

The Economic Impact of Taliban Restrictions on Women's Education and Future Workforce Participation

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Abstract. The arrival of the Taliban in August 2021 has significantly affected Afghanistan's government and economy. The Taliban formed their government based on Sharia law. The Taliban approved restrictive laws toward the Afghan people, particularly women and girls. Schools above sixth grade and universities were banned for girls. In addition, women and girls lost their fundamental rights, such as the right to education, work, freedom of movement, and participation in public life. This paper seeks to explore the restrictive rules of the Taliban toward girls and women, and the economic impact of Taliban restrictions on women and girls in the present and their future aspirations. The study employs data analysis to gather comprehensive data on the approach. The study's findings indicate that the economic impact of Taliban restrictions has decreased the country's economic context compared to the past, increased the rate of unemployment and poverty, led to a decline in humanitarian aid, and prevented the country from participating in the global labor market.

Keywords: Taliban, Women's Education, Workforce

1 Introduction

On 15 August 2021, after two decades of war and the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban took power in Afghanistan[1]. The Taliban formed their government based on Sharia Law, and the root of their ideology stems from their Jihadist revolution. Once in power, the Taliban began enforcing harsh rules against the Afghan populace, particularly targeting women and girls, which violated basic human rights, such as the right to education. In March 2022, the Taliban banned females from enrolling in secondary schools beyond the sixth grade[2]. This ban was later extended to universities in December 2022, and on December 24, 2022[3], the Taliban also banned females from working in national and international NGOs[4]. These restrictions not only jeopardize Afghanistan's current economic stability but also create significant long-term obstacles to the country's development and prosperity. This article aims to analyze the Taliban's restrictions on women and girls and to highlight the short- and long-term impacts of these restrictions on women's participation in the workforce.

2 Method

The research strategy is normative. The sources used for this research are secondary data such as books, UN agencies, reports and journal articles to critically examine the role of the Taliban in shaping women's right to work in Afghanistan as well as the future of the labor market, examining the changes and continuity of educational opportunities and women's right to work under the Taliban regime.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Taliban's Restrictions on Women

With the return of the Taliban to power in 2021, women and girls have faced extreme challenges and human rights violations. The Taliban implemented rules and policies that restricted every aspect of women's and girls' lives[5], preventing them from exercising fundamental rights including the right to education, participation in public life, freedom of dress code, freedom of movement, work, freedom of expression, and political involvement. Afghan women and girls have been deprived of their basic rights[6].

3.2 Rights to Education

In March 2022, the Taliban banned girls above the age of 12 (grade 6) from attending school. Universities and other educational centers were also closed to women and girls. Furthermore, women and girls have been prevented from leaving Afghanistan to pursue higher education abroad[7]. Over time, the Taliban increased their pressure. In July 2022, the Supreme Leader of the Taliban, Hibatullah Akhundzada, approved a law on the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. This law institutionalized more restrictions, including the mahram requirement, mandatory dress codes, and the separation of men and women in public spaces. Through this law, the Taliban exert greater control over the lives of women[6].

3.3 Rights to Work

On 28 September 2021, the Taliban announced their cabinet without the inclusion of women. Shortly after, they removed the sign for the Ministry of Women's Affairs and replaced it with the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice[8]. On 24 December 2022, the Ministry of Economy banned women from working for national and international organizations in Afghanistan. This ban directly affected more than 15,000 women employed across 183 national and international NGOs. By May 2023, approximately 25 percent of the surveyed organizations were operating with male staff only. These restrictive policies severely impacted women's financial independence and weakened Afghanistan's economy[9]. If such policies continue, the country will face worsening poverty, higher unemployment, and reduced

international aid[10].

3.4 Rights to Freedom and Movement

The Taliban have banned women and girls from accessing public spaces such as parks, restaurants, gyms, and beauty salons. Moreover, women and girls are not permitted to travel more than 72 kilometers from their homes unless accompanied by a mahram (male relative)[7]. Such rules negatively affect women who do not have male relatives and prevent them from accessing essential services[11].

