



Afghans
For Progressive
Thinking (APT)

اندېښنه پوهنتون

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Introduction

Today, in the face of bans, restrictions, and shrinking civic space in Afghanistan, we witness how Afghan youth, especially young women, refuse to surrender and show to the world that their struggle for education and justice is far from over.

This booklet is the result of three months of advocacy and writing program organized by Afghans for Progressive Thinking organization (APT), where young women learned how to transform their experiences into policy and recommendations for change. During this program, APT divided participants into six groups to analyze urgent challenges and propose solutions that demand attention from policymakers and international institutions.

As a result, the young women participants produced six policy briefs that are interconnected ranging from the denial of education and civic participation to the arbitrary detention of women, the absence of safe channels for reporting abuse, the urgent need for inclusive scholarship pathways, and more. Together, these briefs form a mosaic of the Afghan youth experience under repression while also offering practical steps for the international community to respond.

What makes this booklet unique is the perspective from which it is written because the policy briefs it contains are not a distant analysis. They are authored by Afghan youth themselves whom have lived through the consequences of exclusion, displacement, and fear. Their words carry a vision for what Afghanistan could become if its youth are empowered to lead.

This collection of policy briefs also reflects the guidance and support of those who stood beside them throughout the program. We recognize the leadership of Ajmal Ramyar, Head Executive of APT, whose commitment to youth empowerment continues to inspire. Our gratitude extends to Caitlyn O'Flaherty and Lindsey Jones-Renaud, who guided participants through writing and advocacy sessions, and provided thoughtful feedback to strengthen the voices of the authors.

Special thanks goes to Mursal, whose design work gave this booklet its visual identity and amplified the voices and messages of Afghan youth with creativity.

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

Afghan Youth and Girls, and SDG 16: Advancing Peace, Justice, and Inclusive Institutions in Afghanistan

Executive Summary

There is differential access to education, civic participation and justice at all levels for Afghan youth, particularly young women and girls, and directly impacts efforts to meet Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16. While SDG 16 aims to improve inclusive decision-making, access to justice and institutions, Afghanistan has serious challenges in the areas of the rule of law and accountability (United Nations in Afghanistan, n.d.; World Justice Project, n.d.).

Gender restrictions and a lack of secondary school education for girls have deprived at least 1.4 million girls of secondary education in Afghanistan since 2021, and higher education has been banned for women since December 2022 (UNESCO, 2024, 2026). This short paper suggests that humanitarian action is not enough to bring peace and justice to Afghanistan; what is needed are safe and structured opportunities for youth to participate and hold accountable, as called for in the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (United Nations Security Council, 2015).

Problem Statement

The SDG 16 target is to build peaceful and inclusive societies, which are built on the rule of law, accountable institutions and participatory decision making (United Nations in Afghanistan, n.d.). But the Afghan government has been stifling girls' education, civic space has been curtailed, and the poor quality of justice systems has not allowed this to occur (World Justice Project, n.d.).

In Afghanistan, secondary and higher education for girls and women is forbidden altogether (banned since September 2021 and December 2022, respectively). This systematic exclusion has resulted in an estimated 2.5 million girls being currently out of school, including the 1.4 million secondary-school-age girls who are directly blocked from education by the bans (UNESCO, 2024, 2026). These restrictions lead to loss of social trust, civic involvement and sustainability of the institutions over time.

Issue Analysis

There are inter-related and compound barriers to the Afghan youth. Leadership, civic awareness and trust in institutions are all outcomes of girls' education and access to education is a key driver of whether girls are able to meaningfully engage in governance and have knowledge, social access and trust.

Arrests, intimidation and threats to personal security were reported in several instances which highlighted the reduction of civic space and accountability in Afghanistan (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). Other current issues include corruption, weak performance of justice systems and institutions, and lack of trust in institutions (World Justice Project, n.d.). This systematic exclusion impacts on SDG Target 16.3 access to justice and SDG Target 16.7 responsible, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making (United Nations in Afghanistan n.d.). All such barriers to education and civic participation will continue to be a failure of institutions that are meant to serve the population.

