specific focus on women's rights, while simultaneously promoting girls' access to education through creative and impactful initiatives.

APT's initiatives encompass a range of key areas. It connects female university students in Afghanistan with mentors from abroad, forging valuable relationships and providing guidance. APT also facilitates networking opportunities for youth, both within and beyond Afghanistan's borders, to encourage open dialogue, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas and experiences. In addition to these endeavors, APT is preparing to equip a team of young women with expertise in the "Internal Family System (IFS)" trauma healing technique. This training will empower them to offer healing sessions to others and create safe spaces for family members in need of support.

Furthermore, APT offers a platform for young women to express themselves by writing and publishing their stories, particularly significant under Taliban rule.

Over the course of its 13-year existence, APT has successfully fostered meaningful engagement among young men and women. Through discussions and dialogues, they have influenced policies prior to the collapse. These conversations center on critical topics and propose solutions for a better Afghanistan and a better world. APT's work has played a pivotal role in shaping policies on both national and global levels, owing to the development of leadership and critical thinking skills among its participants.

Since its inception in 2010, APT activities have impacted and inspired over 60,000 youth and children to build a vision for a just and inclusive society.

You may read more about APT at: www.aptyouth.org

Integrating Afghan women's voices into Canada's foreign policy:

How can Canada establish formal mechanisms to ensure Afghan women's lived experiences directly shape its foreign policy positions on Afghanistan?

Executive summary:

Canada, alongside Germany, the Netherlands, and Australia, has launched an initiative to hold the Taliban accountable for violations of women's rights under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women CEDAW (Wong, 2024). While this initiative signals a meaningful commitment to international accountability, it carries a significant unintended risk: pursuing the case through the International Court of Justice may require treating the Taliban as Afghanistan's lawful state representative, thereby granting it a form of international legal legitimacy it has not earned. However, this initiative is important because it attempts to address severe and ongoing violations of women's rights in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. If the case proceeds, consequently it may legitimize the Taliban by treating them as the official representative of Afghanistan in international law. Once recognized in this legal context, the Taliban could withdraw Afghanistan from CEDAW (Willmer, 2025), Or weaken other international treaties that protect women's rights. This policy brief calls on the Canadian government as one of the initiative states to support alternative representatives, provide flexible funding to Afghan women-led NGOs, and institutionalize Afghan women's input within Global Affairs.

Problem Statement:

In September 25, 2024, Canada, Germany, Netherlands, and Australia initiated efforts to bring a case against Afghanistan in order to hold the Taliban de facto authority regime accountable for violations of women's rights under CEDAW convention (Wong, 2024). However, a key concern is that pursuing such a case may require recognizing the Taliban as the official representative of Afghanistan in other words as a legal state. (Willmer, 2025). This could unintentionally legitimize the Taliban as a lawful government capable of acting on behalf of Afghanistan at the international level (Willmer, 2025). Such legitimacy may strengthen the Taliban's ability to advance its interpretation of women's rights, which is based on a selective reading of Islamic law that conflicts with international human rights standards and mainstream Islamic jurisprudence. Consequently, the Taliban could seek to withdraw Afghanistan from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women CEDAW (Willmer, 2025).

According to UNESCO, since the Taliban seized power, more than 1.1 million Afghan girls and young women have been denied access to formal education. Currently, around 80% of school-aged girls and young women in Afghanistan—approximately 2.5 million people—are out of school, and nearly 30% of girls have never entered primary education (UNESCO, 2023).

In addition to restrictions on education, women and girls in Afghanistan face widespread gender-based violence, child and forced marriage, and significant barriers to accessing justice and legal processes. One witness, Haya Iman (pseudonym), reported that women who had obtained legal divorces before 2021 were being coerced into reuniting with former husbands. These practices contradict both established legal procedures and recognized Islamic principles, including women's right to seek divorce (khula) under certain conditions (Khaja, personal communication, 2026).

