

Cutting the internet in Afghanistan is gender-based violence

by Bree Benbow, A Mira Gunawansa and Isabelle Zhu-Maguire

16 December 2025



Awaiting destiny
Photo Credit: Hasina A.

In September, Afghanistan went dark. Not from a technical fault, but from deliberate internet blackouts imposed by the Taliban.

Under the pretext of preventing “immoral activities”, Talib authorities severed fibre-optic lines, dismantled thousands of telecommunications pillars and shut down the country’s **remaining digital lifelines**.

This was no administrative hiccup, but a calculated extension of the Taliban’s violence, engineered to instill fear and tighten control, particularly over women.

The blackouts spread gradually throughout the month, beginning in the north and reaching Kabul by 5:00 PM on 29 September. By the next day, global monitoring groups confirmed that national access had collapsed, leaving more than **43 million people cut off** from communication, income, education and aid. While this blackout was absolutely devastating for all Afghans who rely on the internet, for Afghan women, already deprived of most freedoms, the blackout was particularly catastrophic.

Simultaneously, since the Taliban’s return to power in 2021, women and girls have been **banned from secondary school, university** and most public spheres. In this vacuum, online education became a lifeline. And this was no minority revolt — tens of thousands of women have secretly participated in digital classrooms and forums, studying late into the night from the privacy of their bedrooms. With a single blow, the September blackouts destroyed this fragile ecosystem.

Many young women had been working towards English language scholarships and university degrees that could open the door to studying abroad and, crucially, to build careers, earn an income and make their own decisions. For them, the internet

was not simply convenient, but necessary for them to survive.

In reference to the blackouts, one young woman, Madina, wrote in a [blog post](#) published after the blackout: “How much grief can a person carry on their shoulders? Why are we strangers in our own homeland? What crime have we committed?”

“At this young age, how much pain we have endured that was never ours to bear. That night [of the blackout], I grew three centuries older.”

[Human Rights Watch](#) and other international bodies have been clear: the shutdown harmed millions of Afghans and deprived them of fundamental rights to education, healthcare and information. Indrika Ratwatte, the United Nations humanitarian coordinator in Afghanistan, [described the situation](#) as “another crisis on top of existing crises”.

In another [blog post](#) by Saleha, she says: “When Afghanistan fell silent, its silence was heavier than the constant sound of war ... The internet blackout was not merely the loss of a signal for many, it meant the removal of bread from an already empty table. In a country where work, education and connection depend on those few hours of connectivity, every minute of outage means hunger, loneliness and fear.”

[The UN human rights office](#) has long stressed that internet access is a fundamental freedom. Without it, expression, healthcare, political participation and public safety all suffer. Critically, it acknowledges that women and girls in restrictive societies rely disproportionately on digital spaces as the only avenues left for education, employment and connection. In Afghanistan, where movement and schooling are tightly restricted, the internet is paramount.

Article 13 of the Taliban’s 2024 “[virtue and vice](#)” laws, which imposes strict dress and behavioural codes, prohibits women from raising their voices in public and forbids eye contact with unrelated men. So, by cutting off digital spaces, the Taliban extends this control into the digital realm, severing women from the few platforms where they can learn, engage and speak.

“I am a writer, and I live through the words I write. Especially when I am sad, it is just writing that can accompany me. But in those two days, I felt that no word can replace a simple video call with my father, no sentence can ease the pain of not knowing how my mother is. The silence was not just an internet outage, it was taking the little hope left in Afghanistan.” So wrote [blogger Mursal](#).

As the UN’s [16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence](#) end, Afghanistan’s blackouts highlight an important truth: gender-based violence can now be inflicted

digitally, at an enormous scale.

Digital censorship within Afghanistan is a deliberate strategy of gender apartheid. The September blackouts were neither random nor trivial, but overt acts of control, subjugation and intimidation. When access to information, education and the inalienable right to speak are systemically denied to women, it constitutes a form of gendered violence as tangible as any other.

These blackouts forced women further from existence, isolating them from both public and private spheres, and completely revoking any shred of agency they had left. For organisations like ours, [AMPLIFY Afghan Women](#), it was a confronting reminder of our work's fragility and utter dependence on the internet.

Thus, human rights advocates and feminists alike should continue to condemn these blackouts as a tool of gender apartheid and advocate for the importance of recognising access to digital spaces as a fundamental human right — especially for women in societies like Afghanistan. Until then, the internet will remain both a battlefield and a barometer of contemporary freedoms.

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