Policy Recommendations

To bring Youth, Peace and Security commitments at the global level to fruition at the local level, the following measures are recommended:

- **Establish youth advisory groups** in UN and NGO programs. Facilitate and encourage structured consultation processes in policy design, protection programming and advocacy priorities (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025) that involve and enable Afghan youth, particularly young women and girls.
- **Support independent monitoring** of human rights and justice violations. This includes documentation and monitoring of arbitrary arrests, intimidation and discrimination against women and girls, and barriers to justice (World Justice Project, n.d.; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025).
- **Strengthen diaspora networks** by strategically building ties and linkages. Voices that go unheard at home need platforms in international policy and practice, and diaspora networks are well positioned to advocate on their behalf (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). Furthermore, networks of Afghan students, women, and youth must be integrated into local advocacy and discussion.
- **Expand access** to legal aid and the understanding of legal rights. Make legal information available in the community; provide information on rights to girls and youth and provide a pathway for exercising rights through the justice system (World Justice Project, n.d.).

Conclusion

The youth and girls should be at the heart of the process of institutional reform if sustainable stability is to be achieved in Afghanistan. The lack of access to education, restriction of civic space, and lack of justice institutions are not isolated issues, but are interlinked and erode the rule of law, accountability, and trust in government that SDG 16 aims to foster (United Nations in Afghanistan, n.d.; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025; World Justice Project, n.d.).

Any solution to the plight of Afghan women and girls should, therefore, promote the rights of women and girls, access to justice, safe participation and connections of Afghan youth to national and international mechanisms for accountability.

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Beyond Equal Treatment: Toward Inclusive Scholarship Policies and University Admission Pathways for Afghan Women with Interrupted Education

Executive Summary

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghan girls and women have been systematically denied access to secondary and higher education. As a result, international scholarships and overseas universities admission have become the only realistic pathway for them to continue their education. However, rigid admission requirements and standardized scholarship policies continue to exclude many qualified Afghan women by failing to recognize the exceptional challenges they face and their extraordinary circumstances.

This policy brief argues that equal treatment does not guarantee equal access in every situation. It calls on scholarship providers, universities, governments, and international organizations and donors to adopt flexible and context-sensitive policies that remove barriers, address systematic problems and create fairer pathways to higher education.

Implementing these recommendations and policy reforms will expand educational opportunities for Afghan women, protect their right to education, promote gender equality, and help build a generation of educated women who can contribute to Afghanistan's future development.

Problem Statement

Afghanistan has become the only country where secondary and higher education are systematically forbidden to females after Taliban's return to power (UNESCO, 2025a). The only hope left is to continue their education abroad through scholarships. However, this path is becoming complicated day by day due to the Universities and Scholarship "one-size-fits-all" model that do not reflect Afghan women's unique circumstances. As a result, many qualified applicants are unable to meet those requirements despite their academic potential.

Visa systems remain prohibitively restrictive: The UK government's "emergency brake" on study visa for Afghan nationals, implemented in March 2026, has terminated even prestigious opportunities, removing one of the last remaining hope for Afghan women to access higher education, (The PIE News, 2026). In addition, the Taliban prohibited the women from traveling alone and have halted verification of educational certificates (Afghan Women's News Agency, 2025). Limited internet access and the digital divide further reduce Afghan students' ability to prepare applications and participate in online learning.

Meanwhile, these barriers are not only financial but also emotional, as 90 percent of Afghan women describe their mental health as bad or very bad (UN Women, 2023).

Policy Analysis

Current scholarship and university admission systems are designed with the assumption that applicants have uninterrupted education, access to official documentation, financial stability, language proficiency tests, conventional visa procedures and the freedom to travel. Since 2021, these assumptions no longer reflect the reality faced by Afghan students. As a result, many highly capable applicants are excluded not because they lack academic merit, but because existing policies fail to understand the exceptional barriers imposed to them.

The persistence of these barriers reflects a broader policy mismatch rather than a shortage of educational opportunities. Scholarship and admission frameworks continue to treat Afghan applicants as ordinary international. As a result, policies often produce exclusion by applying identical standards to applicants with profoundly unequal starting points.

Addressing this challenge does not require lowering academic standards. Rather, it requires adopting an equitable approach that distinguishes merit from circumstance. Without policy reforms, the international community risks losing an entire generation of talented women whose potential remains one of Afghanistan's greatest assets.

Policy Recommendations

Scholarship Providers

- Make standard requirements (bank accounts statements, formal transcripts, language tests, etc) optional rather than mandatory for Afghan applicants.
- Replace in-person interviews with remote alternatives. Review each application individually, accepting demonstrated competences, and remove application fees entirely for applicants from Afghanistan.
- Provide fully funded scholarships as partially funded scholarships cannot solve Afghan Applicants' problems.

Governments

- Introduce exemptions to visa bans for Afghan women with confirmed scholarships, collaborating with universities and UNHCR to streamline visa procedures.
- Establish humanitarian student fast-track visa categories recognizing Afghan women as refugees of gender-based persecution.