Millions of women and girls currently living in Afghanistan would be affected if the Taliban regime is legally recognized on the international stage as representative of the Afghan government. One of the risks would be that their restrictive policies against women could be treated as lawful state actions. This could also make it more difficult for the international community and organizations like the United Nations to intervene or challenge these restrictions, as they may be considered internal affairs of a recognized government. As a result, violations of women's rights could become harder to address through international legal mechanisms.

Policy Analysis:

According to Article 93(1) of the UN Charter, Afghanistan is ipso facto, or automatically, a party to the International Court of Justice Statute (United Nations, 1945). The ICJ framework was designed to hold recognized states accountable, which means applying it to Afghanistan creates a structural dilemma in which pursuing accountability and avoiding legitimization are in direct tension with each other. The question of who should negotiate with Afghanistan regarding obligations under CEDAW concerns representation, which consequently leads to the recognition of the Taliban regime as Afghanistan's government (Willmer, 2025).

Although the initiative aims to seek accountability for serious violations of women's rights in Afghanistan through an established legal framework, which demonstrates a commitment to defending women's rights, it may indirectly result in the acceptance of the Taliban regime as the representative of Afghanistan. According to CEDAW provisions, before a dispute can be brought to the ICJ under Article 29, states must first attempt to negotiate the dispute with the state (Afghanistan) and, secondly, must attempt arbitration if negotiations fail. To prove these requirements are met, the initiating states would have to demonstrate that they have attempted to negotiate with Afghanistan (Willmer, 2025). A concern therefore arises about who the initiative states are required to negotiate with. Since the Taliban control Afghanistan, it is impossible to avoid determining who legally represents Afghanistan.

As one of the state parties to CEDAW, Canada's laws are consistent with CEDAW, are enforced, and the government appears to be fairly proactive in challenging cultural norms that harm women. However, the initiative faces a significant limitation because pursuing accountability under the existing

legal framework requires engagement with the authorities exercising control in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban currently exercise that control, negotiations required under CEDAW may be interpreted as implicitly recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

Therefore, the existing framework cannot resolve the dilemma on its own; alternative representation mechanisms and diaspora-led consultation structures become not just helpful additions but necessary corrections. Former Afghan women politicians, members of parliament, and journalists are well informed about Afghanistan's constitution, laws, and obligations under international law. These alternative representatives could potentially advocate for Afghan women's rights and significantly contribute to making the CEDAW framework an enforceable obligation in Afghanistan, regardless of which regime is in power.

Recommendations:

A) Alternative representation—such as opposition or alternative authorities recognized as “legitimate representatives of the people,” as seen in contexts like Libya and Syria—could be considered in the International Court of Justice framework. (Willmer, 2025). During the civil war in Syria many states considered the Syrian National Coalition (opposition) as a “legitimate representative of the Syrian people. In addition, during the 2011 uprising against Gaddafi, the National Transitional Council (NTC) was recognized by many states and by the UN General Assembly as the “legitimate representative of the Libyan people (Talmon, 2011). Therefore, Canada, together with other initiative states, can recognize alternative representatives that are active in Canada and other initiative states, including former Afghan women parliament members, politicians and journalists. As the Taliban's regime, laws and beliefs are significantly different and against the Afghanistan population, alternative representatives are well-acquainted with Afghanistan's legal system, CEDAW obligation, and international human rights laws. Alternative representatives substantially advocate for Afghan women, raise their voices and concerns, and make decisions on behalf of Afghanistan.

