DEVPOLICYBLOG

# Impacts of the Taliban's ban on women's work and education

By Matiullah Qazizada
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Upon reclaiming power, the Taliban banned girls from schools above year six and women from work, with few exceptions, such as in the health sector. These regressive and stringent policies have exacted a substantial socio-economic toll, not only jeopardising Afghanistan's relationship with the international community but also impeding the flow of crucial aid to the nation. In this blog, I examine the economic consequences of the exclusion of women from work and education in Afghanistan.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the annual economic cost of banning women from employment in Afghanistan is estimated at USD1 billion (5% of GDP). Globally, the ban placed Afghanistan 177th out of 177 countries in terms of women's inclusion on Georgetown University's Women Peace and Security Index.

A 2022 International Labour Organization report indicates that Afghanistan's female labour force participation rate was 19% in 2020, four times less than male participation (81%). Under the Taliban, the state of women's participation in the workforce further deteriorated. In the third quarter of 2021, following the collapse of the republic in Afghanistan, women's employment rate decreased to 16.7% (Figure 1). In January 2022, women's employment as at the second quarter of 2022 was projected to be around 25% lower than in the second quarter of 2021, assuming no positive policy changes — an alarming development.

Figure 1: Afghanistan female labour force participation (% of total labour force)
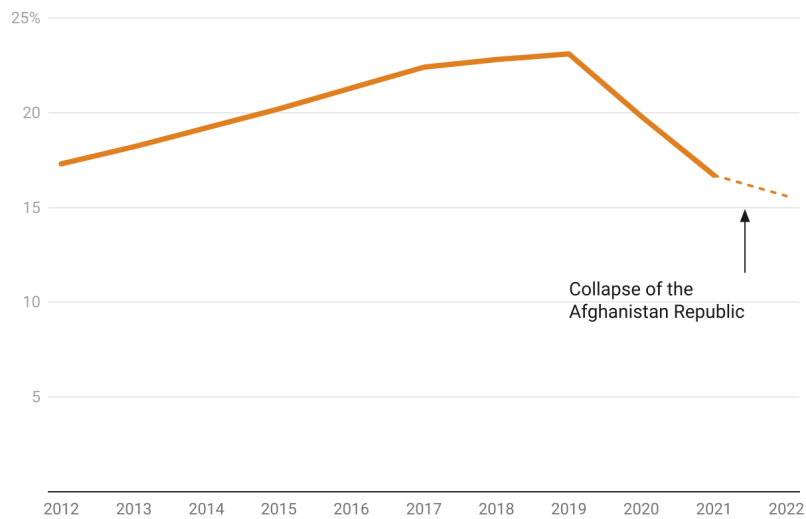
Data for 2021 and 2022 based on International Labour Organization estimates and author calculations.
Source: World Bank · Created with Datawrapper

The Taliban ban on women's participation in work and education remains unchanged and has had severe economic consequences for Afghanistan and its citizens. It undermines the role of women in families and society, affects the flow of aid, increases poverty and restricts economic growth.

Donors are reluctant to provide aid to Afghanistan when women are banned from work and education. Two-thirds of Afghanistan's population (28.3 million people) are in urgent need of emergency assistance. In the two years since the fall of the republic, about 10 million more people have fallen into this category. This is for several reasons, but one is the ban on women working.

In the past two decades, women have played momentous roles in all dimensions of Afghanistan's economic development. For example, they were actively involved in livestock production, the processing of dairy products and crop processing (threshing, cleaning, drying, and preserving). Furthermore, Afghan women contributed through their work on a range of export products such as carpets, hides, karakul skins and wool. In the 20 years prior to the collapse of the republic, Afghan women successfully established and ran approximately 57,000 small and medium-sized enterprises with the support of donors.

However, a 2023 study by UNDP demonstrates that the Afghan economy is expected to deteriorate, and extreme poverty will persist for decades if foreign aid is reduced. Respecting the rights of women and abolishing the ban on their work remains essential to prevent the throttling of aid to Afghanistan.

Banning women from work is also [a significant barrier to poverty reduction](). In Afghanistan, 96% of people are at risk of [falling below the poverty line](). Research shows that societies have less poverty when men and women are given the same opportunities to work. Compared to men, women typically invest a larger percentage of their income to support their families and communities. For example, [Shelley Phipps and Peter Burton]() studied data from the 1992 Expenditure Survey in Canada. They looked specifically at households where a married couple live together and both partners have full-time jobs. The authors found that where wives accounted for a higher share of family income, there was higher expenditure on childcare, children's clothing and food. Other research indicates that when women make money, they use 90% of their income [to support their families]().

Prohibiting women from working also hinders the country's economic growth. The participation of women in the workforce has significantly helped economies grow in OECD countries over many decades. [The Gender and Sustainable Development OECD report]() shows that a country's GDP significantly increases if women are employed at the same rate as men. It has been demonstrated that the inclusion of women in decision-making groups, committees, and businesses has a significant positive impact on effectiveness. As an example, [a study of Fortune 500 companies]() found that firms with more women serving as board directors had much better financial results. They had 53% higher returns on equity, 24% higher returns on sales and 67% higher returns on invested capital. A nation can experience [higher productivity and economic growth]() with the contribution of women.

The exclusion of women from the education and the workforce in Afghanistan carries many costs. It will have devastating consequences for future generations. In the short- to medium-term, as a result of these policies, aid will be lost, poverty will intensify, and the country's economic deterioration will be exacerbated. While further studies are required to estimate the costs of the ban on women working and accessing secondary education, there is already an overwhelming consensus that these policies abuse the rights of women, damage the country's interests and need to be abolished immediately.

About the author/s

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The Devpolicy Blog is based at the Development Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.