Universities

- Establish Foundation or Bridge Programs (6–12 months) before degree study. These should teach:

Policy Recommendations

English for Academic Purposes, Academic Writing, Digital Skills, Research Skills.

- Accept alternative documentation when official transcripts are unavailable; (sworn affidavits, teacher recommendations, and third-party verification), review applications individually, and partner with organizations that maintain student records.
- Offer intensive pre-sessional English courses for students who have not passed an official language test.

Donors and International Organizations

- Provide fee waivers or vouchers for TOEFL, IELTS, and Duolingo tests. Offer free test preparation courses through partnerships with organizations and training courses.
- Provide laptops or tablets and cover internet data costs. Support the development of bridge programs at host universities.

All Actors

- Integrate mental health support into every scholarship program:
 1. Group sessions and confidential counselling during the application process
 2. Culturally competent counselling services upon arrival
 3. Peer support networks connecting Afghan women students
 4. Fund in-country psychological support for women still in Afghanistan
- Establish clear, transparent communication channels to keep applicants informed about their status. And coordinate across sectors to create seamless pathways from application to graduation.

Conclusion

Afghan women have not lost their ambition to learn nor are they asking for special treatment; they are asking for fair access to education despite extraordinary barriers they face. Without flexible scholarship policies, humanitarian visa pathways and alternative admission procedures, thousands of qualified women will continue to lose their only opportunity for higher education. Governments, universities, scholarship providers, and international organizations must act together NOW to ensure that talents are not lost because of circumstances beyond these students' control. **The decisions made today will absolutely determine whether hopes and ambitions are restored – or another generation is left behind!**

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No More Lost Years: A Policy Roadmap for Afghan Girls' Education

Executive Summary

As of right now, Afghanistan is the only nation in the world where girls are routinely excluded from secondary and higher education, a policy in effect since September 2021, when secondary education for girls was suspended, and December 2022, when women were prohibited from attending universities. Over 100,000 young women have lost access to higher education, while over 2.2 million girls are still denied secondary education (UNESCO, 2025a). No significant progress has been achieved to restore their right to school, despite repeated requests for action and broad worldwide concern.

Restoring secondary and higher education access, increasing community-based and digital learning opportunities, investing in women educators and educational infrastructure, boosting scholarships and globally recognized learning pathways, and fortifying ties between Afghan communities and international organizations are all suggested in the brief.

This brief calls on the United Nations and international donors to prioritize funding and formal accreditation of community-based and digital learning pathways in order to prevent Afghanistan's four-year education ban from becoming permanent.

Four years of inaction have already jeopardized the destiny of an entire generation. Immediate and coordinated action is required to ensure that Afghan girls may reclaim their educational rights and contribute to their country's future.

Problem Statement

The continuous restriction of girls' education is not just a violation of internationally recognized human rights but also a fundamental hurdle to Afghanistan's social and economic rehabilitation. Education is essential for sustainable development, poverty reduction, gender equality, and economic progress. By restricting girls from finishing secondary and higher education, Afghanistan limits the country's future workforce, reduces women's participation in public life, and undermines long-term stability and prosperity.

The repercussions go beyond the educational sector. Afghanistan is losing potential teachers, healthcare workers, journalists, lawyers, engineers, and other professionals that are required to restore the country. Every extra year of exclusion raises the social and economic costs of recovery, limiting chances for a whole generation of young women.

Qualitative interviews conducted for this policy brief emphasize the human consequences of these restrictions. Participants reported losing educational prospects, professional goals, and confidence in their future. They also reported increased psychological distress, heightened uncertainty, and limited access to different learning possibilities as a result of financial constraints, inadequate internet connectivity, and the lack of authorized educational pathways.

The interviews also provided two significant conclusions. First, families continue to promote girls' education despite persistent restrictions, suggesting that communities can play an important role in future educational endeavors. Second, participants expressed worry that four years of limitations are gradually normalizing girls' exclusion from education, raising the possibility that protracted denial of education may become socially acceptable if significant action is delayed.

This policy brief urges Afghan stakeholders, the United Nations, international donors, civil society organizations, and local communities to take immediate, coordinated action to restore girls' access to education and avoid the long-term social, economic, and humanitarian consequences of inaction.