B) Canada should provide long-term, flexible funding to Afghan women-led NGOs through established Global Affairs Canada mechanisms, including the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) and the Women's Voice and Leadership (WVL) program. Under these channels, funding could be disbursed through core, multi-year grants that allow organizations to allocate resources toward education, legal aid, and emergency support based on evolving community needs rather than rigid project-based restrictions. This would ensure predictable financial support while strengthening the capacity of Afghan women's organizations and diaspora-led groups to respond to ongoing human rights and humanitarian challenges

C) Canada should institutionalize Afghan women's input within Global Affairs Canada by establishing a standing advisory working group composed of Afghan women's rights advocates, members of the Afghan diaspora, and international

law experts. The group would meet on a quarterly basis (every three months) to ensure ongoing and timely engagement. It would provide structured input in the form of written policy briefs, thematic reports, and formal recommendations addressing issues such as human rights, humanitarian access, and gender equality. These outputs would be submitted to relevant policy divisions within Global Affairs Canada, including human rights policy units, international assistance branches, and regional South and Central Asia desks. The recommendations would directly inform Canada's diplomatic strategy—particularly its coordination with international partners and engagement with Afghan authorities—as well as its legal positioning on whether interaction with de facto Taliban authorities constitutes recognition under international law.

Conclusion:

The international initiative to hold Afghanistan accountable under CEDAW highlights the urgent need to address severe violations of women's rights while operating within a complex legal framework. However, it also exposes a fundamental tension between ensuring accountability and avoiding the unintended legitimization of the Taliban as Afghanistan's governing authority. In particular, pursuing such a case may require engaging with the Taliban in a way that could unintentionally legitimize them as a lawful government capable of representing Afghanistan at the international level (Willmer, 2025), while also raising the risk that the Taliban may advance a selective interpretation of women's rights based on a restrictive reading of Islamic law and potentially withdraw Afghanistan from CEDAW (Willmer, 2025). This dilemma cannot be fully resolved through existing legal mechanisms alone and therefore requires careful diplomatic and legal safeguards. Canada, as a leading state in the initiative, should take a proactive role in strengthening alternative consultation structures and clarifying the limits of recognition in all engagement with de facto authorities.

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Expanding safe educational pathways for Afghan girls and women:

What specific steps should Canada take to remove the barriers preventing Afghan girls and women from accessing scholarships, emergency student visas, and safe educational pathways abroad.

Executive summary:

Afghan girls face ongoing restrictions on access to secondary and higher education within Afghanistan. While Canada has provided educational opportunities for Afghan girls, access remains limited due to ongoing barriers, including financial constraints, visa requirements, and complex immigration procedures. As a result, many qualified students are unable to pursue higher education despite receiving admission offers. For example, Nabila, a young woman inside Afghanistan, received a university offer of admission but could not proceed due to the cost of traveling to a third country for visa processing. This policy brief calls on the government of Canada in collaboration with Canadian universities to take decisive action to expand scholarship opportunities, reduce financial barriers, and introduce a fast-track study permit process for Afghan girls seeking higher education.

Problem Statement:

Since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021, they have imposed policies that severely limit access to education for girls and women. As a result, Afghanistan has become the only country in the world where women are prohibited from accessing secondary and higher education. Approximately 2.2 million girls are currently barred from attending school beyond the primary level, and more than 100,000 young women have been denied access to university. (UNESCO, 2023).

In response to this educational crisis, the Government of Canada has supported educational opportunities for Afghan girls and women through international assistance and partnerships. These efforts include community-based learning initiatives, online learning programs, and scholarships that provide alternative pathways to education. Canadian funding has helped approximately 25,000 Afghan girls access primary education despite the Taliban's restrictions on female education (Public Safety Canada, 2021).

Despite these efforts, there are still significant gaps in the accessibility and effectiveness of educational pathways for Afghan girls. In practice, many qualified applicants are unable to access existing opportunities due to systemic barriers embedded in program requirements and immigration processes. Afghan applicants must apply through the general study permit system, which does not account for their unique humanitarian circumstances. As a result, applicants may be denied study permits because they are required to demonstrate their intention to leave Canada after completing their studies, despite the ongoing insecurity and

restrictions they face in Afghanistan. For example, Western university's Afghan refugee scholarship program provides full financial support but is limited to a small number of applicants and requires strict eligibility criteria. Similarly, recent cases indicate that the federal government has denied study permit to several Afghan girls despite their admission to Canadian universities. For instance, Farzana, an Afghan student who received a full scholarship to study at Wilfrid Laurier University, met all academic requirements but was nevertheless denied a study permit by federal government (Policy Options, 2024). These barriers undermine the effectiveness of Canada's educational support initiatives and restrict Afghan girls' access to opportunities designed to address the broader education crisis.