3.5 The Short-Term Impact on the Economy

Since the Taliban seized power, women have lost their jobs in both government and private sectors. Most women-owned businesses have been shut down. According to a UN report, in December 2022, Afghan women were banned from working not only in national NGOs but also in international organizations. In April 2023, all beauty salons were closed. Reports show that more than 60,000 women were employed in beauty salons across Afghanistan. The overall employment rate of women dropped by 25 percent between August 2021 and December 2022[9]. The ban on education and employment for women has harmed the economy. Afghanistan's annual gross domestic product (GDP) decreased by 2.5 percent around USD 500 million in the first year after the Taliban's return. The ban on women working in national and international organizations has also reduced the amount of aid that supports the country's economy[12].

3.6 The Role of Businesswomen in the Economy

Afghan women business owners played an essential role in the development of Afghanistan's economy from 2004 to 2021. The Afghan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry reported that the total number of Afghan businesswomen was estimated to be 57,000. This included 2,500 formal businesses, with the majority operating in the informal sector[10]. The formal businesses included information technology, media, restaurants, fitness clubs, beauty salons, import and export, travel agencies, logistics, and manufacturing. It is clear that when half of a society remains excluded, the result is a negative impact on its economic system. Restrictions on women's employment could result in an annual GDP decline of 3 to 5 percent, with an estimated economic loss ranging from \$600 million to \$1 billion. If such policies continue, Afghanistan's economy will continue to deteriorate, resulting in poverty, unemployment, and decreased international aid[13].

3.7 The Long-Term Economic Damage

The systematic exclusion of women from education by the Taliban goes beyond a fundamental human right of society and can be considered a potential economic disaster. By dismantling two decades of progress and advancement for women and girls in the field of education, Afghanistan is depriving itself of the vital human capital

that is essential for sustainable national development. From an economic perspective, one of the key factors in the process of long-term development is capable and experienced human capital. Undoubtedly, the deliberate exclusion of half of the population from educational opportunities will lead to a significantly restricted labor market, reduced utilization of human resources, and the creation of serious obstacles to innovation and entrepreneurship.

Recent forecasts show that Afghanistan could face serious financial problems if women continue to be excluded from the economy. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) warned in 2022 that the country might experience a 30% decline in GDP over the coming decades due to women's marginalization in key commercial sectors[10]. This trend has already been seen in other war-torn countries or those facing gender inequality, indicating it is not just a possible future issue. Additionally, the World Bank pointed out that not educating girls as well as boys could result in a lifetime loss of productivity and earnings between \$15 trillion and \$30 trillion[10]. Even though Afghanistan's economy is smaller than others, the impact of excluding women could be much larger.

Moreover, the prohibitions on education are causing a deteriorating brain drain since educated women especially those with professional or higher education are applying for asylum in neighboring nations or the West. This is a double loss: not only does Afghanistan forfeit the economic contribution of skilled women, but also the generational investment made in their education and training[14]. The exit of this educated elite limits the development of a professional class required for institutional expansion, healthcare, educational reform, and growth in the private sector.

Data from countries such as Bangladesh and Rwanda show that women's attendance at school and university is good for the economy[15]. Along with reducing maternal mortality and child poverty, investing in girls' education in Rwanda has led to increased female labor force participation and increased GDP. Afghanistan, on the other hand, is regressing rather than advancing. Depriving women of education limits the future workforce and puts the country at risk of a labor shortage. International programs must recognize that the Taliban's policies are an economic problem with global implications as well as a moral one[13]. Gender-based restrictions in Afghanistan prevent it from participating in global labor and capital markets, trapping the country in a cycle of poverty, aid dependency, and social unrest.

4 Conclusion

The Taliban's policies towards women and girls have remained two decades of progress and development in Afghanistan, denying women basic rights and depriving half of the society of educational and employment opportunities. These restrictions carry a significant long-term economic impact and are a violation of human rights. Without educated and empowered women, Afghanistan's economy will neither grow nor be globally competitive. The country must accept that women's participation is not only a significant imperative but also an economic necessity for improvement toward stability and prosperity.

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