Issue Analysis

The absence of Afghan girls from education has resulted in a national development problem with far-reaching social, economic, and humanitarian implications. Four years of restrictions have harmed Afghanistan's future workforce, decreased women's involvement in public life, and hampered the country's potential to achieve long-term growth. The longer these limits last, the more difficult and expensive it will be to reconstruct an inclusive education system and replenish the country's human capital (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

The qualitative interviews conducted for this policy brief reveal five interconnected effects of the restrictions: a loss of educational and professional opportunities, a decline in mental health, educational migration, continued family support for girls' education, and the growing normalization of exclusion (Author interviews, 2025). These findings show that the crisis is affecting an entire generation of Afghan women's futures, far beyond the classroom.

Hasina's story shows the immediate scholastic and psychological consequences of extended isolation. After leaving school, she attempted to learn independently; but, the lack of experienced teachers, approved programs, dependable internet connectivity, and suitable learning materials hampered meaningful development. She mentioned feeling hopeless about her future and without any aspirations to pursue. Hasina also observed that many girls in her village had dropped out of school, married young, or fled Afghanistan in pursuit of better educational possibilities. Her example demonstrates how educational exclusion can have long-term social and emotional implications if options are limited.

Zahra's experience highlights the impact of constraints on educated women and their professional engagement. A university graduate and former television newscaster, she claimed that the constraints drove her to abandon her beloved job and seek alternate employment as a teacher. Although she continues to give back to her community, she has reported increased stress, decreased confidence, and concern about the future. Zahra also stressed that years of international concern had not resulted in substantial change for Afghan girls, and she urged more action to preserve their right to an education.

Zainab's experience demonstrates another consequence of the restrictions: educational migration. To continue her university studies, she moved to Iran, where she encountered the emotional and financial difficulties of abandoning her family and adjusting to a new educational environment. Although she was able to continue learning, she emphasized that no girl should be forced to leave her country in order to receive an education. Her story illustrates the growing loss of outstanding young women whose knowledge and skills may have helped Afghanistan's future growth.

Participants expressed worry about the rising normalization of girls' exclusion from education. Although many people continue to support girls' education, participants said that certain communities have come to accept long-term limitations as an inescapable reality. If this tendency continues, restoring educational possibilities may become more difficult, and more women may give up hope of returning to school.

Alternative learning efforts, such as online courses, self-study, community-based education, and scholarships, have helped some girls continue to learn. However, participants consistently stated that these alternatives cannot substitute formal, approved education. Poor internet connectivity, restricted learning resources, budgetary restraints, a paucity of experienced teachers, and the lack of legally recognized certifications were among the most common impediments highlighted in the interviews. These obstacles continue to hinder many girls from receiving a quality education.

The data show that improving girls' education requires more than just temporary learning opportunities. Coordinated national and international action is required to reestablish formal, accredited secondary and higher education while enhancing alternate learning routes during the transition. Without bolder action, Afghanistan risks losing an entire generation of educated women, weakening governmental institutions, delaying economic recovery, increasing reliance on humanitarian aid, and jeopardizing the country's long-term development.

Policy Recommendations

To restore Afghan girls' access to school, Afghan stakeholders, the United Nations, international donors, civil society organizations, and education partners must work quickly and collaboratively. The recommendations below are based on the evidence and interview findings reported in this policy brief.

- **Restore access to formal secondary and higher education:** Restoring girls' access to accredited secondary schools and universities should remain a top priority. International engagement with Afghanistan should continue to prioritize girls' education in diplomatic discussion and humanitarian initiatives, seeing education as a fundamental human right and a necessary condition for the country's long-term development.
Lead stakeholders: De facto authorities, United Nations, OIC, international partners.
Expected outcome: Gradual restoration of girls' enrolment and access to formal education.

- **Expand accredited community-based and digital learning:** While formal education is still restricted, international organizations and education partners should expand community-based education, accredited online learning, accelerated education programs, and distance learning to ensure that girls can continue their education without losing years of knowledge.
Lead stakeholders: UNESCO, UNICEF, Education Cannot Wait (ECW), NGOs.
Expected outcome: Reduced learning loss and improved access to quality education for girls.
- **Invest in female teachers and education systems:** Sustained investment is required to attract, retain, and support female teachers while also improving school facilities, instructional materials, internet connectivity, and psychosocial services. A better education system will allow for a speedier and more effective recovery once formal schooling is fully restored.
Lead stakeholders: International donors, Ministry of Education, UN agencies.
Expected outcome: Improved quality, resilience, and accessibility of education services.
- **Increase scholarships and internationally recognized education pathways:** Governments, institutions, and foreign organizations should provide more scholarships, authorized online programs, regional university collaborations, and academic exchange opportunities for Afghan girls. These approaches will enable females to complete their education while mitigating the long-term effects of educational disruption.
Lead Stakeholders: Governments, universities, UN agencies, donor organizations.
Expected Outcome: Increased access to higher education and reduced learning disruption.
- **Strengthen partnerships with Afghan communities:** The interviews conducted for this policy brief show that Afghan families continue to support girls' education. International organizations should build on this commitment by working closely with communities, educators, civil society organizations, and religious leaders to promote girls' education, strengthen local initiatives, and monitor progress toward restoring educational opportunities.
Lead stakeholders: Afghan communities, civil society, religious leaders, UN agencies.
Expected outcome: Stronger community engagement, increased public support for girls' education, and improved accountability for education initiatives.