Policy Analysis:

The barriers facing Afghan girls in accessing Canadian education pathways are rooted in the structure of Canada's immigration and study permit system. These systems were designed for applicants from stable countries and rely on requirements such as proof of temporary intent, which do not reflect the realities of individuals coming from conflict-affected contexts (UNESCO, 2021; UNESCO, 2026). As a result, Afghan applicants are structurally disadvantaged by criteria that do not account for humanitarian circumstances.

Although Canada has introduced initiatives to support Afghan students, including scholarships and targeted immigration responses, these measures remain constrained by the standard immigration framework. Government reports acknowledge efforts to improve access for Afghan nationals; however, existing procedures continue to rely on conventional eligibility and documentation requirements (CIMM, 2023a; CIMM, 2023b). In practice, this means that even qualified applicants who receive admission and financial support may still face barriers at the visa stage.

Collectively, these conditions demonstrate that the current approach is insufficient. The persistence of structural barriers indicates a need for more flexible and humanitarian-informed mechanisms, which directly informs the need for expedited processing, adapted eligibility standards, and expanded institutional partnerships.

Policy Recommendations:

- The Government of Canada should reform study permit and visa assessment criteria by introducing a fast-track study permit process for Afghan girls admitted to Canadian post-secondary institutions. This reform should explicitly modify or waive the "intent to return" requirement for Afghan applicants, recognizing that return to Afghanistan is not a safe or realistic expectation under current conditions. Instead, visa assessments should prioritize documented academic admission, institutional sponsorship, and humanitarian risk context rather than temporary residence intent.

- The Government of Canada should expand educational pathways for Afghan women by strengthening partnerships with Canadian universities and colleges to increase access to higher education. This includes increasing the number of fully funded scholarships and reducing restrictive eligibility requirements such as application fees, proof of financial sufficiency, and rigid documentation of prior education, while also introducing flexible credit transfer and academic recognition systems for disrupted educational backgrounds.
- The Government of Canada should develop formal agreements with transit countries such as Pakistan and Iran to allow Afghan students to legally enter and remain temporarily for visa processing, including biometrics and interviews, under humanitarian or temporary transit arrangements. This would require coordination within existing bilateral frameworks, given the complex migration and refugee dynamics in both countries.
- The Government of Canada should introduce protection and integration pathways for Afghan girls by expanding work permits and creating clearer routes to permanent residency for Afghan graduates at risk because return to Afghanistan may not be safe under the current regime. By linking study opportunities with long term safety, Canada can make sure that Afghan graduates build secure futures and contribute positively to Canadian society.

Conclusion:

Since 2021 in Afghanistan, millions of girls and women have been denied from going to schools and universities. Even those Afghan girls who search for alternatives routes to continue their education abroad face challenges due to strict visa rules. Canada can make a difference here and support thousands of girls whose only dreams is to continue their education. First, a fast-track study permit is necessary because it will remove the long and uncertain visa process that most of the times ends in refusal. The government of Canada must make sure that those already admitted to universities are not blocked at the visa stage. Another important step is introducing more scholarships to reduce the financial burden that prevents many students from even applying. Finally, a flexible admission rules is important as many girls have gaps in their schooling or lack official documents because of Taliban restrictions. Hence, alternative proof of learning and recognition of non-traditional study would give them a chance to continue their education. Education is not only about learning, it is about survival, dignity, and the chance to build a future.

