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Social Issues in Afghanistan Update: July–October 2022

[...]

Context

Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the new Government has continued to announce and put into practice policies and regulations especially detrimental to men, women, girls, boys, and people with disabilities and their households. These policies and regulations include major restrictions on women's freedom of movement, such as the requirement of a Mahram (male guardian) while in public, putting a mental and financial burden on families. These restrictions have led to many women losing their jobs and prevent them from pursuing personal and professional growth. In the third quarter of 2021, the number of employed women decreased by 16% ([ILO Twitter 19/01/2022](#)). Restrictions have also created barriers to providing and accessing equitable services, including healthcare.

The policy ordering the collection of beggars from Kabul's streets and the policy regulating street vendors had the most severe impact on the livelihood of people, particularly women and children, as they were forced into activities associated with exploitation and abuse to earn a living ([WFP 15/06/2022](#)). The implementation of these policies just before winter has intensified their impact on people, especially women and children in need of protection.

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) projected acute food insecurity in Afghanistan between June–November 2022, with 18.9 million people (45% of the population) facing acute food insecurity and nearly six million (14.3% of the population) in emergency ([IPC 09/05/2022](#); [WFP 07/11/2022](#)). Because of poverty and reduced purchasing power – a result of the economic crisis caused by the freezing of Afghan funds and the war in Ukraine – people are spending 92% of their income on food, and 89% of the population has poor food consumption ([WFP 19/10/2022](#)). This is compounded by the lack of access to medical care, affecting all households but especially those that include family members with chronic medical needs. People's limited resources have been exhausted, and many have begun turning to potentially harmful and irreversible coping mechanisms to survive.

The lack of income forces poor families to find alternative ways to support themselves, including sending children to work, begging, or peddling as street vendors. There has also been an increase in families marrying off their underage daughters ([AAN 20/10/2022](#)). Restrictions on women's ability to work, the onset of winter, and the enforcement of new Taliban policies, some with unintended negative consequences, will result in some households exhausting their resources and capacities to cope.

Restrictions on freedom of movement for women and girls

[...]

Some female health workers have been unable to travel to work because not accompanied by a Mahram ([HRW 18/01/2022](#)), and some said the restrictions have forced them to leave their jobs. A lack of female doctors, nurses, and medical staff will severely limit the access of women and girls to healthcare, as it is unlikely that female patients will be willing to openly disclose their symptoms and medical history to male doctors. Mobility restrictions and the reduction in female health workers are key barriers that may result in female patients and pregnant women not receiving adequate care on time and potentially developing long-term complications or even losing their lives ([UN Women 03/12/2021](#)). The effect of these

restrictions on women's ability to access lifesaving healthcare was illustrated in the aftermath of a severe earthquake in June 2022,¹ where the lack of female doctors prevented female survivors from receiving medical attention ([TOLOnews 24/06/2022](#)).

Impact of restrictions on freedom of movement on access to aid and services

Mobility restrictions and the Mahram requirement, including reproductive health restrictions, have been applied differently across the country. For example, women in the districts of Karz and Arghandab in Kandahar, as well as Ghazni and some parts of Nangahar, are unable to access health services without the presence of a Mahram ([The Wall Street Journal 25/03/2022](#)), but women's access to health services in Mazar-e Sharif appears not to be rigorously restricted ([SIGAR 30/07/2022](#)). In some parts of the country, healthcare staff have been ordered not to provide care to female patients not accompanied by a Mahram. Some health workers who violated this policy have been detained and charged ([FP 02/03/2022](#)). One of the health facilities providing free medical care in Helmand province has reported that some patients drive six or seven hours to receive care ([MSF 10/05/2022](#)); women are unlikely to be able or willing to travel such distance without a Mahram.

Women and girls in need of humanitarian assistance are left behind because of the lack of female aid workers. A national NGO operating in Helmand shared that despite receiving calls from women requesting support and inclusion in assessments, they are unable to send female staff because of the Mahram requirement. The same NGO noted that women cannot visit their offices for the same reason ([discussion with an Afghan NGO in Helmand 23/22/2022](#)).

Impact of restrictions on freedom of movement on the cost of aid delivery

Restrictions on the freedom of movement of women directly affect the cost of aid delivery. The requirement for a Mahram to accompany female humanitarian workers means that the Mahram must be compensated at the very least with food and travel, a cost directly borne by the organisation. Other requirements, such as gender-segregated workspaces and shuttle services, also have a substantial financial impact. Smaller INGOs and Afghan NGOs face more difficulty adapting to these new requirements logistically, operationally, and financially, affecting their overall operational ability ([ICVA 01/02/2022](#)). One INGO in Wardak shared having hired more female staff and having budgeted Afn 10,000 (approximately USD 100) per month for each Mahram to ensure the staff can continue to reach women in need ([discussion with an INGO in Wardak 23/11/2022](#)).