Conclusion

Four years after Afghan girls were barred from secondary and higher education, the consequences go far beyond a loss of knowledge. The ongoing denial of education has harmed Afghanistan's human capital, reduced women's participation in economic and civic life, caused psychological suffering among young women, and jeopardized the country's long-term growth.

Each year that these restrictions are in place raises the social, economic, and humanitarian costs of recovery.

The findings of this policy brief show that Afghan girls continue to aspire to school, families continue to support their daughters' learning, and communities remain critical partners in restoring educational opportunities. However, temporary methods such as online learning, community-based education, and scholarships cannot substitute for formal, authorized education. These programs should complement, not replace, the restoration of females' access to secondary schools and colleges.

The experiences of Hasina, Zahra, and Zainab demonstrate the human impact of numbers. Their experiences highlight not only the loss of education, but also the loss of career potential, emotional well-being, and the opportunity to properly contribute to Afghanistan's future. At the same time, their tenacity proves that Afghan girls have not abandoned their right to education.

Despite the international community's repeated commitment to girls' education, millions of Afghan girls continue to be excluded from classrooms. Continued statements of concern must now be accompanied with consistent, organized, and practical action. Governments, United Nations agencies, international donors, civil society organizations, and Afghan stakeholders share responsibilities for ensuring that Afghan girls are not left behind.

Restoring girls' access to school is not simply a legal and moral imperative; it is also critical to Afghanistan's future stability, economic recovery, and sustainable development. Investing in girls' education today means building a stronger, wealthier, and peaceful Afghanistan. The moment to act is now, before another generation is denied the opportunity to learn, lead, and contribute to the country's destiny.

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Protecting Women in Herat, Afghanistan.

Immediate Actions for the UN Security Council

Executive Summary

The arbitrary detainment of women in Herat drew international outcry and questions regarding the safety of women and girls in Afghanistan. In June 2026, numerous women in Herat were arbitrarily detained for an alleged violation of the dress code. Peaceful protests against such arrests were met with excessive force, and these arrests have contributed to increased fears for women's freedom of movement, and reflect the broader restrictions on women's rights imposed by the Taliban since 2021.

This policy brief outlines the causes and extent of these arrests, the reasons for their urgency for the international community, and the effects of the arbitrary arrest and detention of women, and their restricted enjoyment of basic rights, on human rights, social cohesion, and the protection of civilians. These events have also highlighted the need for a stronger international response from the UN Security Council.

The policy brief includes recommendations to the UN Security Council, including calls for improved monitoring under the UNAMA, support for independent investigations into arbitrary arrests and unnecessary use of force, the provision of improved protection for women and human rights defenders, and improved international pressure to ensure women's and girls' rights.

Problem Statement

Arbitrary detention by Talibans become a big challenge for Afghan women and girls in Afghanistan, arresting women in public for dress code puts women in a big risk and danger, most of women that has been arrested and investigated by Talibans now they are facing serious problems they don't feel themselves free anymore, it represents a growing human rights concern.

Five year of Talibans rules banning girls from education and not letting women to work, arbitrary detention of women and girls for dress code a real injustice and persecution against Afghan women and girls.

Going outside or leaving home is now a big worry for Afghan women because they feel Talibans is waiting for them, an eyewitness, a girl arrested by Taliban for dress code after her release from Talibans investigation area, she didn't came out of her room for two months because of fear and mental health, the similar violations has been documented by UN elsewhere.

These rules are against the principle of CEDAW, which calls for the elimination and discrimination against women and the protection of their fundamental right.

They also undermine the objectives of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which emphasises the protection of women and girls and their meaningful participation in public life.

Analysis of the Issue:

The recent arrests of women in Herat are part of a broader pattern of restrictions on the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan rather than isolated incidents.