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Asylum, funding, and visibility for Afghan women activists:

How can Canada better protect, fund, and amplify the work of Afghan women activists who face serious risks for defending human rights inside Afghanistan?

Executive summary:

Since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, Afghan women and girls have been banned from secondary and higher education (UNESCO, 2023) and removed from most jobs due to increasing restrictions on women's employment (UNICEF, 2026). Afghan women activists in particular have faced increasing restrictions, safety risks, and barriers to participation in the society and public life. Many of these activists, who advocate for education, human rights, and community support, are forced to work in dangerous conditions with limited resources and little international protection (UNESCO, 2023). While Canada has introduced immigration pathways, funding initiatives, and advocacy efforts to support vulnerable Afghans (IRCC, 2024), many activists especially those in rural areas or working informally continue to face barriers in accessing these supports.

This policy brief is based on testimonies from Afghan youth and a review of Canadian policies. It examines key gaps in protection, funding, and visibility, and argues that Canada can strengthen its response by making asylum pathways more accessible, providing direct support to grassroots initiatives, improving access to technology and education, and creating more opportunities for Afghan women to safely participate in international discussions. These steps would help ensure that support reaches those most affected and improves the safety, visibility, and long-term opportunities available to Afghan women activists.

Problem Statement:

Since the Taliban's return in 2021, Afghan women activists have been facing severe challenges and risks related to their activities. According to Salah, one of the women rights activists who participated in the Youth Online Policy Advocacy Meeting, "the biggest challenge is the lack of financial resources, which limits the abilities of activists to expand their supportive programs beyond cities into rural areas and villages" (Salah, personal communication, 04, 2026). The problem is not only financial but also related to the restrictive rules of the Taliban against women. According to Fatima, another participant in the Youth Online Policy Advocacy Meeting, "the situation of women in Herat, one of the provinces of Afghanistan, shows that women are not allowed to go outside without covering their faces with a full hijab. If they do not comply, they may be sent to jail by the Taliban. She also explained that, under current rules, husbands are allowed to beat their wives, and women are not allowed to report these incidents to the police unless they have very serious injuries. Fatima is a pseudonym used to protect the participant's identity. Salah's real name is used with permission. Testimonies were collected during the Youth Online Policy Advocacy Meeting and are cited as personal communications because the recording is not publicly available." This reflects the severe restrictions and lack of protection women are facing (Fatima, personal communication, 04, 2026).

Afghan women activists continue to face urgent protection risks, especially those who have fled to neighbouring countries including Pakistan and Tajikistan and remain without secure immigration status or safe resettlement pathways. While Canada has supported Afghan resettlement, its humanitarian program for Afghan nationals depends on referrals from designated partners, which can leave some at-risk women activists outside formal protection channels (Government of Canada, 2024). At the same time, Human Rights Watch reported that Pakistani authorities have increased pressure on Afghans to return to Afghanistan, where activists, journalists, and women who opposed Taliban policies may face persecution (Human Rights Watch, 2025). This creates a serious protection gap for Afghan women activists who need faster, safer, and more accessible asylum and resettlement options.

Issue Analysis:

The challenges faced by Afghan women activists are not only the result of Taliban restrictions, but also reflect gaps within existing support mechanisms. Although Canada has introduced humanitarian pathways and resettlement measures for vulnerable Afghans, many of these programs rely on referrals from designated partners and formal channels that are not always accessible to grassroots activists. Consequently, women working informally or those who have fled to neighbouring countries may remain outside existing protection systems. In addition, limited financial resources continue to constrain the ability of local women-led initiatives to expand their activities and respond to the needs of communities beyond major urban centres.

While Canada's existing efforts have provided important forms of support, significant barriers remain. Current mechanisms have not always been flexible enough to address the realities faced by women activists who are at immediate risk or who operate outside established networks. As a result, many Afghan women activists continue to experience limited access to protection, resources, and opportunities to safely share their experiences and contribute to international discussions. These gaps suggest that Canada's response can be strengthened through more accessible protection pathways, greater support for grassroots initiatives, and increased opportunities for safe participation and visibility.