Impact of restrictions on freedom of movement on women's professional growth

The many restrictions on women's freedom of movement and access to the public space have created a constraining environment for them, especially in the workplace and in universities. The Mahram requirement directly affects women's professional growth and further entrenches inequality. Only families with a significant amount of disposable income can afford the additional cost of visa fees and plane tickets for a Mahram to accompany a female student to her destination country, hindering the

¹ On 22 June 2022, an earthquake of magnitude 5.9 on the Richter scale hit eastern Afghanistan, around 46km southwest of Khost city. The earthquake killed at least 1,000 people, injured 3,000, and destroyed 10,000 homes.

ability of families with fewer means to benefit from the upward economic movement that further education provides. The implementation of the Mahram policy at airports is inconsistent. During the reporting period, some female scholars who had been accepted to universities abroad were prevented from boarding their flights because they were not accompanied by a Mahram. These scholars noted that there was disagreement among Taliban airport officials about whether to let women travel abroad without a Mahram ([AW 27/09/2022; discussions with female scholars 16/07/2022 and 20/09/2022](#)). Female travellers with formal approval to travel without a Mahram still faced undue stress and uncertainty at the airport prior to their travel ([discussion with a female scholar 08/11/2022](#)).

Potential knock-on effects of restrictions on freedom of movement for women and girls

Restrictions on freedom of movement for women and girls are just one of many policies in place that limit female participation in the public sphere, shrinking women's civic space substantially ([UN News 25/11/2022](#)). Women and girls are subject to harassment and violence as they manoeuvre the public space ([Amnesty International 27/07/2022; Al Jazeera 28/11/2022](#)); such measures are used by the Taliban to justify their restrictions as a protective measure ensuring the safety and dignity of women.

It is important to note that not all women and not all families are affected by these restrictions in the same way. The Mahram requirement places a higher burden on households where there is no male family member or the male family member has a disability. Not only are such households generally more vulnerable economically, but households with family members with a disability often have greater health needs that add to their financial burden. Without a Mahram, they are less able to access healthcare ([discussions with women-headed households with members with special needs 02/10/2022 and 28/10/2022](#)).

Even in families with a working-age male member, job scarcity and a drastic decline in household income means the Mahram requirement causes a further financial burden. Male family members have to take time off education, work, or other forms of income generation to accompany female family members. There is also the additional issue of childcare for large families who may not have support at home to look after their children while the women or girls in the family are out.

The reduction in women's access to public space means less knowledge about services and humanitarian assistance, which disproportionately affects women in households without a male family member who can act as a Mahram. Systematic and prolonged lack of access to humanitarian aid and services will negatively impact the ability of women and their families to meet their needs, resulting in the adoption of negative coping mechanisms and further exposing women, girls, and their family members to serious protection risks.

Policy to provide Kabul beggars with state assistance

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan has worsened since the Taliban seized power and the international community froze access to financial reserves and cut all assistance other than humanitarian. Increased unemployment, inflation, displacement, and restrictions on women have resulted in more people resorting to negative coping mechanisms, including begging.

It was estimated that 97% of Afghans could fall below the poverty line by mid-2022 ([UNDP 09/09/2021](#)), and 18.9 million individuals (almost half of the population) are estimated to be acutely food-insecure ([WFP 15/08/2022](#)). Between July–September 2022, more than 87% of respondents said they had lost their

source of income, and 19% of them had to beg or depend on charity to put food on their table ([REACH 09/2022](#)). This is in addition to pre-existing urban poverty and migration from conflict-affected areas to Kabul under the previous government. Many of those families who have lost their breadwinners have resorted to sending their children out to beg to earn a living ([UNHCR accessed xx/xx/2022](#)).

In an attempt to resolve the begging issue, provide assistance to the poorest, and bring order to the city, the Taliban issued a decree in mid-August 2022 and established a Beggar Collecting Committee to identify beggars in Kabul and assist them based on what they consider ‘deservingness’. ‘Deserving’ beggars will receive monthly cash assistance, beggars with the ability to work will receive employment opportunities, and children will be enrolled in education facilities ([Afintl 18/09/2022](#)).

This will result in the protection of those found to be ‘deserving’ from abuse and exploitation – especially children, who in the past have been exploited for drug dealing, theft, and to beg, sometimes rented out to begging gangs by their parents for a daily rate ([IWPR 27/02/2017](#)). Children will be enrolled in schools, and their parents will receive monthly payments to not send them out to beg again.