Since the Taliban returned to power in 2021, women and girls have faced growing limits on education, jobs, movement, and public participation. The arrests in Herat and the use of force against peaceful protesters highlight these broader policies and have increased fear among women throughout the country (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan [UNAMA], 2026). Some UN experts and human rights advocates describe the Taliban's ongoing restrictions on women and girls as a form of gender apartheid, calling for stronger international recognition and accountability (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2026).

These ongoing violations are closely connected to the lack of accountability in Afghanistan. Women who are arbitrarily detained have little access to legal protection, and there is no independent justice system to investigate abuses or hold those responsible accountable. As a result, many violations remain unpunished, allowing similar abuses to continue without consequences (OHCHR, 2026).

The impact extends beyond the women who are arrested. Many families are more worried about the safety of women and girls and have further restricted their movement, education, and jobs. This not only violates the rights of individual women but also harms communities by reducing women's participation in social, economic, and civic life (UNAMA, 2026).

These developments raise serious concerns under international frameworks, including United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. This resolution emphasizes the protection of women and girls and their meaningful participation in peace and security efforts (United Nations Security Council, 2000). If these violations continue without stronger international attention and accountability, they will lead to further human rights abuses, greater social isolation, and a worsening humanitarian situation for Afghan women and girls.

Policy Recommendations:

The United Nations Security Council must take urgent action to protect women and girls in Herat and respond to the recent arrests.

- **Recognize gender-based persecution:** The Security Council should acknowledge the Taliban's systematic targeting of women and girls as gender-based persecution under international law.

it can encourage the international community to view these policies as crimes against humanity and support efforts to hold those responsible accountable. Recognizing these violations would send a strong message that the international community does not accept these actions against Afghan women.

- **Demand the immediate release of detained women:** The Security Council must advocate for the immediate and unconditional release of all women detained for their clothing or for peacefully exercising their fundamental rights. Member States should also keep diplomatic pressure until these arbitrary arrests stop and the broader restrictions on women and girls are lifted.
- **Strengthen monitoring, accountability, and investigations:** UNAMA should monitor the arrests of women in Herat more closely and regularly report its findings to the Security Council. In addition, independent and impartial investigations should be supported to document abuses and identify those responsible. If these violations continue the Security Council should consider targeted sanctions against involved individuals. Thorough documentation can also support future international accountability efforts.
- **Provide better protection and humanitarian assistance:** The United Nations, with agencies like UNFPA, UNICEF, WFP, and humanitarian partners, should increase legal aid, psychosocial support, temporary safe shelters, and protection services for affected women and girls. Women at immediate risk due to their activism or arbitrary detention should have access to safe evacuation options whenever possible.

Conclusion:

The arbitrary arrests of women in Herat show the urgent need for a stronger and more coordinated international effort to protect the rights and safety of Afghan women and girls. These violations have raised fear, limited women's participation in public life, and worsened the general pattern of discrimination women face in Afghanistan. The United Nations Security Council, along with UNAMA, UN agencies, and Member States, should take real steps to improve accountability, support affected women, and stop further abuses. A prompt response is crucial to protect the dignity, security, and basic rights of women and girls in Afghanistan.

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Global Youth, Peace and Security Commitments

How can existing global commitments on Youth, Peace and Security be translated into real protection and participation for Afghan youth living under current restrictions?

Executive Summary

The world has promised that young people should participate in peacebuilding and should be protected. These promises were made in UNSCR 2250 and 2535, which recognizes young people as essential partners in peacebuilding and calls for their meaningful participation, protection, and inclusion in decision-making.

The YPS commitment have not become true in Afghanistan, youth in this country still face exclusion from decision making, weak protection, limited civic participation, limited access to education and employment. Although all young people experience these problems, but females in this country are experiencing the greatest restrictions.

This is an essential issue because when youth are excluded, peace and development become more difficult. When youth are not given the chance to participate, share idea, and while they are not protected, the development of the country become weaken.

This policy brief recommends to United Nation and international organizations, to ensure the YPS agenda is being implemented in Afghanistan, youth should be given the chance to participate, share idea, be involved in civic activities, and strengthen protection services, and support youth organizations.

Problem Statement

The United Nations Security Council, through Resolution 2250 (2015) and Resolution 2535 (2020), established the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda, which requires member states and the international community to ensure young people's meaningful participation in peacebuilding and decision-making, along with their protection from violence and inclusion in society 13. However, in Afghanistan, a fundamental gap exists between these global commitments and reality.

Young people make up approximately 63% of Afghanistan's population, with the UN Population Fund reporting that 63% of the population is under the age of 25 1 10. Despite being the demographic majority, Afghan youth were systematically excluded from the 2020 U.S.-Taliban peace agreement and subsequent Doha negotiations, which were conducted without their consultation yet directly shaped their future 2. As one youth participant noted, "many feel that their voices were ignored, and their futures bargained away without their consent 2".