Recommendations:

- Government of Canada: Expand Safe and Accessible Protection Pathways for Afghan Women Activists. Current resettlement programs often depend on referrals from designated organizations, which can leave vulnerable activists outside formal protection channels. Expanding emergency protection measures and creating more accessible pathways would help ensure that women at risk can access safety more quickly.
- Government of Canada: Prioritize At-Risk Afghan Women Activists in Resettlement Programs. Prioritizing and accelerating applications for women at heightened risk would help address the protection gaps faced by activists living

in neighbouring countries without secure immigration status.

- Global Affairs Canada and International Donors: Increase Direct Support for Grassroots Women-Led Initiatives. Direct and flexible funding would allow local women-led initiatives to sustain their activities and better respond to the needs of communities beyond major urban centres.
- International Human Rights Organizations and Civil Society Groups: Increase Safe Participation and Visibility for Afghan Women Activists. Creating safe opportunities for Afghan women activists to participate in international discussions and advocacy initiatives would help ensure that their experiences and perspectives are represented in global conversations while prioritizing confidentiality and informed consent.

Conclusion:

Afghan women activists continue to demonstrate resilience despite ongoing restrictions and limited access to support. Many remain underserved by existing protection and funding mechanisms. By expanding protection pathways, prioritizing at-risk activists in resettlement programs, increasing direct support for grassroots initiatives, and creating safe opportunities for participation, Canada and its partners can play a stronger role in protecting and amplifying the voices of Afghan women activists. Taking action on these recommendations would help ensure that support reaches those most in need and contributes to a safer and more inclusive future for Afghan women.

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Canada's role in advancing accountability at the UN and international forums:

What concrete actions should Canada take at the UN and other international forums to advance accountability for gender-based violence and systemic repression in Afghanistan?

Executive summary:

This policy brief addresses the systematic restriction and denial of women's rights under Taliban rule in Afghanistan by examining the restrictions imposed on women in relation to their access to education, public services, cultural activities, personal autonomy, and protection from gender-based violence. It draws upon direct testimonials of women along with findings from United Nations agencies, specifically UN Women, UNAMA and UNHCR, highlighting a pattern of exclusion, intimidation, and violations of rights against Afghan women and girls.

All in all, the evidence suggests a systematic denial of women's rights in various aspects. The testimonials and international findings reflect a pervasive practice of violations on women's rights by the Taliban.

Problem Statement:

Since their return to power in August 2021, Afghan women and girls have been effectively denied access to education, employment, cultural life and public services. The current regime's policies and actions have progressively curtailed women's participation in public life and undermined their legal rights to protection against, among others, issues of marriage, divorce and movement (UN Women, 2023; UNAMA, 2023).

Testimonies show how women have increasingly been excluded from participation in public and cultural life. Z. Sarwarzad, who recently graduated from school, spoke about how the authorities disallowed women from presenting works at a calligraphy exhibition that she and her peers had organized themselves. She said, "we organized everything ourselves but we were not allowed to present it properly." This reflects the broader restrictions placed on women's participation in public and cultural life.

Serious concerns are also present in relation to women's legal rights and personal independence. Haya Iman, a pseudonymous woman from Baghlan province, narrated cases of women who, despite complying with the rules on attire, are denied entry in the government offices to access public services. She also narrates stories of women, who, though having been legally divorced prior to the Taliban take-over, are being compelled to re-unite with their husbands, indicating the eroded legal safeguards concerning marriage and divorce rights.

The exclusion is experienced directly by women and girls throughout Afghanistan. Some have reported being denied entry to government institutions

despite adhering strictly to clothing mandates, while others are being pushed into forced re-marriage after obtaining divorce, and still others have been obstructed from participating in cultural activities through various prohibitions.