The criteria for identifying ‘deserving’ and ‘not deserving’ are unclear, with some publicly available information suggesting that in addition to the community referring the ‘deserving’ beggars to the Beggars Collecting Committee, inability to work caused by disability and lack of skills are the main criteria ([Etilaat Roz 11/09/2022](#); [Pajhwok 22/09/2022](#)). While the policy might be well-intended, the lack of clarity on eligibility criteria and implementation may unintentionally lead to further exclusions.

[...]

As at 3 December 2022, 19,072 beggars were collected in Kabul.² 7,707 of them (40.4%) were considered ‘deserving’, while 11,365 (59.6%) were deemed professional beggars. 6,374 (33.4%) were children, of whom 2,609 (40.9%) were considered ‘deserving’ and 3,765 (50.1%), including 62 unaccompanied children, ‘not deserving’. The unaccompanied children have since been referred to care and training centres (orphanages) for livelihood training and education ([FDPM Twitter 04/12/2022](#)). 1,737 (9.1%) of the collected beggars were men, 634 (36.5%) ‘deserving’ and 1,103 (63.5%) ‘not deserving’. Men with ability and skills to work were promised jobs ([DW 08/08/2022](#)). Most of the beggars collected (10,961 or 57.5%) were women – 4,464 ‘deserving’ (40.7%) and 6,497 ‘not deserving’ (59.3%) of assistance ([FDPM Twitter 04/12/2022](#)). Many female beggars are war widows and heads of households, including households with members with chronic diseases, disabilities, or addictions ([NPR 17/07/2022](#)). It is unclear what was offered to women who were found to be ‘not deserving’ of assistance (57.8% of all female beggars collected).

‘Deserving’ beggars were referred to the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) for a monthly stipend. As at 1 October 2022, ARCS confirmed that they had provided 103 beggar families (a total of 640 people) with AFN 2,000 (approximately USD 20) per individual per month and that the programme would continue with the support of the Azizi Bank ([ARCS Twitter 01/10/2022](#)). Some beggars said the money is enough to cover all their monthly expenses, while others have reported that despite being considered eligible, they have not received the money on time ([La Prensa Latina 08/09/2022](#)).

In the absence of a social safety net, this policy could offer a systematic approach to supporting the most economically and socially disadvantaged groups. However, it is unclear how cash assistance for beggars is being funded, what the long-term plan for the programme is, or how long the programme

² All collected beggars have their biometric data registered ([La Prensa Latina 06/10/2022](#)). Those caught begging again will face consequences: face-to-face advice from police district officials after the first attempt and their case filed in court if they are caught again ([La Prensa Latina 08/09/2022](#)).

will run. A similar decree on begging was implemented in 2009 by the previous government but only continued for two years before it was suspended for budgetary reasons ([DW 11/06/2014](#)).

Potential knock-on effects of the new policy on beggars

While the new policy will provide support for families deemed deserving of assistance for as long as the programme has funding, there are unintended negative consequences for those considered professional beggars or not deserving of assistance. Women are disproportionately affected by the decree, and because of the limitations placed on them, they are less likely to be able to find alternative sources of income. Informal discussions with Kabul residents found that some female beggars want to work as domestic staff in people's homes, but the social stigma associated with begging follows them, and few households are willing to hire a former beggar. As a result, female beggars (both women and girls) have resorted to knocking on the doors of houses to ask for assistance during the evening ([discussions with Kabul residents 12/11/2022 and 20/11/2022](#)).

The most severe potential unintentional implication of the begging ban on women and girls is the increased risk of being forced into illegal and desperate acts for survival associated with exploitation and abuse. Those forced into such acts are among the most victimised and abused portion of the population. During the late 1990s, bans on the movement of female beggars in shops and malls was correlated with an increase in illegal and desperate acts; widows with children were particularly affected ([RAWA 08/1999](#)). It is likely that some female beggars will once again be forced into such acts to support their families – especially female heads of households without a working-age male, with young children, or with family members requiring special care.

The gendered impact of the new policy on beggars will also affect children. Where children can work (especially boys), it is likely that they will stop attending school to support their families. A survey of 1,400 households in seven provinces found that sending children to work was the only form of income generation for 18% of families ([Save the Children 14/02/2022](#)). Another study found that 42% of children cannot attend school because they are working to support their families ([REACH 09/2022](#)).

Children from families deemed undeserving of assistance will likely be more exposed to exploitation; if picked up by the authorities after their biometric data has been taken, they are also at higher risk of legal consequences. Some parents experiencing poverty will more likely fall victim to deception and agree to turn over their children into labour with physical violence or intentionally sell their children into more desperate illegal activities ([U.S. Embassy 19/07/2022](#)). Some parents sell their children or force their young daughters into early marriage in exchange for doweries and in the hope that this will ensure their daughters' wellbeing ([WFP 15/06/2022 and 03/12/2021](#); [AAN 20/10/2022](#); [New York Post 26/01/2022](#); [Newshub 24/10/2022](#)). This trend is likely to worsen as families make difficult choices to keep their children alive. Child labour, including sending children to collect plastic to re-sell or food waste or washing cars with polluted channel water, is also closely linked to negative health outcomes for children and their mental and physical development. In some cases, children who fail to collect enough money to support their families may face violence at home ([RF/ERL 11/03/2008](#)).