Under Taliban rule, civic space for youth expression has been effectively closed, with young people facing "serious consequences for expressing their views". 2

Young women experience compounded exclusion, denied education and participation in public life 5. The denial of girls' secondary education affects approximately 2.2 million adolescent girls, making Afghanistan the only country with a nationwide ban on girls' secondary and higher education 5.

The collapse of the justice system and dismantling of child protection mechanisms have increased youth vulnerability to exploitation, forced marriage, and hazardous labor.

International efforts to implement YPS commitments have been described as "tokenistic," failing to create meaningful change and deepening distrust between young Afghans and international institutions. Without deliberate action to operationalize the YPS framework, these commitments will remain empty words, leaving Afghan youth unprotected and excluded from the future they are meant to build.

Issue Analysis

Although the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda recognizes young people as essential partners in peacebuilding, these commitments have not been effectively implemented in Afghanistan. United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2250 (2015) and 2535 (2020) call for the meaningful participation, protection, and inclusion of youth in decision-making. However, the current political and human rights situation has created significant barriers that prevent these commitments from being realized (UNSC, 2015; UNSC, 2020).

One of the main reasons for this implementation gap is the restrictive policy environment. Since 2021, limitations on girls' education, women's employment, and civic freedoms have reduced opportunities for young people, particularly young women, to participate in public life and contribute to peacebuilding (UNAMA, 2025–2026). At the same time, ongoing economic hardship, high unemployment, and reduced international engagement have weakened institutions and limited the resources needed to support youth-focused programs (UNICEF, 2026).

The challenges facing Afghan youth go beyond education and employment. Many young people experience poverty, psychological distress, and restrictions on freedom of movement and expression, increasing their vulnerability to discrimination and social exclusion (UNICEF, 2026; UNAMA, 2025–2026). Civic participation is also limited because youth-led organizations have fewer opportunities to engage in public dialogue or influence policies that affect their lives. In addition, limited access to justice and weak institutional accountability reduce young people's confidence that their rights will be protected or that their concerns will be addressed (UNSC, 2020).

As a result, the gap between international commitments and the realities facing Afghan youth continues to widen. Without stronger political commitment, protection of fundamental rights, support for accountable institutions, and meaningful opportunities for youth participation, the objectives of the YPS agenda are unlikely to be achieved in Afghanistan.

Policy Recommendations

- **Youth participation:** The United nation and other international organizations should create a safe way for Afghan youth to share their ideas, since many Afghan youth cannot participate openly and in safe way, thy can use secure online meetings or consultations. young Afghan women should also be given the chance to participate and share their ideas.
- **Recommendation 2: Accountability:** The United Nation should not just make commitments, but also, they should check if their promises are being implemented. they should regularly publish reports on youth participation, protection and education. Donors should also ask and check if Afghan youth are receiving the help and assistance.
- **Recommendation 3: Support youth organizations:** Many Afghan youth organizations are still working despite for restrictions, international organizations and donors should help them by providing funding, training. As working in person for women are restricted and difficult, they should be given opportunity to work remotely.
- **Recommendation 4: Education and jobs:** The half o Afghan youth (girls) are banned from secondary education, we want United nation to support them by funding and supporting online education, and by expanding scholarship opportunities. They should find and support the ways which Afghan youth can educate.
- **Recommendation 5: Protection and mental health:** Youths' programs should not only focus on education and employment, they should also consider the mental health support and they ways how they can help Afghan youth who experienced different kinds of violence in their lives.

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Safe Channels for Reporting Abuse

Executive Summary

For many young people in Afghanistan, reporting abuse can be almost as difficult as experiencing it. Even when survivors want to seek help, they may worry about retaliation, social stigma, or not being believed.

These problems existed before 2021, but restrictions on freedom of expression and civic space have made it even harder for people to speak about abuse or seek justice. As the Afghan Journalists' Center documented 181 press freedom violations only between August 2023 and August 2024, including 133 threats against journalists, 48 arrests of journalists and media workers, and the closure of eight media outlets (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

The absence of trusted reporting systems leaves many young people without a clear and safe way to seek help. The aim is not only to encourage reporting, but to make sure that young people who come forward are treated safely, respectfully, and with their rights protected. This policy brief looks at why many young Afghans do not report abuse and what can be done to make reporting safer.