Growing instances of forced and early marriages among girls are a concern of critical nature. Wahida, who conducts small training classes for girls, said that an approximate 13-14 year old girl was recently forced into marriage to a man who had more than one wife already. According to Wahida, “families are threatened, and they feel that they have no choice.” This is also indicative of broader issues noted by UNICEF (2023) according to which, poverty, lack of access to education and insecurity have contributed to the alarming rise of child and forced marriage in the country.

This is both a local and a global issue. At the local level, exclusion of women from social, economic and political activities hinders the country’s future prospects in terms of development and security. These restrictions deny young people future opportunities and personal development. At the international level, these developments trigger immediate human rights concerns, prompting for action-oriented strategies and policies toward promoting women’s rights in Afghanistan.

Issue Analysis:

The restrictions imposed on Afghan women are not isolated policies but a part of a broader system to limit women’s participation in public sectors. The evidence and testimonies presented in this brief point out the barriers to education, employment, cultural engagement, and legal protection. By implementing these restrictions women are excluded from opportunities that support economic independence, social participation, and personal development. The persistence of these challenges is linked to the absence of effective domestic accountability and the weakening of legal protection for women. The statements further elaborate that even women who comply with existing regulations are denied access to public services and their legal Islamic rights. International organizations including UNAMA, UN women, and UNHCR, have continued to document and report violations; however, only monitoring the violation without proper actions has not been sufficient to reverse current trends. While humanitarian assistance has provided essential support, many Afghan women continue to face significant barriers to education, legal protection, and their basic social rights.

Given these realities, a comprehensive solution is required that strengthens accountability, access to education and cultural opportunities, increases legal protection, and provides safety pathways. These approaches not only respond to immediate humanitarian concerns but also help preserve opportunities for Afghan women to participate in society and exercise their fundamental rights.

Recommendations:

- **Strengthen monitoring and accountability mechanisms:** Continued monitoring by UNAMA and Human Rights Council of the United Nations is crucial to document and publicize violations and to apply appropriate diplomatic and legal pressure. Transparency through reporting helps ensure international awareness and galvanize relevant policy responses for women's rights.
- **Promote rights-based awareness through Islamic scholars and community leaders:** The international community should support the advocacy of respected Islamic scholars and community leaders to disseminate awareness among the population, especially in rural areas where traditional norms often dictate choices influenced by religious beliefs. Restriction of rights related to education, consent for marriage and refusal to grant divorce contravene principles of Islam such as seeking knowledge and consent.
- **Support safe educational and cultural opportunities for women and girls:** Canada and its international partners should provide funding for initiatives that allow women and girls in Afghanistan to pursue learning and culture, in particular in online formats, learning centers at local community levels, and scholarships, in addition to backing artistic and cultural projects organized by women themselves.
- **Provide legal aid and protection:** Legal assistance and advocacy should be expanded for women at risk of forced marriage, divorce denial, or denial of independent living. Legal support could offer women victims protection against rights abuses.
- **Expand humanitarian and scholarship pathways for vulnerable women:** Canada and its international counterparts must increase available resettlement slots, emergency visas and scholarships for Afghan women and girls exposed to grave dangers of marriage compulsion, cultural ostracization and lack of access to learning opportunities.

This necessitates firm international intervention and strategic actions in order to restore and protect the rights and freedoms of women and girls of Afghanistan. The brief concludes with recommendations at the international, national, and community level for restoring their rights and freedoms.

Conclusion:

In Afghanistan, women and girls in Afghanistan continue to face unprecedented restrictions under Taliban rule which includes a ban on their education, public participation, legal rights, and personal freedoms. For this brief, we gathered testimonies and reports from young women living inside the country, all of them showing a clear pattern of exclusion and abuse. These violations not only harm individuals but also weaken the country's future development and

stability. Therefore, strong international action, community-based advocacy, and expanded support systems are urgently needed to protect Afghan women's rights and ensure they have opportunities to live, learn, and thrive.

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The End