Policy to centralise and manage street vendors in Kabul

Unemployment has resulted in many Kabul residents working as street vendors to cover their families' expenses. After the Taliban came to power in August 2021, more than 500,000 people lost their jobs ([ILO 19/01/2022](#)); by mid-2022, this number increased to nearly 700,000 ([UNDP 05/10/2022](#)). Many people without access to other forms of employment turned to peddling on sidewalks to make ends meet.

In January 2018, the previous government introduced a policy with a one-year deadline to remove all vendors from the streets and assign them to designated spaces ([Jomhor News 29/01/2018](#)). The government failed to meet the deadline, and street vendors slowly returned to their previous locations. This resulted in corruption, as different groups collected money illegally from vendors who wanted to retain their spots. According to some reports, the municipality and police were receiving an average of AFN 40 (approximately USD 0.40) per day from each street vendor, depending on the size of their booth ([Pajhwok 15/08/2021](#)). The previous government started to re-implement the policy in 2021, surveying vendors, issuing licenses, providing booths, and setting fixed sums and annual payments. They also established that only one person per household could be a vendor – a policy aimed at expanding opportunities for other poor households and preventing a monopoly on street vending ([Information TV YouTube 11/07/2021](#)). Before the takeover of Kabul, the policy had begun to be implemented in the Cinema Pamir area, in police district 1.

The Taliban have since sought to implement a similar programme with a few differences. Under the new policy, vendors are not being surveyed, and there is no requirement of only one vendor per household. Street vendors have to buy new booths from the municipality for a one-time cost of AFN 16,000 (approximately USD 160) and must pay rent for their spot ([Anis Newspaper 29/05/2022](#)). Kabul municipality officials said rents range between AFN 500–2,500 per square meter based on booth size, activities, and location. Street vendors who cannot afford higher rents can move to a location with lower rent. Vendors have been complaining about the high rent costs and low level of income. One street vendor said his daily income used to average AFN 3,000, of which he paid AFN 800 per month to traffic police and AFN 200 per month to the municipality.³ With the new policy, his daily income averages AFN 500, of which he needs to pay AFN 800 per month for a security guard to watch the booth at night and AFN 1,500 per month for the municipality rent. He also had to buy the booth for AFN 16,000 ([discussion with street vendor 29/11/2022](#)).

Impact of the policy on vendor livelihoods

Although the new policy seeks to eliminate corruption and streamline peddling, vendors have complained about the high rent of booths and low sales, which impact their livelihood. Many vendors noted their sales have been affected by the decline in consumer purchasing power as household incomes have decreased. Despite a 14% reduction in average monthly household income from the first quarter of 2022, during the third quarter of 2022, the average family's basic monthly needs have increased by more than 12% ([IFRC 11/11/2022](#)). One street vendor from Paktika who recently started selling fruits on the streets of Kabul because of a lack of job opportunities shared: “I came here from Paktika because there were no opportunities where I am from. I sell fruits on the streets here, and I make AFN 300 per day, but my expenses are high. I have to pay AFN 600 per month for my home, AFN 1,500 per month in rent to the municipality for my booth, and AFN 800 per month to a guard to

³ Municipalities used to appoint people with disabilities who could not find other work to collect fees from vendors.

watch my booth at night. I am worried my business is going at a loss, and I will not be able to support myself and my family, but I have no other options. ” [\(discussion with street vendor 29/11/2022\)](#)

Kabul’s street vendors have been hit by an increase in costs for their booths and a decrease in overall income. The requirement to buy expensive new booths has placed an additional burden on them and their families. One of their main complaints is that while the monthly rent is calculated based on size, activity, and location, the one-time cost (AFN 16,000) of purchasing a booth is the same, irrespective of size. Vendors have had to borrow money from relatives to purchase booths [\(discussion with street vendor 29/11/2022\)](#). The alleged cost of building each booth is AFN 2,500, but they are sold for AFN 16,000 each [\(8am 31/07/2022\)](#).

While the implementation of the policy to centralise and manage street vendors seeks to create order and generate revenue for the State, it risks making an already financially disadvantaged and poor demographic even poorer. The high start-up cost for purchasing a booth and the need for some vendors to borrow money to make the payment puts them at a disadvantage, as debt can render families more vulnerable to exploitation or more likely to marry off their children to pay their debt.