Problem Statement

Afghanistan has no effective national system for protecting young people from abuse and ensuring that survivors can safely report violations. UN Women reported in 2025 that 78% of young Afghan women aged 18–29 were not in education, employment, or training, compared with 20.2% of young men while women continue to report feeling unsafe in public spaces and facing restrictions on their movement and participation in public life (UN Women, 2025).

Between 15 August 2021 and 30 September 2024, UNAMA documented violations affecting 336 journalists and media workers, including 256 arbitrary arrests and detentions, 130 cases of torture and ill-treatment, and 75 threats or instances of intimidation (UNAMA, 2024). UN Women interviewed a 26-year-old Afghan journalist who said she stopped working after the Taliban takeover because she was afraid (UN Women, 2024). Human Rights Watch (2025) also reported the arrest and detention of journalists in connection with their reporting.

In 2024, 6,232 child protection cases were registered and managed through UNICEF's Child Protection Information Management System, but only 72% received appropriate services (UNICEF, 2025). UNAMA's report on the handling of gender-based violence complaints found that women and girls faced barriers to reporting, including concerns about confidentiality, protection, and access to justice (UNAMA, 2023).

Policy Analysis

Afghanistan's main policy gap is not only the lack of laws, but the lack of safe and reliable institutions to implement them. Although Afghanistan previously had formal mechanisms for addressing violence, including specialized legal institutions and protection services, many of these mechanisms have weakened or disappeared since 2021. The current justice system does not provide clear, transparent, and accessible procedures for survivors, particularly women and girls. UN Women reports that women face restrictions in accessing justice because of limited movement, dependence on male relatives, and the reduced presence of women judges, lawyers, and service providers (UN Women, 2024).

Another gap is the lack of confidentiality and protection after reporting. Survivors may fear that their complaints will become known to family members, community leaders, or authorities. This is especially serious when the perpetrator is a relative or when reporting may lead to retaliation. Informal mediation can also prioritize family reconciliation over the survivor's safety.

The weakening of civil society and restrictions on freedom of expression have further reduced access to trusted reporting channels. UNAMA documented arbitrary detention, torture, threats, and intimidation against journalists and media workers between August 2021 and September 2024 (UNAMA, 2024). Although these cases do not directly measure abuse among young people, they show the wider risks associated with reporting violations. Young people may therefore avoid reporting abuse because they do not believe that institutions can protect them.

There is also a gap between reporting and receiving support. A complaint is not effective if the survivor cannot access legal assistance, psychosocial support, healthcare, or safe accommodation. Restrictions on women's participation in public life and on humanitarian organizations have made referrals and protection services more difficult to maintain. As a result, many cases may remain unreported, while survivors who do seek help may not receive consistent protection or follow-up.

Recommended Policy Actions

- **1: Educate Young People About Their Rights and How to Report Abuse:** Create community programs to teach young people, parents, and community members about young people's rights, abuse, and available support services. These programs should explain how to safely report abuse and build trust, since fear, shame, family pressure, and community rejection can stop young people from speaking up. UNICEF Afghanistan, Save the Children, Afghan Youth Services Organization, and the Afghanistan Child Protection Area of Responsibility could support these programs.

- **2: Expand Safe Reporting Options:** Provide free and confidential ways to report abuse, including toll-free helplines and secure online platforms such as Signal, WhatsApp, and Telegram where internet access is available. Young people should be able to report anonymously and have their information protected, with trained staff ready to provide safety advice and connect them to support. UNICEF Afghanistan, Primero Team, International Rescue Committee, Afghan Youth Services Organization, Signal Foundation, and telecommunications providers could support this work.
- **3: Establish One-Stop Support Centers for Reporting Abuse:** Create safe and confidential support centers in existing hospitals or educational facilities, especially in areas with limited internet access. Young people could report abuse there and receive medical, legal, and protection support in one place. War Child, World Vision Afghanistan, and Save the Children could support these centers.
- **4: Protect and Support Young People Who Report Abuse:** Protect young people who report abuse by keeping their information private and protecting them from punishment or retaliation. They should also have access to safe shelter, financial help, counseling, and medical support when needed, with support from IOM and UNHCR.

Conclusion:

The difficulty young Afghans face in reporting abuse is connected to more than fear or social stigma. It is also the result of weak institutions, limited confidentiality, restricted civic space, displacement, and the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Young women and displaced young people face additional barriers because they may depend on others for movement, protection, and access to services. When reporting does not lead to safety, support, or accountability, survivors are more likely to remain silent. Addressing this problem therefore requires attention to the gaps between existing policies and their implementation, especially the lack of trusted reporting channels and effective protection for survivors

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